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ANGELS AS SPIRITUAL GUIDES



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To one of my spiritual teachers, and an example of an earthly angel, Sister Mary Francis Lynch. Sister Mary taught us grace and laughter in the pursuit of a higher calling to human and spiritual education and peace.

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Abstract

The existence of angels has been discussed for centuries in legendary, philosophical, and religious writings. Angels are believed to be superhuman entities that exist to be servants of a higher being. These spiritual beings are thought to be intermediaries between God and human kind. They are believed to perform the tasks of messengers, guides, and guardians. Many people have reported encounters with angels at different times in their life. Near-death research has recorded angelic encounters, during near-death experiences, by describing encounters with beings of light or angelic forms recognizable to the experiencer. This essay will discuss some legendary, theological, and philosophical beliefs that support the belief in the reality of angels as messengers, guides, and guardians to human beings and their function as spiritual guides during near-death experiences.

Introduction

Angelology, the study of angels, has existed for many centuries. During the Middle Ages, the interest in studying angels peaked and then began to abate by the 19th century. However, interest in angelology is now having a resurgence.

An angel, as defined by Webster (1983), is a spiritual being that is employed by God to communicate with human kind. Angels are defined as ministering, messenger, or guiding spirits. Since there are no irrefutable evidence to prove in the existence or non-existence of angels, knowledge about them are based upon legends, theological beliefs, philosophical interpretations, and phenomenological experiential reports.

A theological belief in angels requires the believer to accept the possibility that there is higher order of existence than human life. According to philosopher Mortimer Adler (1982) however, philosophical theories can express beliefs that are not based upon a theological belief, therefore providing possible explanations for angelic encounters that involve agnostics, atheists or individuals who do not believe in the existence of angels. Agnostics think that it is impossible to know whether there is a God and atheists believe that there is no God. For an agnostic or atheist, a belief in angels can be as difficult to accept as is a belief in God.

Angel researcher Taylor (1992) believes that angels are of interest for everyone regardless of their religious belief, race, or nationality and that angels have been around long before any religion was formed. She has found that many parents report that their children believe in angels even without an introduction to a belief in angels by other children or an adult. According to Gallup & Castelli (1989), 50% of the U. S. people, age

18-49, believe in angels. The percent of believers in angels drops to 36% for individuals over 50 years old (pp. 75-76). Taylor (1992) comments that a 1988 Gallup poll reports that 74% of teenagers believe in the existence of angels (p. 15).

According to angel researcher Sophy Burnham (1990), the mystery of angels has been part of most cultures in the world and has been part of the development of some folklore and theological beliefs. The belief in angels has been carried through ancient history and Judaic, Christian, and Islamic lore and has influenced each other's religious faith. Religious writer Betty Malz (1973) believes that angels make their presence known when a mortal is in need of guidance or assistance. In her own near-death experience, Malz reports that she was helped through her transition from life into afterdeath by an angel (p. 21).

The belief in angels is not universal. According to Gallup & Castelli (1989), over 50% of the adult U. S. population do not believe that angels exist. Thomas Aquinas believed that the failure of some individuals to believe in the possibility of angels is a result of an inability to differentiate between sense-perception and imagination, from one perspective, and intellection or understanding, from another (Adler, 1982). In addition, many eastern religions do not maintain a belief in spiritual beings.

In this paper, I will look at the beliefs of angels as spiritual guides from the perspective of legendary stories, theological beliefs, philosophic reasoning, and near-death experiences. Through the review of these systems of thought, I will provide support to the legends that angels do exist and that the form they take is based upon the interpretation of the believer. My philosophical argument will provide that, even if an

individual does not want to theologically believe in angels, there is nothing impossible about believing that incorporeal beings can exist. As further evidence to the possibility of the existence of angels, I will discuss the frequent encounters with angelic beings during near-death experiences.

History of Angelology

The belief and study of angels has existed since ancient times. Winged entities have been found painted on ancient Egyptian tombs, throughout ancient Greece and in Asia Minor. Many renowned leaders and spiritual teachers have spoken about receiving guidance from angelic beings. Jesus, Muhammad, Socrates, George Washington, Nikola Tesla, Da Vinci, Raphael, Emerson, Joan of Arc, Swedenborg, Bernadette of Lourdes, Joseph Smith, Carl Jung, and many others have spoken about contact with angels (Ronner, 1985; Steiger, 1981).

During the Middle Ages, the study of angels abounded. Theological groups, philosophers, and writers depicted angels in many fashions. Medieval history is interwoven with stories of angels who appear to guide individuals. However, due to some of the preposterous studies that were being performed during the Middle Ages, such as the debate as to how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, angelology lost many of its theological and philosophical scholars (Leavell, 1973; Ronner, 1985; Zaleski, 1987).

There has been a resurgence in angelology in recent years. According to a recent U.S.A. Today article entitled "Angels Among Us," books and seminars are now being published and presented to help individuals learn more about the subject of angels

and to attempt to "[get] in touch with their [personal] angel" (Parker, 1992, p. 2D). The interest in angels has also been heightened as a result of increased reports of near-death experiences in which the experiencer encounters beings of light which are sometimes described as angels. Michael Talbot (1991) reports that the beings encounter during a near-death experience "act as guides and counselors whose only purpose is to teach" (p. 250).

Angels in Legend and Folklore

The legends and folklore stories of angels intervening in the lives of mortal humans have existed for centuries. Angels have had central or significant roles in the great epic poems of Dante, Milton, and Goethe, and angels are celebrated in a variety of ways by the writers of English lyrics, from Shakespeare, John Donne, and Henry Vaughan to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Henry W. Longfellow, Leigh Hunt, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Robert Bridges.

Many human encounters with angelic beings are accepted by the experiencer without any sense of its theological or philosophical meaning. Theological reasoning accepts the reality of angels, through faith, and provides the religious dogma to support this belief. Philosophical reasoning does not require the belief that angels exists, just the acceptance that it is possible for them to exist. I have separated my study of angels into this section because many of the stories of angelic encounters support various theological beliefs or philosophical reasoning. Encounters with angelic spiritual guides, during a near-death experience, are supported by theological beliefs, philosophical reasoning, and

by the phenomenological experience of the encounter by the experiencer.

In a modern encounter with a "comforting angel," a woman who was severely injured in an automobile accident reported that she was "comforted" by an angel who came in the form of a man surrounded by a pink glow. "He seemed to be all soft, vaporous light. His movements were graceful and fluid; his hands were extended, almost reassuringly, palms open towards her. He had the most loving eyes she'd ever seen, and the kindest smile (Webber, 1992, p. 26).

According to Ronner (1985) some of the leading angel writers have been Emanuel Swedenborg, John Milton, Thomas Aquinas, and False-Dionysius. Swedenborg was a 1700s scientist who believed that human souls became angels after their death. John Milton, wrote Paradise Lost in which he had good and bad angels fighting about the heavens and earth. Thomas Aquinas, known as the "angelic doctor," was the greatest angel scholar of the Middle Ages. In his book, Summa Theologica, he detailed his interpretation of angelic life. He wrote that angels are all intellect without material existence but can take on form as necessary (Aquinas, 1960; Burnham, 1990). False-Dionysius was a Middle Eastern writer who lived during the 6th century. He examined the early biblical writings and is credited for developing a heavenly hierarchy of nine angels choirs or orders and in to three groups.

False-Dionysius' angelic hierarchy consists of three triads. The highest triad consists of Seraphims, Cherubims, and Thrones. The middle triad is made up of Dominations, Virtues, and Powers. The lowest triad are the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. According to Godwin's (1990) interpretation of False-Dionysius' angelic

hierarchy, Seraphs are considered to be the highest of God's angelic servants whose honor is to ceaselessly chant God's glory. The Cherubims are the guardians of the Tree of Life and God's charioteers. Thrones are God's chariots. In the middle angelic triad, Dominions are tasked to "regulate angels' duties." Virtues are the angels that bestow "Blessing from on high, usually in the form of miracles." The Powers are the angels that are thought to be the "border guards" of heaven. In the lowest triad, the Principalities are considered the protectors of religion. The Archangels are the "Messengers which carry Divine Decrees." They are considered the most important intercessionaries between God and humans and command the "legions of Heaven." The final grouping of angelic bodies are the Angels. These entities are considered to be the closest to humans and are the messengers between God and humans (pp. 23-66). The Archangels and the Angels may be the spiritual entities that act as guides during near-death experiences since the Archangels Sari-el is considered to be the "Angel of Death" and some near-death experiencers report being guided by angelic beings.

The English monk, the Venerable Bede (1966) related a story of the of the intervention of a spiritual guide in the life of a man who was close to death.

A handsome man in a shining robe was my guide, and we walked in silence in what appeared to be a northeasterly direction...He soon brought me out of darkness into an atmosphere of clear light, and as he led me forward in[to] bright light." The guide then directed the man to return to his body and "weigh your actions with greater care and study to keep your words and ways virtuous and simple (pp. 289-293).

In a more modern story, Moody (1977) shares a story of a veteran of World War II who described his experience with a spiritual entity.

I was serving in the infantry in Europe. I had an experience I won't forget...I saw an enemy airplane diving toward the building we were in, and it had opened fire on us...The dust from the bullets were headed in a path right towards us. I was very scared and thought we would all be killed

I didn't see a thing, but I felt a wonderful, comforting presence there with me, and a kind, gentle voice said, 'I'm here with you, Reid. Your time has not come yet.' I was so relaxed and comfortable in that presence...Since that day, I have not been one bit afraid of death (p. 26).

The continued popularity of the classical writings of Dante, Milton, Goethe, Shakespeare, Donne, Vaughan, Rosetti, Longfellow, Hunt, Dickinson, St. Vincent Millay, and Bridges have continued the interest in angelology and inspired modern writers to share their experiences and the experiences of others in collections of stories, plays, and film.

Angels and Theology

According to Adler (1982), in order to separate the "facts" of angelology from legend and folklore of personal experiences and stories, the study of angels must be examined from a theological and a philosophical position. The interpretation of the existence of angels is based upon the difference in theological beliefs regarding the reality

of the existence of angels and the philosophical interpretation of angels possibly being objects of thought. The separating the two interpretation allows for both individuals with or without religious-spiritual beliefs to accept the possibility of the reality of angels. Religion-spiritual interpretations of the existence of angels is based upon faith. The philosophical acceptance of angels is based on the possibility of their existence as incorporeal entities or "minds without bodies."

The monotheistic religions of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam share the beliefs of a tripartite universe consisting of a Heaven, Earth, and Hell which is populated by angels, humans, and demons (Burnham, 1990; Godwin, 1990). This is in contrast to the monistic beliefs of Hindus, the Jains, and the Buddhist. According to Godwin (1990), most eastern religions have no belief in angels as messengers. This function is believed to be performed by reincarnated holy sages or incarnations of deities. In most western religions, which are based on prayer, angels act as messengers of God.

Ronner (1985), states that angels are believed to have been created by God before the universe and life. Rawlings (1981) comments that the empire of angels, described in both the Old and New Testaments, is immense. According to the Old Testament, "The chariots of God [are] twenty thousand, [with] thousands of angels" (Psalms 68:17). In the New Testament, the apostle John reports a heavenly vision of angels.

And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne
and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand
times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands (Revelation 5:11)

The religious beliefs in angels are based upon faith in things unseen, sacred

writings, and the dogma of the religions. Christian religious leader, Billy Graham (1986), has written about angels from a Biblical sense in order to provide insight into the belief of angels and to "focus on the positives of Christian faith." He professes a belief in the existence of angels because the Bible says there are angels and he senses their presence in his life (pp. 23-24).

In the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, angels are believed to act as spiritual guides in the believer's life. According to Zaleski (1987) the sixth century Pope, Gregory the Great, was guided by an angel who at one time instructed him, after revealing a vision of "hell", to "leave, and consider carefully how you will live from now on" (p. 29).

In the Old Testament, angels are reported to act as guides and messengers. "For my Lord, in whose presence I have walked, will send his angel with you and make your mission successful" (Genesis 24:40). "See, I am sending an Angel before you to lead you safely to the land I have prepared for you" (Exodus 23:20). In the New Testament, angels also act as messengers and guides, and as protectors of Jesus. In Acts 12:7-9, an angel acted as a guide to the apostle Peter when he was lead out of jail by miraculously unlocking his chains, doors, and leading him past the guards.

Muslims believe angels act as messengers and spiritual guides. In the sacred writings of the Koran, an angel, in the form of a man, came to Muhammad and directed him in the development of his faith. According to Zaleski (1987), the Prophet Muhammad was "transported" from Mecca to Jerusalem in one night in the company of the angel Gabriel, as his spiritual guide.

Angelic missions are not always as merciful; they can also act as agents of

retribution. King Herod, in biblical history was killed by an angel when he declared himself a god. "Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness so that he was filled by maggots and died-because he accepted the peoples worship instead of giving glory to God" (Acts 12:23). In the Old Testament, the "angel of death" was assigned to kill all of the first born males in Egypt, as retribution for the continued enslavement of the people of Israel.

Many statements made about angels, in the sacred texts of religions, cannot be explained in naturalistic terms and could be considered miraculous. The explanation of these types of experiences requires the individual to have either a faith in a higher level of being than human existence, or possess a philosophical understanding which allows for the possibility for the intervention of incorporeal beings in human life.

Angels and Philosophy

The philosophical study of angels looks at angels as incorporeal beings of speculative thought that possibly exist. As an object of thought, angels have a possibility of existing but must be compared to known actualities or forms, such as human beings, in order to be accepted.

Thomas Aquinas (1960) believed that real incorporeal beings exist without matter. He cited three examples of incorporeal entities, the human soul, angels, and God. He believed that the only way that one could know anything about incorporeal entities, or minds without bodies, must be through laborious reasoning which leads to the conclusion that there is a possibility for the existence of angels. One method to define angels is

through negation or the separation of thought from matter. A second method to define the existence of angels is by elucidating on the effect the spirit might have on human life. Noting that some events happen that cannot be corporeally explained allows for the possibility of an incorporeal explanation to a human experience.

Thomas Aquinas believed that angels are 100 percent spirits, that have no mass or matter, and take up no space. He equated their existence to human thought. Therefore, in answer to the historical question asked about angels, "How many angels can dance on the point of a pin?" Aquinas reasoned that every angel in the "cosmos" could dance on the point of a pin and still allow space (Ronner, 1985, p. 34).

Adler (1982) provides a reasonable philosophic argument for the existence of angels and their ability to impact human lives. He comments that since angels are perceived to be incorporeal objects they cannot act directly, by exerting physical force, to cause a response. However, by exerting spiritual energy, angels can effect bodies or produce physical effects. Adler uses the analogy of a corporation to demonstrate the ability for angels to be present in a "heavenly realm" and in the physical space of the object it is influencing, at the same time. A corporation is normally registered in one state but can be present in other states at the same time. Also, a corporation is not a physical body but it is considered a "moral person," responsible for its actions and can take action upon others. Adler also uses the evidence attributed to telekinetic energy, the ability to move physical objects through thought, to also support the possibility of angelic influence on human life.

If the existence of angels can be accepted as possible, through theological beliefs

and philosophical reasoning, the experiential contact with angels by human beings can further help to confirm their existence. Collections of personal encounters with angels supports the beliefs in angelic beings. Furthermore, near-death experiences, that consist of vivid encounters with "beings of light," may phenomenologically support the belief in the existence of angels.

Angels and Near-Death Experiences

Near-death experiences are a human phenomenon in which human beings sense they are passing from life into an after-life but after a brief glimpse of the after-life, return to their current existence. During this experience, many individuals report an encounter with a being that is described as an angel. The angel acts as a guide to help the individual through the afterdeath experience (Rawlings, 1978).

The near-death experience is a conscious perceptual experience in which the individual experiences a sense of being detached from the physical world during the process of physiological dying. Individuals may experience their own physiological dying and at the same time become aware of their existence in an altered state. In this altered state, they may experience a sense of peace, body separation, entering darkness, passing through a tunnel, seeing a light, and entering into the light (Ring, 1980).

Near-death experiencers are generally positively affected by their experience. The confrontation with death, through a near-death experience, seems to give the individual more meaning to his or her life (Kalish, 1981). According to Peay (1991), most individuals who have a near-death experience are not fearful of death and are more

compassionate, with the sense of unconditional love towards others.

Moody (1977) reports that some people, who have had a near-death experience, claim they were saved from physical death by the intercession of a spiritual being. According to Moody's research, a number of near-death experiencers became conscious of spiritual beings who seemed to be present to guide them through their transition from death into afterlife, and in some cases, to tell them that their time of death had not come and that they were required to return to their bodies.

Near-death researcher Kenneth Ring (1985) also reports that a number of his research subjects reported encounters with other beings, during their near-death experience, who acted as guides for their journey. The spiritual guides would communicate telepathically, providing reassurance and some direction concerning the experience. This type of communication is similar to the "holographic thought balls" described by Swedenborg. He described the communication as telegraphic bursts of knowledge as a picture language that is so full of information that each image contains a "thousand ideas." He commented that when the angels spoke that their thoughts became three-dimensional symbolic images (Ring, 1980, Swedenborg, 1984). Some experiencers have reported that, following their near-death experience and contact with spiritual beings, they were more conscious of their "inner source of wisdom" and had an increased contact with their spiritual guides.

Some researchers refute the validity of near-death experiences by concluding that the experience is only the mind's defense against the fear of dying. However, children's near-death experiences appear to refute these conclusions. The near-death experiences of

children are very similar to the experiences reported by adults (Moody, 1988). Children, under the age of seven do not normally fear death. They consider death to be a temporary event after which one eventually returns to life. Therefore, children would have no reason to create a positive after-life image in order to defend a fear of dying.

Other researchers attempt to explain the near-death experience by stating that it is a result of a chemical reaction within the brain during the dying process as opposed to an altered state of consciousness that is a result of a purely spiritual experience. According to researcher Ronald Siegel (1981), the descriptions given by individuals who have had a near-death experience are "virtually identical" to the descriptions reported by individuals who have experienced hallucinations that were either drug-induced or caused by other means. Carl Sagan (1979) believes that some aspects of the near-death experiences can be associated with a defect in the human neuroanatomy that, under certain conditions, always causes the illusion of an out-of-body experience. He also associates the near-death experiences of passing through a tunnel with latent memories of the human birth experience of passing down the birth canal, and that the perceived bright light at the end of the tunnel, during the near-death experience, is actually the mind's recall of the lights of the delivery room, during the experience's birth.

In contrast to those that would debunk the near-death experience, the astral projection or out-of-body experience is a paranormal event, which happens during many near-death experiences, and provides documentation of the validity to the near-death experience. During the out-of-body experience, the experiencer gains knowledge of activities that he or she could not have known prior to or during the experience without

separating from his or her physical body. The most impressive validation of the near-death experience is the attitudinal and personality changes of the experiencers following their experience (Moody, 1988; Morse, 1990; Ring, 1980, 1985).

Melvin Morse (1990), in his near-death research with children, reports that children sometimes are met and guided by guardian angels. These angels support the child and are with him or her through the near-death experience. Some children report that the angel is large and is surrounded by a bright light. Raymond Moody (1988) describes a child's description of his near-death experience as passing through the tunnel and being met on the other side by a group of angels. The child described the angels as not having wings but as glowing and emanating love. He reported that he was told by the angels that if he passed a certain point he would not be able to return to his life. Another child described that as part of her near-death experience, she had an out-of-body experience in which she was met by a "pretty lady" who "helped her through the tunnel (pp. 58-62).

The veracity of the acceptance of angels as spiritual guides is questioned by some researchers. Siegel debunks the reports of the presence of spiritual guides as imaginary playmates or hallucinated companions. Kübler-Ross, however, contradicts Siegel's opinion by asserting that reports provided by lonely children and stranded mountaineers, of a sense of not being alone, is actually their sensing of the presence of their guardian angel (Zaleski, 1987, p. 135).

Ronner (1985) comments that the reason that humans cannot see most angels is due to the fact that physical eyes are not made to see the spiritual world, the same as the

human ear is not designed to hear the high pitched frequencies that dogs can hear.

Another reason he provides for an angel's invisibility is the expectations of the angel observer. If one does not expect to see something, then in all probability he or she will not be able to see what is actually present (p. 105).

Through the psychic phenomenon of near-death experiences, individuals have seen angels and experienced their comfort, protection, and love. Angels appear to have an important part, in the near-death experience, as a guide for the experiencer, as he or she passes through the experience dying and transitioning to an afterlife.

Angels act as messengers to warn the near-death experiencers to remember what they have experienced and strive to abstain from any former, inappropriate behavior. Individuals who have experienced a near-death experience relate an understanding that spirituality concerns the ability to love other people, not specific religious doctrines and denominations, and that the importance of human life is service to others and the seeking of knowledge. The near-death encounters with angels also support the individual's sense of security and peace with him or her self following the near-death experience (Moody, 1988; Peay, 1991; Ring, 1980; Zaleski, 1987).

Conclusions

As children, many of us became aware of or began to believe in angels. As Taylor (1992) reported, many times children are aware of angels without parents or others imparting them with the knowledge of the possible existence of angels. This personal, satisfying belief in angels, tends to continue to guide and comfort the individual

throughout his or her life and is believed to guide him or her from death into afterlife.

In legend and folklore, humans have related stories and personal experiences involving angelic beings and the involvement of angels in human lives. According to Daniel, Wyllie & Ramer (1992), the affiliation between humans and angels is an intimate relationship. Angels help to reveal that the Creator is a part of each human being. The angels' recognition of the Creator, within humans, and their service to God, are what motivates the angels to interact in human lives (pg. 55).

Through religious faith, many come to believe in the existence and power of angels in their lives. Angels are known, through sacred writings, to have guided religious personages and brought forth messages from God. Angels are believed to be continuously involved in believers' lives. Malz (1973) describes angels as agents of miracles that humans can see if they have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. She states, "if you can explain it, it is not a miracle." By allowing God to open our spiritual eyes and ears, we can see beyond the "normal" realities of our world (pg. 114).

Philosophy has presented arguments that support the possibility of the existence of angels and their ability to have an impact on the human experience. By allowing for the possibility of the existence of angels, philosophy has made it possible for non-believers in spiritual life to believe in the existence of angels. According to Adler (1982), the acceptance of the possibility of the existence of an "incorporeal substance" allows for the conclusion that angels do exist.

Near-death experiencers have consistently reported the interaction of angels with the experiencer as spiritual guides through the afterlife experience. If it is accepted that

near-death experiences are a glimpse into life after death, then it is possible to also believe that angels act as guides, from life into afterlife. Zaleski (1987) reports that individuals remain under the protection of a guardian angel during their current life and into the passage to the afterlife. The guide is present even if the experience of passing into the afterlife is an incident caused by either dreaming, trance, or death.

The belief in angels as spiritual guides ultimately becomes a personal belief. Individuals can come to believe in angels through philosophical reasoning or theological faith, but their ultimate unwavering belief in angels may only come from personal encounters with angelic beings in their life and/or during an altered state of consciousness, such as a near-death experience. Through these encounters with angelic beings, experiencers may find a new aspect to their life.

Angels do exist. Not necessarily in the images that artists and sculptors have portrayed them, or in the personages that writers have depicted them, but in the essence of angelic believers' impression of their encounter with their angelic spiritual guides.

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