

Angel spirituality

Angel spirituality is a global phenomenon on the scene of contemporary religion, and there are millions of Google hits for instance for "angel healing" and "angel therapy". There is also a thriving market for best-selling books on angels not to mention the variety of angel art, objects and popular-culture representations. Although angel spirituality is especially a (Christian) Western phenomenon, we can also find angels, angel mythology and imagery for instance in the Japanese manga in which it mixes with Buddhist imagery of celestial beings (Sharbat Dar 2021).

The symbolism of the angel has a long history in both theology and art. Medieval Christian angelology represented angels as forming heavenly hierarchies or "choirs" and the most powerful and noble of the angels were the Seraphims who were also closest to God and whose main task was to praise him. The Archangels, much lower in rank, were the main messengers of God. The task of the more ordinary angels and guardian angels, even further down the hierarchy, was to minister earthly affairs and provide guidance to humans. In medieval angelologies, we can sometimes also find angels dedicated to different cosmic elements such as the planets or the minerals and angels could even be connected for instance to colours and weekdays (Michael's colour being blue and his day Wednesday; see, e.g. Jones 2010). These kinds of rankings and correspondences are adopted and creatively elaborated in esotericism and contemporary angel spirituality and they can also be further supplemented for instance by adding correspondences between angels and emotions, moods or the chakra-system.

In the history of esotericism angels have been regarded as some the most important intermediaries between humans and the divine or cosmic realm and order. Many thinkers and teachers – such as the mathematician John Dee (1527–1608), the early Protestant mystic Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), or the occult writer Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) are known from having made direct contacts with angels. In *Heaven and Hell* (originally 1758), Emmanuel Swedenborg (1861–1925) describes meeting with angels and tells his readers that these heavenly figures appear to humans when they so wish and that we should not actively seek their contact. His vivid text pictures

angels who live an active heavenly life in perfect harmony dressed in clothes the colours of which reflects their changing moods – thus giving emphasis to aesthetics that is often important in the depictions of the angels. Rudolf Steiner's (1861–1925) lectures on angels (see Steiner 1998) suggest that the angelic realm can be studied by clairvoyance and that everyone can learn to be in contact with her own guardian angel as well as with the archangels, both for one's own good and for the benefit of the whole universe. The book *The Brotherhood of Angels and Men* (1927) by Geoffrey Hodson and with a foreword by Annie Besant is presented as a directly channelled message from an angel called Bethelda.

Contemporary angel spirituality offers interpretations that vary between a Christian and a more esoteric or new age emphasis (e.g. Gardella 2007; Draper & Baker 2010; Utriainen 2015). Billy Graham (1918–2018), one of the best-known Christian public figures in the USA, published *Angels: God's Secret Agents* in 1975, a book in which he describes how angels are presented in the Bible and provides evangelical interpretation of angelic apparitions. His most important message (echoed by many other spiritual teachers) was that God sends angels so that humans need never be alone. In contrast with this gentle and peaceful understanding of angels, the US evangelical culture also gives space to much more violent and warlike apocalyptic angel imagery (see e.g. Gardella 2007, 168–200). An example of clearly more alternative contemporary interpreters of angels is Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939–2009), the leader of →The Summit Lighthouse in the USA. She taught on angels alongside with other new age spiritual subjects such as healing, karma and reincarnation, and her popular books include the best-selling practical pocket guide *How to Work with Angels* (1998).

Contemporary angel spirituality often presents itself as interreligious and as not confined to institutional religion. Angel spirituality combines teachings and beliefs from different religious traditions, and especially well-represented are Christianity and Hinduism as well as →Theosophy and →Anthroposophy. Reincarnation is one frequently presented idea. Someone can be understood to suffer from such emotional or health problems that have originated in previous lives (and thus not solvable by standard secular psychotherapy), for example. Furthermore, one's personal or guiding angel can be conceived as following the soul throughout the chain of incarnations and in so doing guarantee personal identity throughout different lives. Even if these ideas came out frequently during my fieldwork in

Finland, they were not readily accepted by all of those who identified as Christian (Utriainen 2014.)

There is research showing that some homosexuals in the USA turned to non-denominational angel spirituality when many institutional churches and congregations closed their doors on them during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s (Schindler 1999). This problematic was reflected also in the famous play by Tony Kushner (1991) and the TV-series (2003) *Angels in America*. We can find gay angels in popular culture, and queer interpretations become possible due to the undefined theology as regards the gender and sexuality of angels. Part of interreligious and vernacular angel spirituality can thus give support to sexual or other minority experiences and identities. Another interpretation found in contemporary culture is the vernacular notion that people become angels after death, an idea that is comforting to many mourners (Walter 2016).

Therapeutic religiosity and rituals

There is a strong emphasis on therapy, healing and wellbeing in contemporary angel spirituality. Angels are very often presented as spirits or energy (e.g., Csáji 2021) that give guidance, support, courage and empowerment in nearly any field of life. This aspect is also present in many of the titles of angel books and other material available in the Internet. This material typically says that it is possible to tap into the healing and supporting energies of the angels by the means of ritual techniques and other practices. These practices range from channelling angelic messages (for instance through mediumship or art) to angel meditations, and from reading angel oracle cards to learning to interpret one's own thoughts or somatic sensations as the message or touch of an angel (Gardella 2007, 93–131; Utriainen 2013).

One noteworthy ritual in angel spirituality is angel-healing or angel-therapy. This can take many forms, but one such form is through a personal appointment with an angel-therapist who summons angels and angelic energies in order either to deal with a particular emotional problem or to provide general support in life. The different energies of the angels can be visualized as different colours and any sensation or mental image experienced can be interpreted as a healing sign or message. It is also possible to give angel-healing to oneself, for instance by imagining how one grows wings from one's own back and wraps them around the body. Another popular ritual is angel-meditation: it can happen by visualizing (either together with others or alone) a journey through winding roads and changing

landscapes in order to meet one's personal angel for counselling and guidance. Yet another ritual is angel visitation in which one invites angels for a visit during which time one would concentrate on one's wishes for the future (Utriainen 2017).

Small ritual practices can be performed in the course of daily life. Such practices include learning to sensitize oneself, for example to certain colours or sounds, and interpret them as signs of angelic presence. Angel oracle cards can be consulted much in the same ways as → Tarot cards or one can carry an angel prayer card in one's handbag or attach it on the bathroom mirror where its message will be regularly seen. Apparitions of feathers, interpreted as signs of angelic presence, are often cited.

These and other rituals and interpretative practices can be learned from books and on the Internet, but they can also be rehearsed and practiced together with other people in courses and workshops. Such groups may form offline or online communities of practice and support-groups for talking about spiritual matters that one cannot always disclose in other social contexts (Uibu 2013). One such sensitive issue can be the engagement and interest in angel-spirituality itself which may not easily fit within the contours of institutional Christianity or secular life (Utriainen 2016).

Women teachers and practitioners

Both practitioners and teachers in the field of contemporary angel spirituality are predominantly women. According to my research conducted in Finland, of those who came to listen to the famous angel healer and writer Lorna Byrne in 2011 94% were women. It is possible that the open emphasis on emotions and relationality (traditional female responsibilities and areas of cultural work) in the discourse, practices, and aesthetics of angel spirituality more readily invites women than men. Another important aspect is that for instance the following famous female figures provide inspiration, encouragement and models of identity and agency to other women (Gardella 2007, 93–102; Utriainen 2014; Mikkola 2021).

Lorna Byrne (b. 1953) is an Irish Catholic whose autobiographic first book *Angels in my Hair* (2008) describes, as its title indicates, very close quotidian relations that the author has had with the angels throughout her life. The book became extremely successful and was soon translated into many languages. Other visible female angel spiritual teachers include the above-mentioned Elizabeth Prophet, → Doreen Virtue

(b. 1958), and Diane Cooper (1940) from the USA, and Marina Zavou (b. not known) from Greece. Doreen Virtue is known for example for her angel oracle cards and for channelling angels' messages. Diane Cooper can be characterized as someone with a very clear new age emphasis; besides angels, she is known for instance for teaching on unicorns, inspiring attempts to photograph angels, and interpreting "orbs" (dots and balls of light) in photos as angelic apparitions (Cooper 2008). Marina Zavou has written about the return of angels and the journey to the fifth dimension (Zavou 2012); she has also performed "karmic operations" in which illnesses and emotional problems diagnosed as originating from previous lives are healed through spiritual surgery performed with the angels. Also, the Norwegian princess Märta Louise (b. 1971) is known for her activity in new age and angel spirituality – this has caused some headache for the royal family as the heads of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Norway (Gilhus 2012; Kraft 2015).

The afore-mentioned women come from different religious and cultural backgrounds, which to some extent shows in their emphases. Their self-positioning vis-à-vis Christianity varies and they may thus take different stances with such issues as reincarnation. However, all these visible contemporary figures are entrepreneurial women who act either outside of or on the borders of institutional religion through offering esoteric interpretations to very powerful Christian symbols. They share the idea that angels can be called upon independently from institutional religious authorities and interpretations, and thus clearly value experience over tradition. In addition to the above-mentioned and other famous international names, there are numerous in various degrees influential teachers in different national and local contexts.

Between Christianity and Esotericism

The angel is a popular and powerful traditional Christian symbol: angels are understood as God's most important messengers and ministers who execute divine power on earth. What most importantly distinguishes traditionally Christian and more esoteric interpretations of angels is the question of the passivity/activity of human beings in relating to the angels. According to traditional Christian teachings it is God alone who can command angels, while in more esoteric understandings humans can actively turn to them. Another important distinction is whether the angels are interpreted metaphorically (as is mostly the case in mainline Christianity) or more realistically as is the case in many forms of more esoteric angel spirituality.

The question is whether it is possible to, either literally or metaphorically, "see" the angels (see e.g. Utriainen 2016.)

Angel spirituality is not only a popular but also a very accommodating form of vernacular esoteric religiosity. It is not a religious institution or movement but rather a trend or current that easily combines with different religious and spiritual forms and aspirations. We can find it as a complementary element in the program of some yoga schools, for example, or as combined with Reiki-healing. Angel spirituality exists both in an ostensibly new age version in which angels are sometimes associated with mighty extraterrestrial powers and as low-key lived religiosity for tending to personal everyday concerns. The ritual forms also vary from channelling spectacles to learning to find the touch of an angel in the small joys and surprises of life. In its most vernacular form angel spirituality can be described as portable everyday religion that adds a layer of magic or enchantment to life.

Terhi UTRIAINEN

Bibliography

Byrne, Lorna. 2008. *Angels in My Hair: The True Story of a Modern-Day Irish Mystic*. New York: Random House.

Cooper, Diana. 2008. *Enlightenment through Orbs*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Csáji, László Koppány. 2021. "Angels as the Shape of Energy: How the Threshold Narratives Shaped the Meaning Construction of 'Angel' and 'Energy' in a Central and Eastern European New Religious Group". *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13 (3–4): 265–299.

Draper, Scott and Joseph Baker. 2010. "Angelic Belief as American Folk Religion". *Sociological Forum* 26 (3): 623–643.

Gardella, Peter. 2007. *American Angels: Useful Spirits in the Material World*. Lawrence KS: University of Kansas.

- Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. 2012. "Angels in Norway: Religious Border-Crossers and Border-Markers". In *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, edited by Marion Bowman & Ülo Valk, 230–245. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Graham, Billy. 1975. *Angels: God's Secret Agents*. Nashville: W Publishing Group.
- Hodson, Geoffrey. 1982 (orig. 1927). *The Brotherhood of Angels and Men*. Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House.
- Jones, David Albert. 2010. *Angels: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kraft, Siv Ellen. 2015. "Royal Angels in the News: The Case of Märtha Louse, Astarte Education and the Norwegian News Press". In *Nordic New Religions*, edited by James Lewis Inga Tøllefsen, 190–202. Leiden: Brill.
- Mikkola, Elisa. 2021. "Angel Spirituality in the World's Happiest Country: The Attraction of Lorna Byrne among Finnish Women". *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13 (3–4): 351–379.
- Prophet, Elizabeth. 1998. *How to Work with Angels?* Gardiner: Summit University Press.
- Schindler, Amy. 1999. "Angels and the AIDS Epidemic: The Resurgent Popularity of Angel Imagery in the United States of America". *Journal of American Culture* 22 (3): 49–61.
- Sharbat Dar, Dunja. 2021. "Japanese Concept of Angels: Analyzing Depictions of Celestial Beings in the *Shōjo* Manga *Kamikaze Kaitō Jeanne*". *Entangled Religions* 12:1.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 2003. *Guardian angels. Connecting with our spiritual guides and helpers*. East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press.
- Swedenborg, Emmanuel. 2007 (orig. 1758). *Heaven and Hell*. Radford: Wilder Publications.
- Uibu, Marko. 2013. "Creating Meanings and Supportive Networks on the Spiritual Internet Forum 'The Nest of Angels'". *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 6: 69–86.
- Utriainen, Terhi. 2013. "Doing Things with Angels: Agency, Alterity and Practices of Enchantment". In *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, edited by Steven Sutcliffe & Ingvild Gilhus, 242–255. Acumen, Durham.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2014. "Angels, Agency and Emotions: Global Religion for Women in Finland?" In *Finnish Women Making Religion: Between Ancestors and Angels*, edited by Terhi Utriainen & Päivi Salmesvuori, 237–254. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2015. "Angel Religion in Finland: Combining Christianity and New Age: Angel Religion in Finland". In *Nordic New Religions*, edited by James Lewis & Inga Tøllefsen, 158–172. Leiden: Brill.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2016. "Matter Challenging Words: From 'Angel Talisman' to 'Prayer Ornament'". In *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, edited Tim Hutchings & Joanne McKenzie, 219–34. Oxon: Routledge.

Utriainen, Terhi. 2017. "Healing Enchantment: How does Angel Healing Work?" In *Spirit and Mind: Mental Health at the Intersection of Religion & Psychiatry*, edited by Helena Basu, Roland Littlewood & Arne S. Steinforth, 253–273. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Walter, Tony. 2016. "The Dead Who Become Angels: Bereavement and Vernacular Religion". *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 73 (1): 3–28.

Zavou, Maria. 2012. *Journey to the Fifth Dimension: A Divine Journey*. Bloomington: Balboa Press.