

The Lovely Face Aflame: An Ambiguity of Angels in St. Teresa of Avila's Visions

By Michael Bradburn-Ruster

For Sachiko Murata

The tradition of angelology stemming from Dionysius had made it quite clear: Cherubim & Seraphim were distinct. The Cherub had the power to see and know the divine light, to be filled with wisdom, which overflows to those below. The Seraph was a six-winged fire-maker, a carrier of divine warmth from the innermost circle, capable of arousing and purifying by lightning and flame, of dispelling all shadow.¹ The two thus represent, respectively, knowledge and love—as well as symbolizing the illuminative and unitive stages of mysticism.²

Yet when the great Spanish mystic and founder of the Discalced Order of Carmelites, Teresa of Avila, speaks of the angel who was the agent of her Transverberation—the piercing of her heart that took place in 1560—she seems to conflate, even confuse them. She tells us that her angel wields a long golden dart, tipped with fire, which he plunges into her heart as far as her entrails, leaving her burning with love for God; he is very lovely (*hermoso mucho*), his face aglow, like those lofty angels who seem enflamed: “probably,” she says, “the ones called *cherubim*, for they don’t tell me their names—yet I see plainly that in heaven there are such differences between angels that I wouldn’t know how to describe them.”³ In a later vision of the Divine Throne, she wonders whether the angels encircling it are seraphim or cherubim.⁴

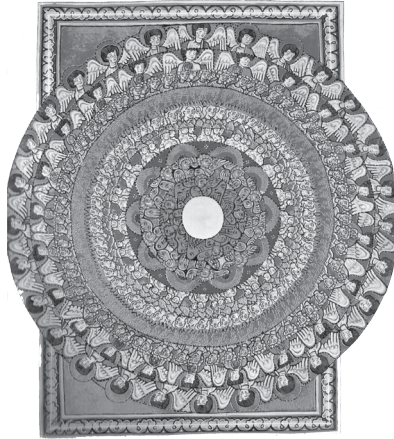
¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1987), 7.1, 13.4; pp. 161-2, 179.

² Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 54, 59, 83, 102.

³ Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Libro de la vida*, ed. and intro. Otger Steggink (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1986), 29.13; pp. 383-4.

⁴ Teresa, *Libro de la vida*, 39.22; p. 539.

Obviously, though she recognizes distinctions, Teresa lacks the terms, and thus ascribes the attributes of the Seraph to what she calls a Cherub. And the Inquisitor Domingo Báñez, her Dominican censor, who found her entirely free of heresy, was no doubt justified in correcting her, writing in the margin, “rather, it appears to be more like those called seraphim”—an emendation which prevailed in the *editio princeps* of Fray Luis de León and many subsequent editions.⁵ After all, though a woman of great intelligence and vision, yet precisely as a woman denied a full theological education, including access to Latin, how could Teresa know the distinct categories and their names? Hence, the saint was ignorant, though blameless.



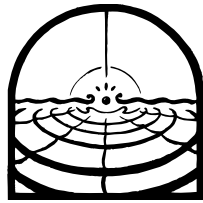
Angels by Hildegard von Bingen

Or so it might appear. Let us consider the problem of categories and names, returning to Dionysius by way of mysticism.

Mystical theology is often deemed the “way of love,” in contrast to speculative theology’s “way of knowledge.” Yet while knowledge and love, the respective activities of the intellect and will, are naturally distinguished in mystical tradition, as in the Fathers, they remain

⁵ See Stegink’s footnote in Teresa, *Libro de la vida*, p. 384, f. 46.

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