

NBC'S DE-/RE-CONSTRUCTION OF "ANGELS"

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There were these three little princes, see, & they were forever having experiences of what we might call positive reinforcement. Good luck, you might say. No wonder they were convinced that the universe is friendly. Horace Walpole (d.1797), being filthy rich & of cheerful disposition despite bouts with gout, charmed his way through the world, living--as the three little princes he'd created--in **Serendip**.....The vignettes in NBC/TV's "Angels: The Mysterious Messengers" (24 May 94) are of witnesses to serendipitous spiritual personal experiences. After the modern media manner, the program was godless & (both senses) graceless (in the theological sense, serendipity being the surrogate for God's gracious action). As for the program's "God"lessness, the producers screened for storytellers who, instead of "God" (a sectarian word), said "angels" (a nondenominational word)....A few further reflections:

1 The blurb read "Ageless and universal, angels have always played an important role in society. Ethereal light and phenomenal rescues have exposed these somewhat elusive creatures to many average people at times of great need" (underlinings mine). That billing was precise to the content: angels are supernatural nannies serving spiritual babies of whatever biological age.

2 Is that what you'll find if you look up "angels" in whatever lexica are at hand? Your resources may mention that they have the "911" value NBC's theologians attribute to them, but that value will not be central. Central will be their **sentness**, the meaning NBC mentions (in title & text) as that of the Greek word transliterated as "angel." But not a word about who did the sending, or the possibility that the purpose exceeds the "911" value.

RHD's first meaning is "a celestial attendant of **God**." Later "a messenger, esp. of **God**....a person who performs a mission of **God** or acts as if sent by **God**." You're way down to the seventh meaning by the time you get "an attendant or guardian spirit," NBC's meaning!

3 Religion (which makes demands) is out, narcissistic spirituality (which demands) is in: that is the hypotext, the hidden meaning, of "Angels: The Mysterious Messengers." The world has set the agenda for a pseudopiety without moral content, a cultural cult whose altar, on which all else is sacrificed, is the individual soul. We should not be surprised that, ironically, this devotion falls into the

category of therapeutic cult whose devotees are hypochondriacal health-junkies. TV has expanded its offerings: sick sex, sick violence, & now sick spirituality.

4 Not that the Bible never uses the guardian-angel idea, but it's minor & peripheral. In the Gospels it's only negative, in a warning against child abuse (Mt.18.10, no parallel); in the NT's 2nd $\frac{1}{2}$, Ac.12.15 & Heb.1.14.

5 "Angels" are now in pop theater (C-2 NYT 27 May 94): "No fewer than five companies of 'Angels in America' are being cast in New York this week....a national tour...begins in Chicago in the fall; and three regional theaters are putting together companies...." The word, virtually independently of context, signals today's soul-longing for Something More & Other. "Angels" is almost a code word for *au courant* spirituality, which....

6in her new book Arianna Huffington, society matron, calls THE FOURTH INSTINCT. But her accent is more moral than mystical: "We grow physically by what we take, and we grow spiritually but what we give," she said 30 May 94 on CNN's "Sonya," who defined spirituality as "giving a piece of yourself to others," instead of being institutionally religious. But A.H. rejected S.'s last phrase, insisting that "churches have been at the forefront of giving." What's refreshing in this is (1) its freedom from guruish interiorism & (2) its ethical sanction, its call to *be* an angel (see RHD "angel," definition 9).

7 "Hark! the herald angels sing / 'Glory to the newborn King!'" Praising God is the good angels' perennial task (as negating him is the bad angels'), but on occasion God "sends" them on missions to announce (as in the Christmas carols), to watch over God's people, to battle demons (Satan's [fallen] angels), & to execute God's judgment (eg, Mt.13.49-50).

8 As if by a symbolic law of cosmic compensation, the farther God seems (in transcendence), the closer seem the angels (in immanence). To multitudes God now seems far away if even existent, so angels (good ones, of course) are easier to speak of & believe in. The history of religions provides evidence of this phenomenon, on which see the OT's "angel of the LORD." In the NT, two phenomena: (1) Angels fade into the background as the Holy Spirit & the indwelling Christ take over; & (2) pagan (& Hellenistic Jewish?) angels are rejected as evil rivals. As to the first, the fading is not just passive, by the expulsive power of a new affection. It's also active, the angels (except in

apocalyptic) getting a shove backwards, as of the old regime (Ac.7.53, 1Cor.6.3, Heb.1.4 & 2.2). On the second, Ro.8.38 & Col.2.18--& NBC's angels, who bless promiscuously (no sin, repentance, atonement, forgiveness, obedience--no biblical religion, no gospel [good news], but instead a serendipity berry, which makes the sour seem sweet)....."Our self-constructed 'God' loves us. The poor thing could hardly do otherwise" (Leander Keck, THE CHURCH CONFIDENT, p.50). Again: The media gave no credit to Jackie O's Christian faith. Eg, p.3 NW 30 May 94: "Her cunning and willpower enabled her, in the end, to find a measure of peace."

9 Biblical angels are masculine but not (Mt.22.30 & parallels) male. But artists have given them not Walter-Mathau-testosterone-craggy faces: rather, pre-Raphaelite-androgynous-pretty-nerdy physiogs. Worse, decorative angels are not even adult, but putti (Italian, "boys"), in spite of the saying "Don't send a boy to do a man's job."....Let's be faithful, & fair, to the angels! Down with media misrepresentations!