

All About Angels and Their Impact on the Puritans

Welcome to “All About Angels and Their Impact on the Puritans,” a lecture for this course! Are angels real, and what are they made out of? Can we see them today and how do they interact with humans? Believe it or not, these were questions that the New England Puritans wrestled with too! Most of them largely accepted that they were real, because they appeared in the Bible several times, which was sufficient evidence for them. But even some widely influential ministers had some questions about whether it was still possible to see them today. And they accepted that even addressing basic questions like what angels were made out of required some serious theological discussion. In this lecture, I will be discussing how the New England Puritans thought about angels as well as how the theme of angels can help us to understand the Puritans, especially their communications media. Puritan ministers did write about angels. For this lecture I will focus on what ministers Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, and Samuel Willard wrote. I will use Increase Mather’s sermon series *Angelographia*; Cotton Mather’s essays *Agathangelus* and *Coelestinus*,¹; and Samuel Willard’s treatise *The Compleat Body of Divinity*. Also, while congregants and laypeople certainly had thoughts about angels and possibly some of their own distinct notions, I will not focus on those. In this lecture, first, I’ll identify three ideas about angels that these ministers all wrote about. Second, I’ll explain how angels might help us to understand Puritan media more. The learning goals are for you to be able to explain one of the three characteristics of angels that I discuss and also draw connections between angels and media.

The first idea about angels that ministers discuss is that angels are spiritual beings. They are said to especially resemble God in this way because God in the Bible is described as pure spirit (John 4:24) and angels are also spirits. Unlike humans, angels do not have bodies. They cannot be seen, either. Mather notes that because they are spirits, there are angels all around people, intervening and acting, but that humans cannot see them (Increase Mather). That they are spirits means that they could pass in and out of physical buildings at ease. Samuel Willard clarifies that spirits cannot be felt, in addition to not being seen. He also states that spirits are very fast, especially compared with corporeal substances (such as humans). Spirits are said to be very strong; they could defeat man in battle easily. Willard writes, “one angel hath strength enough to bicker with a world of men” (53).² Finally, spirits are said to be especially unchangeable. Apparently they cannot become changed easily by inferior beings, because of their power and spiritual nature (Willard 53).

The second idea about angels is that it is important to be very cautious when trying to recognize if an angel had appeared and spoken to someone in their own day. While ministers allow that it could be possible for angels to appear in their time, they strongly advised caution in interpreting something as an actual angel sighting in their time. Increase Mather devotes much of the last treatise in his sermon *Angelographia* to the question of the possibility of angel sightings, asking “Whether angelical apparitions may in these days be expected; and if so, how they may be discerned from satanical illusions?” He answers that angels can definitely still appear but indicates that a lot of apparent angel sightings were actually false and even dangerous (*Angelographia* Part B 4). He writes that the Bible tells us that Satan could transform himself into the appearance of a good angel, so not everything that *seems* like a good angel actually is

¹ *Agathangelus* is an essay inside of a work called *Coelestinus* (which contains the essay named after the title), but I have cited it separately in the Works Cited.

² See sermon 17, question 4 in *The Compleat Body of Divinity* (1726) for more.

one. And he gives examples from history in which people have encountered demons repeatedly while thinking that they were good angels. Finally, Cotton Mather expresses caution himself when encountering an angel in his study. He asks Jesus to protect him from the wiles of the devil, after encountering it, in case it were not genuine (Mather Diary vol I 86).³

Finally, the third idea from New England Puritan writers about angels is that angels help humans. Angels can aid humans in a variety of mighty and advantageous ways. Writers use different Bible passages to support this point. For example, they use Psalm 91 which is about the person who trusts in God: “For he [God] will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”⁴ Some also use Psalm 34:7, “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.”⁵ Cotton Mather focuses on angelic aid in his essay *Agathangelus*, whose thesis is: “That when the great God our Saviour, has brought us to be His and serve Him, the Good Angels of that Glorious God, will many ways be serviceable to us; will do us good offices that may be wondered at” (page B2). He says the angels can “do...good offices” for people. His essay is based on a story in the Bible (in Acts 27) where the apostle Paul has a miraculous dream from an angel during a time when he and others onboard a ship have been in a storm for several days and are in danger of getting shipwrecked. The angel helps a great deal, however, telling Paul that he and the others will stay alive for the purpose of Paul being able to be present before Caesar.

Increase Mather also devotes a significant part of *Angelographia* to explaining angelic aid to humans. His second main point in his sermon is: “That they, who truly fear God, have many deliverances and receive many benefits, by the ministry of Holy Angels” (Part A 27). He is saying that someone who has salvation will be greatly helped by the angels. Mather discusses how the Christian church receives benefits from the angels, but also how generally people can benefit from angels in crucial moments. For example, he provides the example of King Darius of Persia and how he did not trust God, but still received angelic help.

Now that I have discussed these three ideas about angels from Puritans—their spiritual nature, how rare it is for them to appear, and their help to humans—I will discuss why it is important to consider angels when studying the communications media of the Puritans. There are two reasons why it can be important. First, angels help us to see English colonists’ interest in nonlinguistic communication. English colonists described some angels as communicating without words.⁶ Cotton Mather describes angelic contact using the words “inspire,” “possess,” and “incline” but not “speak”: “Angels were by the Holy Spirit of God, sent from heaven, to inspire them [the writers of the bible]; and possess them, and incline them, and give direction unto them” (*Coelestinus* Part B 65). He described in his diary how he received a “strange impression on [his] spirit” before preaching on the words of an angel from Acts 10:4 and indicates that this impression is from the help of an angel (*Diary* 190). For Cotton Mather, angels highlight that such a thing as messages without words are possible. These “impressions” or “inspirations” seem to be more holistic and sensory forms of communication. Increase Mather, meanwhile, writes in *Angelographia* that “The Holy angels have a great influence, upon the thoughts, minds, and Spirits of men.” This kind of influence is not necessarily through speech. For example, he discusses how Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor, received information about

³ See year 1684-5 in Cotton Mather’s diary (pg 86).

⁴ Increase Mather *Angelographia* part A, 40, 55, 62, 65, 69, 87; Cotton Mather *Coelestinus* Part B, 103

⁵ Increase Mather *Angelographia* part A, 1, 85; *Coelestinus* Part A, 19, Part B, 93, 104

⁶ Though of course, there are also several instances in which they are described as communicating with words, but I won’t focus on describing those in this paragraph.

a cure for his disease from an angel in a dream, a cure that doctors were not able to provide him. The exact details of the dream are not conveyed, but from the context it seems as if the cure was presented to him clearly and deeply, but without words. We think of the Puritans as being part of an era in which print technology was extremely popular. Indeed, the printing press had been introduced in Europe more than a hundred years ago and it famously has been said to be one of the most important factors in the Reformation. And yet, many ministers became interested in angels, which did not use only printed and written messages. Ministers, seemed, rather, to be fascinated by a more holistic and seemingly ancient way of communicating.

Secondly, I posit that the theme of angels led the Puritans to new ideas about what genre is. That is, angels led to new questions about how to categorize and organize different media objects, from printed sermons to the reciting of catechisms. But first, what is genre?—Is it a way to categorize and organize content? One scholar, Lisa Gitelman, describes genre as “specific and dynamic, socially realized sites and segments of coherence within the discursive field” (2). She points out the organic appearance of these kinds of categories from actions in society. Genres are spaces of “coherence,” in which similarities bring together different elements into one group. Angels introduce their own kind of genre: angelically-inspired writings—which seems to lead to the development of new hybrid genres. Cotton Mather focuses on this genre of angelically-inspired writings, giving examples of parts of the Bible or even some of his own sermons. These are their own genre partly because they are treated as divinely-inspired writings. The Bible in particular, is a special text that’s not like any other. Mather writes in *Coelestinus* that it is “of an heavenly extract, and of an heavenly substance” (Part B, 66). It might be that this particular genre of angelically-inspired writings led to a profusion of other genres as well. For example, Cotton Mather’s writing seems to blend both more imagistic and narrative writing with more rigid and sermonic writing. *Coelestinus* itself could be a good example. In one part he describes ascending into heaven, how he and the reader “...are got so high with our conversation in heaven that we mount up as the eagle and set our nest among the stars, to lodge among the angels in a soar of piety...” (*Coelestinus* Part B 109). And yet, he also describes a main doctrine, or point, for his entire essay *Coelestinus*, making sure that everything corresponds back to that doctrine. This doctrine is “A true and right Christian is one of an heavenly conversation...” (Part B, 3). He seems to form a new hybrid genre of a sermon-essay.

I’ve covered three main facets of angels that many Puritans believed as well as two ways they help us to understand Puritan communications better. Are there any other reasons that you think the theme of angels is important for understanding Puritan society? As you continue to listen to lectures for this course, consider some ways that the concept of angels shapes the themes you are learning about. One of the discussion questions asks you to look more closely at Increase Mather’s *Angelographia* sermon series. The other one asks you to choose one of the three facets of angels I talked about in the beginning to respond to. I look forward to reading your answers in the forum!

Discussion question 1: Which of the three facets of angels from Puritan writings that I have described interests you the most? Why? What did you know about this already and what did you learn? What is your own response to this particular facet? (to what extent do you agree or disagree and why?)

Discussion question 2: What are some of the connections that you see between angels (however you understand them) and communications/media? How might knowing about the Puritans help you to extend or develop these connections? In your discussion, if you would like, respond to this quote from Increase Mather's sermon in order to analyze how Puritans thought about angels conveying messages.

*"3. The Holy Angels have a great influence, upon the thoughts, minds, and Spirits of men. Evil Angels inject evil thoughts into the mind [this section is about evil angels communicating but we can focus on what we typically think of as angels, "good angels," for now, since this lecture focuses on them] ...So have the Holy Angels a great influence on the Spirits of them that fear the Lord, exciting them unto the things that are good. They have the benefit of Angelical Suggestion, in many good motions, more than themselves are aware of. It is true, that all Holy thoughts are originally from the Spirit of God: Nevertheless, He is pleased oftentimes to make use of the Ministry of Angels therein. Angelical motions are *ab extra*. Angels do not dwell in the Souls of Believers, as the Holy and Eternal Spirit doth: nor have they power to make their Suggestions effectual: they can't give Life & Grace with the good motions Suggested by them, as the Spirit of God doth. Ministers in Preaching may propose Arguments to men, and can do no more. The Eternal Spirit only can make those Arguments to prevail. That which Ministers do externally and visibly, the Holy Angels do after a Spiritual and invisible manner" (Increase Mather *Angelographia* part A 45-6)*

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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*Part A of the entire work called *Coelestinus* is the section up until the end of "Agathangelus"; Part B is the section starting from the dedication to the end of the entire work. The work starts a new numbering system in Part B.

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*Part A is the section up until the end of "The Sin and Misery of the Fallen Angels: Part B is the section that starts with "A Disquisition Concerning Angelica Apparitions" until the end of the entire work.

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