

The Angels' Comeback

A Retrospect at the Turn of the Millennium

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1. Symbols of Change

“Ten years before the turn of the millennium the heavens open again. As in the age of our forefathers there is a busy crossing of the borderline. The angels come back! At least writers and film-makers hear their wings growing. A sign that the saving power is approaching in apocalyptic danger? An escape into the illusionary, because we cannot endure the unbearable loneliness of our cosmic existence?”¹ By this blow into the horn I wanted to point out the spiritual dimension of the great historical event to the readers of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* immediately after the tumbling of the Wall and the political change in 1989. A glance into religion history teaches us that angels always turn up in times of crisis. When religious cult loses its attractiveness, when political systems lack stability and an apocalyptic mood spreads out – then the saving is near right in the centre of these dangers. Their presence indicates a place of doom, an experience of pain, an hour of mourning. But in the moment when the angel appears, the process of recovering and restoring already begins. That is why angels are symbols of change.

No one reckoned with the comeback of angels about the turn of the millennium. The great theologians of the 20th century had simply forgotten them or were ashamed of them. As a reviewer working for several newspapers I noticed the increasing presence of angels in novels, stories and autobiographies. Inspired by her childhood-memories Isolde Ohlbaum² published her first photos of sepulchral angels. In the same year, 1986, Wim Wender's film “Der Himmel über Berlin”³ was premiered. This film consisting of a sequence of scenes had a popular

1 Wolff, *Engel Flügel*; cf. Wolff, *Wiederkehr*. Stubbe, *Wirklichkeit*, refers to this.

2 Ohlbaum, *Lust; Licht; Flügel*.

3 Wenders / Handke, *Himmel*.

remake, "City of Angels". In a key-scene the two angels Daniel (Bruno Ganz) and Cassiel (Otto Sander) pass through the Wall dividing Berlin. This passing across the border became the basic model of the events of November 1989. That walls may give way and the heavens may open again, that creation changes and man with it, this is proclaimed by the film as in Biblical times. My article for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* had been given to the editorial staff a short time after the tumbling of the Wall. I would have loved to have it printed right away. But Martin Meyer, the editor in charge, thought that the angels have patience. To reassure myself I wrote the book "Breit aus die Flügel beide"⁴ ["Spread both your wings"]; in this I related biblical tradition and the discourse on angels in art, poetry, and autobiography to seven phases in life. In vain I tried to have it accepted by a publisher. Angels are no longer a subject selling in the book market, I heard time and again. At last, the book was published by Herder in 1993.

In the meantime a life without angels cannot be imagined in modern feeling. As products of art and as kitsch they are available in drug-stores and flower-shops, they decorate biscuit boxes and underwear made by the company "Viva Maria", or they are ornaments on little gift-books, the production of which has become uncountable. In general usage the word "angel" has become a synonym of readiness to help. People who unselfishly serve other men are called "angels", like Mother Theresa from Calcutta. Modern techniques of reproducing artefacts make classical pictures of angels omnipresent on postcards, calendars and in book illustrations. They inspire artists to work again on the myth of the angel. The range of meaning is so wide that the angel is also suitable as a memorial of the persecution of homosexuals, as Rosemarie Prockel has demonstrated by her "Frankfurter Engel".⁵ Books on angels are as numerous as the celestial choirs themselves. Some editions are sold millions of times – like Anselm Grün's "50 Engel für das Jahr". With many readers collected personal experiences and anecdotes are extremely popular – like "Ich geb' dir einen Engel mit".⁶

Readers of literature on angels are not interested in theories and theology, but in experience. Mystic experiences and communications from the inner world, the esoteric field of religions, are asked for. Readers who are interested in the subject of "angels" are looking for stimuli to consider their own life reflected in another reality and to contact this through techniques of meditation, oracles and prayers.⁷ This new yearn-

4 Wolff, Flügel.

5 Initiative Mahnmal Homosexuellenverfolgung e.V. (ed.), Frankfurter Engel.

6 Westphal, Engel.

7 Wallimann, Engeln.

ing for spirituality is no romantic escape from the present world, but a complement of the one-sided rationalistic concept of reality.⁸ As an assistance for learning to practice insights into the background area of the visible world even grown-up readers increasingly have recourse to children's books on angels.⁹

Meanwhile the angels' comeback is evident. Not everything, that is put on the book-market in great numbers, is substantial. Therefore, we need not tarry with criticizing the numerous esoteric books on angels which are often nothing else than self-elevation and projection. As a *connecting theme* of all big monotheistic religions, as *experience impersonated* in the supreme poetry of mankind, and as *guides* through the labyrinth of life, angels testify to divine presence throughout the ages. Our age has a great need for genuine experience, for contacting the lasting, for encountering the origin of life. Who talks about the angels, always talks about the experience of transcending everyday life and the limits of one's own personality. The angels' song is the Trishagion "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa 6:3) in celebrating the Eucharist, which joins together heaven and earth. To experience the holy as *mysterium et fascinosum* is the focus of any talking about angels, at last. It always aims at the ultimate source of reality: Thus every experience of angels is an experience of the divine.

Prompted by her own experience Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has carried out several opinion polls¹⁰ concerning the Germans' belief in angels. In 1997, 32% of the German population were convinced of the existence of angels, 37% in Western, 14% in Eastern Germany. A second poll in September 2000 showed that the belief in angels among males had decreased. Whereas in 1997 23% of the male population still believed in angels, in 2000 only 16% did so. The number of 40% women convinced of the angels' existence remained constant. Even more people believed that guardian angels exist. To the question "Do you think that you have a personal guardian angel, or do you not believe this?" 47% of the persons interviewed in Western Germany answered in the affirmative, 18% did not deny the existence of guardian angels. That is 60% in Western and 39% in Eastern Germany, who had a positive relation to guardian angels. In the USA even 69% of the interviewed believed in guardian angels.

The ideas about the function of guardian angels are quite clear. To the question what one would talk about to one's guardian angel there

8 Cf. Abadie, *Everything's*.

9 Cf. Fine, *Engel*; Tamaro, *Tobias*; Bauer, *Opas*; Heinlein, *Schutzengel*; Timm / Scheffler, *Schutzbengel*.

10 Noelle-Neumann / Piel, *Engel*; Noelle-Neumann / Petersen, *Begegnung*.