

**Has Secularism
Emptied the
World of Angels?**

by

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Has secularism emptied the world of angels?

Late modern worldviews in the west tend towards secularism, particularly towards atheistic humanism, and are beginning to pervade culture in a way that was once true of Christianity. Any articulated belief in God and of spiritual worlds requires caution in communicating to this new age. David Hay's research (1998 & 2000) has shown that increased care with religious language has driven the vocabulary of spiritual experience deep into the public psyche so that many people will not actually own up to such experiences until they are sure that they are safe to do so.

One wonders if it is true that to express a belief in God in secular society requires the dredging of a dusty vocabulary; even more whether it is true that 'religious language' in the public church arena will be increasingly unused to speaking about angelic hosts or demonic legions.

This article examines the movement from the romantic (pre-modern) Christian worldview to the current (late modern) secular worldview, by considering the understanding of angels.

It does so by looking at the depiction of angels in the writings and artwork of William Blake, who wrote in the eighteenth century and then comparing that with some religious and secular views elicited in the late twentieth and twenty-first century.

The Angelic World of William Blake

William Blake was born in Soho, London, in 1757. He recalls that at the age of eight he saw "a tree filled with angels" on Peckham Rye, their bright wings "bespangling every bough like stars."

As a teenager, he walked the streets of London and went on long expeditions to the surrounding county villages of Dulwich, Islington and Marylebone where he noted angels working in the hayfields. As an adult, when he was explaining his inspiration, he said that instead of seeing the sun rise as a round disc of fire, he saw "an innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." He continued to say, "I question not my corporeal or vegetative eye anymore than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it and not with it."

In these terms, Blake is suggesting that his notion of angels is in itself a known lense, a religious hermeneutic, through which he looks hopefully out into the world. It is not as though Blake was in any sense attempting to be orthodox or credal, as his rebelliousness to the institutional Church demonstrated, but he was looking for a means of expression that could be communicated in the context in which he lived.

There were some though, including Wordsworth, who were unable to accept Blake's means of expression and who saw his visionary approaches as a sign of madness or of hallucination.

Blake's view of angels is well expressed in his "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" that were published in 1794.

As ever, it is Blake's artwork that elucidates the uncertainties in the text. The drawings of angels are of flying, naked, preadolescent and genderless children – in the tradition of the medieval artwork of the Renaissance age. The first angel to be seen is that on the frontispiece of the "Songs of Innocence" where a shepherd can be seen, pausing from his piping to his sheep, to look up at the angel flying above him.

The angelic child has outstretched arms, beckoning the shepherd to other thoughts and worlds. The angel is released to explore and discover.

By contrast, the angel on the frontispiece of the "Songs of Experience" has been captured by the adult and sits on the adult's head like a small child being taken for a walk with a parent. The angelic child still has outstretched arms but they are held by the adult who is taking the child into the adult world.

These thoughts are echoed in the poetry of the two books. In the "Songs of Innocence" the released angel appears in a dream in "The Chimney Sweeper"

*"And by came an Angel who had a bright key
And he open'd the coffins and set them all free.
Then down a green plain, leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the sun."*

The Angel's freedom however was not an actual emancipation, rather a spiritual one in that child labour had to continue in the cold chimneys but with a new sense of religious belonging.

By contrast, in the "Songs of Experience" the captured angel appears in a dream in a poem entitled "The Angel."

I dreamt a dream! What can it mean?

And that I was a maiden queen:

Guarded by an angel mild

Witless woe was ne'er beguiled.

And I wept both night and day

And he wip'd my tears away

And I wept both day and night

And hid from him my heart's delight

So he took his wings and fled

Then the morn blush'd rosy red:

I dried my tears and arm'd my fears,

With ten thousand shields and spears.

Soon my angel came again;

I was arm'd, he came in vain.

For the time of youth was fled

And grey hairs were on my head.

This poem has been variously interpreted by Freudian, Marxist and religious critics to offer different insights, but it certainly details the estrangement of early childhood dreams that are banished in adolescence and kept at bay in adulthood.

Thus Blake has found huge value in the religious language of angels to speak of 'contrary states of the human soul' and to articulate the rural idyll or social injustice of his age. It was a language that went beyond his religious framework because he also used it to speak against the repressive entrapment of institutional religion.

In the words of Holmes (1997), Blake's songs "make us re-read our own childhood and supposed maturity; and alert us again to the possibility of angels and what they may be telling us."

The Angelic World of the Bible read in the Twenty-First Century

In 1998, the University of Exeter published the first of its three reports of 'The Biblos Project' and entitled it "Echo of Angels". The Biblos team had noticed that the Bible, valued by secular sources as well as by the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, was increasingly considered to be a complex piece of literature for the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century curriculum. The report noted in its introduction,

“If there are angels, can they create an echo? The Bible is quite clear that there are angels and that whether they are human or whether they are a type of heavenly being, they act as messengers of God. They are not passive, like the recumbent stone figures over graves.”

It goes on to note that the three revealed religions that have most interest in the characters and events described within the Bible also share a belief in angels and angelic intervention. The Jewish and Christian scriptures speak about meeting angels unaware (Genesis 18 and Hebrews 13 v 2) and the Qur’an states that angels are never sent without good reason (Sura 5.8).

Maybe because of such references and worldviews that do not easily fit in with a more reductionist secular worldview, the Biblos team wanted to test whether the Bible was disappearing from RE or whether it was being relegated for use only for nurture and worship. Their aim was to reclaim the Bible’s place within narrative, allowing for late modern readers to be “sceptical believers, credulous sceptics, fundamentalist atheists, biblical literalists etc.” (P 80) but noting that whatever the reader’s personal script, they will have been affected by the influence of a former Biblical worldview. Of particular value for this discussion of angels is their stated intention to reclaim the Bible as narrative and to allow for the indescribable to be articulated by the incomplete media of symbols, metaphors, similes, parables, riddles, analogies and stories, all of which offer “splashes of God light” (P 33).

Three years later, the second report of the Biblos project, “Where Angels Fear to Tread” (2001) offered findings after research had been conducted on how the Bible was taught in different stages of schooling.

The third and final report of the Biblos Project was entitled "On the Side of the Angels" (2004) and this endeavoured to get closer to the problems of the Bible in British culture and was careful to research to listen to the insights of children in years 6, 9 and 12, checking how attitudes vary with age, gender or religious affiliation.

What is helpful to the present discussion is that the Biblos project believes it is writing into a late modern culture that has become ambivalent towards religion and yet which still has not abandoned many religious beliefs and values.

Despite an on-going process of secularisation in which many people have become estranged from institutional religion, beliefs are becoming increasingly personalised.

G K Chesterton is attributed to have said that when people stop believing in God they do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything. In this he is interpreted to be commenting on the more bizarre ways of belief that spring up after orthodox creeds are abandoned.

If this is true, as the Biblos project suggests, it might be worth asking what has happened to the belief in angels. Maybe they have not been slain but re-born. Maybe there is a "return of the repressed" when the more demonic beings of Halloween have emerged when the feast of All Saints was forgotten.

The revival of angelic experience is well documented by Heathcote-James (2001) who interviewed over 800 people who claimed to have experienced visions of angels. This doctoral research is written from an objective standpoint yet presents these experiences as happening to ordinary members of the British public. Entitled "Seeing Angels", the book breaks down the angel stories into various sections; covering angel

visions, angel voices, angel warnings etc. The same author went on to write another book, a year later, detailing anecdotal evidence of after death communications with loved ones.

Heathcote-James quotes a contemporary survey in 1993 that recorded 69% of the American public to believe in angels and 46% to feel they had a guardian angel. Her objective was to chart the similar rise of "angel phenomenon" **in Britain**. Her results chapter details a data reduction (the first 350 accounts) sent to her, in which she comments on her respondents' age at the time of the angelic experience, their faith and their gender. She noted that her largest proportion of respondents were aged 31-50 and that in general angels appeared as a representation of what was understood within the faith world of the person experiencing the phenomenon. Gender difference offered no obvious variation though more women saw angels in traditional form and more men saw them in human form.

In similar ways, but with a more evangelising attitude, Theolyn Corten's writings detail a developed research into angels from 'Discovering Angels' (1996) through 'Angels Script' (1997) to 'Living with Angels' (2005) and 'Working with your Guardian Angel' (2006). The latter work is a twelve week programme in how to harness the help of a guardian angel.

Such research charts the re-appearance of angels within the experience of normal people and offers an insight into their private worlds but offers no analysis as to psychological profile and only a brief insight into cultural context. For many, the experience has remained personal and was connected to a period of transition.

Seven Angel Worlds of the Twenty First Century

Having discussed Blake's poetic interpretation of angelic beings in the 18th Century and then considered how religious language has become privatised in the 21st Century, alongside a reoccurrence of personal angelic experience, I will now offer seven worlds in which angelic beings exist currently.

1) The World of Literalism

Increasing secularism has caused a counter increase in religious fundamentalism in all religions. One way in which this is seen is in a literalist interpretation of religious concepts such as angels. An example of this can be seen in the twentieth century evangelist Billy Graham's book called 'Angels' in which he records instances of actual angel sightings. These examples range from stories where some people (not all present) are aware of gleaming powerful bodies who protect God's people in moments of danger, to stories of one-off encounters that make a huge difference to people. They reiterate modern day accounts of the Old Testament story of Elisha and his servant who was unaware of angelic protection at the siege of Samaria (2 Kings 6 v 15-19).

Another way in which angels are reported as actual sightings is the return of religious experience offered outside of a creedal formula. Such instances are often documented by Heathcote-James (2001, 2004) and Cortens (1996, 1997, 2005 and 2006). In these instances religious experience is offered without any attempt to explain them.

2) The World of Fantasy

Within the charismatic and evangelical wing of Christianity, there also resides a far greater willingness to believe in guardian angels or the angelic host who are on hand in a given context to wrestle with the powers of evil. An example of this can be seen in the novels of Frank Peretti, whose books "This Present Darkness" or "Piercing the Darkness" detail an occult realist world in which angels of light are empowered by prayer. Although these books are clearly fictitious and written as fantasy literature, they nonetheless represent a worldview that is enacted and lived in by many charismatic Christians.

A non-realist perspective is offered in the creative fantasy world of Philip Pullman's trilogy "His Dark Materials" (1997) which is loved by children, if debated by more literalist religious adults.

3) The World of Controlled Regression

A case study for this is found in 'Rita' whose fuller story is retold in the Birmingham Research Reports (Worsley 1999) in an article describing how adults recycle their faith originally formed in childhood. Rita was brought up as a Roman Catholic in Southern Ireland in the 1920's. After a convent education, she came to England and trained as a nurse, marrying an English doctor. She felt that this early faith was a resource to her throughout her life and stood her in good stead until a depressive

illness six years previously. During this depression Rita returned to a convent where she was prayed over by nuns and nursed back into health.

It was in the convent that Rita had a chance to reflect, to remember and to reclaim a former faith from childhood. She said "I am closest to God in bed...where I am really warm and contented and where I know there is no rushing in life anymore. I rushed my life when I was young, papering bedrooms and tearing paper down and putting it up again." Cosseted in her bed in the convent, she remembered her childhood world, a place in which she believed she was guarded by angels from harm. She remembered once running over a hump-backed stone bridge on the outskirts of her village – a bridge that her friends were terrified of because they believed it to be the house of a troll. She reasoned to herself that angels were stronger than trolls and so overcame her fears to cross the bridge.

This memory restored a brokenness deep in her spirit and as an ageing woman she deliberately reclaimed such simple faith in angels to combat the devils of the mind that beset her in depression. This wilful regression to reclaim an earlier faith might be termed as controlled regression – a pragmatic reclamation of a former simplicity – a reinstatement of childhood faith structures to overcome the creaking faith of adulthood. Several instances recorded by Heathcote-James (2001) of angelic visitations coming at moments of trauma or distress, could, under closer analysis be seen in these terms.

4) The World of Near Death Experience

The increase of technology of the late twentieth century brought advances not only to communication systems but also to medical practice. With this arose the

phenomena of some patients recalling experiences at moments they were to later realise as being close to the point of death. Some people would experience a mystical light, some an 'out-of-body' experience and some the presence of a glowing presence which they might interpret as being an angel or a Christ figure.

At times these experiences would cause those who had them to completely change their lifestyles – especially if they were to interpret them as being the mediatory intervention of an angel. No uniform theology exists to categorise such experiences but they are discussed by both psychological (Blackmore 1993) and spiritual sources (Fox 2000, Heathcote-James 2004).

5) Mental Illness

There is clearly a continuum between health and illness in which we all exist and this includes mental illness. Therefore recent literature has been more open to exploring the interface between spirituality and mental illness, more willing to accept the insights of those who experience depression or psychosis. A recent example of this is the book 'The Journey' by Skelton (2005) that charts a spiritual journey through mental disorientation.

"I had a sense of being dragged through time and space and found myself one minute in the past and the next minute in the future. I became so confused by all the voices that I did not know who or where I was. I felt the presence of angels everywhere, some of light and some of darkness, and the only thing I knew was that I had to try and bring harmony and find the truth." P.30.

6) Dream Worlds

There has never been a time when the interpretation of dreams has not been a cause for significant reflection. Biblical sources (see the four Josephs identified by Copley 2004 p.1 who are The Prophet Joseph, The Husband of Mary, The Qur'anic Interpreter and The Secular Character of the Webber musical) which detail the rising and falling of empires through dreams. The nineteenth and twentieth century sources saw a search for the analysis of dreams (Freud 1900/1999) Jung (1965).

It is in the realm of dreams that angels are particularly prevalent, not only as the winged or glowing figures of the Biblical narrative, but as the one-off encounters of virtual reality that change people's lives.

In her recent doctoral dissertation on Children's divine dreams (2005), Adams reports on angels appearing in children's dreams. As well as her own sources, Adams cites the work of Mallon (2002) in which a 12 year old girl dreams of an angel that sits at the foot of her bed, guarding her through the night. Elsewhere Mallon describes a 5 year old boy's dreams of an angel who entered his room when he was sick, talked to his mother and then pronounced a cure for him.

7) Poetic Worlds

Poetry has always understood language to be an incomplete medium and has therefore endeavoured to play with words, their sounds and their rhythm – offering new worlds of meaning within the constructs of language. As a result the movement

from a static literalism to a fluid imagination can be chartered without a breakdown in communication. A poet can talk of angels as being the messenger of God, a winged seraph, a beautiful being or a cherub and can herald this intention in diverse ways at the same time.

At the start of the 21st Century, poetry is a useful vehicle to describe angels as, in the words of Badham (2006) *"It is not clear whether they need to be understood as ontological realities rather than being a psychological way of articulating religious experiences of the transcendent."*

Conclusion

Secularism has not emptied the world of angels but it has embarrassed the religious world by its restrictive communication. Secularism can have the effect of driving underground the language of angels when they are understood to be the monovalent beings of a fundamentalist worldview rather than the multivalent beings of universalising worldviews. A future secularism may learn to breed cherubs and grow angels if it relaxes its hold on fundamentalist truth and allows for angels to be born as "splashes of God" (Copley 2004).

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