



*Sense and Nonsense about Angels and Demons*  
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# ANGELMANIA!

A lot of people get carried away with angels, but we still need to think about them.

**A**n awful lot of what people say about angels is nonsense. For centuries people have entertained the wildest speculations about both angels and demons. We've all heard the question about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, a question that for many of us epitomizes the fanciful, irrelevant nature of doctrine. "Who knows and who cares?" we think when we hear a question like that.

## A Brief History of Angelology

The study of *angelology* (the doctrine of angels) played a surprisingly big role in medieval thought. The basic textbook on the subject was a book called *Celestial Hierarchy*, purported to be authored by Dionysius, an Athenian converted to faith in Christ through the preaching of the apostle Paul (Acts 17:34). Medieval theologians generally accepted the book's claim at face value and consequently treated it as an authoritative guide to what the apostles believed about angels. Modern scholars, though, uniformly agree that the book was written centuries later, and so they refer to its author as "Pseudo-Dionysius." We'll talk more about this angel book in chapter 12.

Angelology reached its heyday in the thirteenth century, when Europe's most brilliant minds wrote extensively on the subject and

university students (e.g., at Paris) were required to take courses in it. Two thirteenth-century theologians epitomized that era's interest in angels and developed the most thorough, sophisticated systems of angelology the world has ever seen. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), widely regarded as the most brilliant Christian theologian and philosopher during the long stretch of centuries from the fall of the Roman empire to the Renaissance, was known as the Angelic Doctor. A member of the Benedictine Order, Aquinas devoted a good bit of his classic, multivolume work *Summa Theologiae* to angels.

Aquinas's older contemporary Bonaventure (1217–74) was called the Seraphic Doctor because he was a member of the Franciscans. They were known as the Seraphic Order because Christ was reported to have appeared to Saint Francis in the form of a seraph. Bonaventure himself was said to have been visited by an angel, and he interpreted the sixth angel of the book of Revelation as a reference to Francis.<sup>1</sup>

Aquinas, Bonaventure, and other theologians of the time sought to answer a number of perplexing questions about angels. They tried to explain when and where the angels were created, to what rank of angels the Devil had belonged and why he fell, what each of the different kinds of angels does, and similar minutiae. Some of the lesser lights of the period got especially carried away with speculations on such matters. One thirteenth-century cleric, Albert the Great, opined that there were 266,613,336 good angels and exactly half as many fallen angels — 133,306,668 in number — making the total number of angelic beings 399,920,004.<sup>2</sup> Most medieval theologians, however, including Aquinas and Bonaventure, argued that the number of angels is incalculable and admitted that some things about angels were beyond our ability to attain certain knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

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## MORTIMER J. ADLER

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The myth that intense discussion focused on the number of angels that might dance on a pinhead is simply one of the many modern inventions contrived to make a mockery of mediaeval thought.<sup>4</sup>

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In fairness, we should acknowledge that medieval theologians did some good thinking about angels and demons—and contrary to popular myth, they did *not* debate the angels-dancing-on-a-pin question.<sup>5</sup> They did debate whether angels occupy space at all and whether angels move in or through space. These questions may also seem arcane, and they probably go beyond what we can know with any certainty, but they were serious questions that had some bearing on the larger question of just what kind of beings the angels are.

In reaction to the excesses of late medieval theology, John Calvin, one of the leading Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, threw buckets of cold water on angelology. Calvin urged Christians to be wise and “leave those empty speculations which idle men have taught concerning the nature, orders, and numbers of angels.”<sup>6</sup> To this day angels are given much more “press time” in Catholic theology than in most Protestant theological traditions. That hasn’t stopped some Protestants, however, from exercising their own imaginations on the subject of angels.

The scientific revolutions of the past four centuries actually began to erode belief in spiritual beings among educated people, especially in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. Belief in angels—let alone adherence to extravagant views about them—came to be regarded in many circles as superstitious nonsense. As late as 1982 Mortimer J. Adler, a prominent American philosopher who actually believed in angels, commented, “It would appear to be a dead subject, of interest only to historians, and of limited interest even to them.”<sup>7</sup> Even in 1990 Malcolm Godwin could write a book declaring angels to be “an endangered species.”<sup>8</sup>

How quickly things change. The year that Godwin’s book was published, interest in angels, which was already building, exploded in America. On the leading edge of the angel craze was Sophy Burnham’s *A Book about Angels*,<sup>9</sup> one of the bestselling books of 1990. A

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## STEPHEN F. NOLL

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People are now talking about angels. But does anyone *think* about them seriously?<sup>10</sup>

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Gallup study reported that belief in angels among US teenagers rose from 64 percent in 1978 to 76 percent in 1992.<sup>11</sup> In 1993 *Touched by an Angel* (remarkable, it should be noted, for its restraint in its portrayal of angels) began its ten-year run on prime-time network television. Angelmania was upon us.

The media seemed to reach its angel saturation point toward the end of the 1990s, but popular interest in angels remains high. According to Barna Research, by the year 2000 over four-fifths of Americans believed that angels exist and that they influence people's lives.<sup>12</sup> Belief in angelic influence, of course, is what makes this subject important. If angels do exist and influence human lives today, what can we know about them?

## The Roads Not to Be Taken

Two all-too-easy approaches to this subject seem to grab many if not most people. The first easy way is to take an attitude of uncritical acceptance toward any information about angels that comes our way, or at least any that appeals to us. Angels are fascinating and mysterious creatures, and any insight we can gain about them can be exciting. Unfortunately, it is impossible for everything people say about angels to be true. Angels are reported to have communicated revelations from God that started religions as diverse as Islam and Mormonism. Some angels are said to have announced that only one religion is true, while other angels are said to have informed the world that all religions are valid. Some people believe angels protect everybody; others believe angels only protect people who have the right kind of faith.

Not everyone sees it this way. Many of the most popular writers on angels take the view that anything goes. Terry Lynn Taylor tells her readers, "Get used to the idea that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' opinions—only opinions that are different or similar. There are no right or wrong religions, no right or wrong ways to God."<sup>13</sup> Frankly, this is nonsense—and we mean that quite literally. Taylor's claim that there are no right or wrong opinions or religions is itself an opinion; and it is either right (something we should accept) or wrong (something we should not accept). More precisely, it is either

true or false. The opinion that no opinion is right or wrong is nonsense because, if it's right, it's neither right nor wrong!<sup>14</sup>

Later in the same book, Taylor asserts, "The best measure of truth is what you feel in your heart is true."<sup>15</sup> On a surface level, it is contradictory to claim that there are no right or wrong opinions *and* that there is something called truth. However, both claims amount to the same thing: you should accept whatever you feel in your heart and not concern yourself with whether it matches with someone else's "opinion" of what is right or wrong. This is a prescription for self-delusion. We are, of course, under no obligation to accept the opinions of others. However, if we want to know the truth, we will listen to others and put our *own* opinions to the test. What we "feel in our hearts" might, after all, turn out to be false.

Similarly bad advice is Karen Goldman's suggested approach to reading her own book on angels: "Eat it all up, and spit out whatever you don't want."<sup>16</sup> We need to be more discriminating in the restaurant of ideas than to swallow whatever tastes good.

We also need to avoid uncritical, gullible thinking about the Devil. Belief in the existence of the Devil and his helpers, the demons, is also widespread, though not as prevalent as belief in angels. But some people give the Devil entirely too much credit. They blame almost everything bad that happens—including anything bad that *they* do—on him. Rather than viewing the Devil as a simple explanation for everything that goes wrong, we need to find a way of recognizing what is truly demonic and what is the result of other factors.

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The other oversimplistic attitude that some of us are inclined to take toward angels and demons is an unmeasured skepticism. It is understandable for thinking persons, disturbed by the excesses of popular teaching and lore about angels, to view the whole idea with what the mid-twentieth century Swiss theologian Karl Barth called a "weary shrug of the shoulders."<sup>17</sup> It is easier to deny the existence of angels altogether, or at least to deny that we

can know anything about them, than to sort through all of the conflicting and hyped claims.

The easiest path, though, is often not the right one. If angels are poised to help us, we may be missing out if we don't pay attention to them. And if demons pose a threat to us, we ignore them at our peril. The smart thing to do is to find out what we can about both angels and demons and determine what, if any, change in our lives we ought to make in the light of that knowledge.

In this book we will be taking a hard look at many popular notions about spiritual beings. We will not try to address every controversial question about angels and demons; instead, we will be glad if we succeed in setting forth a good, helpful way of thinking about the subject. Our goal is to discern the truth about angels and demons and to dispel much of the nonsense about them that is so prevalent in our society. Our method is to *think critically*—neither gullibly accepting nor casually ignoring what others say, but giving careful, reflective consideration to the subject. Some of the things that we have learned about angels and demons, frankly, surprised us. They may surprise you as well.

## SENSE

You can't believe everything you hear about angels.

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## NONSENSE

You can just ignore the whole subject of angels.