

Angels in English Religious Cultures c.1480-1700

Introduction

I propose to examine the nature of popular beliefs surrounding angels in Reformation-era England (c.1480-1700). My intention is to use this theme in order to explore key issues in religious, social and cultural change during a period of dramatic upheavals and striking continuities. A close scrutiny of this aspect of popular devotion will contribute not only to a greater understanding of contemporary culture and mentalities, it will also engage with a number of current lively debates surrounding the impact and long term repercussions of religious reform upon the lives of ordinary people.

A persistent belief in angels as protectors and intercessors was widespread throughout this period, and is a rewarding area of study because of the ambiguous and contested place they hold in Christian (and particularly Protestant) theology. Although indubitably biblical, the variety of rituals, representations and devotions associated with angels occupied an uneasy position between orthodox piety and illegitimate 'superstition'. They therefore offer a unique opportunity to examine contemporary structures of belief. As well as demonstrating the integration of nature and 'supernature' in early modern mentalities, studying angels will allow an investigation of the nature of religious change. Theologically less dubious than purgatory, transubstantiation or saint-veneration, angels nevertheless caused English reformers considerable unease. The survival and mutation of this aspect of popular devotion therefore raises interesting questions about the reception of religious reform at a popular level. To revisionist historians, angels might seem a symptom of the

resilience of Catholic devotion, whilst others have suggested they replaced the saints as the ‘ideologically appropriate friends of humanity’.¹ However, neither of these explanations is entirely convincing. My hope is to situate angelic beliefs with respect to post-revisionist scholarship recognising continuities in religious culture, albeit complex ones. Recent research has shown that the reform of English ‘popular’ religion was a long term, fluid process, where older assumptions and observances were assimilated and harnessed. A study of angels potentially has much to say in this context.

Literature Review

In recent decades historians have become interested in many aspects of the supernatural: witchcraft and demonology, prodigies, portents, miracles and ghosts have all attracted notice; but with a few exceptions such as literary studies of Milton, or investigations of renaissance ‘ceremonial magic’, early modern scholars have paid scant attention to the cultural and epistemological implications of the angels’ continuing presence.² Within the existing literature angels remain a diffusely treated topic. Two studies which have proven particularly influential to the study of late medieval and early modern religious culture are Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars* and Keith Thomas’ *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, but neither author devotes a separate section to the angelic beings within their work, although each recognises the potential significance of their presence. Other studies that focus more specifically on angels have indicated their integral importance to religious cultures,

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided* (London, 2003), p.581.

² Robert H. West, *Milton and the Angels* (USA,1955); Wayne Schumaker, ‘John Dee’s Conversations with Angels’ in Wayne Schumaker, *Renaissance Curiosa* (New York, 1982); Deborah Harkness, *John Dee’s Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge, 1999)

and have highlighted some of the aspects of the topic which are likely to be fruitful in a more detailed study, but comprehensive investigation into these transient beings remains to be undertaken.

Several scholars have identified the importance of angels as an aspect of religious culture, and in a number of articles have documented the development of the concept in order to trace their emergence as an integral and ubiquitous part of religion.³ This work establishes the main characteristics of angels as powerful creatures who carry out God's commands, and identifies why angels became important to religious mentalities. Building on this, in *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, David Keck casts the net Europe-wide to provide an excellent, wide-ranging study of the celestial beings, illustrating how they became a cornerstone of medieval Christianity.⁴ Keck is able to trace the scriptural origins of the celestial beings; to demonstrate the contribution of scholasticism to the emergence of a distinct Catholic angelology and to illustrate why and how angels were to assume an integral position in the theology and philosophy of the medieval church to become an inextricable part of daily life, 'one of the fundamental elements of living, dying, loving and hoping'. Keck's work is broad in its temporal and geographical scope and serves as comprehensive, if general introduction to the importance of the angelic presence and the significance of commonly held assumptions relating to celestial beings. Although he establishes the ubiquity of the angels within the daily practice

³ S.G.F Brandon, 'Angels: The History of an Idea', *History Today*, 13 (October, 1963), pp.655-665; Enid Gaudie, 'Flights of Angels', *History Today*, 42 (December, 1992), pp.13-20; S.A.Meier, 'Angels' in Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan (eds), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford, 1993); C.A.Patrides, 'Renaissance Thought on the Celestial Hierarchy: The Decline of a Tradition', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20:2 (April, 1959), pp.155-166; A.Sutton and L.Visscher-Fuchs, 'The Cult of the Angels in Late 15th Century England' in L. Smith and J.M.H. Taylor (eds) *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence* (London, 1996)

⁴ David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1998)

and worship of the church, he does not attempt to delve further into the implications of this for personal religious identity.

In *Saint Michael the Archangel in Medieval English Legend*, Richard Johnson does address the question of how angelic belief informed personal religious devotion, albeit in association with only one aspect of angelology.⁵ The Cult of Saint Michael was a vital aspect of belief: Michael was one of three archangels mentioned by name in scripture and was also the only angel that was also a saint, with feast days in his honour. Johnson argues that the foundation myths of the various shrines dedicated to the Saint provided the main source for popular assumptions about the existence and responsibilities of the angels, shaping expectations and serving as a spur to piety. He illustrates the formative influence of the foundation myths and the important role of pilgrimage for the cult of the angels. The study highlights a fruitful line of enquiry and is an aspect of the topic yet to be fully explored within the context of the reformation.

Although Eamon Duffy acknowledges in *The Stripping of the Altars* that ‘devotion to the angels was a prominent feature of late medieval piety’, he does not devote a chapter specifically to them as he does with the saints, and his discussion of them is relatively brief. However, angels do appear throughout his exhaustive study and they undoubtedly offer support for his picture of a vital and popular late medieval church.⁶ As well as firmly establishing the cultural significance of the celestial beings, Duffy also indicates those areas of angelology which were a cause of concern

⁵ Richard Johnson, *Saint Michael the Archangel in Medieval Religious Legend* (Suffolk, 2005)

⁶ Angels appear frequently in many of the areas of traditional religion discussed by Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars*: the importance of angels to medieval devotion, the role of Saint Michael and the special protection offered by angels, pp.269-272; the unorthodox practices associated with angels p.73; belief that angels carry prayers to heaven p.100; angelic appearances in primers p.236-7; angelic association with the Cult of the Five Wounds pp.238, 242-3, 247; angelic association with the Cult of the Blessed Virgin pp.257, 263; the angelic role in purgatory p.345. See also plates 50, 74, 100-2, 105-7, 109 which illustrate the ubiquity of images of angels in religious culture.

for the medieval Catholic authorities. Like Keck, Duffy recognises that the manipulation of angelic power and attempts to conjure angels were a source of anxiety for the church and were likely to prove problematic in the processes of reformation.

With regard to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, recent doctoral studies illustrate the importance of the topic and emphasise their significance to historians of the English reformation. Jonathan Macy takes a historical-theological approach in *Angels in the Anglican Tradition 1547-1662*, tracing the development of angelology in English theology and uncovering the perceptions and attitudes of important reformation thinkers about the heavenly beings. Kate Harvey's comprehensive account *The role of angels in English Protestant thought 1580 to 1660* has a broader scope and as a consequence she is able to chart the development of a specific, English-style of angelology following the beginning of the reformation process in England. How much of this innovative theology was conveyed to the average church-goer and how well it was received by the unlearned laity is one of the research questions that I will be seeking to explore.⁷

There are several studies that explore the secular responsibilities of the angels and provide some intriguing suggestions about their importance outside a specifically religious context. Henry Mayr-Harting, in an inaugural lecture on *Perceptions of Angels in History*, argued that western angels also acted as social agents, intervening in human affairs to assist in the settling of disputes or providing additional authority for human actions and decrees. The angelic hierarchy, first formulated about 500 AD by a Syrian monk named Dionysius, also provided a model for the social and political organisation of human affairs and supplied individuals and institutions with

⁷ Kate Harvey, *The Role of Angels in English Protestant Thought 1580 to 1660* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge, 2005)

supernatural validation. This is an idea that Bruce Gordon investigates in his important article 'Malevolent ghosts and ministering angels: apparitions and pastoral care in the Swiss Reformation', where he draws similar conclusions to Mayr-Harting. Gordon suggests that angels provided much needed pastoral comfort following the disruption of reformation, and argues that angels could fulfil the vacancy left by the abolition of the cult of the saints, assuming a role as 'biblically sound beings who act as protectors, intercessors and communicators in order to assuage the anxieties of the quick'. The angelic role of offering spiritual solace in forms recognisable to the laity is evidently an important theme which deserves further attention.⁸

Finally a forthcoming collection of articles edited by Peter Marshall and Alex Walsham entitled *Angels in the Early Modern World* perhaps most convincingly establishes both the cultural ubiquity of the heavenly beings, and the importance and value of using them to gain a fresh perspective on the religious cultures of the period. The contributors' articles demonstrate the scale of angelic activity: they explore the role of the heavenly beings against the backdrop of the Renaissance, Reformation and development of science; they cover a large swathe of the globe ranging from Europe to New England and Latin America; and they consider how angels were implicated in the processes of Protestant and Catholic renewal, their relationship with witchcraft and 'magic', and their representation in the arts.

⁸ Henry Mayr-Harting, *Perceptions of Angels in History. An Inaugural Lecture delivered in the University of Oxford on 14 November 1997* (Oxford, 1998); Bruce Gordon, 'Malevolent ghosts and ministering angels: apparitions and pastoral care in the Swiss Reformation', in Bruce Gordon, and Peter Marshall (eds) *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2000), pp.87-110.

Research Questions

Collectively, the existing literature indicates those aspects of angelic belief that are of particular interest to a historian of English religious cultures, and demonstrates the potential utility of the concept for exploring early modern mentalities. Certain themes recur in the literature: they were role models for both individuals and society as a whole, providing models of pious Christian life and hierarchical organisation. Angels were also joint worshippers alongside humanity, and they performed important functions as agents of God's providence and spiritual allies in the battle to achieve salvation. This study will seek to explore in more detail these fruitful avenues of enquiry in order to reveal the wider significance of angels in the early modern world, and to trace the effect of great religious and secular turmoil on the development of angelic belief.

It will be important to identify the 'official' stance and theology of both Catholic and Protestant reformers on the heavenly beings, and in turn this will enable the identification of medieval traces and survivals in more 'popular' perceptions of the layfolk. The notion of 'popular' belief is certainly problematic, and terms such as 'unorthodoxy', 'superstition' and 'magic' must be fully explained and used with caution, but it is still possible to attempt to uncover the extent and nature of participation in angelic belief. The question of change over time is an aspect that has been neglected by historians prior to this, but by firmly establishing the origins of angels in the medieval period, and documenting the progression of devotion through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it will be possible to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how and why religious belief evolved.

Chapter Plan

Section One: Angels in pre-Reformation England, c.1480-1530

This section will establish the significance of angels in late medieval religious culture, exploring the assumptions and expectations that characterised angelic belief and examining the position of the angels in the context of other aspects of medieval devotion. Of particular interest is the relationship between angels and saints; the nature of the cults of named archangels (Michael, Gabriel and Raphael); and the possibility that angels might be associated with unorthodox or ‘quasi-magical’ practices.

Section Two: Impact of the Reformation, c.1530-1580

In section two I will investigate the impact of reform, identifying which aspects of angelic belief came under scrutiny by reformers and which, if any, were rejected entirely. I will go on to consider the practical implications of new religious understanding, seeking to grasp how alterations to the liturgy and the physical transformation of the church interior effected the layman’s perception of the angelic beings. The section will address the question of where and how angels continued to appear in reformed religious cultures.

Section Three: Later Stages of Reform c.1580-1640

Section three will attempt to discover if increasing confessional diversity was reflected in angelology and whether the great variety of contemporary belief – usually described in terms of Catholicism, prayer-book or conformist Protestantism, Laudianism, Puritanism or the ‘Godly’ – produced distinct ideas about angels.

Catholic belief is an area that has been ignored by historians, and the degree of overlap and the interchange of ideas with reformed angelology will be an important aspect. In this section I will also engage with current historical debates about the emergence of ‘Anglicanism’ and the developing sense of ‘Englishness’, seeking to uncover the angelic role as instruments of God’s Providence, ministering to his chosen people.

Section Four: Religious tumult, Civil War and Beyond c.1640s-1700

In two divisions:

- (i) *1640s and 50s*
- (ii) *1660s onwards*

Given the exceptionally complex nature of events during this period I will divide the section into two parts. The first period was a time of immense religious and secular turmoil, but it was also an extremely fertile moment for English angelology. Many popular and vernacular tracts on the subject emerged at this time, and creative thought on the topic widened its scope considerably. The Restoration period saw more stability in domestic affairs, but the establishment of dissenting churches and the presence of new sub-cultures meant that novelty continued to characterise angelology.

Sources

In seeking to uncover ‘popular’ religious cultures my sources will of necessity be diverse and eclectic. To establish the church’s position on angelology I will utilise the *Use of Sarum*; the legislation enacting reform and the Prayer Books of 1549, 1552 and 1559; collections of occasional prayers endorsed by the crown; instructional

material such as primers and catechism issued by the government; and the writings of prominent reformers, both English notaries and influential figures such as Luther, Calvin and Bullinger. However, the dangers of making an artificial division between ‘official’ and ‘popular’ belief are well recognised by historians and it is evident that many of these sources also provide important evidence of how the average layman formulated his understanding of heavenly beings. There were also other materials that were central to the religious culture of the majority: for example sermon collections such as Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* and *Mirk’s Festial* provided the staple of the weekly sermons that the priest read in the pulpit and the laity listened to in the nave. For a society where the bulk of the population remained illiterate, visual culture was also exceptionally important as a means of conveying ideas to the congregation, and church architecture and furnishings provide numerous opportunities to explore the nature of angelic belief. Books of Hours, will preambles and cheap print can provide insight into the more personal aspect of individual devotion; and ballads and tracts, polemical writings and homilies and sermons provide greater comprehension of how angels were involved in confessional disputes later in the period.

Summary

The thesis will be arranged chronologically to incorporate an understanding of change over time, facilitating engagement with current lively debates surrounding the impact and repercussions of reform. Historians increasingly perceive the English Reformation as a long-term process of negotiation and development, where the application of categories such as ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ is problematic given the

diversity of religious belief, the slow and irregular pace of reform and more sensitive understandings of individual devotion and the experience of conversion. New confessional identities emerged only gradually, and older assumptions and practice were assimilated and harnessed in the service of novel causes. The early modern period was therefore characterised by an 'ideological eclecticism', whereby people applied a variety of ideas and techniques in order to account for the functioning of the universe and the troubles and misfortunes of earthly life. Keith Thomas has illustrated how people strove to guard themselves from the forces of evil by channelling 'magical' power, but the Protestant reclassification of such practices as unacceptable 'superstitions' left people without the services and protection traditionally provided by the church.⁹ It is therefore suggested that the clergy were willing to compromise with earlier beliefs and for the sake of order and unity they therefore attempted to find new equivalents to old devotions, or turned a blind eye to those practices that might be considered to be 'adiaphora' or 'things indifferent' to salvation. Diarmaid MacCulloch has gone so far as to say that angels may have assumed such a function: taking over the intercessory and protective functions previously ascribed to saints and thus providing a Protestant alternative to a popular Catholic devotion.

Although a discussion of angelic belief engages with such debates, I propose that the angelic role was in fact more important than this reasoning allows. The continuing significance of angels throughout the reformation period does not suggest an uneasy compromise, rather there is evidence that angels were enthusiastically embraced by reformers and their traditional traits exploited in the struggle against heresy. Although the ambiguous nature of the angels had the potential to cause the

⁹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (London, 1997)

Protestants unease, once divorced from unorthodox accretions angels were a useful tool which reformers were not afraid to employ. The ambiguous status of angels can therefore be exploited in order to examine the highly complex nature of early modern mentalities, and the ubiquitous angelic presence also provides an insight into numerous aspects of religious culture. In her work on providence Alexandra Walsham has revealed the expectations that people continued to harbour of God's active intervention in daily life, and as the 'ideologically appropriate friends of humanity', angels contributed to changing conceptions of the early modern universe and had an important role to play in the religious cultures of the time.¹⁰

Appendix A: Timetable of Completion

Appendix B: Bibliography

¹⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided* (London, 2003), p.581; Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); Alexandra Walsham, "'The Fatall Vesper': Providentialism and Anti-Popery in Late Jacobean London', *Past and Present*, 44 (1994), pp.37-87.