

INTRODUCTION

A generation of men there is, who would have all the talk and enquiry about Angels and Spirits to pass for Old-wives stories, or at best the waking-dreams of persons idly disposed ... Now, what pity and shame is it, when the holy Scriptures have told us so much and plainly concerning this excellent sort of Creatures, and the good turns we receive continually from their Attendance and Ministry, and the admirable vertues we have to copy out in their Example; and we Christians profess to expect the happiness of being made like unto them, and bless'd hereafter in their Society; we should yet continue so profane, and sceptical, and indifferent in our belief, esteem, thoughts, and speeches about them?¹

Despite what Protestant minister Benjamin Camfield suggests in this passage, angels, those spiritual beings that were one step down from God, one step up from men in the universal hierarchy, were not considered Old-Wives tales in early modern England. Rather, faith in the reality of their existence was commonplace. Belief about angels was a mainstay of the Christian church, and numerous responsibilities and theological assumptions were associated with these evocative and often mysterious supernatural beings.

In recent decades historians of the early modern period have become increasingly interested in many aspects of the supernatural, and subjects such as prodigies, portents, miracles and ghost stories have all attracted greater notice, supplementing the already extensive scholarship on witchcraft and demonology. The result has been a rich body of literature that has greatly expanded our understanding and appreciation of the early modern world, and the beliefs and expectations that informed contemporary mentalities.² However, the above lamentation of Benjamin Camfield, in the foreword to his 1678 *A theological discourse of angels and their ministries*, is one that could be repeated by twenty-first century scholars, because within the existing literature angels are one aspect of the supernatural that have remained a diffusely handled topic.

Since it is a commonplace of early modern studies that the mental universe of contemporaries was infused by Aristotelian contraries, the neglect of the 'good' angels at the expense of the evil is particularly surprising. In *Thinking with Demons*, Stuart Clark demonstrated that the early modern mentality was organized around oppositional thought and expression. His suggestion that

contrariety was not only a ‘universal principle of intelligibility’ but was also profoundly influential for ‘styles of argument and communication’ was marshalled in support of his thesis that early modern demonism was coherent and rational in its own terms, not an exotic and marginal aberration.³ However, his contention that opposites ‘require each other in order to form wholes and improve understanding’ might now be fruitfully revisited with regard to those supernatural beings found at the opposite pole to the demons in his study.

English Religious Cultures

The English Reformation has long been a fruitful area of research, and more recently scholarship has progressed from a preoccupation with the rate, geography and social distribution of conversions to Protestantism, to focus instead on broader questions about the processes of reform and their meaning for early modern society.⁴ Tessa Watt’s notion that later sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century culture comprised ‘a fusion of new and traditional elements’, resulting in ‘a patchwork of beliefs’ that were “distinctively ‘post-Reformation’, but not thoroughly Protestant” has proven a tremendously useful concept, and scholars have subsequently sought to pinpoint elements of continuity as well as change, recognizing strategies and ‘accommodations’ adopted by reformers in order to secure the loyalty of the people.⁵

The recent ‘post-revisionist’ trend in Reformation studies is therefore to see continuity with the past rather than radical dislocation, with the gradual modification of belief and an ongoing dialogue between traditional understanding and innovative reformed ideas. Historians such as Peter Lake, Judith Maltby, Tessa Watt and Alexandra Walsham have argued that considerable overlap existed between the world-views of the reformers and the laity, and attention has shifted to focus upon undercurrents of continuity that eased and alleviated the upheavals of the mid-sixteenth century.⁶ Instead of seeing the Reformation as a purely destructive campaign that obliterated inherited systems of tradition and custom, replacing them with radical and disconcerting new precepts, historians now recognize a willingness on the part of Protestant ministers to ‘exploit, engage with, and re-channel common assumptions’, arguing that such accommodation catered to the intellectual and emotional capabilities of the laity and created points of intersection between old and new ideas.⁷ Historians have consequently examined those aspects of belief where old and new ideas intersect, seeking to construct a more nuanced picture of English religious cultures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Angels have a strong claim to be examined in a similar light. A persistent belief in angels as protectors and ministers was widespread in early modern England, and angels were the focus of a particularly disparate grouping of assumptions and

expectations. The ubiquity of belief about angels in religious cultures, coupled with the great flexibility and diversity of the angelic motif, makes them an excellent unit of historical enquiry. They were a shared cultural 'space', within which contemporaries engaged in theological discourse and worked through complex ideas, as well as an important rhetorical tool for those attempting religious reform. As with demons, an examination of belief about angels therefore has the potential to elucidate early modern mentalities and expectations, and is an excellent means to explore the belief systems that gave structure to the early modern world.

Beginning with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'field of cultural production', this study therefore perceives of angels as a cultural motif that was determined by the way it fitted into the interests and preoccupations of the society that created it.⁸ To revisionist historians, angels might seem a symptom of the resilience of Catholic devotion, whilst others have suggested that they served the pastoral agenda of Protestantism, stepping in to replace the saints as the 'ideologically appropriate friends of humanity'.⁹ However, neither of these explanations is entirely adequate, as they ignore the continual re-imagining of angels in a variety of different political, cultural and confessional sites. Therefore, this enquiry is not framed as an intellectual history that concentrates exclusively on patterns of thought at the expense of the interests they served and the social and cultural contexts in which they were conceived. Nor is it a narrative of the fluctuating fortunes, or popularity of angels, set against the backdrop of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather, this monograph uses belief about angels to throw light on the strategies and methods employed by religious reformers seeking to persuade the laity of the veracity of their particular confessional stance. It emphasizes the relationship between ideas and historical change. Within the text, discourses about angels are disentangled and clarified, and the pastoral and didactic functions of belief about angels are considered alongside the rhetoric of those individuals competing to shape the development of religious cultures in early modern England.

The persistence of belief in angels thus offers an opportunity to explore the survival and mutation of a key component of traditional belief in Reformation England, with angels forming one of the points of intersection and accommodation identified by post-revisionist scholars. An examination of belief about angels speaks to recent debates about how Protestantism was able to enter the hearts and minds of the English laity, and how the populace was able to adjust to the dramatic restructuring of the religious landscape in the sixteenth century. The underlying argument in this study is that although continuity was an integral element of religious cultures, it is important not to prioritize this at the risk of obscuring equally important change. Continuities were complex, and fiercely contested by those of differing confessional stripes. The development of the identities of Catholics, church papists, prayer-book Protestants, Puritans and Presbyterians was conditioned by conflict within and between them. The ways

in which people reacted to the ‘official’ understanding of angels, and how they sought to commandeer angels in defence of their own understanding of what the church should be, needs to be considered. A disparate range of confessional identities emerged and were hardened within the same physical and intellectual environment throughout this period, and this study utilizes angels as a shared theoretical and cultural ‘space’ in which to understand these processes.

This study therefore perceives of reform as an ongoing process, and uses belief about angels as a means to elucidate and trace the continuing development of doctrine and practice throughout the period of the ‘Long Reformation’. The broad temporal scope of the study provides the perspective from which to perceive the ongoing evolution of the Church of England, and provides an insight into change within the context of broader social and political trends. Studying belief about angels contributes to our understanding of how reformers tried to implement change through the institution of the Church, but also how this was re-appropriated and challenged in wider public discourse. It indicates how contemporaries sought to shape and influence the expectations of the laity, as well as their intents and purposes in attempting this in the first place.

Histories of Angels

In 2009, in a review in the journal *Reformation*, Diarmaid MacCulloch described angelology as a theme in early modern Christianity ‘which might be seen as even more important’ than the ‘almost over-researched’ witchcraft.¹⁰ In the essay, MacCulloch considered the importance of angels as ‘the accredited agent of communication used by the deity’, and reflected on two recent works that investigate why belief in angels was important to early modern religious cultures. Both the existence and the content of MacCulloch’s essay are testament to the fact that the study of angels has come to life in recent years, following the comparative neglect of this key component of Christian belief in the historiography. However, in this emerging field, there is still no comprehensive, in-depth study of belief in angels in early modern England. This study seeks to address this gap, tracing the evolution of belief in angels throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and locating this belief firmly in the context of early modern religious cultures and mentalities more broadly.

Early modern scholars had previously paid scant attention to the cultural and epistemological implications of the continuing presence of angels in English religious cultures. It is striking that in two works which have proven exceptionally influential with regard to scholarship on late medieval and early modern religious cultures, Keith Thomas’ *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, and Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars*, neither author devoted a separate section to angelic beings, although each recognized the potential significance of their pres-

ence.¹¹ Scholarly interest in early modern angels was limited to the areas of elite ceremonial magic and literary studies, focusing on the occultism of John Dee and his conversations with angels, or offering a limited consideration the significance of belief in order to contextualize an investigation into John Milton's angels in *Paradise Lost*.¹²

From the late 1990s, scholars of the medieval period have shown more interest in the subject. In *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, David Keck casts the net Europe-wide to provide an excellent, wide-ranging study of celestial beings, illustrating how they became a cornerstone of medieval Christianity.¹³ Keck's work is broad in its temporal and geographical scope and serves as a comprehensive, if general, introduction to the importance of the angelic presence and the significance of commonly held assumptions relating to celestial beings. Richard Johnson's *Saint Michael the Archangel in Medieval English Legend* is another more recent work which similarly identifies the value of angels as a unit of historical enquiry, and indicates an aspect of belief that could prove fertile grounds for further examination. Johnson addresses the question of how angelic belief informed personal religious devotion, albeit in association with only one aspect of angelology.¹⁴ Johnson argues that the foundation myths of the various shrines dedicated to the angel provided the main source for popular assumptions about the existence and responsibilities of angels, shaping expectations and serving as a spur to piety.

In 2006, Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham published an edited collection that was a reflection of a growing interest in the topic. *Angels in the Early Modern World* convincingly establishes the cultural ubiquity of angels, demonstrating the scale of angelic activity and establishing the groundwork for future scholarship in what is now an emerging field.¹⁵ The collection is very broad in scope: contributors' articles explore the role of angels against the backdrop of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment; 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.

Taken as a whole, this recent scholarship has demonstrated the legitimacy and potential usefulness of a more comprehensive and in depth study of the cultural significance of angels in early modern England, but as yet, such a study has not appeared in print. Although the field of angelology has begun to come to life, with recognition that angels are a legitimate unit of historical study, publications within it have retained their literary focus. Faisal Mohamed's *In the Anteroom of Divinity: The Reformation of Angels from Colet to Milton* (2008), concentrates on the theology of a range of canonical Renaissance authors, particularly that associated with the angelic hierarchy, while Joad Raymond's insightful *Milton's Angels: The Early Modern Imagination* (2010) only briefly surveys the develop-

ment of early modern angelology, before moving on to a detailed analysis of the poet's angelic theology.¹⁶

This book will provide a more systematic evaluation of the significance of belief about angels in early modern England, firmly locating the concept in the political, social and religious context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. It builds on the groundwork and insights of recent scholarship on the medieval period, examining how the attitudes and assumptions uncovered by David Keck evolved during an era of exceptional religious turmoil and reform. Similarly, it recognizes that the cult of Saint Michael and the angelic hierarchy are fruitful lines of enquiry, and traces the impact of the Reformation upon these important elements of religious cultures. Moving away from the literary preoccupations of recent work in the field, it will not concentrate exclusively on patterns of thought during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Instead, the book will focus on the social context in which these patterns of thought were constructed, establishing how clergymen reformed and reconstituted their beliefs about angels, and then utilized these ideas in the confessional struggle for the soul of the continually evolving Church of England.

Traditional and Scriptural Angels

Similarly to many other aspects of Christian belief, the angelic motif was a fusion of ancient ideas from several near eastern religious traditions. However, the mainstay of belief about angels was Hebrew and Greek scripture, which provided countless examples of their existence and endeavour, and which formed the foundation of medieval angelology. Angels are first mentioned in the Old Testament in the form of a Cherub, guarding the gates of Eden after the Fall (Genesis 3:24), and thereafter they appear frequently to assist the functioning of God's providence and to serve as 'administrators in a hierarchical bureaucracy of the world'.¹⁷ An angel prevents Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac; angels carry messages such as those to Hagar and Balaam; prophets often encounter them in visions or episodes, such as Jacob's dream of angels on a ladder ascending to heaven; and an angel offers comfort and instruction to Elijah when he is in the wilderness. They are also particularly prominent in many of the familiar passages of the New Testament, and the narrative of Jesus' life is replete with angelic collaborators. His birth is foretold to Mary by an angel (Luke 1:28) and announced to the shepherds by a heavenly host (Luke 2:9); angels minister to him in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1) and preside at his tomb after the Resurrection (Matthew 28:2, Luke 24:4). Following Jesus' death angels continue to appear in various guises, and they play a vitally important role in the book of Revelation, participating in the destruction of the earth and engaging in a war against Satan and the evil angels (Revelation 7:2). Yet the roles that angels took

in scripture were not exclusively those of succour and protection, because they might also act as dispensers of divine justice: the two angels that visit Lot smite the men of Sodom with blindness and proclaim that they have been sent by God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1); and it is an angel that nearly destroys Jerusalem when God is displeased with David (2 Samuel 24:16).

Tradition provided the basis for other expectations about angels, and gradually general assumptions about them began to emerge. The Greek and Latin Fathers accepted that the angels were creatures that dwelt in the upper heavens, had no natural corporal body and were sexless, despite their usual artistic representation as male. The appearance of the angels can be traced back to supernatural beings in Graeco-Roman culture, which acted as benevolent mediators between men and the gods; the attribute of wings, which has scant scriptural validation, may have been inspired by the image of Iris, a messenger for the Gods found in Greek mythology, or the winged figures found on Etruscan tombs or in frescoes at Pompeii.¹⁸ A text that played a particularly important role in the development of theological ideas about angels was *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, the treatise which outlined the order of angels, translated into Latin in the ninth century. The author is usually referred to as 'Pseudo-Dionysius', because medieval writers confused him with Dionysius the Areopagite who was understood to have listened to St Paul's address to the Athenians, or with St Dionysius, the third century apostle to Gaul. Dionysius' highly influential treatise organized the nine angelic names found in Scripture into three descending hierarchies, comprising of Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones; Dominions, Virtues and Powers; and Principalities, Archangels and Angels. In doing so he established a hierarchy within which the angels performed specific functions and participated in the order and workings of the universe as a whole. Although not officially verified by the Church, Dionysius's scheme became widely accepted and such luminaries as John Scotus, Hugo of St Victor, Peter Lombard, Bonaventura and Thomas Aquinas all produced commentaries on his work.¹⁹

One of the results of these theological musings was the association of distinct characteristics with particular orders (often derived from their names) as angels became more individual and less impersonal instruments of the divine will. The first hierarchy were defined by their relationship with God. Following the traditional translation of the Hebrew word 'seraph' as burning, the Seraphim were identified with a fiery love of God, the 'summit of the creaturely ability to contemplate and love the divine.'²⁰ The Cherubim were particularly associated with the quality of knowledge, and Thrones were considered steadfast and tranquil, illustrating the divine presence, authority and power of the Lord. The second hierarchy had names that hinted at their participation in the ordering of the universe: Dominions presided over the earth, Virtues would operate within the world, perhaps performing miracles, and Powers were thought to be adept at

repelling harmful forces. The orders of the third hierarchy were the most active in human affairs: Principalities were responsible for the governance of kingdoms; Archangels directed human affairs, delivering important messages; and the Angels were believed to fulfil the role of guardians to individuals, watching over and ministering to them.

The bible also contributed to the development of distinct angelic identities, providing the names of the three archangels: Gabriel, Michael and Raphael. Michael appeared in scripture as the champion and leader of the angelic host, and his defeat of the 'dragon' in the Book of Revelation ensured his special responsibility for combating evil.²¹ He was also crucial to the drama enacted around the deathbed where it was believed the good and evil angels took part in a struggle for the soul of the dying. Michael's role here was that of a vital supernatural ally. The deathbed was in fact one of the most important arenas for angelic intervention on earth, and it was a common conception that angels provided succour for the dying and after death would receive the souls of the saved in order to carry them into Abraham's bosom, as was attested to in the Bible (Luke 16:22). The archangel Gabriel's identity was intimately connected to his relationship with Mary because of his proclamation at the Annunciation; and Raphael, who accompanied Tobit's son Tobias on a dangerous journey to Media, was considered the 'Medicine of God', associated both with healing and offering special protection to travellers and pilgrims.²² Although not recognized as canonical by the Church, the apocalyptic book of Enoch provided more angelic names, and taken together these sources made it less likely that angels would be perceived as ciphers, mere manifestations of divine providence. This in itself was an important development in medieval perceptions of the divine beings and had important implications for religious devotion.

Scripture emphasized that angels, although excellent, were infinitely inferior to Christ (Hebrews 1:13–14), and warned against offering undue veneration to them (Colossians 2:18). The possibility of the worshipping of angels troubled the church throughout the Middle Ages, as did attempts to harness the supernatural power of the angels for private advantage. Periodically the Church had to act to condemn the unorthodox coercion of angelic power, such as the Roman council that at the end of the fifth century forbade the use of amulets engraved with angelic names, or Charlemagne's ban on the summoning of angels that were not found in scripture.²³

Despite these contemporary misgivings, this survey of the origins of belief about angels suggests the great versatility and utility of the motif. From these firm foundations in scripture and following the dictates of tradition, angels became an integral part of the religious world view of medieval English people, engaging with a diverse range of belief and doctrine, and prompting a variety of expectations and assumptions. However, the ambiguities in the status of angels

were to give them a contested place in Protestant theology, and although indubitably biblical, the variety of rituals, representations and devotions associated with angels occupied an uneasy position between orthodox piety and illegitimate 'superstition' for many reformers. They therefore offer a unique opportunity to examine contemporary structures of belief and the nature of religious change.

Structure

The underpinning logic of this study is that an angel was a culturally constructed motif that reflected the anxieties and preoccupations of the society that created it. As such, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive, universal survey of English angels. Instead, I aim to elucidate the most significant discourses about angels in a wide variety of early modern sources, focusing on printed polemic in conjunction with material evidence. Principally, I examine angels in the light of the strategies and methods adopted by religious reformers seeking to persuade the laity that their innovative theology was in fact representative of the one true faith. The ways in which they took up and utilized the motif of angels, and the meanings they attached to them, reveal much about post-Reformation mentalities and the ways in which change was implemented through the institution of the church.

The long chronology of the study allows for an insight into both the initial impact of reform on belief about angels, as well as a survey of the continual evolution of angelology throughout the 'Long Reformation.' Tracing the development of belief up to the late seventeenth century allows for an investigation of the cyclical nature of the processes of reform, and recognizes that teleological narratives founded on the assumption of the steady processes of 'secularization' have proved insufficient interpretive frameworks for the post-Reformation world. It also makes possible a properly contextualized study of angels that is firmly rooted in wider developments in the political, social and religious spheres, acknowledging the cultural foundation and composition of religious cultures. In the process it unites the historiographies of two centuries that are often artificially separated.

Chapters are organized within a loose chronological framework, though a thematic organization takes precedence. Chapter 1 is a survey of the place of angels in late medieval English cultures, exploring the unique relationship between humans and angels and their perceived roles in the life of the church, establishing their status as a ubiquitous element of the religious landscape. The use of angels for didactic and pastoral uses, and the potential impact of these ideas upon personal devotion will be considered, before wider questions relating to the angels' involvement in the salvation of mankind and the functioning of eschatology are addressed. The chapter lays the foundation for an understanding of how reformed thinking was to radically alter belief.

Chapters 2 and 3 investigate the dramatic religious upheaval of the sixteenth century, and the survival and mutation of belief about angels in the face of religious reform. Chapter 2 establishes those aspects of belief that were vulnerable to reformed thinking in a period when parochial religious culture was transformed by an attack on the principal expressions of communal faith and observers. Traditional understanding of the angels included certain indefensible elements, focused around their assumed roles as mediators between men and the divine, and furthermore angels were compromised by an association with what now came to be seen as objectionable or 'superstitious' Catholic devotional practices. This chapter investigates how these elements were suppressed by the reformers, as well as evidence that the reformers were eager to appropriate the angelic motif, as angels began to form an essential feature of English Protestantism. Chapter 3 continues this line of enquiry, providing evidence of the persistence of a core set of beliefs about angels that endured throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, beliefs which together could be considered to be the 'authorized', Church of England, angel, well suited to the ecclesiology and religious outlook of the Church. It investigates how belief about angels continued to fulfil important and wide ranging pastoral and didactic functions, and how churches utilized the concept of angels in polemic designed to establish Protestantism in the hearts and minds of their parishioners.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the problematic legacy of the Elizabethan settlement, investigating how angels could become conduits for unorthodoxy in the hands of those pushing at the boundaries of what has been termed an 'Elizabethan consensus'. Because they were theologically malleable, angels were recruited by clergymen of all stripes in support of their particular reformed stance, and these dissenting voices need to be heard in order to gain a more complete notion of the status of angels in early modern religious discourse and in the Church more generally. Chapter 4 therefore considers how Presbyterians, Arminians, Laudians, and Puritans used the angelic motif to argue about what the Church of England should be, as confessional stances emerged and were hardened over the period. Hostility to Catholicism was a formative influence on the English Protestant identity, so an understanding of the significance of angels for those on the opposite side of the denominational divide is also crucial for a more complete construction of post-reformation angelology. Chapter 5 therefore investigates how angels were used to articulate the divide itself. A consideration of angels during the reign of Mary I reflects on wider questions of the tone and effectiveness of Marian Catholicism, and beyond this, the chapter seeks to uncover how the experience of persecution affected the ways that angels were discussed, perceived and utilized by Catholic contemporaries.

Chapter 6 seeks to widen the terms of the debate by examining how the rhetoric of the reformers was received at an individual level. Moving away from the

explicitly confessional tone of many of the sources examined in the preceding chapters, it considers evidence of belief in angels amongst the English laity. By utilizing diaries, cheap print and literary sources, it will provide an insight into the place of angels in individual belief. Although by no means a comprehensive survey, this will indicate possible alternative understandings of angels that were in competition with the 'authorized' angel of religious polemic.

The final chapter investigates broad intellectual shifts that had enormous implications for angelology. The threat posed by the rise of mechanical philosophy and experimental science in the seventeenth century threatened to undermine the fundamentals of belief in angels, but the evidence does not support a paradigm whereby people gradually lost all faith in supernatural creatures. This chapter questions the paradigm of secularization, and illustrates how clergymen reacted to the 'new thinking', and to growing fears of heterodoxy and atheism, by mounting a stout defence of angels. This defence could prompt clergymen to go much further than their predecessors in asserting the reality of angelic beings and their participation in life on earth, as a search began to provide the empirical evidence that would prove the existence of the supernatural, and thus disprove the claims of the materialists.

Historians increasingly perceive the English Reformation as a long-term process of negotiation and development, which encompassed an astonishing diversity of belief and where the pace of change was at times bafflingly swift, and at others slow and irregular. The early modern period was thus characterized by ideological eclecticism and fixed confessional identities emerged only gradually, as older assumptions and practice were assimilated and harnessed in the service of novel causes. Through the examination of a particular aspect of theology and devotion, this study seeks to elucidate how these processes were worked through and understood by contemporaries. Utilization of the angelic motif allowed a varied range of individuals and groups to engage in religious discourse and allowed angels to become a concept within which diverse and complicated ideas about the functioning of the universe were played out.