

THE DEAD WHO BECOME ANGELS:
BEREAVEMENT AND VERNACULAR RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Some twenty-first century mourners describe the deceased as becoming an angel. Using published research, along with opportunist and anecdotal sources, the following questions are explored: who becomes an angel? who addresses them as angels? what do once-human angels do? what are they? where and when are they encountered? and in what sense are they believed in? Once-human angels are found in cemeteries, in memorial tattoos, at the deathbed, but mainly online - both computer and angel are mediums or messengers linking this world and the next. Unlike passive souls cut off in heaven from the living, angels have agency, a) continuing their earthly activities in heaven and b) looking after those on earth who still need their care and guidance. The once-human angel thus expresses a continuing bond between the living and the dead, particularly important for younger mourners who may live many decades before joining the deceased in heaven. This notion is taught by neither churches nor popular culture; it is not a creedal belief, but an idea, a meme, that some mourners use – and creatively develop - in particular contexts for particular beloved deceaseds, and may be understood as vernacular religion.

KEYWORDS: folk religion, vernacular belief, bereavement, angel, soul, continuing bonds

INTRODUCTION

‘I will be able to visit my loved ones as a guardian angel. I will be able to come from above and see the goings on down here and see if I need to guide my family.’
(African American female with end-stage renal disease, 2013)

In the marketing of one Swedish funeral service provider ‘a coffin is an *angelbox* and an urn is *angeldust*’. (Raudon, 2011, p.82)

‘Many of my families are really contented with the idea of their loved one living with the angels or taking angel status and never mention heaven or God.’
(Funeral celebrant, southern England, 2013)

This article examines a currently popular belief – that the dead become angels – and how this might work in bereavement and in condolence. In terms of American thanatology, my approach is innovative, for three reasons. First, though bereavement research has examined whether religion in general helps bereaved people cope (Park & Benore, 2004; Stroebe, 2004) and the effect on bereavement outcomes (Wortmann & Park, 2008), it rarely considers what specific beliefs might mean for mourners and how specific beliefs intersect with specific bereavement processes. This I aim to do.

Second, though there is considerable research and professional interest in meaning-making in bereavement (Neimeyer, 2000), the meanings examined are typically individual and personal, or at most familial (Nadeau, 1998). Likewise, palliative care shows more interest in personal meaning-making or ‘spirituality’ than in shared religious ideas. This individualising of meaning by both academics and practitioners ignores that meanings may be learnt or shared or dismissed, that meanings come in and out of fashion, in other words that meanings are social and cultural as well as individual. Though each grief is experienced personally and mourners may be socially isolated, mourners are no less cultural beings than at any other time of life (Walter, 1999).

Third, when western thanatology does engage with religion, it is typically with institutional religion (e.g. Garces-Foley, 2005; Klass & Goss, 2005), even though there are countless anthropological studies demonstrating in other parts of the world the interplay of institutional religion and folk religion (e.g. Endres & Lauser, 2011). This article’s examination of a particular discourse about what happens to the dead – that they become angels – discovers that this discourse is neither institutional nor entirely individual, but is part of a folk or vernacular culture that is ongoingly co-constructed (often online) through the creativity of individual mourners.

Contemporary Academic Angelology

Whether in religious USA, or more secular Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands or England, the idea that the dead become angels seems to be growing in popularity – yet has received scant academic attention. So far, only four academic studies, all qualitative and all very recent, have focused on this emergent phenomenon. Keane’s (2009) study of online pregnancy loss memorials showed that picturing the foetus as an angel is a key way that bereft mothers picture the foetus as real, as a person. Walter’s (2011) study of online tributes to Jade Goody, a young English celebrity who died in 2009 leaving two young boys, showed how the idea of her becoming an angel occurred far more frequently than the traditional idea of her as a soul in heaven. Each of these two researchers focussed on the specific context - pregnancy loss, and children’s loss of their mother – to make sense of angel imagery. Gustavsson’s (2011) analysis of Swedish and Norwegian internet memorial sites, though

finding babies and parental figures to be those most frequently imaged as angels, also found a range of other figures becoming angels. Quartier (2011) argues that contemporary images of heaven and angels attempt to personalise Christian beliefs that are otherwise impersonal, with angels expressing ongoing relationships between the mourner and the one mourned. In addition, a number of studies on angels in contemporary American culture mention the dead becoming angels, but only briefly and with little comment or analysis (e.g. Gardella, 2007; Garrett, 2008). Some social scientists documenting contemporary angel belief (e.g. Draper & Baker, 2011) make no mention of the idea that angels might be deceased humans.

This article draws on published research and on a range of opportunist and anecdotal sources to examine the spread of angelic afterlives beyond the specific online contexts of pregnancy loss and of young children losing a parent studied by Keane and Walter. I will synthesise, interpret and theorise existing data more than report new data. Given the embryonic stage of empirical research in this field, the article is suggestive rather than definitive.

The angelic dead are intriguing, for at least two reasons. First, they may represent a new twist in the cultural history of western images of the afterlife (McDannell & Lang, 2001). The most common afterlife belief in the twentieth century West was that the person comprises a mortal body and an immortal soul, the latter on death going to heaven to be united with the souls of loved ones. In the twentieth century, before the rise in divorce toward the end of the century, increased longevity produced unprecedentedly long marriages which, combined with romantic ideals of love, produced elderly widows who found comfort in the thought that soon their soul would join their husband's in heaven (Walter, 1996). As we shall see, soul reunion is very different from angelic activity.

Second, the origin of angelic afterlives is not as clear as might initially be supposed. Though it is possible that the writer of the Old Testament book of Daniel and even St Paul pictured the dead becoming angels (Garrett, 2008; Segal, 2004), the historic Judaeo-Christian mainstream has not taught this; it has classified angels as an entirely different order of being from humans, and portrayed the dead either as eternal souls or souls awaiting physical resurrection (McDannell & Lang, 2001). Contemporary Paganism likewise teaches that 'Angels are beings of spirit who have never been incarnated in physical form.'ⁱⁱ Nor do angelic afterlives directly stem from the popularity of angel talk in contemporary culture. Peaking in the USA in the 1990s and then spreading to many European countries, angel talk has been widely noted, with belief in guardian angels variously estimated in surveys at 80% in the USA (Wuthnow, 1998, pp. 121-122), 66% in Germany (Murken & Namini, 2006), and 40% in the UK (Field, 2011). But as Walter (2011) has pointed out, most popular angel books (of which there are many), along with movies such as *Wings of Desire* 1987 and *City of Angels* 1998, make very clear that angels were never human, and angel books typically make little or no reference to bereavement. The consensus among academic observers of popular angelology is that contemporary angels comprise a different order to humans but provide practical assistance to humans in their mundane material lives (Alver, 1999; Gardella, 2007; Garrett, 2008; Heathcote-James, 2002; Jones, 2011; Murken & Namini, 2006, 2007; Rees, 2010; Rees, 2012; Wuthnow, 1998).

Only very recently have some surveys into religious beliefs begun to include angelhood as a possible post-mortem state (Draper and Baker 2011); until Keane's 2009 study, no academic researchers had noticed that angels might play a significant role in popular afterlife belief, though American journalists had noticed it at least twenty years earlier. Scholars of religion tend to look at formal religious institutions and beliefs, along

with religious movements such as the New Age and the new spirituality, so have failed to notice an angelic afterlife belief appearing outside of these – in the realm of vernacular belief. Cultural studies has looked at angels in American culture, but its focus on published popular culture such as books, television programmes and movies has somewhat eclipsed the vernacular, that is to say, life as lived. The posting of everyday life on the internet makes this research task somewhat easier now, and this article draws heavily on internet posts.

Let me give a historical example. In the early nineteenth century, as today, that the dead become angels was not formally taught. Yet the family Bible of a Swiss peasant family includes these entries:

‘On the 13th of August 1824 was born Johannes Hauenstein. Baptised on the 15th. On 21 March 1826 the above-mentioned became again an angel of heaven.’

‘On 18 May 1831 the mother of the above-mentioned children also became an angel of heaven, aged 28 years and one month.’ⁱⁱⁱ

To find twenty first century angelic afterlives, we need to look at today’s equivalent of the family Bible, which may include spontaneous shrines, informal conversations, internet cemeteries and, more recently, memorial posts on social network sites such as Facebook. Using such sources, I will now proceed to discuss several aspects of post-mortem angelhood – who becomes an angel, who addresses them as angels, what do once-human angels do, what exactly are they, where and when are they encountered, and in what sense are angels objects of belief? One key aspect of contemporary angels, namely their highly visual character, is addressed in a companion article (Walter, 2015).

WHO?

Who Becomes an Angel?

The first thing to say is that – despite the quote with which this article began - people typically refer not to themselves, but to a deceased loved one, becoming an angel. This is unlike western talk of reincarnation which more typically relates to the speaker (Stringer, 2008, p. 33; Walter & Waterhouse, 1999). Occasionally, people speak of all the dead becoming angels, but far more common is to refer to a specific deceased loved one.

The two main candidates for post-mortem angelhood are the very young whose innocence matches those of angels; and parents and grandparents who, like ancestors in non-western cultures, continue to guide their offspring even after death. In terms of gender, angels over the centuries have moved from uniformly male in Biblical times, to include adoring female angels in Renaissance nativity scenes, to the largely female angels of the twentieth century (Zuffi, 2003), and it indeed seems that female humans are today more likely than male humans to be described as angels, both in life and in death. For the very young and the very old, however, gender is less relevant to angel status. However, I have examples of deceased middle aged males – including some pretty rough diamonds - becoming angels, so it may be that the female domination of angelhood is eroding.

Grand/parental Figures

Parents of either gender readily gain angelhood. This was central to Walter’s (2011) analysis of the Jade Goody tributes which offered hope that this deceased mother could continue to

guide and care for her young children. The fourteen year old daughter of Jacintha Saldanha,^{iv} the Duchess of Cambridge's nurse who took her own life after falling for a hoax call from a journalist, read out the following tribute after the Mass for her mother: 'We love you Mum, sleep in peace and please watch over us until we meet again in Heaven. We will always love you and keep you close to our hearts.'^v

Marwit and Klass (1995) have shown that guidance from the deceased is one way in which bonds may be continued, especially with a family member a generation or two above the mourner; this post-mortem relationship of ongoing guidance is readily portrayed in the image of the deceased becoming a guardian angel providing practical everyday guidance and protection. In a number of instances, the concept of post-mortem guardianship is described, without the word 'angel' being mentioned, as in the Saldanha quote above. Stringer describes how common it is in the UK for people to want to know that their deceased loved ones are looking over them and looking after them; 'they would bring their troubles and concerns to the dead and expect them to look out for the family.' After a baptism, some women 'took their child to the grave of a grandparent and asked for that person to recognise the new life and to look after the child.' (Stringer, 2008, pp.36,37). This may, or may not, invoke an explicit description of the deceased as an angel.

It is thus not surprising that grandparents frequently feature in the role of guardian angel watching over the living. Although Day (2012) in a recent English study argues that it is particularly grandmothers who play this role, it is not hard to find deceased grandfathers continuing to guide the living (Marwit & Klass, 1995). 'Grandpa, I was only seven years old when you died... I hope that you have been watching over us for the last eleven years and will continue to do so for the rest of our lives. I know that you are v proud of me, in everything that I have accomplished.....'^{vi} An Irish college lecturer who teaches death and loss with social care students has observed that several students speak of their deceased grandparents as guardian angels; some pray to their grandparent more than they do to the saints or to Jesus.^{vii} She compares this with the relationship of Africans and Latinos to family ancestors. Some prophets in syncretic African religions 'proclaim that traditional ancestors and Christian angels are the same person' (Boyer, 2001, p.310). As one African American said, 'I believe angels guide me every day - the angels of lost family members and ancestors they come to us when we are in need.'^{viii}

Children

That stillbirths and those who die in the womb are depicted as angels has been documented by Keane (2009) and Gustavsson (2011). This has a long history, going back to at least the Renaissance and the Baroque in which it became fashionable to picture heavenly winged beings as babies (Walter, 2015), images echoed in today's internet infant memorials (Keane 2009). Baby memorial sites in Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK, and the USA now often include angel in their title, and more than one online information service about stillbirth and pregnancy loss is called *Angel Babies*. A company specialising in headstones and memorials for children is named *Little Angels*.^{ix} It is perhaps the baby's glorified inexperience that qualifies it for angelhood: both angels and babies can know no sin (Jones, 2011). Or perhaps there are roots in the folk belief that the child's soul originates from heaven, so the baby is particularly close to God (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli, 1987).

Murders and disasters nowadays often produce an effusion of both spontaneous shrines and internet posts; when young people have died, angels feature strongly. Thus after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing whose many victims included children in daycare, 'artistic expression often tried to provide solace to the horror of the murder of 19 children by

illustrating both their ascension into heaven and their transformation into angels, and angels gently carrying them to heaven.’ (Linenthal, 2001, p.62) After the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, ‘several angels could be found in the artwork and words of young people struggling with grief and loss’ (Clark, 2003, p.160), while after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, a local art teacher created twenty seven angels which he hammered into the ground. In the UK, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, ten-year-olds murdered by their school caretaker in 2002, were often depicted as angels.^x

Despite their inexperience, babies and young children can on occasion also become guardian angels. Perhaps their inexperience gives them magical powers? One mother addressed her stillborn child: ‘My dear sweet angel... Please watch over mommy and daddy.’^{xi} In much of Latin America, babies become angels; their task is to pray for their families, not the other way around (Scheper-Hughes, 1992).

Others

Parents apart, those in mid-life are less likely to become angels, but are by no means excluded. A thirty year old man is memorialised by his sister: ‘An angel in heaven you have become / My little brother you shall remain.’^{xii} A fifty-one year old female is memorialised by a friend: ‘You are in a better place, and I for one know I have the greatest guardian angel that a person could ask for. Till we meet again someday...’^{xiii} A man mourning a British soldier killed in Afghanistan wears a t-shirt with the inscription ‘Lost a Friend, Gained an Angel’ (Walklate, Mythen, & McGarry, 2011)p.159.

Spouses

Though elderly spousal bereavement is the most common form of major bereavement in contemporary western societies, elderly spouses are rarely seen among the angelic host. The one exception I have found is fictional (Kerr, 2011), discussed elsewhere (Walter, 2015).

Who Addresses Them as Angels?

Later, I will argue it is highly significant that those who depict the dead as angels tend to be younger rather than older mourners. First, though, we need to consider whether those who depict the dead as an angel are likely to be of a particular nationality, religion, social class or gender. I look briefly at each of these, before examining the writer’s relationship to the one envisaged as having become an angel - which is both easier to evidence and of particular significance in terms of bereavement.

Angels as a part of contemporary popular culture originated in the USA in the second half of the twentieth century (Gardella, 2007; McDannell & Lang, 2001), moving thence to Europe, particularly Scandinavia (Gilhus, 2012). But whereas the presence of (typically, never-human) angels in formal doctrine, movies, books, etc can readily be shown, plotting the geography of personal and vernacular belief in once-human angels is much more challenging. Whereas belief by Americans in angels has been surveyed (Draper & Baker, 2011; Wuthnow, 1998), belief that the dead become angels has not. At a 2013 international death studies conference, I asked the eight Americans present (most of them over 50) if they knew anyone who thinks the dead become angels; several said no, but two said ‘Everyone!’ – adding that as Christians they themselves had believed this since their childhood. The truth is, we do not know the historical geography of the folk belief in once-human angels.

What about religion? Are Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox Christians more or less likely to see their dead as angels? Colleagues have told me that those living in deeply

Orthodox areas such as the Republic of Georgia, Greece, and rural Romania are unlikely to see their dead as angels, though urban dwellers less influenced by priests might. In Georgia, however, souls in heaven may in dreams exhibit angelic capabilities such as punishing and guiding the living. I have some examples of Catholic once-human angels, but an Italian-American theologian told me that in popular Catholicism the distinctions between God, Mary, lesser saints, and the family dead are not so important; they all have spiritual power so may all be prayed to – the family dead have no need to become angels as they are already lesser saints. The dead becoming angels may, possibly, be particularly attractive to those Protestants whose formal teaching no room for saints and prohibits easy traffic between the living and the dead. But as with nationality, we are left with more questions than answers.

My analysis (Walter, 2011) of angel postings for Jade Goody focussed on her mourners' working class position, angel imagery emerging 'bottom-up' from pop culture rather than 'top-down' from theologically educated culture, though I left open the possibility of more multi-class angels after other deaths. Unfortunately, it is difficult to discern the social class origins of much of the anecdotal data presented in the current article.

Gender, however, is clearly significant. Gustavsson (2011) notes of Scandinavian internet memorial sites that the writers are mainly female. Indeed, a quick glance at almost any relevant online and offline context indicates a clear majority of women addressing the dead as angels, echoing the much higher proportion of women over men who are religious (Davie & Walter, 1999), who post on internet memorial sites, who provide and attend bereavement counselling, and who write books on bereavement and who write books on angels.

Relationship to Deceased

Primary mourners, that is, close kin and other intimates, often picture their dead as angels. We have noted mothers depicting infants as angels, but mothers may depict children of any age as an angel, as did the mother of 19 year old James Bubear who died in a drowning accident: 'Heaven has another angel'.^{xiv} After Richard, aged 27, died of cancer in 2007, his mother wrote: "I got to borrow an angel who spread his light in my life with each breath." (Gustavsson, 2011, p.155). Children also write about their elders: "rest in peace dear daddy, I love you...I am so proud to have my father as my guardian angel." (for a 48 year old father^{xv}). Grandchildren also write: "See you in heaven Nana as I am sure you will be one of God's special angels." (for a 78 year old^{xvi})

Secondary mourners (peers and more distant relatives), along with tertiary mourners (those who never knew the deceased but who participate in vernacular shrines and online memorials), are also purveyors of angelic afterlives. Thus, for James Bubear, probably from a peer, 'Happy 21st birthday James.....rock the sky and stars. R.I.P. Angel xxx' And from a mother who knew James only through media coverage of his death: 'Keep the angels smiling James and watch over your family. The world has lost a good man.'^{xvii} Later, I note that angelic posts from secondary and tertiary mourners can distress primary mourners who find the angel image flippant and unable to mirror grief's depths.

To summarise, the work that angel imagery does is family work. Talk of the angelic dead, like ancestor rites, displays family (Morgan, 1996). The heavenly behaviour or character of angelic babies, parents and grandparents are normative for those particular roles on earth (innocence, or guidance). But unlike ancestor rites, the online environment allows the display of a wide range of family relationships, and more importantly the grief of friends

(Jakoby & Reiser, 2013), previously often excluded from family-dominated mourning behaviour (Doka, 2002).

WHAT?

Are once-human angels the same as the souls of the dead? What do they do?

Agency

Though devout Christian *souls* may spend their time in heaven actively worshipping God (McDannell & Lang, 2001), most souls since the nineteenth century romantic movement spend their time passively waiting for the arrival of their yet-to-die loved ones and then, when they arrive, sitting quietly with them on a cloud. Compared to these rather passive souls, it is striking how active angels are. They are active within heaven – singing, blowing trumpets, flying around, shopping even – as in the epitaph ‘Shopping with angels’ carved into a memorial bench at Olney Natural Burial Ground, England. Those who had a lively character on earth are particularly active in heaven (Walter 2011). Foetal loss memorial sites typically depict angel babies not interacting with the earth plane, but – if not asleep – playing, kissing and hugging each other, picking a heavenly flower, etc. Having specific agency, the deceased-as-angel continues as a recognisable individual, rather than as an amorphous soul (Quartier, 2011). In the absence of mediumistic powers, the living cannot call up dead souls, but mourners remain in control of the angelic dead, defining and picturing their activities.^{xviii} There is thus a double agency, with mourners actively creating a picture of the active angelic dead; this is central to my analysis later of continuing bonds.

Once-human angels may also be active as messengers, flying back to earth to guide and guard their remaining loved ones, and especially continuing the work of mothering dependent children - a strong theme in the Jade Goody tributes (Walter, 2011). Angel imagery was present, though less frequent, twelve years earlier in both offline and online condolence books for Princess Diana, a mother of somewhat older boys than Jade’s. Some messages portrayed Diana as the young princes’ guardian angel; others depicted her as an angel who had gone to heaven to carry on her unfinished business of caring for the sick (Jones, 1999). As with Jade Goody, becoming an angel with agency is particularly attractive when the death is premature and the person’s life work is unfinished. Angels can continue and/or finish the work; souls cannot. A message to gifted but alcoholic singer Amy Winehouse, tied to a tree outside her home in London, requested: ‘Please sing for my grandparents and Pierre in heaven! And have a drink with them too!’ This exemplifies a minority request to the dead: to care for loved ones not on earth but in heaven.

Blauner (1966) has observed that in many cultures the prematurely deceased become ghosts, beings who cannot fully leave this world because they ought, by rights, still to be on it. Ghosts are troublesome at best, malign at worst; seeing a ghost or feeling its presence is rarely a pleasant experience (Davies, 2007; Finucane, 1996). Sir James Frazer (1933) showed that most cultures fear and dread the spirits of the deceased. African ancestors are benevolent only if correctly propitiated; otherwise they punish their descendants for neglect of ritual obligations (Brain, 1973). But today’s once-human angels are uniformly helpful and need no propitiation; feeling their presence is reassuring.

Care

What do once-human angels do? Their main role is to guide and care for their relatives on earth.

In the West, the living are expected, formally at least, to relate to their dead by remembering them. In the East, the living are expected to care for their dead, and in turn the ancestral dead will guide and care for them (Smith, 1974). In Western post-mortem memory, the remembered one is the passive recipient of memory; s/he is thus deprived of agency. This constitutes a problem in terms of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) which, as Goss and Klass (2005) have observed, in the modern West typically comprise positive bonds of love and affection. Although there are circumstances where love is one-way, ideally it is reciprocated, so one would hope a continuing bond of love to be reciprocated. Here angels have a trump card over souls: they have agency and can directly care for and guide the living, without the intermediary of a spiritualist medium. If ‘death ends a life, not a relationship’ (Day, 2012, p.66), the dead need agency. But angelic afterlives themselves pose a problem for continuing bonds: though angels have agency, the living are acted on *by* angels, they cannot themselves do anything *for* angels. This distinguishes angels from both the reciprocal relation that those in Africa and the East^{xix} can have with their ancestors, and from traditional Catholic or Orthodox Christian souls whom the living can pray for. That, at least, is how it appears in the imagery. But as I argued a few paragraphs above, the living do in fact exert agency, defining and picturing the activities that their beloved angelic dead engage in.

Angels traditionally care and guide rather than remember. But in the churchyard of the Tyrolean village of Neukirchen, while some of the many plastic angels guarding graves are indeed praying and watching, I noticed others who appear to be pondering and remembering - in thoughtful posture, head leaning on one hand. One plastic winged putto leans on a little plastic gravestone with the inscription ‘Es bleibt die Erinnerung’ (‘What remains are memories’). In this busy and immaculate churchyard to which throughout the day village women come to tend graves, maybe the angels remember twenty four hours a day, on behalf of the living who may forget, at least in their sleeping hours? If one way that the living care for the dead is to remember them, is one way the angelic dead care for the living is to help us remember them? In Catholic Tyrol, it seems so.

So maybe what matters is not love, but the memory of love? For some mourners, death does end the relationship with the other, enabling the other to be internalised within the mourner so there is not so much a relationship as a oneness (Árnason, 2012). As Morrie Schwartz put it as he faced his own end:

‘As long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on - in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here.’ (Albom, 1997, p.174)

The outer representation (picturing where the deceased is and what they are doing) reveals the mourner’s inner representations (Marwit & Klass, 1995; Mogenson, 1992), but we need more research into the relation between the two. Field et al (2013) have distinguished between internalised and externalised expressions of continuing bonds; an external expression such as conceiving the deceased as a sentient being can be positive if it reflects a spiritual belief, but in the absence of spiritual belief may reflect a refusal to accept the death. Field et al did not consider the belief that the dead become guardian angels; this could be an external or an internal representation – or both.

Angels *Versus* Souls

What are angels? How do they differ from souls?

Belief in the soul resting in peace in heaven offered hope for the industrial revolution's weary workers, and the soul awaiting its beloved offered hope for the twentieth century's elderly widows. But today's younger – and likely long-lived - mourner is too impatient to wait fifty to eighty years for reunion with a deceased peer or grandparent. The Victorian value of patience in anticipation of reunion was based not only on Christian teaching and romanticism, but also on rather short life expectancies. If old people today typically grieve offline the death of spouses and peers whose souls they will soon join, young people may grieve online the deaths of older relatives whom they depict as guardian angels.

Historians have clearly demonstrated the western decline of hell, starting in the early modern period (Walker, 1964) and largely complete in most western countries by the end of the First World War, though continuing for much of the twentieth century in Ireland and the USA (Walter, 1996). Traditionally, souls are judged, destined for either heaven or hell; contemporary angels are incapable of sin. So with the decline of hell, angelic afterlives become plausible. Even after the decline of hell, souls can be described as shady, unhappy or troubled, the latter two adjectives being applied to living as well as dead souls. We say of young children, 'she's a happy little soul', but we could equally say 'she's a troubled soul'. Souls are ambiguous. Indeed, the formulaic 'May her soul rest in peace' implies that it may perhaps not rest peacefully.

Despite a theological history of devils and fallen angels (Garrett, 2008; Knausgaard, 2008; V. Rees, 2012)^{xx}, twenty first century angels are now deemed entirely happy and positive – reflected in how we use 'angel' and 'angelic' to describe the living. Angels resonate with a culture that can be unremittingly positive. Positive thinking, the human potential movement and New Age spirituality have little place for sin and sadness. Twenty first century funerals, rather than looking forward anxiously to the soul's post-mortem judgement, look back in celebration at the life lived, eulogising it in positive terms (Garces-Foley & Holcomb, 2005). It is not just babies who are without sin; we now all are. So it is not just babies who become angels.

Angels *Plus* Souls

Without the assistance of a spiritualist medium or serendipitous sensing of its presence, the soul in heaven is inaccessible to the living. As Eric Clapton's *Tears from Heaven* (often played at funerals) makes painfully clear, heaven is no place for the living (Quartier, 2011). The soul in heaven therefore expresses the modernist notion that the dead have to be let go of (Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992). The body has died, the soul is in heaven, and I must live without the person until I myself die. The idea that the dead become angels who can continue to guide and care for us expresses the romantic notion that a bond can be continued with the dead. If the eternal soul represents the deceased's continuing identity, the post-mortem angel represents a continuing relationship (Hauenstein, 2009).

It is not surprising that hopes of post-mortem angelhood or guardianship are sometimes combined with belief in the reunion of souls. Thus the Swedish mother of murdered toddlers wrote: 'Play with the angels until I come up to you some day and can embrace you both again.' (Gustavsson, 2011, p.149). And Jacintha Saldanha's teenage daughter, already quoted: 'We love you Mum, sleep in peace and please watch over us until we meet again in Heaven...' The dead become angels only until the living join them. Once the

living are themselves in heaven, they no longer need looking after, so their need for a guardian angel ceases. As Jackie Kay's poem *Darling* puts it:

The dead don't go till you do, loved ones.
The dead are still here holding our hands. ^{xxi}

In the meantime, the dead need hands to hold ours. Souls cannot reach out to the living; but angels – possessing hands as well as wings - can and do. Only when we ourselves go, do the angelic dead no longer need to reach out to us.

In many cultures, ancestors progress over time from active engagement with the living to a more diffuse membership of the overall community of ancestors, eventually to lose their personal identity after two generations when no-one living directly remembers them. Maybe twenty-first century angels also progress over time, from watching and guarding we the living, to eventually enjoying our company in heaven. Maybe at this point, angels become souls; guardians become once again companions.

WHERE?

Where may the angelic dead be encountered?

Sacred space is, in large measure, where the dead are encountered. In Japan, offerings are made to the dead and guidance sought at household altars. In Europe, churches were often built around relics: it was the presence of the dead, and the opportunity to pray to them, that made the church sacred. Bailey (1997) has argued that the churchyard is likewise sacred because it is where the village ancestors lie, and Davies (1996) has argued that over time even secular British crematoria can gain a sacred aura. In each case, one may ask 'What is the relation between the space of encounter, and afterlife beliefs?' 'What kinds of belief become plausible in such spaces?' This section, therefore, examines some spaces in which post-mortem angels are particularly likely to be found, and how these spaces sustain belief, hope and comfort. I do not have space here to examine memorial tattoos, instead looking at the deathbed, the places and spaces in which the dead body comes to rest (or not), and most importantly, cyberspace. I omit discussion of historic and contemporary visual culture: this particularly expansive mansion where dwell once-human angels is described more fully in Walter (2015).

One place where the living sometimes encounter the dead is the deathbed. Near-death experiences, after which the person recovers, and deathbed visions, where they do not, are found in all societies. They may include a being resembling a human, but with certain non-human features such as transparency or a shining appearance (Garrett, 2008, pp.212-23). This 'angel of light' is sometimes recognised as a pre-deceased relative. Combining the two construes the deceased relative as a kindly angel of death, calling the dying person home. The more that such visions are reported and – with the contemporary ease of digital publishing - images of them published, the more plausible becomes the idea that family members who go before us become angels. It is even possible that such visions underlie the very origins of the concept of angel. Moving to after, rather than before, death, it is not uncommon for mourners to sense the presence of the dead (Rees, 1971), and Day (2012) has argued that these experiences form the basis for afterlife beliefs, especially the sense that the deceased loved one is guiding and guarding.

Scattered Remains

In his seminal work *Death and the Right Hand*, anthropologist Robert Hertz (1960) argued that in many societies what happens to the body, to the soul, and to mourners symbolize and affirm one another. Thus in Islam and in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, burial sustains and is sustained by belief in the resurrection of the body. Modern cremation's more immediate and radical destruction of the body, accepted by most Protestants and some Catholics, fits the idea of an immaterial immortal soul (Davies, 1990). Rumble et al (2014) have recently argued that contemporary ecological discourses now re-position mortal remains not in a defined full body or ash grave, but as dispersed throughout the environment – whether through a natural burial that sustains nature, or through the practice, increasingly common in the UK, of scattering the ashes. Though the reality of scattering is that the ashes fall to the ground in a heap, the *image* of scattering 'to the winds' is of my remains becoming 'Part of all you see / The air you are breathing', to quote Ewan McColl's 1980s song *The Joy of Living*, sung at his funeral by his widow Peggy Seeger and their children. This resonates with the idea that the dead become not (only) souls lodged in heaven but angels able to fly anywhere and everywhere, watching over their loved ones on earth. If disposed-of remains, located in a specific place, are the corporeal counterpart of the soul's lodging in heaven, dispersed remains are the material counterpart of the ever-present angel.

This interpretation may seem fanciful, but consider the following. In a 2013 discussion about angels by dialysis outpatients in the American south, all with end-stage renal disease, an eighty year old of South American origin announced,

'I am going to be cremated and I will come back in dust particles, each dust particle will be a piece of my spirit and allow me to watch what you are all doing. I will be like a ghost with an ability to visit many areas and people who are still alive and important to me. Some people I will play tricks on and some people I will help. You may laugh but this is my plan for my afterlife and I will be cremated by my family. A piece of my dust will stick to your clothes and that will be me watching over you. You can laugh but I'll be around even though I do not have a body. I will be watching my children, my grandchildren and see how they get on. I don't want to miss anything - that's why I like this idea.'^{xxii}

Where are the angelic dead encountered? Like this man's and McColl's dispersed ashes, angels can be anywhere and everywhere. I have not come across anyone else making this connection, but the scattering / dispersal / angel connection is precisely what Hertz would have predicted.

Online

The most common place where the angelic dead are encountered, however, is online.

The first thing to say about the online environment is that, now in the second decade of the twentieth century, it has evolved from a special place to which one goes, to the space in which many younger people exist - an everyday environment. Unlike in the 1990s, when you had to choose to enter an internet cemetery, marked by cemetery gates like an offline cemetery, messages about and even from the dead can now pop up on social network sites anywhere, any time. Offline, the veil between the living and the dead is particularly thin in certain liminal spaces – the household altar, the Eastern Orthodox church (Ernst, 2007), the western cemetery (Warner, 1959). Online, the veil may hardly exist; online, the dead are no longer sequestered (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011-12). The nearest material comparisons are our South American friend's and Ewan McColl's ashes, permeating every molecule of the air their survivors breathe. Just as these scattered remains are imagined to be everywhere rather than located in a grave to be

visited, so online the dead may now be encountered any time, without the need to visit a designated internet cemetery. Memories that were once deposited in an online cemetery are now dispersed throughout the internet.

Jakoby and Reiser (2013) have shown how spirituality, and in particular mention of heaven, has re-appeared online, even in secular Germany. Kasket (2012) has shown that on Facebook, the dead are often addressed as though they have agency ('I know you can read this'). For the dead to have agency, they must be somewhere, and where could that be other than heaven? As one MySpace mourner put it: 'I bet they have Myspace in heaven so you can see all of this awesome stuff.' (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011). Neither Kasket nor Brubaker and Hayes point out that the only beings in heaven – other than God - who have agency are angels. But consider Altena's (2011, p.319) description of a Dutch virtual memorial: 'One parent imagines her dead daughter to be her little guardian angel whom she asks to provide her and her husband with a new baby brother or sister. Here, weblog messages have become digital versions of conventional prayers and requests.' In this post, and in many others, cyberspace becomes the medium through which the living and the dead can communicate; the living use the computer, tablet or smartphone to contact the dead, the dead use their angelic powers to look after the living. There is a remarkable similarity between cyberspace and angels: each is able to traverse the gap between earth and heaven. Online, angels are the natural image for the dead, especially the dead with whom continuing bonds are desired.

Facebook is a particularly amenable place for angels. Its overall ethos is that posts be positive. It provides an environment in which I can promote myself, and – because I am known by the company I keep – a good way to do this is to praise my friends. If on Facebook everything and everyone, at least most of the time, is wonderful, then the dead must also be depicted as wonderful, indeed as angelic. There is no place on Facebook for the ambiguity of souls that may be troubled as well as happy, hell-bound rather than heaven-bound. Facebook is the natural environment for those heavenly beings that are, by definition, full of light and positivity.

While cyberspace is now an ever-present environment, each online site is also a 'communicative island' (Geser, 1998) with its own rules, including feeling rules (Jakoby & Reiser, 2013). Thus a German spiritual website ran a discussion in 2011 on 'Can the dead also be angels?' The discussion reflects both theological and popular books on angels, with a dominant verdict that angels are a different order of being from humans, e.g. 'The dead can be our spiritual guide, but guardian angels are completely different.'^{xxiii} Likewise once-human angels are rarely found in sites for the expression of grief, such as Cruse Bereavement Care's *Road4U* site^{xxiv} where young people can express the complex and far from positive feelings of grief that are unwelcome on general social network sites such as Facebook. Memorial sites are about the dead, though grief may also be expressed; bereavement sites are about grief, though material about the dead may also be posted. It is on memorial sites and Facebook that angels may regularly be seen. (Norms are of course site-specific offline as well as online, which may illuminate why angels rarely if ever appear in offline research reports or in clinical interviews with bereaved people.)

Just as some primary mourners may not feel able to express their own grief on a general social network site such as Facebook, so they may find the unrelenting positivity of Facebook's angelic dead fails to mirror their own complex and raw emotions. Facebook expands the range of mourning, bringing in secondary and even tertiary mourners who hitherto had little or no forum in which to express condolences or publicly eulogise the dead (Brubaker et al., 2013). When a young person dies, their parents may enter for the first time

the world of Facebook precisely in order to access the messages of affection posted there by their child's friends, one father of a 15 year old stating 'The memorial site has meant a lot to us, almost unbelievably so, in our process of grieving. We see that not only have we lost a son and brother, but that a lot of other people also have lost a friend. This shows we are not alone with our sorrow.' (Gustavsson, 2011, p.147). But there is also anecdotal evidence of parents who have closed their deceased child's Facebook site because they struggled with the levity of comments posted by friends. One bereaved parent told me how ambivalent she was about her deceased son's friends' posts. It was nice for example, that they remembered the fifth anniversary of his death, but the posts were so superficial. It is, of course, easy to research online posts and those who value them, whereas closed-down sites, and those who close them, are invisible – so it is difficult to assess how many are encouraged, how many distressed, by angelic posts.

What, though, about online baby memorials, full of angel imagery posted by bereaved parents? One researcher told me that bereaved mothers, even if they themselves portray their baby as an angel, do not like being told by others that their baby has become an angel. Likewise, bereaved parents who choose to have another child rarely appreciate well-meaning condolers advising them to do this. Perhaps the bereft have to find positivity for, and in, themselves; being jollied along by the fake positivity of others is rarely experienced as supportive. Unfortunately, Facebook's hyper-positive angelic dead may indeed be experienced as fake, or at least superficial.

BELIEF?

If there are a number of spaces and places where the dead are portrayed as angels, is it helpful or meaningful to say that people *believe* their dead are now angels?

As already noted, this idea/belief/hope comes from neither church teaching nor popular books on angels. Rather it seems to be a way of expressing relationships with the dead, something that western religions, especially Protestantism, struggle to articulate - so articulations of relationships with the dead come, in the West, from below, from informal rather than formal culture. The idea that the deceased is now an angel may come from direct experience, such as sensing the deceased's presence (Day, 2012; Rees, 1971), but more often it simply expresses a relationship. At the same time, picturing the deceased as an angel is not directed *against* formal religious teachings. Whereas popular belief is often conceptualised as over against formal institutional religion, vernacular or folk belief simply reflects life as lived (Bowman & Valk, 2012), whether in tandem with, in ignorance of, or in opposition to, formal religion. As Swedish folklorist Gustavsson comments (2011, p.149), 'This... is a conceptual world that the afflicted persons themselves can create in order to find some form of consolation.' This reflects where Woodhead (2012) suggests religion in general is heading:

'Real religion – which is to say everyday, lived religion – is thriving and evolving, while hierarchical, institutionalised, dogmatic forms of religion are marginalised. Religion has returned to the core business of sustaining everyday life, supporting relations with the living and the dead, and managing misfortune. That's why angels, cathedrals, pilgrimages and retreats are all doing well.'

The era in which credal belief is understood as Christianity's touchstone (something alien to the East) may be waning.

Abba, from Gustavsson's secular Sweden but popular throughout the West, understand this in their 1979 song *I Have a Dream* with its chorus 'I believe in angels':

I have a dream, a song to sing

To help me cope with anything...
I believe in angels....
I have a dream, a fantasy
To help me through reality

And maybe Abba themselves will become angels:

When I know the time is right for me
I'll cross the stream – I have a dream...

Abba identify angels as a coping strategy. This, rather than a transformative worldview, is what religion is for many people. Beliefs, ideas, practices are articulated when needed to cope with adversity, without any desire to make them into a coherent worldview (to the considerable annoyance of some clergy and theologians). Such beliefs and practices are not creedal but situational (Stringer, 1996, 2008) – hence the earlier section on *where* angels may be found.

The Abba song refers also to ‘the wonder of a fairy tale’. Angels are more fairy tale, legend, folklore than creed. Whereas creedal belief states truth in formal propositions, fairy tales, legends and folklore allude to truth, in this case the truth of loss. As one mother emailed me:

‘Some of my son's briskly unsentimental former girlfriends have posted ‘angel’ remarks, exactly of the kind your research cites, on his Facebook page. If I were to ask them if they really believed in guardian angels, or in an angelic Michael looking after their interests, they'd laugh brightly, and perhaps a little sheepishly. I suppose it's a new discursive form which doesn't denote the least religious belief, necessarily; yet it does have a real societal significance. Is it a modern replacement for a lost language of sentiment, but which does the same emotional work?’

Some westerners say they ‘like’ rather than ‘believe’ the idea that the dead become angels, just as some say they ‘like’ rather than ‘believe’ the idea that the dead are reincarnated (Walter & Waterhouse, 1999). The idea that the deceased is now an angel is a linguistic resource, a coping strategy, used by some mourners.

If creedal belief spreads through evangelism and formal teaching, the angel ‘meme’ spreads virally online; it is not a coherent belief system, but a singular idea that can be replicated in different contexts, including that of mourning. Composing an online memorial post is similar to writing in an old fashioned visitor's book or guestbook: the writer looks to see what others have written to gain inspiration, or at least a language, for expressing his or her own experience. Thus one angel post can lead to many others, and it is no surprise that online memorials and social network sites are where once-human angels are most often found.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented a range of anecdotal and published evidence that the twenty first century western dead are increasingly depicted as having become angels. Angels, like Facebook, provide direct connection to the deceased. In turn, angels – like other manifestations of the dead on Facebook – are interested, and even participate, in everyday life: in birthdays, in breakups, in exam nerves. In an increasingly (if unevenly) affluent, postmaterial society, this world is no vale of tears but one of activity and fulfilment; what matters is everyday life on earth, not future life in heaven. Thus the dead are interested in and even assist our earthly life, rather than our earthly life being a miserable prelude to our soul's eternal repose in heaven. The beloved dead as guardian angels support younger mourners who expect to live many decades before their souls can join the deceased in heaven; thus the contemporary angelic host comprises mainly babies, children, young adults and grandparents.

Depicting a relationship with the deceased, angelic language can also offend some primary mourners. Once-human angels are mentioned much more frequently in some situations (e.g. cemeteries, Facebook) than others (e.g. research interviews, grief support sites), so are situational. No part of secular philosophy or mainstream Christian tradition, they are nevertheless depicted by people of faith and of none.

This article has been suggestive rather than definitive, and there is much that we do not know about the role of angel imagery within mourning. We can say with confidence, however, that angel talk provides a lens through which mourners explore their experiences and relations with the deceased. It is a vernacular resource used – and creatively developed – by some mourners. Given its total absence in both professional and research literatures on bereavement, it is a resource of which many bereavement professionals are possibly unaware. One setting angels may have so far been reluctant to visit is the counselling session and the pastoral encounter between clergy and bereaved parishioner. Secular therapists and counsellors may fail to see angels if they focus on feelings, rather than on the deceased and on what the client imagines the deceased to have become. Clergy may fail to see angels if their focus is church doctrine rather than the vernacular religion that expresses parishioners' lived experience. But the absence of angels from therapeutic or pastoral encounters does not mean that once-human angels do not have – or for that matter, undermine - meaning within bereavement. Hopefully, this article will alert counsellors, therapists and ministers to the role of angel imagery within mourning and to hint at its possibilities for exploring a bereaved client's relationship with the deceased. Practical suggestions for this approach within the therapeutic encounter are found in Mogenson (1992) and (for German speakers) Kachler (2011).

When?

This article has examined the 'who, what and where' of once-human angels, but has omitted the 'when'. Just as the geography of this folk belief is unclear, so is its contemporary history. If once-human angels are to be found in places like the early nineteenth century family Bible cited earlier, finding historical examples is like looking for needles in haystacks, though their recent semi-viral spread online makes contemporary documentation much easier. Thus we find numerous angel posts for today's dead, contrasting with their absence in an analysis of web cemeteries fifteen years ago (Roberts & Vidal, 2000); and we find a marked increase in the number of angel memorial posts for young mum Jade Goody in 2009 compared to young mum Princess Diana in 1997.

So why has the idea that the dead become angels apparently taken hold in the twenty first century? I hypothesise that its current popularity has two recent historical roots. First, there is the manifest presence of (never human) angels in popular culture, peaking in America in the 1990s (Gardella, 2007) and in north-western Europe a decade later, just one of a number of playful new discursive engagements with the supernatural. Second there is a blurring of the boundary between life and death, between the living and the dead (Howarth, 2000), promoted in part by medical developments in resuscitation techniques, organ transplantation, gene therapy, and cloning, along with accounts of near-death experiences by those who have returned from the other side. Alongside this blurring has come a strengthening of the nineteenth century celebration that love is eternal and transcends the grave; this idea had been carried throughout the twentieth century by popular culture (Stroebe et al., 1992; Walter, 1999) but toward the end of the century re-gained an academic and professional foothold as modernist discourses of progress in which the dead have to be let go of were deconstructed and death was re-enchanted (Lee, 2008). Put all this together, and you

get vampires, werewolves and zombies becoming fashionable with teenagers (Coombs, 2014), along with the idea that the dead are not cut off from the living but continue to care for them as angels. Younger mourners have taken the idea of angels who never were human, and creatively turned them into the idea that the dead become angels, using this as a discursive resource in mourning. This has coincided with Web 2.0, enabling this mutation of the angel ‘meme’ to proliferate online. It is a genuinely bottom-up vernacular belief, articulating, I argue, younger mourners’ experiences of continuing bonds. But it is also possible that it is just a fashion, a fad, a flash in the pan, and will disappear just as fast as it appeared.

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ⁱⁱ <http://www.paganspath.com/meta/angels.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Thanks to Hans Hauenstein for this example.

^{iv} Memorialising entails perpetuating the deceased's name; I therefore consider that, when researchers report public memorials, it is – as a general rule – unethical to remove the names that memorialisers have taken steps publicly to perpetuate. Mourners' names, however, should normally be anonymised.

^v <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20737375>

^{vi} <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/K/Ki.html>

^{vii} Jennifer Moran Stritch, personal communication

^{viii} Group discussion in the American south with patients with end-stage renal disease, conducted by Natasha Donnelly 2013.

^{ix} <http://www.little-angels.biz/> Accessed 5 Oct 2013.

^x <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1416608/Words-of-peace-for-two-little-angels.html>

^{xi} Virtual Memorial Garden <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/> (Natalie Marie Matheny)

^{xii} Virtual Memorial Garden <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/> (Damian Andres Martinez)

^{xiii} Virtual Memorial Garden <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/> (Priscilla May Martinez)

^{xiv} <http://www.forevermissed.com/james-bubear/#about> Accessed 30 Aug 2013

^{xv} Virtual Memorial Garden <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/> (Dan W. Kirkland, Jr)

^{xvi} Virtual Memorial Garden <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/> (Mary Marlow)

^{xvii} <http://www.forevermissed.com/james-bubear/#about> Accessed 30 Aug 2013

^{xviii} Thanks to Elena Papageorgiou for this insight.

^{xix} And, according to Cannell (2011), also English genealogists.

^{xx} And more recently in Rilke's second Duino Elegy 'Jeder Engel ist schrecklich' (Every angel is terrible).

^{xxi} <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/lib/tmp/cmsfiles/File/review/964kay.pdf>

^{xxii} See note viii.

^{xxiii} <http://www.hexengemeinde.de/viewtopic.php?t=22851&sid=729adcea7993cd7f49c0c611d4d3328b> Thanks to Nina Jakoby for pointing me to this site, accessed 30 Aug 2013.

^{xxiv} <http://www.rd4u.org.uk/>