

# Angels in our Popular Culture

by Johan D.Tangelder

Our modern Western society has achieved much: wealth, comfort, scientific discoveries, and equal opportunities. Despite these material gains, it lacks the transcendent vision that makes life meaningful. Many Baby Boomers, now in their forties and fifties, are beginning to realize that “man cannot live by bread alone” (Matt.4:4). They show a growing anxiety about the “why” of existence and are reacting to the extreme consumerism of North American society. But the Boomers’ spiritual search has taken on many directions. They are detached from “organized religion,” and have joined the growing movement that seeks spirituality of all kinds. But what does spirituality mean? The quest for spirituality is for many a journey of self-discovery and personal growth. They want a personal God who does not demand too much, a faith that is fulfilling, tolerant and empowering. In the new spiritual marketplace the old verities are gone. It is all about the autonomous individual - personal preferences and interests, embracing a therapeutic culture and *finding truth for me*.

## Renewed Interest in Angels

Canadian mainline denominations have witnessed a drastic decline in membership even though a vast majority of Canadians confess believing in God. Science and secular education have not been able to stamp out beliefs about the invisible world. A large number believe that a spirit world exists. Some four in ten maintain “we can have contact with the spirit world.” There is even a resurgence of interest in angels. Gordon Legge, the religion editor at the *Calgary Herald* writes, “Angels are everywhere, whether or not you believe in them, in books, movies, mugs, and ornaments.” Alberta’s former New Democratic leader Pam Barrett – who is willing to investigate any religious doctrine after her near-death experience in a dentist chair – claims that she has seen an angel. One night in 1974, sick from radiation therapy for cancer, Barrett believes that she saw “a black-skinned angel in a white gown with long arms.” And when she saw it she thought, “An angel has come for me, and I’m going to die.” The *National Post* [Dec. 16, 1999] featured an article about Paul Colilli, a professor at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. He had written a book *The Angel’s Corpse* with the aim “to rescue angels from the vulgarity of commercial culture and restore them to their traditional role as God’s agents on earth.” Colilli believes that “understanding the historical function of the angels might give insight to the mysteries of life and death.” Rev. Gailand MacQueen, who teaches religious studies at Huntingdon College in Sudbury, Ont., notes that “angels are one of the elements of a new spirituality, a new belief that the world is not just made up of atoms banging against each other.” *Time’s* front page cover [December 27, 1993], featured a winged angel, with the heading, “The New Age of Angels, 69% of Americans believe they exist. What in Heaven is going on?” Books on angels are bestsellers. Tony Kushner won a Pulitzer Prize for his play *Angels in America*, in which an angel visits a man with AIDS. Even Hollywood has become intrigued with the subject. In *It’s a Wonderful Life* the apprentice angel Clarence restores hope to a man on the verge of suicide. Martha Williamson’s *Touched by an Angel* is an enormously popular television show with a loyal viewership. Angel artifacts have become big business with “heavenly profits” notes the *Los Angeles Daily News*. There are angel catalogues, angel

seminars, angel pins, angel newsletters and angel sightings.

Television “prosperity gospel” preachers have also joined the “angel bandwagon.” They have enlisted angels in the service of people rather than of God. Myriads of angels are supposed to be at the beck and call of the faithful. And if angels don’t perform for you, the fault is yours. They only will work for you if you don’t doubt. You can tell the angels what to do. In the words of the “prophetess for profit” Gloria Copeland:

“Your words put the angels to work on your behalf to bring to pass whatever you say.... The angels are waiting on your words.... They will not work without words.... Your last words either put the angels to work or force them to step back, bow their heads, and fold their hands. Your angels are waiting for you to give them words to pass.”

This faddish attraction to angels does not necessarily mean that droves of people have turned to God. This new trend is more of a New Age phenomenon than a return to the Christian faith, as many are not only infatuated by angels but also by UFOs, the so-called “unidentified flying objects.” New Age angels are soft, mellow, cuddly, and harmless. They are kind and non-judgmental. They are available to one and all. “Each of us has a guardian angel,” declares Eileen Freeman, publisher of a bimonthly newsletter *AngelWatch*. “They’re non-threatening, wise and loving beings. They offer help whether we ask for it or not. But mostly we ignore them.” They are not God’s powerful creatures, who guard the gates of paradise with flaming swords. Sweet little girls play angels in pageants. Woolly angel figures decorate Christmas trees.

### **Angels in Reformed Theology**

Can spirituality be shaped and filled without creeds, confessions, and doctrine? Can we be spiritual apart from the Holy Spirit and His Word? I don’t believe this is possible so let’s look at the place angels have in Reformed theology and spirituality. Why leave it up to the New Age Movement to reckon with them? If we only give place to angels in hymns, we should not complain if they only show up as innocent little cherubs on greeting cards, totally devoid of Biblical meaning. Angels do not seem to have a place in Reformed thought. It is strange and remarkable that so little attention is paid to them. I believe it is regrettable that the practical and profitable Biblical doctrine of angels is seldom preached about in our time. How many sermons have you heard on the theme of angels? Dr. Billy Graham remarked in *Angels: God’s Secret Agents* that he had never heard anyone preach on angels. I suspect that the same is true in Reformed churches. Angelology is a terribly neglected subject. We don’t seem to take it seriously. Why are Reformed Christians oddly silent while our postmodern world is fascinated by angels?

In his essay *Thinking About Angels* Stephen F. Noll commented that angelology is a weather vane, showing the direction of the various winds of doctrine that blow through the history of Christian thought. I believe he is right on the mark. Dr. Roger Greenway, professor of missions and former missionary in Sri Lanka and Mexico, points out that most western missionaries do not know how to deal with a world controlled by spirits, demons, ancestors, magic, charms and fetishes. They don’t know how to deal with it because it does not fit into the Western, scientific approach to reality in which

they have been trained. And he observes that “they have not denied that the Bible speaks of angels and demons, signs and wonders, but they have pushed them back into the distant past.” Dr. Richard DeRidder, who was also a missionary in Sri Lanka, said that what deeply impressed him was the irrelevance of so much of traditional Reformed theology to the Sri Lankans and their situation. He realized that this theology seldom spoke to their real needs. Like Greenway he noted that Satan, demons, angels, charms, etc., are neither of great concern nor do they receive much attention in the West. Yet these are living issues for the Christians in Sri Lanka. The greatest joy for Dr. DeRidder was the proclamation of Christ’s victory over the power of evil, and to see the shackles of slavery to elementary spirits broken by Christ.

With the ancient *Nicene Creed* we affirm that we “believe in one God, the Father almighty Maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible.” However, Christians in the Western world don’t find this easy to comprehend. In practice, reality has been reduced to the physical universe with God added on. We unreservedly believe in the literal resurrection of Christ and His ascension, but when it comes to the spirit world many are so influenced by the modern western scientific worldview that they exclude the spirit world. Try to mention angels or demons and eyebrows are raised. But there is more to reality than we can touch, see, and taste. We impoverish ourselves if we choose to ignore the invisible world. The Christian faith cannot be rationalized. We cannot have control over the knowledge of God and His creation. God’s Word does not seek to convince us of the existence of the spiritual world, but takes it for granted. Of the invisible world we know absolutely nothing beyond what the Bible reveals. And any belief in the invisible world, which does not rest on divine revelation, is essentially mere superstition. We cannot deny that the Bible abounds in appearances of both fallen and perfect angels. They meet us in the very beginning of Genesis to the last book of the Bible, and almost everywhere in between. Their vital role in the history of redemption is abundantly evident. If we are to be faithful students of the Bible, we have no choice but to speak about them. We should remove our rationalistic blinders. People who believe that angels don’t exist are like the hireling prophet Balaam, who couldn’t see an angel although one stood in his way as an adversary against him. The donkey saw the angel, and was granted the gift of speech to make him aware of the heavenly being in front of him. The donkey was more spiritually in tune than Balaam (Nu. 22: 21-35). The twice born of God (John 3:3; Hebr. 11:27) can see and experience the invisible. Heaven is as real as the earth.

### **Are We Earth-Focussed?**

When we can no longer say anything about heaven we truncate the Christian faith. When the Church loses sight of heaven, her mission will eventually be limited to this world. The Social Gospel movement and Liberation theology are typical examples of this earth-focussed theology.

If we become unduly concerned with the purely physical world and neglect the spiritual world, we settle for materialism.

In the Biblical worldview the emphasis is on the nearness of the spiritual world. And the angels are among its innumerable inhabitants. Historically, the doctrine of angels has not always been so problematic. The church father St. Augustine (354-430) had much to say about angels. Medieval Christianity engaged in extensive discussions about them. Theologians of that time are often represented as debating earnestly over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. But this debate never actually took place. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) attempted to demonstrate their existence by reason.

He devoted no fewer than 118 individual questions regarding the nature and condition of angels. The Reformation era brought nothing new with respect to angels. Both Luther and Calvin had a vivid view of their reality and role in God's plan of salvation.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that the prevalent thought in Western Reformed spirituality is: "What can angels do for us since God has given us His Son?" But Scripture gives a different impression. We are spiritually the poorer for it if we don't pay heed to the vital role of angels. God gave not only His only Son, but also the angels. Our Lord does not want to be seen and acknowledged apart from them (John 1:51; Matt.26:53f.).

For those that ask, "Why study angelology?" there is a ready answer. The grandeur and complexity of the angelic world naturally stimulates study, and that study enhances our sense of God's glory.