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THE ANGEL OF THE NATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

The angel of the nations comes into being in the context of the Old Testament, as a vicar of God, his envoy and representative, mediating between the human and the transcendent. The role of Israel in relation to other peoples is also gradually clarified in the course of the Old Testament and the figure of the Angel appears as an essential point of mediation between a multiplicity of peoples, the special nature of the chosen people and the uniqueness of God. All these questions will remain crucial during the long historical debate that is analyzed by this paper and continues to this day.

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From its origins in the ancient Jewish world up to the numerous recurrences in the 19th century, the figure of the angel of the nations has thus contributed to the conceptualization of important political functions, such as those of mediation and representation, of managing meetings and conflicts between the various peoples, of reminding us of the implicit limits on all human political power.

The apparently archaic nature of the term, therefore, actually conceals the fact that its political content is still relevant and even urgent; tracing the history of the evolution of this figure, focusing on some of the most crucial phases of that history, allows us significant insight into some of the deepest roots of current political themes.

The angels of the nations are angels believed by certain Jewish and Christian traditions to be assigned by God to individual peoples and nations: guardian angels for communities just as an individual has their guardian angel. The most important biblical reference is found in Daniel, where the angel who appears to the prophet says: «But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia» (Daniel 10.13); and later: «Do you know why I have come to you? Now I must return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I am through with him, the prince of Greece will come. But I am to tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is no one with me who contends against these princes except Michael, your prince. As for me, in the first year of Darius the Mede, I stood up to support and strengthen him» (Daniel 10.20-21 and 11.1).

These passages refer to the angels of the nations¹: the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece were the defending powers of Israel's enemies in their battles with the Jewish people, who were, in their turn, helped by their own protector, Michael, «one of the chief princes». Subsequent to these verses we find the existence of a people's protecting angel attested to in many ancient and medieval texts. In the Jewish world this belief is picked up by Philo of Alexandria², while in the Christian tradition we find references in Irenaeus³, Clement of Alexandria⁴, Hippolytus⁵, Origen⁶, Gregory

¹ See the entry *Angels (I. in the Bible)* by J. Morgenstern in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. I, pp. 304-310; B. Teyssèdre, *Anges, astres et cioux. Figures de la Destinée et du Salut*, Paris 1986; tr. it. *Angeli, astri e cieli. Figure del Destino e della Salvezza*, ed. D. Berretti e P. Aimò, with a preface by P. A. Rossi, Genova 1991, pp. 63-69, 171-173, 271-273; J. Daniélou, *Les anges et leur mission*, Paris 1990; tr. it. *Gli angeli e la loro missione*, Milano 1998, pp. 22ss.

² *De post. Cain.* 26.

³ *Adv. Haer.* III, 12, 9.

⁴ *Strom.*, VII, 6, 4 and VI, 157, 5).

⁵ *Co. Dan.* IV, 40, 4.

⁶ *De Princ.* III, 3, 3 and *In Genes. Hom.* 9, 3.

Nazianzen⁷, Basilus⁸, Jerome⁹, Augustine¹⁰. The tradition is particularly strong in the Eastern Church (from 5th century Armenia to 18th century Russian Orthodox theology¹¹).

Within the hierarchy the angels of the nations are positioned by the Pseudo-Dionysius in the third hierarchy, where the Principalities, the Archangels and the Angels appear, that is, in the order of angels who interact with humanity, our lives and histories: «We must consider that [...] the revealing order of the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels, presides, through each other, over the Hierarchies amongst men»¹². On the subject of the guardian angels of the nations he refers to the passage already quoted from the book of Daniel: «The Word of God has assigned our Hierarchy to Angels, by naming Michael as Ruler of the Jewish people (Daniel 10.13), and others over other nations (Daniel 10.13; 10.20). For the Most High established borders of nations according to number of Angels of God (Dt 32.8)»¹³. This last biblical passage to which the Pseudo-Dionysius refers is from Deuteronomy, where, in the Septuagint, we read: «When the Most High divided the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam, he appointed the bounds of people according to the number of the sons of God». The «sons of God» (see Job 1.6) are in fact the angels.

Although it is made clear that the human hierarchy, and therefore political power, are subordinate to the angelic powers, the Pseudo-Dionysius assigns a primarily spiritual – more than political – role to the angels: their aim is to “initiate” humans into a spiritual life, elevating them above the mundane, because «there is one Head of all, and to this, the Angels, who religiously direct each nation, conduct those who follow them»¹⁴. This idea of the religious role of the angels of the nations remains alive all the way up to an author like Nicholas of Cusa¹⁵. In his *De pace fidei* the participants in the dialogue which takes place in heaven between the representatives of the different religions are the angels of the nations. They act as spokespeople before God and the blessed, laying before them the sufferings of humankind («from the kingdom of this world sorrowing messengers had conveyed to Him the moanings of the oppressed»¹⁶), and speak in particular of how many of them – the majority – are unfree, especially in material terms: «almost all [men] are compelled to live a hard life full of troubles and miseries and to be underlings, in abject subjection, to kings who wield dominion»¹⁷. This material servitude, in denying humans their liberty, also affects them morally and spiritually because in such situations most people are unable to learn to know themselves or to search for God: «of all [men] few have so much leisure that by using their freedom of choice they are able to arrive at a knowledge of themselves. For they are distracted by many corporeal cares and tasks; and so, they are unable to seek after You, who are a hidden God»¹⁸. To this must be added

⁷ *Poemata dogm.* 7, 23ss. and *Orat.* 28, 31.

⁸ *Adv. Eun.* 3,1.

⁹ *In Dan.* 10, 13 on struggles between the angels.

¹⁰ *En. in Psalmos* 88, 3.

¹¹ See the bibliographical references in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, Paris 1930, under the entries *ange* and *angélologie*.

¹² Pseudo-Dionysius, *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, IX, 2, engl. tr. in *The Works of Dyonisius the Aeropagite. Part II: The heavenly hierarchy*, tr. by J. Parker, James Parker&Co., London 1899, p.1-66, available at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_13_heavenly_hierarchy.htm

¹³ *Ibi*, IX, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibi*, IX, 3.

¹⁵ See K.G. Hugelmann, *Das Volk in der Philosophie und Theologie des Nikolaus von Kues*, in “Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift” 10(1959), pp. 29-37; M. Merlo, *Vinculum concordiae. Il problema della rappresentanza nel pensiero di Nicolò Cusano*, Milano 1997, pp. 260-262.

¹⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *De pace fidei*, I.2, engl. tr. in *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, ed. by J. Hopkins, The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis 1994, p. 633 (both the original text and the translation are available at <http://www.cusanus-portal.de>).

¹⁷ *Ibi*, I.3, p. 634

¹⁸ *Ibi*, I.4, p. 634.

the violence and religious persecution that many people suffer: « for the sake of religion very many [men] were in armed conflict with one another, and that by physical force men were either compelling [their fellow-men] to renounce their long-adhered-to religious sect or were inflicting [upon their fellow-men] death».

Here the angels of the nations thus initially appear as the peoples' «message-bearers of the laments» before God, rather than messengers of God, although it is immediately said that they have been « had been established by the King of the universe, from the beginning, over each of the mundane provinces and over each of the religious sects». Having listened to the sufferings of mankind, the «full assembly of the saints»¹⁹ listens to the submissions of the different religions and, finally, God sends the angels of the nations back to earth as *administratorii spiritus* to build unity and peace in faith. The angels of the nations are therefore both the voice of God and the voice of the peoples and they consequently move in two directions: announcing the word of God to the peoples and bringing God the voice of men, in particular that of the downtrodden. They convey unity on the one hand, on the other, diversity: the archangel, at first speaking as a representative of the angels, acknowledges that the many originate in the one («From one [man] there was multiplied the great number of people who inhabit the surface of dry land»²⁰), with which they must be rejoined, but he then immediately goes on to remind God himself that the many cannot exist without diversity («You know, O Lord, that there cannot be a great multitude without much diversity»²¹). The angels of the peoples therefore express this dual sense of unification and differentiation that characterizes the relationship between a single humankind and diverse peoples.

In the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, on the other hand, we find a greater emphasis on the political role of the angels of the nations. St. Bernard seems to grant the Principalities a role in actual historical events rather than just in people's spiritual lives, thus returning to the Old Testament emphasis in the matter. This «political» role is described in detail using a series of precise terms which indicate the presence of angels at all stages of the evolution (from its beginnings to its waning) of political power, the limits of which are clearly defined: «The Principalities are still higher, and through their wise interventions they fashion, govern, circumscribe, hand over, interrupt, change all earthly sovereignties»²². St. Bernard, however, strongly underlines the fact that this «political» function of the angelic powers derives not from the angels themselves, but from God. Their power is derived, not intrinsic: their influence on the power of nations should not be understood as produced by the deification of earthly authority, but rather by the angels' submission to God's sovereignty. «The Principalities – writes St. Bernard – command and govern: but they too are governed, in that they could not exercise their prerogatives if they ceased to depend on God»²³. This medieval tradition stays alive until the Renaissance and the modern age, as we can see in Tommaso Campanella's *De angelis*, which refers explicitly to St. Bernard's statement without comment²⁴, and the classic *De angelis* by Francisco Suárez, in which he actually makes the different hierarchies of angels an object of faith²⁵.

¹⁹ *Ibi*, I.2, p. 633.

²⁰ *Ibi*, I.3, p. 634.

²¹ *Ibi*, I.4, p. 634.

²² Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Consideratione*, V, 8, in 8 voll., ed. J. Leclercq, C.H. Talbot et H.M. Rochais, Editiones Cistercienses, Roma 1957-77, vol. 3, p. 472: «Putemus Principatus his quoque praelatos, quorum moderamine et sapientia omnis in terris principatus constituitur, regitur, limitatur, transfertur, mutilatur, mutatur».

²³ *Ibi*, V, 11, vol. 3, p. 475: «Praesunt Principatus et regunt, sed reguntur et ipsi, ita ut regere iam non norint, si regi desierint».

²⁴ T. Campanella, *Theologicorum Liber V De Angelis*, VII, 21, in *Le creature sovranaturali : inediti Theologicorum liber V*, ed. by R. Amerio, Centro internazionale di studi umanistici, Roma 1970. See D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, London 1958, rist. 1969.

²⁵ F. Suarez, *De Angelis*, I, XIII, 2 in *Opera omnia*, ed. S. Coleti, Venezia 1740ss., vol. II. On the «guiding and moderating» angels for provinces and cities – and not just for individuals – see the reference in J. Bodin, *Universae naturae theatrum*, Lyon 1596; tr. it. in *J. Bodin. Antologia di scritti politici*, a cura di V. I.

According to Suárez the angels of the nations are specific guardian angels: God has arranged a guide and a protector for collective persons – peoples, communities (the churches, for example) - as well as for individuals. Suárez, who constantly stresses the great liberality with which God sends guardian angels and who therefore tends to adopt the most generous estimates of angelic presences, believes that it is also probable that there are specific guardian angels for public figures: popes, kings, prelates, princes would thus have two guardian angels, one for their private person, one for their public person²⁶.

The doctrine of the angels of the nations inevitably creates difficulties in its theological interpretation, particularly with regard to the problem of war. What actually happens between the angels of the nations when their respective peoples are at war? The simplest interpretation is that offered by Jerome in his commentary on the book of Daniel: the prince of the Persians who holds out against the liberation of the chosen people guided by the angel Michael is a bad angel. The struggle between the angels is thus explained as a struggle between good and evil. But this interpretation only sufficed for as long as war was seen as conflict between the chosen people and other (not chosen) peoples. The question became more complex when the chosen people multiplied and war was no longer just between believers and infidels, but habitual war between Christians – now political rather than religious.

St. Gregory the Great offered a solution²⁷, destined to remain a classic, adopted by St Thomas Aquinas²⁸ and then by Suárez²⁹. In Gregory the Great's interpretation the Prince of the Persians is not a bad angel, but rather a good angel, entrusted by God to that kingdom. Just as the individual pagans have a guardian angel, the pagan peoples also have their own protector. The opposition between the angels is explained by the fact that they do not know the will of God in everything and therefore, until it is revealed to them, they appeal to God in the interests of their people – whose merits the angels emphasize – and in so doing end up in conflict with each other. This conflict, however, is not between the wills of the angels, but rather between their contingent appeals: as soon as God reveals his will to the angels they reach immediate and perfect agreement. The message of Aquinas and Suárez is clear: even Christian princes, and even when they are defending perfectly legitimate interests, must submit to the universal will of God and, through it, find harmony.

Bodin's interpretation of this question is interesting: he is referring to civil war rather than war between nations, and the question that he poses is: *Etiamne inter angelos bella civilia geruntur?*³⁰ The answer is no longer theological, but moral, even though it is still based on a cosmic vision in which opposites find harmony in the harmony of the universe: the opposition between the angels of which Daniel speaks isn't a struggle between vices, but rather a competition between virtues, such as must occur between great spirits poised to give the best of themselves³¹. Here, too, angelology mirrors the terrestrial situation and political programmes.

Comparato, Bologna 1981, p. 253. On the subject of the angel in Bodin, see D. Quaglioni, *Angeli e demoni alle soglie del razionalismo giuridico e politico. Il caso di Jean Bodin*, in F. Rosa (ed.), *L'angelo dell'immaginazione*, Trento 1992, pp. 215-228.

²⁶ «Unde mihi probabile sit, quod communiter creditur, has personas publicas, duos habere Angelos custodes, nimirum, inferiores quatenus tales personae sunt, et superiores ratione muneris. Nam sicut duplici egent prudentia, et rectitudine et illa, quae ad bonum commune pertinet, altioris rationis est, ita duplici indigent gubernatore, et custode Angelo» (F. Suárez, *De Angelis*, cit., VI, XVII, 25).

²⁷ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, XVII, XII.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *2 Sent.*, d. 11, q. 2, a.5; *Summa Theologiae*, I^a, q. 113, a. 8.

²⁹ F. Suárez, *De Angelis*, VI, XIX, 13.

³⁰ J. Bodin, *Colloquium Heptaplomeres. De rerum sublimium arcanis abditis*, ed. L. Noack, Schwerin-Mecklenburg 1857, rist. Hildesheim 1970, p. 116.

³¹ «Igitur inter angelos non nisi virtutum et illustrium animorum certamen existit: inter homines rarius virtutes cum virtutibus, saepe vitia cum virtutibus, etiam vitia cum vitiis, opinio cum opinione, pietas cum impietate, religio cum superstitione et religione, saepissime tamen cum superstitione superstitio ipsa certat» (*ibi*, p. 117). Angels are also mentioned in Hobbes' *Leviathan* (part III, chap. XXXIV), but the discussion focuses on the angelic characteristics of incorporeality, substantiality and permanence, starting from the Old and New Testaments.

As the modern age progresses the angels of the nations virtually disappear, sharing the fate of the angels generally, who are heavily criticized in this period. The most important criticism – in Protestantism, since there are no particular developments in Catholicism – is that of Schleiermacher, who, although he did not deny their existence, declared that they did not affect human existence in any way³².

It could be said, adopting Romano Guardini's interpretation³³, that the angels are transformed during the modern age into purely earthly figures lacking the supernatural power which they had in ancient times and in the Middle Ages. And this change runs in parallel with their move from the public to the private sphere, with the loss of their essentially 'political' role:

« . . . the human figure is in itself inadequate to represent them, but when such a representation is made, they appear as virile figures, not just because of their strength, but also because they deal with the public sphere [*öffentlichen Sphäre*] of existence: the world as God's work, the story of salvation, human existence as the Kingdom of the Highest. They are the assistants in the workshop of the world, servants of the blessed authority of God, warriors in the army of the King of the universe. Their figure is corrupted as soon as the personal, the romantic – above all the erotic – enters the picture and they become the sensual and sometimes pathetic Beings of which the art of the modern age is full»³⁴.

Even a cursory examination of the way in which the figure of the angel has been represented in art down the centuries allows one to recognise this "degradation": «their image becomes steadily more graceful, sensitive, small and delicate, not to mention the ambiguity of the Baroque and Rococco [angels]»³⁵.

But this decline of the angels does not signify their disappearance: the humanized angels, who have already been demoted to the status of earthly creatures, are further transformed at the beginning of the 19th century. They become mythic powers and regain their superhuman energy and stature, but have by now lost all connection to biblical revelation, God or Christian transcendence. Thus the destiny of the angels of the nations is exemplary of the process of secularization: the transposition of concepts from transcendence to immanence with the consequent deification-mythicization of earthly forces.

Still following Guardini's analysis, we see that Hölderlin's work is crucial to this transformation: «In him the angels again appear alarmingly sized, and are always referred to the history of a town, a city, a native land, like the "angels of the fatherland"». The biblical elements of prophecy [...] and the *Apocalypse* still matter; but the angels' significance is completely immersed in the world, in immanence. They are the deified heroes of their fatherlands' histories, closely linked to it as models and tutelary deities»³⁶.

The angels placed by God over the nations – from above, placed below – have disappeared: their place has been taken by the heroes of the fatherland, who through sacrifice acquire – from the bottom up – a higher, divine essence, and thus become the supernatural protective forces of a people. One man alone cannot withstand their presence, this can only be done within the vital context of his people, in celebrations, in battle. The historical, public – as opposed to individualistic and private – character of these powers is evident here³⁷.

This reference is particularly to the elegy *Stuttgart*, where we read:

³² F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Der Christliche Glaube*, Berlin 1921-22, vol. II, 42s.

³³ See R. Guardini, *Der Engel in Dantes göttlicher Komödie*, Kösel, München 1951², especially pp. 33ss. On Guardini's interpretation of the angel, and, more generally, on the whole question of angelology in the 19th century, see S. Zucal, *Ali dell'invisibile. L'Angelo in Guardini e nel '900*, Brescia 1998.

³⁴ R. Guardini, *Der Engel in Dantes göttlicher Komödie*, cit., p. 35.

³⁵ *Ibi*, p. 39.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ See R. Guardini, *Hölderlin. Weltbild und Frömmigkeit*, München 1955, 1980³, p. 163. On Guardini's interpretation of Hölderlin, see S. Zucal, *Romano Guardini e la metamorfosi del «religioso» tra moderno e post-moderno. Un approccio ermeneutico a Hölderlin, Dostoevskij e Nietzsche*, Urbino 1990, in particular pp. 60ss..

«Aber ihr, ihr Größeren auch, ihr Frohen, die allzeit
 Leben und walten, erkannt, oder gewaltiger auch,
 Wenn ihr wirket und schafft in heiliger Nacht und allein herrscht
 Und allmächtig empor ziehet ein ahnendes Volk,
 Bis die Jünglinge sich der Väter droben erinnern,
 Mündig und hell vor euch steht der besonnene Mensch –
 Engel des Vaterlands! o ihr, vor denen das Auge,
 Seis auch stark, und das Knie bricht dem vereinzelt Mann,
 Daß er halten sich muß an die Freund und bitten die Teuern,
 Daß sie tragen mit ihm all die beglückende Last»³⁸.

The transformation of the angel of the nation into the hero of the fatherland is, however, only a small part of the broader process of secularization which is evident in Hölderlin, in which other aspects of the figure of the angel are involved, particularly the character of the angel as a “messenger of God”. The signs of the times, the turning of history, the eschatological hour are now announced by an eagle, not an angel: it is the eagle who announces the return to truth, represented in Hölderlin’s poetry not by Christ, but by Greece. Guardini summarizes this transformation thus:

«It is no longer Christ who returns, but Greece; the sender is no longer our Father in heaven, but Aether; the acting force is not the “*pneuma* of Christ”, but a Dionysian over-fullness of the spirit. The knot which is to be untied is not the sins of humanity, but history’s inner lack of solutions. The eagle is sent, not the angel. It is not the Virgin Mary, who “by the Holy Spirit and the power of the Almighty” “[...]” “will conceive and give birth to a son” (Luke 1. 35 and 31), who is made receptive [. .], but Germany. The latter will welcome Greece when it comes and from their union will arise a new life”³⁹.

The transformation of the angel messenger into an eagle inevitably brings the philosophical significance of the symbol of the eagle in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to mind⁴⁰, and also, on the historico-political plane, Germany’s imperial eagle.

The emergence of the theme of the “nation” during the 19th century and its establishment at the heart of political debate by the end of the century also, of course, influenced the theological literature. In fact, just at the beginning of the 20th century, the angels of the nation suddenly reemerged strongly, not only in connection with the above passage from Daniel, but also, and to a greater extent, in the passages in Paul’s letters in which he talks about *rules* (i.e. principalities) and *powers* and defines the relationships between humans and political power and between political power and God Himself. The “political” interpretation of the angels in both senses will culminate, not by chance, in Germany in the 1930s, to then experience a new “depoliticization” when the Nazi regime collapses and WWII ends⁴¹.

At the beginning of the 18th century Martin Dibelius⁴² picks up the subject of the angels of the nations and links it to the authorities of whom Paul speaks in his Letters to the Romans and the Corinthians. He pays particular attention to a passage in Romans 13.1: «Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God». The authorities to whom Paul is referring are undoubtedly first of all the civilian authorities, but the term he uses is *exousiai*, which he also uses, in the plural, to indicate the angelic powers. Adding to this philological point the other passages from the letters of Paul and the fact that in early Christianity, as in the Jewish community generally, it was commonly

³⁸ F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, 6 Bde., Cotta, Stuttgart 1953, Band 2, p. 92, available online at <http://www.zeno.org/nid/20005104912>.

³⁹ R. Guardini, *Hölderlin*, cit., pp. 182-183.

⁴⁰ On the parallel between Hölderlin and Nietzsche’s eagles, see G. Penzo, *Invito al pensiero di Nietzsche*, Milano 1990, pp. 63-64.

⁴¹ See the references to this debate in W. Carr, *Angels and Principalities. The Background, Meaning and Development of the Pauline Phrase *hai archai kai hai exousiai**, Cambridge 1981, pp. 30-35 e 115-121.

⁴² See M. Dibelius, *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus*, Göttingen 1909.

believed that angels were appointed to the nations, Dibelius considers there to be sufficient grounds for stating that the authorities to which Christians had to submit were not just the civilian authorities, i.e. the state, but also the spiritual forces placed above them⁴³.

Dibelius' interpretation, subsequently picked up by many other commentators⁴⁴, adds a new element to the characterization of the angels of the nations, who had previously, in fact, been understood more as angels of the people than as angels connected to any political authority. Their function appeared to be principally linked to the evangelizing and spiritual elevation of different peoples and only secondly to their political direction. Here, on the other hand, the angels appear to be directly connected to political state power and this connection is linked to St. Paul's, extremely delicate, passage according to which the faithful are obliged to submit to the state. This means that the angels of the nations no longer represent a mere secondary curiosity within an already esoteric subject like angelology, but actually have a bearing upon the theological roots of political power and obligation. Not by chance, then, were the angels a subject of animated debate in 1930s Germany: paradoxical as it seems, the discussion actually has considerable political significance.

Faced, in the early 1930s, with the numerous attempts within the German world to make that political power absolute – attempts which found assent in many sectors of both Catholic and Protestant theology – this call upon the angels of the nations suggests a reaffirmation of the limit placed on political sovereignty by the existence of a superior power. A homily given by Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich, one of the greatest opponents of the contamination of Christianity by National Socialism, can be read from this perspective; it was originally given in 1924, and then published in an anthology in 1933⁴⁵.

After recalling the Biblical roots of the belief in the angels of the nations, Faulhaber outlines the nature of the angels of the people: they are superhuman powers which the love of God has placed in opposition to the superhuman power of evil in order that the people may be saved. They are creatures and therefore limited, but stronger than humans: they are not omnipresent, like God, but quick as lightening in the execution of his commands; nor are they omnipotent, as he is, but stronger than any force the people might possess; they are not omniscient, like God, but they are wiser than statesman and intellectuals. In accordance with the three figures of the archangels, the angels of the people have a threefold mission. That of Raphael is above all to *guide* the peoples: «the rightful guides of a people are not those who impose themselves upon the people, but those who are sent by God»⁴⁶. This divine mandate is not of course expressed directly: on the concrete historical plane it is the people themselves who choose their own leaders, but upright leaders are those who account to God for their mandate. The angel of a people thus sees to it that they are guided towards truth and not lies: «At a time when so many hands reach out to *seduce* (*verführen*) the people, the Word consoles us: guardian angels must *guide* (*führen*) the peoples»⁴⁷. In the second place, the angels share Gabriel's mission: they must bring the good news of redemption to the people. And finally, they have Michael's mission: Michael is not only the angel who fights evil but also the one who brings the justice of God. This is why the angels of the people «must uphold the law of God, require that men are obedient to divine command and realise God's plan on earth, even if the road to this plan leads over the bodies of the peoples»⁴⁸. What can the peoples learn? From the doctrine of the angels of the nations, they can learn to respect the laws of God in public

⁴³ See *ibi*, pp. 189ss.

⁴⁴ Among these G. Dehn, O. Cullmann, K.L. Schmidt. In the course of his research, however, Dibelius modifies his opinion, thus drawing closer to the majority of who think it unlikely that the *exousiai* of Romans 13.1 refers to angelic powers: see the entry on *exousia* in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, hrsg. von G. Kittel, Kohlhammer, Köln 1933-1979.

⁴⁵ See M. Faulhaber, *Die Schützensengel der Völker* (1924) in *Zeitrufe, Gottesrufe*, Freiburg i.B. 1933, pp. 416-439.

⁴⁶ *Ibi*, p. 421.

⁴⁷ *Ibi*, p. 422. On the change from the concept of *Führer* to that of *Verführer* (seducer), see also D. Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von E. Bethge, München 1959, vol. II, p. 35.

⁴⁸ M. Faulhaber, *Die Schützensengel der Völker*, cit., p. 424.

life, avoiding any «*idolatry of their own nationality or state*»⁴⁹; they can learn to preserve moral values in their customs and laws and to cultivate love and the commitment to create peace on earth.

Joseph Bernhart's reflections in *Der Engel des deutschen Volkes*⁵⁰ follow a similar direction. In this text, in which the tradition of the angel of the nation is strongly reaffirmed in relation to Germany at the time, the author interprets each people as an historical expression of a thought which is eternally present in God. This explains the insuppressible originality of each people, regardless of the length of their survival. The angels of the nations represent this individuality before God in the form of a pure spirit. Through the *pietas* given to each angel by his people, each nation can be said to present itself ideally before the throne of God and to recognize his absolute sovereignty. With this, according to Bernhart, «the rightness of nationality and the wrong (*Unrecht*) of nationalism» finds theological expression⁵¹. The “satanic” temptation with which all peoples must contend is to make of their angel their God, and in so doing to deify their own genius, their very identity. But the angels are not God (Judges 13.15-16). Bernhart contrasts the glorification of racial hatred and contempt for the other with the example of the Jewish prophets who, although operating within the tradition of a chosen people, were the announcers of a final salvation which is presented to a community of «many peoples» (Is 2.3).

Christianity is coherent with this approach in its rejection of a cult of the state and of «political religion», for ever⁵², in the conviction that a people cannot itself be «the last word of existence and of the human soul»⁵³, because what is essential is to belong to the people of God, who are not this people, or that people, but everyone, anywhere, who has been liberated by grace. The guardian angel of these people of God is the Archangel Michael, who stands above the angels of the different nations. He, whose name means «Who is equal to God?», is the defender of the rights of God and the image of His Justice. Those who, like the German people, have placed themselves under the protection of this angel and have chosen him as the angel of their nation, have proclaimed their will to be part of this wider “people of God”. If now – Bernhart concludes – they want to renounce you, they will be renouncing their very selves: «the victory of the beast over the spirit would also be its ultimate victory. Because a people who sacrifice their own angel sacrifice themselves»⁵⁴.

The above shows clearly the considerable importance of the angels of the nation in the political debate of the 1930s. But this interpretation of the angels of the nations also has another - theological - implication: it reveals - by no accident, in those years – the complex dialectic of political power which plays out between the godly and the demonic. It was Cullmann who best revealed this dialectic⁵⁵. In his interpretation the expression *exousiai*, as before in Dibelius, indicates both the state and the angelic powers: «state authorities are no more than the executive organs of these invisible powers»⁵⁶. These invisible powers are instituted by God and put at the head of the different nations in order to demonstrate His protection of them. This is why Christians must submit to them. But, although defeated by Christ, these powers can also rebel against his sovereignty and claim to be absolute themselves: this is the possibility of the demonic inherent to political power.

“But as soon as – writes Cullmann – this liberation of the ‘powers’ that act behind the state has been achieved, they manifest their demonic nature, violence breaks out, the state becomes the ‘Beast’. This freeing

⁴⁹ *Ibi*, p. 426 (in italics in the original text).

⁵⁰ München 1934.

⁵¹ *Ibi*, p. 17.

⁵² *Ibi*, p. 25.

⁵³ *Ibi*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibi*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ See O. Cullmann, *Königsherrschaft Christi und Kirche im Neuen Testament*, Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon 1950. But some years previously the essay by G. Dehn, *Engel und Obrigkeit. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis vom Römer 13, 1-7*, had been published in *Theologische Aufsätze. Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag*, München 1936, pp. 90-109.

⁵⁶ O. Cullmann, *Königsherrschaft Christi und Kirche im Neuen Testament*, cit., pp. 25-26.

of such powers is most likely to happen when the state deifies itself: it then allows an “image of the Beast” (Rev. 13.14s) to be fashioned and worshipped»⁵⁷.

A consequent dialectic of political obligation derives from the above dialectic of power:

«the attitude of the Christian is absolutely clear: the most loyal submission to the state as such, to which he will render all that which he owes to it, and all that is required for its survival and protection, but, on the other hand, he will also offer immovable resistance as soon as the state deifies itself»⁵⁸.

The ambiguity of political power – which may either maintain its subordination to the divine order, or rebel and become demoniacal – is thus explained by the ambiguity of the angelic powers: they too are divine creatures with the freedom to choose between obedience and rebellion. The demoniacal possibility inherent in power is due to its divine origin. On the other hand, this origin also guarantees that the demonic will not be able to prevail completely because it has already been defeated and the reign of Christ has been established over all things, «above all rule and authority and power and dominion» (Ephesians 1.21). The demoniacal may spread, it may spread in a terrifying way, but it cannot overthrow the dominion of Christ.

The reference made at that particular time to the demonic nature of power inevitably brings to mind the interpretations of the Nazi regime as demonical⁵⁹, as having sliced away all dependence on God and given itself divine status. This connotation, by the way, was given not only by critics of the brutal unfolding of Nazi violence: even at the beginning of the 1930s the national socialist culture itself rehabilitated and glorified the “satanic” spirit as the spirit able to subjugate matter⁶⁰.

The subject of the angels of the nations in its historical development appears dense with meanings and implications. Three aspects stand out above all. The first of these is the transcendence of political power, the fact that it has a divine source, that it is never consumed by its historical manifestations. Here the angel prefigures the divine origin of power and, more generally, the invisible, hidden aspect of all political power. Power does not originate in itself, nor is it consumed when it manifests itself; it retains a transcendence which is not entirely objective. It is not surprising that through the terrible experience of totalitarianism this awareness penetrated beyond the realms of purely theological literature.

The second aspect is that of the limits to political power. Since the civil authority is subject to a spiritual power which is in turn subject to God, it cannot claim to be absolute. The angel of the nations expresses the submission of all powers to the dominion of Christ and therefore the relative nature of all earthly systems – their contingency and worldliness and consequent openness for criticism and improvement. No earthly kingdom corresponds with that of God: the angel not only expresses the transcendent origin of earthly power, he also preserves its secularity. As the Messenger of God and his Kingdom, the angel is the guardian of [their?] difference⁶¹. Positioned between heaven and earth, the angel appears to political power in order to remind it of its smallness and of its sin, and to show it the transcendence of ‘Jerusalem’. In this sense one can share

⁵⁷ *Ibi*, p. 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibi*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Even the – almost contemporary – classic text on the demoniacal side of power refers to these authors when it reconstructs the Pauline interpretation of political power: see G. Ritter, *Die Dämonie der Macht. Betrachtungen über Geschichte und Wesen des Machtproblems im politischen Denken der Neuzeit*, München-Leipzig 1940.

⁶⁰ See for instance A. Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts*, München 1930, p. 270.

⁶¹ For some interesting, if disjointed, references to the subject of “political angelology” which connect the angels of the nations with the dominion of Christ in the above sense, see H.W. Schütte, *Königsherrschaft Christi. Thesen zur Funktion einer theologisch-politischen Formel*, in AA.VV., *Kritik der politischen Theologie*, München 1973, pp. 16-28; A. D’Ors, *Teología política: una revisión del problema*, in “Revista de Estudios Políticos”, 205(1976), pp. 41-80.

Newman's reading⁶² of the emblematic passage from the Old Testament: David «looked up and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. *Then* David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell on their faces» (1Chr. 21, 16).

And finally, the third aspect is that of power's potential to become demonic. When the angel of the nation, heretofore simply a guardian, and a messenger of God, aspires to be a mediator, a bringer of salvation; when, rebelling, he hurls his invisible power not only against God but against man himself, he becomes an instrument of servitude, of tyranny and of death. The demonic nature of power is that of the fallen angel of the nation. When he falls, he brings man down with him. Marc Chagall, in the painting *The fall of the angel*, begun in 1923 and finished in 1947, captures the fate of an era: his angel, a flaming figure which, piercing the night, strikes out at a defenceless humanity, symbolizes the mystery of the spread of anti-Semitism and the tragedy of the war.

⁶² J.H. Newman, *Sermon 29. The power of nature (The feast of St. Michael and all angels)*, in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 8 voll., Longmans Green & Co., London 1907, vol. 2, available at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume2/sermon29.html>.