

Historians show how Angels survived Puritan purge by hanging round death beds

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Angels have an important role at Christmas, as part of the nativity story or just appearing on top of a Christmas tree. However they were nearly swept from our culture in a purge of Catholic practices and symbols by zealous Tudor and Stuart Protestants. Even Christmas itself was banned for a time under Cromwell, yet somehow angels remained popular figures.

Now a new study entitled 'Angels in the Early Modern World' led by Professor Peter Marshall of the University of Warwick and Professor Alexandra Walsham of Exeter reveals how Angels escaped the puritan purge by hanging around English death beds.

Angels were viewed with suspicion by reformation thinkers. They were concerned that they could become over venerated and even have prayers directed to them by superstitious believers using angels in the place of the worship of saints. The worship of saints had been rejected by the Protestant faith and Angels also came close to theological oblivion. Protestants scholars excised the book of Tobit from the bible thus removing the only biblical references to the angel Raphael. References to angels were dropped from Church of England burial services of 1549, 1552 and 1559 and many Protestant theologians questioned the concept of 'guardian angels'. Calvin criticised 'those who limit the care God takes of each of us to a single angel, do great injury to themselves and to all the members of the church'. However Martin Luther and others did support the idea of Guardian Angels.

Though not totally removed from the Protestant faith Angels literarily became a lot less visible. Statues of Mary and other saints disappeared from churches, and images of Angels too were often removed or defaced (thought the fact that Angelic carvings were sometimes placed high up in the roof bosses of churches made them difficult to get at). This invisibility was also championed by Elizabethan England's leading theologian, William Perkins, who stated that angels 'appeare not nowe as in former times'. The future King James I of England agreed, writing in his *Daemonologie* of 1597 that 'since the coming of Christ in the flesh, and establishing of his Church by the Apostles, all miracles, visions, prophecies, and appearances of angels or good spirites are ceased'.

Why then did Angels grow again in popularity? In *Angels in the Early Modern World* University of Warwick Historian Professor Peter Marshall shows that Protestant theologians who rejected concepts such as purgatory, the idea of ghosts being the spirits of the dead, and folk beliefs such as fairies increasingly began to use Angels to mop up these difficult problem areas. The pre-eminent Protestant ghost authority of the age, Ludwig Lavater wrote in 1572 that spirits were 'not the souls of dead men, but either good or evill angels'.

Miracles were now seen as rare but when they were mentioned they were now assigned to actions of angels such as the miraculous bringing of buttermilk to the starving child of Protestant minister Faithful Teate during the 1641 Catholic rebellion in Ireland.

Angels also began to be used in popular belief to replace the actions of fairies, bringing another dimension to debates today on whether to put an angel or a fairy on top of a Christmas tree.

But where Professor Marshall demonstrates that Angels really cornered the market in Protestant affections was at the deathbed. His research shows that many Protestant thinkers seemed to have a soft spot for the idea that Angels liked nothing better than to help out at the deathbed of a believer. Shakespeare most famously has Horatio's valediction for his

deceased friend Hamlet 'good night sweet prince, And flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest.' Whatever Shakespeare's religious leanings were, that line struck a chord in his largely Protestant audiences and is supported by the writings of Protestant theologians. In 1617 Protestant thinker Robert Hill encouraged the dying to 'think that the angels stand at your bed's head, to carry your soul into Abraham's Bosom.' A few years later John Bunyan took a similar line noting that 'whereas the deathbed of the ungodly is surrounded by devils to take the soul to hell, the dying Christian is waited upon by angels' to carry him to heaven.

Professor Marshall argues that Angels survived as popular figures in Reformation England as, try as they might, Protestant thinkers simply could not live without them, and certainly couldn't face dying without them.

Source: University of Warwick

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