

ANGELS OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

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WHEN ANGELS APPEAR in religious or scriptural narratives, they represent the invisible, mysterious, spiritual realm of God. They make God's will and action known. Spiritual teachers such as Ignatius Loyola speak of angels of light and darkness, active within the praying or meditating individual. In his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius is drawing on his late medieval religious heritage and can take the existence of angels simply for granted, and on that basis analyze and interpret states of soul.

As a man of his time, Ignatius was unable to locate individuals within social, political and religious systems. Ignatian spirituality is effective and nourishing at the personal and communal levels, but it leaves social and political realities untouched, unscrutinised. Thus, inevitably, its political and cultural effects are conservative: it reinforces the *status quo*. Ignatius' talk of good and evil angels sustains—unconsciously and therefore all the more powerfully—the prevailing social and religious system.

This essay is a critique of the unarticulated political ideology underlying the rhetoric of angels and devils as we find it in Ignatius and in many other writers. Ignatian spirituality in general, and what it says about angels and devils in particular, may appeal to those comfortably established in Church and State, but it is positively harmful for those deprived by the systems of advantage and opportunity. Angels may be presented as the voice of God, impartial and transcendent. But the reality is that this so-called voice of God is a clever disguise for the voice of the ruling systems. Angels represent the dominant modes of thought, reinforcing their assumptions and their patterns of order, power and social control. None of this is apparent on the surface, because the mechanisms are seldom made explicit. They will never be obvious to the advantaged. Those in power will be at

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The Favoured by Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918)

most superficially aware of the mythologies legitimating their position. Because such awareness will subvert the advantage they hold, it is in their interests to ignore the mythologies and to pretend ignorance of them. There is both more and less to angels than meets the eye. Justice and truth require that we undertake a critical social analysis of how angel figures function in religious writings and in spiritual tradition.

Sacred narratives and texts rarely state their assumptions. Narrative and dogmatic genres enable the authors to avoid being explicit about them. Yet authoritarian personalities and institutions nevertheless assert their power through such documents, without seeming to do so. Narrative is never as transparent as it appears. It can be highly freighted with ideology operating in the service of domination. As people in our own age become less gullible and more sceptical, the mainstream Churches appear ever less credible. One important path of re-evangelization may consist in purging our presentation of Christian faith from oppressive ideology, and thus in presenting faith in a radically new way.

Let me state three theses:

- any authentic religion or spirituality will be critically aware of how it functions within the world's social, political and economic systems, and will be concerned to articulate itself as a force for liberation;
- an inauthentic religion or spirituality will be an ideology of domination, hiding its own true character under the sacred garb of myths;
- talk of 'angels' is often an integral part of the mechanism by which prevailing ideologies disguise the truth, and thus helps hold individuals and communities within oppressive dependence.

In what follows, I propose to develop these theses in two ways. I want to expose the unreality of the so-called 'angels of light and darkness' by looking at the metaphors involved in our naming them, our identifying them. I also want to suggest a more positive account of the reality that talk of the 'angel of light' is seeking to articulate. The criterion for authenticity in religion and spirituality is, to my mind, a concern for justice and equality. When religious and spiritual rhetoric is peddled without such a concern, the result is a politico-economic fundamentalism that has nothing to do with the true gospel of Jesus.

Light and Darkness

The idea of angels is closely linked to the primordial contrast between light and darkness. We are aware of a wide and obvious difference between light and darkness, and we naturally extend this pattern of thinking when we talk of the angels of light and darkness. We think that darkness has or is a substantial reality, just as we think of light as a substantial reality. But the truth is otherwise. Light and darkness are only indications. The substantial reality is the *source* of light, the source that is present when we see light, and absent when we are in darkness. In the presence of a sufficiently powerful source of light, our eyes can see external figures and objects more or less clearly and distinctly. Darkness, for its part, has no reality or consistency of its own, despite the ways in which our language encourages us to think of it. Our patterns of thought and language are deceptive.

All too easily we interpret our experience in terms of our preconceptions. We claim to experience objective reality, whereas what we really experience are our preconceptions, our invented notions and beliefs which we have imposed on ourselves or received from others. Of course I am not denying that light and darkness affect our experience; I am only denying that they have any objective reality, any substantial being, in themselves. Darkness is only the absence from our sight of the source of light, and hence our resulting incapacity to see. It is not a positive reality in itself.

If darkness is not an objective reality, but simply a subjective experience of not being able to see, then the so-called 'angel of darkness' cannot be objectively real either. We are using a figure of speech, a creature of language whose whole existence is in and as a word. It makes us feel threatened by playing on the natural emotion of the fear of darkness, and thus achieves hidden intentions and purposes. 'Angel of darkness' is a metaphor, a linguistic product of an ideology inculcating a particular worldview through the natural instincts of love and fear.

Human language reflects the chaotic variety of emotions and needs within individuals and groups. Love and fear are active in every individual and group, pulling them in conflicting directions. Love may overcome fear, and draw the group into unity; alternatively fear may prevail, and in such a way that its source becomes projected onto a mythical, demonized Other. When religions speak in terms of angels of light and darkness, it is often such fear mechanisms that are at work. But it is important to recognise that there is no objective reality in this 'other' that is the target of the projections; rather an innate self-hatred is being displaced onto a pseudo-reality. We are the angels; our enemies are the devils. But neither of these affirmations is true. Rather, both the angel and the devil are realities within us, within each of us. The metaphor of the angel of light often expresses a repressive self-righteousness, and as such it illustrates the true wisdom lurking in Ignatius' teaching about the angel of darkness masquerading as the angel of light.

No language can function without metaphor, and metaphors are not always false or malign. But we need constantly to be aware of their social and political functions. Some examples may bring home what I am trying to convey. In the synoptic Gospels, the Pharisees accuse

Jesus of driving out the demons with the help of Beelzebub, a charge which Jesus is presented as vigorously refuting.¹ In the Old Testament, Beelzebub was the god of the Philistine city of Ekron, whom Ahaziah, King of Israel, was tempted to ask whether he would recover from sickness, before he was rebuked for his infidelity by Elijah (2 Kings 1:2-9). Some scripture scholars think that this name can be traced back to Ugaritic roots. 'Beelzebub' is a prince, a fertility god otherwise called 'prince, the lord of the earth' and 'prince, king'. It was Jewish hostility to the Philistines which



A Japanese Demon

had corrupted the title so that it was understood as 'lord of flies'. The enemy's god, and by extension the enemy themselves, were redescribed in terms of ridiculous pests and demons. A similar dynamic may be operative in some of the harsher statements about the Jews put on the lips of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel:

'Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.' (John 8:43-44)

This phenomenon can also be documented outside the Christian tradition, in the Vedas. In the Rig Veda, Varuna, the highest spirit or god of the cosmic rhythm, is called an *Asura*. In texts written by the enemies of the Rig Veda's authors, this word came to mean something demonic. It came to designate a demon or evil spirit, who is 'not god'

¹ Mark 3: 22-27; Matthew 10: 25, 12: 24-27; Luke 11: 15-20.

and who is constantly opposed to the *devas*, the true gods. The objects of the in-group's worship are divine; those of the out-group's are demonic. One and the same name or identity can serve as an object of respect or ridicule—everything depends on the social location and perspective.

Even in my own lifetime, adherents of non-Christian faiths in India were referred to, before Vatican II, as *agnanis*—in English 'ignorant ones' or 'infidels'. Whoever did not embrace Christianity was simply an 'infidel'—a compliment with which the Muslims paid Christians and other non-Muslims in the same coin. More recently, in the political sphere, we may cite President George W. Bush's talk of an 'axis of evil' in connection with the Iraq war. In so doing, Bush is proudly and uncritically implying that the USA is the centre or axis of everything in the world that is good.

The language of angels and devils or gods and demons reflects a primordial human tendency to split the world into two opposed camps of 'us' and 'them'. Everything good, noble and beautiful is linked to *us*, the angels; everything wicked, base and ugly is linked to *them*, the demons.

Angels are commonly imagined in the world's religions as young, and as charming, beautiful winged figures. Devils and demons appear also as winged, but they are old, ugly, frightening bird-beasts, with horns on their heads, claws on their fingers, and fangs in their mouths. They can swim across oceans, fly across space, and traverse long distances instantaneously, just like angels. But they are also capable, thanks to their superior power, of overcoming the angels. Such images are perhaps no more than reflections of a desire for youthful power, for beauty, for goodness and for immortality, and of a fear of death, of evil and wickedness. It is in such a way that angels and demons can live an unreal but powerful life in human psyches.

When traditional spiritualities and scriptures mythically personify angels, they perpetuate belief in them by lending an air of objective reality or legitimacy to tribal antagonisms. The USA today represents the most powerful manifestation of such tribalism that has ever been known. Its ideological basis is a religious fundamentalism similar to that which prevails in the tribally religious state of Israel. Given the power of modern technology and the system of economic free enterprise, the USA combines tribalism with modernity, and exemplifies at its grossest the religious and political dynamic of the

nation state. There is nothing exclusively Islamic about the idea of a holy war.

Good and Evil

The point can be extended to much of our discourse about good and evil. Such language often merely reflects a psychic consensus, a cultural tradition or defence mechanism. Talk of 'good' and 'evil' generally expresses nothing more than subjective desire and revulsion, legitimated in terms of a divinely ordained ethical and scriptural code, and of social and religious institutions. The gods are a screen for society's projections, figures in a religious ideology which enforces conformity and asserts superiority over both neighbours and enemies.

'Good' and 'evil' often function, therefore, as ideological constructs; they serve agendas of power and domination, disguised as moral and theological codes of purity and impurity, of honour and dishonour. They are not innocent, pure and disinterested in the way that they first appear to be. The use of such language often exemplifies the real truth hidden in Ignatius' insight about the angel of darkness appearing as an angel of light. There is something ambiguously demonic built into all religions and moralities; they hold out promises or make threats in order to control and regulate both individual and collective freedom. Individuals are thus socialised into determinate ways of thinking, and come both to internalise and to perpetuate them.

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As long as they remain committed to such dualist patterns of sensibility, organized religion and morality can neither be free nor freeing. Instead, they function as fundamentalist propaganda in the interests of those in power. They instil in those who conform a selfish expectation and hope of ultimate reward, and threaten them with terrible punishments should they dissent. This kind of spirituality and morality is not really free. The God of such religion and morality is a capricious tyrant, the creature of the social tyranny that is exercised through such a religious system.

I am not denying the objective truth that some states of affairs are good while other states of affairs are evil. I am denying that 'good' and 'evil' are themselves substantive realities, and rejecting any belief in good or bad angels as objective causes of good or evil states of affairs. I am insisting, rather, that we ourselves are the angels or messengers of

the good and evil that we do and suffer. Such an assertion raises the possibility of an authentic religion and spirituality of total freedom, which readily accepts its moral responsibility for good and evil, and is not driven and enslaved by the promise of reward or by the threat of punishment. Human beings, at least collectively, are responsible for much that they do and endure.

If this point is clearly understood, there can indeed be a legitimate prayer to 'good angels'. Such prayer can express our fear of harm and our desire to summon up good will in service of life, of nature and of our fellow human beings. It can also strengthen our commitment to overcome the ill will expressed in every selfish impulse and act.

The *rishis*, the sages of ancient India, spoke of God, the ultimate Reality, as beyond and transcending the divisive categories of moral good and evil. God neither governs such categories nor is governed by them. If we imagine things to be otherwise, we are the victims of an anthropomorphic idol; we are seeking to measure God, to cut God down to human size. God's self transcends our dilemmas of moral good and evil.

Scripture speaks of a God who frees us from the bondage of morality. God promises us a transcendent truth and grace that the world of law can neither provide nor imagine. There can be no spiritual salvation *in* or *into* a world dominated by the law of moral good and evil. True salvation has to be a salvation *from* a world of law, reward and punishment. God alone can give such grace: for those who love God, God works in *everything* for their good (Romans 8:28). This grace and goodness is beyond the reach of moral, aggressive activism. Salvation is a contemplative oneness with God, with a God working in all cosmic processes, all historical events. Those who have attained to such a union may truly and authentically be described in terms of the metaphor, 'angels of light'. Jesus himself was such an angel, such an evangelist of freedom and salvation. His whole life, his death and resurrection, bear witness to this kind of salvific liberation.

The Use and Abuse of a Metaphor

From what I have just said about Jesus and about other prophets of salvation, it will be clear that I recognise a legitimate use of the term 'angel'. I am refuting simply the alienating patterns of thought that are often embedded in such discourse. Talk of angels can express an

important truth about ourselves, about how we can be messengers—and thus in the root sense angels—of good and evil to one another.

The more conventional uses of this metaphor, however, are seriously harmful, and reinforce attitudes of aggression and fear that have nothing to do with the gospel:

- they encourage us to split our sense of self and thus to compromise our integrity;
- they project the good or evil we ourselves do on to mythical external agencies, and thus obscure our own responsibility;
- most seriously of all, they legitimate and enforce the social and legal structures of a particular political and economic system by attributing them to God and imposing them in God's holy name;
- they sacralise society's sanctions by means of doctrines of heaven and hell. Conformists are taken to the bosom of the angels in eternal heavenly light, while dissenters are sent to the outer darkness that is the realm of the demons.

Talk of the angels of light and darkness is often part of an alienating worldview that masks an oppressive social order. It can all too easily hide the reality of blatant and avoidable exploitation. Its seductive, rollicking rhetoric promotes a false consciousness that appears all the more plausible the more it perpetuates itself from generation to generation. Such talk is an important ideological tool supporting social orders that are tribalist rather than evangelical. It abuses the holy name of God, and it sets the idols of an oppressive cult on the divine throne. It obscures the truth that God is one without favourites, a God who is to be 'all in all'.

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