

The Beginning of Angels

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Introduction

“If there is such a thing as a universal idea, common across cultures and through the centuries, the belief in angels comes close to it.”¹

An American Religion of Angels

This book is an outgrowth of the enormous popular interest in angels that has grown steadily over the past several decades in America. Market forces coalesced with a religious awakening to create a uniquely American socio-economic phenomenon—what Peter Gardella dubs an “American religion of angels.”²

This cultural phenomenon was first sparked by the 1960s popular occult explosion. The rise of an occulture cast new light upon lesser known esoteric spiritual traditions, increased interest in the paranormal, and fostered a return to more intimate contact with—and participation in—nature (e.g., ecological movement).³ The renewed interest in angels so prevalent today did not initially emerge from mainstream religious institutions or the market place. Rather, it sprung from esoteric spiritual movements.

Why did this happen? One possibility is that modern conceptions of a materialistic, mechanistic, and impersonal universe compelled some to turn to an “enchanted-world cosmology,” that is, a world assumed to be filled with spiritual presences and inexplicable powers.⁴ The spiritual rebirth of the 1960s sought to combat modern rationalism and material reductionism. It endeavored to redirect a public

1 Nancy Gibbs, “Angels Among Us,” *Time* (December 27, 1993), 58.

2 Cf Peter Gardella, *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 3–6.

3 For a comprehensive work that provides an excellent overview and introduction to alternative spiritualities and occulture within popular Western culture, see, Christopher H. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vols. 1 & 2, (London: T & T Clark International, 2004 and 2005).

4 Cf Susan R. Garret, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

immersed in a materialistic, industrialized and scientific culture on to a new path—one promising an individualized, mystical, and cosmologically centered experience. Today’s piqued interest in angels also marks the return to angelicism in America, which as Harold Bloom reminds us, “is not a new event; it reflects a tradition that has prevailed since the nineteenth century, when it culminated in the most American of religions, Mormonism.”⁵

Perhaps the most successful of these spiritual movements is the so-called New Age, whose clearest antecedents go back to the late nineteenth century theosophical movement.⁶ The New Age, a counter-cultural grassroots movement of self-religious practitioners, in particular “used angels to reassert the power of the supernatural in supposedly secular areas like social action, ecology, psychotherapy and healing.”⁷ More than any other esoteric spiritual movement, it drew angels into the ambit of modern secular interests, making them relevant outside—and, to a degree, even inside—mainstream institutional churches. Blunt, rampant commercialization of angels has also helped place angels firmly in America’s culture. And it’s more than just a fascination. It’s a belief. Since the 1990s, American belief in angels has been hovering around 75%, a fact that has not escaped the notice of the media and entertainment industry, marketers, and even academics.

American perceptions of angels may well be a cocktail of ingredients—a strong pour of spirituality infused with religious sensibilities, and, in some cases, an added dose of doctrinal teaching. But the most powerful ingredient is the nation’s own religious and commercially charged culture. Thus, a broad spectrum of Americans perceives angels vetted and packaged as spiritual accessories, economic commodities, and as a source of entertainment by commercial

5 Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1960), 70.

6 Cf Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 70–99.

7 Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 3.

ventures. Numerous movies, television shows, and plays have been churned out presenting angels in a “sentimental, comical, or even raffish” manner.⁸ And yet, all this being told, angels are not marketed in a cultural vacuum. In reality, much of the commercialization of angels draws its inspiration from Western ecclesial and esoteric traditions of the past. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, acknowledged or not, angels are marketed within an eclectic mix of received ecclesial, esoteric, and newly minted, secular traditions.

This cultural phenomenon has been with us for nearly half a century, and yet little historical analysis has been presented that unlocks the undercurrents driving it. I suggest that it is partly kept afloat because many Americans (and certainly many outside its culture) live according to a double consciousness of the world. Intellectuals and ideologues may draw a rigid line between religious and scientific worldviews, but in our contemporary society this line has blurred, and has thus made it easier and more acceptable for people to profess their belief in the real existence of angels. Understanding the historical background of both these worldviews not only helps us understand *how* and *why* two very different quests to understand angelic origins arose, but also sheds light on present debates that seemingly have little to do with angels.

This brings us to the central purpose of this work. While the media has indeed sensationalized the apparent soaring rate of belief in the existence of angels among Americans, it rarely included careful social or historical analysis.⁹ Consequently, few of us are aware that our

8 David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992), 41.

9 The ability to measure common perceptions about angels through statistical data, that is to say through opinion polls, is a recent development that attained popular acceptance by the mid-twentieth century. The latest opinion polls conducted indicate that belief in angels is presently at an all-time high. In 1994, 72% of Americans expressed a belief in angels, a figure that jumped to 78% in 2004. See: “Eternal Destinations: Americans believe in Heaven, Hell,” Gallup.com, Posted May 25, 2004. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/eternal-destinations-americans-believe-heaven-hell.aspx>. In 2011 a national Associated Press-GfK

notions of angels in general—and of their origins in particular—are anything but new. The only thing new is the packaging, repurposing, dissemination, and branding of angels by religious and secular entrepreneurs eager to exploit their popularity.

By offering an historical perspective of past perceptions about angels, I hope to shed light on undercurrents driving this phenomenon. The most significant, yet least understood undercurrent is our own worldview. Where we stand on many issues—whether we are aware of it or not—often depends on our worldview or cosmological vision of the universe. We may not be aware that we have a worldview—but we all do. To complicate matters further, our worldview is most likely an untidy conflation of two overlapping worldviews: one pre-modern (a Christian cosmology); the other modern (a scientific cosmology). We will look at both in this work, since an understanding of each is necessary to make sense of modern perceptions of angels, and key to understanding how and why quests for the origin of angels took two distinct, contrary paths.

I also approach angels as more than just a passing cultural trend in America. It has, after all, persisted for decades now, with little sign of letting up. I believe that we're simply in the latest phase of a much larger and longer Western cultural tradition of popular belief in angels that existed long before polls were conducted. To put our fixation on angels in a larger historical perspective, we must look back far beyond our contemporary line of sight. For angels are an ancient concept, one closely tied to the age old notion of *intermediaries*.

poll based on interviews with 1,000 adults in the United States showed that 77% of adults believe angels are real. The report went on to say: "Belief is primarily tied to religion, with 88 percent of Christians, 95 percent of evangelical Christians and 94 percent of those who attend weekly religious services of any sort saying they believe in angels. But belief in angels is fairly widespread even among the less religious. A majority of non-Christians think angels exist, as do more than 4 in 10 of those who never attend religious services." See "Poll: Nearly 8 in 10 Americans believe in angels" CBSnews.com, Posted December 23, 2011. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201_162-57347634/