ANGELS: A Cultural Trend of the 1990s

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Angels, both in religion and entertainment, reached the height of their popularity among American society during the 1990s. From personal guardians to the main characters in mainstream film, angels were present in almost every facet of American culture. Through a detailed analysis of how angels are defined, understood and socially accepted across several religious spectrums as well as a closer look at the social environment of the 1990s, it is possible to better understand how and why angels became the subject of a cultural trend during this time.

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Introduction

Angels have played a very prominent role in American culture, both in terms of religion and spirituality, as well as the market and entertainment. This is especially true of the nineties, during which the popularity of angels was at all-time high. The following will explore the many facets of this cultural trend that I call “the angel craze.”

The first section of my research is titled “Defining Angels.” In this section I have attempted to fully understand what angels are and how they are understood by different types of people. Included in this section is:

• an anthropological definition of angels
• a brief description of the possible origin of angels
• religious definitions whereby angels are defined under a variety of religious perspectives including the New Age Movement

The second section of my research is titled “Angel Craze in the Nineties.” This section accounts for the bulk of my research; it includes information concerning the following topics:

• popular belief in angels, especially as it pertained to guardian angels and angel encounters
• angel-themed or inspired non-profit organizations
• angels in the market, especially in terms of products and collectibles
• angels in entertainment, specifically the films “City of Angels” and “Dogma”

The third and final section of my research is titled “Causes for Angel Popularity.” In this section I attempt to better understand why the United States experienced such a large cultural trend. To do this, I have researched social issues of the decade, specifically the AIDS epidemic and the youth counter-culture. To explain the correlation between these topics and the popularity
of angels I have included the perspectives of religious leaders, theologians, sociologists and philosophers. I specifically describe the viewpoints of Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim in regard to the social purpose of religion.

To study a cultural and social trend is to unveil a bit our identity as a society; our culture defines us. In researching the angel craze of the nineties, I have attempted to piece together a small part of the personality of the collective “we.”
Defining Angels

ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEFINITION

In general, angels are defined divine or supernatural beings created by God, and many times, they are referred to as pure spirits (“Angels”). To completely understand this definition, it is important to define its parts, especially the terms “supernatural” and “spirits.”

The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides two proposed definitions of the word supernatural, and they are as follows: (1) “of or relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe; especially of or relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit, or devil, (2) departing from what is usual or normal especially so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature; attributed to an invisible agent.”

Spirits are supernatural beings that are usually less powerful than gods and are usually defined as group rather than named individuals who have specific identities (Stein, 196). In most cases in which the term “spirit” is used, it is often said that they can provide people with protection, success, and luck; however, they are also sometimes blamed for misfortune people have experienced (Stein and Stein, 197).

Origin of Angels

From an anthropological perspective, the origin of angels is unknown; however, angel-like creatures can be traced in history as far back as Aristotle. In discussing the creation of the world in his work Metaphysics, Aristotle wrote about what he called the “Prime” or “First Mover,” who many Christians would call God. Aristotle believed that if there was a first mover, then there must also be spiritual secondary movers. These secondary movers would most likely be defined as angels by those who practice Christianity.
Angels seem to be absent from Greek and Roman mythology, some of the earliest forms of religion. In medieval times, theologians believed that angels filled the space between what is human and what is God. Greek and Roman gods co-existed with their human worshipers by delivering their own message and socializing with humans on earth, even developing physical relationships with them; there was no need for angels as there was no gap to fill. Even the king of the gods visited earth regularly (Gibbs and Allis.)

**RELIGIOUS DEFINITIONS – A Variety of Perspectives**

**Buddhism and Islam**

Angel-like creatures/celestial beings are found in many different religions and cultures around the world. For example, Buddhists believe that creatures called devas exist in the supernatural world, but can often visit humans on Earth. Devas are not gods, but are called upon for help or protection like angels. However, unlike angels, devas were not created by a superior being and while they can exist for very long periods of time, devas can die. Buddhists also believe in apsaras, which are described as “celestial nymphs” (Keown).

It has been suggested that other, less familiar belief systems such as Gnosticism, Greek polytheism, Zoroastrianism include teachings about celestial beings that are inferior to a supreme being(s), but are superior to humans. Schindler points out that the creatures found in different religious texts are often talked about in a way that makes them seem more like the angels found in the Bible or the Koran (Schindler.)

Angels play quite an important role in the Islamic faith. A common belief about angels among Muslims is that four archangels often act in the place of Allah, one of which is called Izrail who the Angel of Death. It is also popular tradition in the Islamic faith to believe that two angels reside in the Mosques in order to record the prayers of worshippers, and also stand
witness for Muslims when it is decided whether they should be allowed entrance to Heaven in the afterlife ("Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia").

**Judeo-Christian**

While angels, and/or similarly defined creatures, are present in many different religions, they are usually viewed from a Judeo-Christian perspective in the United States, as this perspective dominates the country in terms of religious belief. However, it is important to note that, even while observing angels from a shared perspective, there are conflicting ideas concerning angels.

Christians and Catholics are of the groups that pay much attention to angels. In the sixth century, Saint Dionysus wrote *The Celestial Hierarchy*, which ranked angels according to their "closeness" to God and described the mission of each rank. Dionysus named nine categories; from top to bottom they are: (1) seraphim, (2) cherubim, (3) thrones, (4) dominions, (5) powers, (6) authorities, (7) principalities, (8) archangels and (9) angels (Corrigan and Harrington.) Despite the nature of spirits to be nameless, angels, as they are perceived by most Christians and Catholics, do in fact have specific identities. Four of the most familiar of the named angels are: (1) Gabriel, (2) Raphael (3) Michael and (4) Lucifer.

Gabriel is best known for delivering messages. His most recognized message in Christianity was to the Virgin Mary, who he told would give birth to the son of God, Jesus Christ. Gabriel is also known in the Islamic faith for delivering the words of the Koran to the prophet Mohammad who recorded them ("Gabriel.") Raphael appears in the book of Tobit and is most commonly known for healing Tobit and rescuing Sara ("Raphael.") Michael is perhaps the most recognized of all the angels. He often appears in the Bible carrying a sword and is known
as a soldier, defender or protector. In the Book of Revelations of the Bible, Michael is the leader of the angelic armies ("Michael.")

The first three angels mentioned are considered good angels, but in Judeo-Christian faiths, not all angels are good. The Bible mentions dark angels, or angels of Hell, that are the followers of Lucifer, an angel that was cast out of Heaven for disobeying God; many people know Lucifer as Satan, or the devil ("Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia.") Satan was an angel who rebelled in heaven, and after the archangel Michael defeated him, the rebel was cast down to earth as were his followers. The story of this war is told in the Book of Revelation. Also in this book of the Bible is the story of the seven angels who will be responsible for destroying the earth with the "wrath of God" before the final judgment, often referred to as the apocalypse (cited in Schindler.)

Specific angels are so important in the Catholic faith, that some people who practice Catholicism even worship those angels. Such attention to angels seems to less common among other branches of religion that fall under the Judeo-Christian perspective. For example, angels are present in the Torah; however, Jews do not believe in a hierarchy. More so, early Protestants rejected both the idea and the image of angels, probably due to their often elaborate depictions at the time as well as their hierarchal nature. In separating from the Church, Protestants eliminated the lavishness of the Renaissance design of churches as well as Church bureaucracy (Gibbs and Allis.)

Factors Often Disagreed Upon

In discussing angels within the Judeo-Christian faith, there are some factors that fall into a grey area. When considering what angels look like, Ezekiel of the Old Testament described angels having four faces, each of a different creature. One face was that of a human, the second
of a lion, the third of an ox and the fourth was the face of an eagle. These angels also had four
wings with human hands beneath them and feet like the "sole of a calf's foot" (cited in
Schindler.) Ezekiel's description is far from beautiful creatures many people envision when
thinking about angels. Throughout history the depiction of angels has evolved from beautiful
men without wings to beautiful men, women and children with wings. In terms of imagery,
varied gender and age of angels became popular during the Renaissance and dominates still
today (Schindler.)

To address the disagreements people have concerning angels, including their appearance,
Rev. John Westerhoff of Duke University's Divinity School explains that the belief in angels is
one that is based in faith, and "faith is perception"; therefore, the form of an angel may differ
depending upon one's perception of angels. Others, such as Sophy Burnham, author of "A Book
of Angels," believe that angels disguise themselves according to what would be best received by
a particular person. She claims that it is possible that people without religious faith encounter the
divine, but due to the disguise, they would not define the encounter as spiritual or religious
(Gibbs, and Allis).

Along with appearance, one of the characteristics of angels that are largely disputed is
whether the creatures have a body. Some theologians of the thirteenth century believed that
anything that was not God was created of matter; therefore, angels do have bodies (Magee.) St.
Thomas was among those theologians who believed that angels were completely immaterial;
however, an angel has the ability to take a body as a vessel in order to appear to humans (cited in
Magee.) It is believed by some people that humans are unable to observe angels when they are in
their true form because humans do not that the mental or physical capacity to understand or
perceive angels (Garrett.)
Factors Often Agreed Upon

Not many people from a Judeo-Christian perspective, including most Americans, would disagree that angels are known as workers and messengers of God, and their tasks are varied (Stein and Stein, 202). There is also a set of characteristics of angels that is usually agreed upon by the public in general. Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas of the 13th century, nicknamed the Angelic Doctor, included a large section on angels in his Summa Theologiae, a widely recognized piece of literature concerning theology. St. Thomas describes angels as perfect, intellectual creatures with pure spirits (cited in Magee). Perfection is a very common characteristic of angels, as is being immortal ("Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia"). Some people further explain immortality as being free of time and space, in other words, angels do not have the ability to grow or change.

It is a modern notion to agree with St. Thomas in regard to whether angels are bodiless. Nowadays, angels are described as made of light (Gibbs and Allis.) Without a body, angels have no need for gender, but are capable of feelings due to their intellect. It has been pointed out that many people believe that humans do become angels in death; however, most theologians will note that the Bible says that angels were created by God as humans were, and they too were granted free will (Gibbs and Allis.)

New Age

The characteristics of angels as they are provided by the Judeo-Christian perspective are also shared by those who practice newer forms of religion, or rather, spirituality. The New Age Movement started in the late 1960s, when young generations were experimenting with music, drugs, art and sex. Religious thought was not left to the wayside during this time of change. It has been suggested that New Age thought originated from Eastern religions, and after having
made its the way to the States, melded with traditional religious practice. New Age thought is centered on personal transformation through meditation, rebirthing, possessing a crystal or receiving a healing (New Age Movement.) Many people who participated in New Age also participated in astrology, tarot or other forms of psychic readings (New Age).

Some psychic practices included contacting spirits from the other side, or calling upon spirits as a means to transform the individual. While the New Age Movement began to die out by the mid-nineties, the idea of spiritualism remained strong through the end of the decade (New Age.) It is perhaps the idea of spiritualism that sparked an interest in angels. Tarot readings and meditation seem far off from the main ideas of Christianity, a religious view shared by a majority of Americans; however, spirits in the form of angels are a common denominator.
Angel Craze in the Nineties

BELIEF IN ANGELS

A majority of people who believe that angels exist define them as “higher spiritual beings created by God with special powers to act as his agents on earth,” (Gibbs and Allis.) The God mentioned in this statement is the one recognized by those of the Judeo-Christian faith, but it seems that belief in angels was popular among all types of people in the 1990s, regardless of religious background. Whether exploring angels as Christian believer, calling upon them as a practitioner of New Age faith, or believing in them for reasons unexplained, people became interested in angels during this particular period of time.

A survey conducted by Time Magazine in 1993 showed that 69% of respondents believed in the existence of angels (Gibbs and Allis.) According to a poll conducted by USA Today and CNN only one year later in 1994, 72 percent of Americans believed in angels. (Lindsey) A professor of New Testament during the nineties at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Dr. Susan R. Garrett said in a 1997 interview that while angels were quite popular among the general public, many of the people who claimed to adore the creatures knew very little about them in either a religious or academic sense (Garrett.)

Angel Encounters: Guardians

One of the most popular beliefs concerning angels in the nineties was that each person has a personal guardian angel. These angels are around to help humans, to guide them in times of need and protect them from evil. The survey conducted by Time also showed that 46% of respondents believed that they had their own guardian angels and only 21% did not (Gibbs and Allis.) As the belief in guardian angels increased, so did the recollections of angel encounters.
Modern encounters with angels differ much from the most popular interaction between the heavenly creatures and humans that are presented in the Bible. As previously mentioned, one of the most widely known stories of angel/human interaction was between the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary (Magee.) Gabriel announced his presence, and spoke to Mary directly; he started his message, “The Lord is with you,” and “Do not be afraid.” In a few short sentences, Mary was told that she would give birth to a child without having conceived one with a man. Mary questioned this, but Gabriel said, “nothing is impossible with God,” (Luke 1.28-37.)

Current stories of angel encounters usually involve a rescuer in a time of great danger, but when the danger is gone, so is the rescuer. In these cases, the angels do not announce themselves, and their appearance rarely frightens those whom they help. Instead, the supposed angels appear to be human passersby who happen to be in the right place at the right time. In fact, the rescuers are rarely described as angels until after they disappear (Gibbs and Allis).

Encounters with angels were so popular in the 90s that complete books of collections of the stories were making best seller’s lists. In Mountainside, New Jersey an organization called the AngelWatch Network tracked angelic encounters and published their findings in a bi-monthly journal. In 1993 the journal had 1,800 subscribers (Woodward.)

In his article, “Watch for Angels,” Robert Maloney divided angels into three categories according to their characteristics. Each category is titled by the name of an angel from the Bible whom exemplifies a certain trait. The first of Maloney’s categories is “Gabriel Types,” angels that appear and disappear suddenly and without warning for the purpose of delivering a life-altering message. This makes sense considering Gabriel’s role in the Bible, which has been discussed previously. The second category is “Raphael Types,” angels who appear as companions on a journey. “Raphael Types” will often converse with humans in a way that will
cause the human to think differently (Maloney, 23.) In the Bible, Raphael was known for healing ("Raphael.") The third of Maloney’s categories was “Michael Types,” angels that protect and fight against evil. Remember, the archangel Michael of Christian scripture was leader of the angelic armies (Magee.)

Maloney suggests that while the messages of angels may be different, they all come from God and they are all meant to leave people with “joyful memories.” Even though this article was written long after the eruption of angel interest in the 1990s, it is quite similar to what one would read about angels during that time (Maloney, 23.)

**NON-PROFIT INSPIRATION**

The increase in interest in angels inspired people to start several non-profit organizations during this time that were, and still are, devoted to serving, protecting and helping people. Among these were the following:

- **The Alliance of Guardian Angels** – This organization’s mission is to “safeguard neighborhoods, schools and cyberspace from bullying, gangs, and violence.” It was founded in 1979 by Curtis Sliwa, but started to really gain recognition in the early 1990s ("Guardian Angels.") In 1995 the organization launched a branch called CyberAngels. CyberAngels was designed to help parents learn how to protect their children from online predators ("CyberAngels.")

- **The Angel Foundation** – This organization is based out of Ohio, and its purpose is to fulfill the dying wishes of the terminally ill. It was founded in 1995 and is one of the few organizations in the nation that grants wishes for adults ("Angel Foundation.")

- **Masonic Angel Fund** – This organization, founded in 1998, is a freemasonry foundation and is “dedicated to the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.” Essentially,
the Masonic Angel Fund is a large fraternity through which men can learn to better themselves and others ("The Masonic Angel Fund.")

- **Angel Food Ministries** – This non-denominational Christian organization was founded in 1994 in Monroe, Georgia. Angel Food Ministries provides food and financial support to families of the United States in need. As of 2011, the organization serves 45 states ("Angel Food Ministries.")

**ANGELS IN THE MARKET**

While angels did their fair share of entering the world of non-profits, it could be argued that they had an even larger presence in the market during the 1990s. Stores across the country sold all types of angel products including books, jewelry, clothing, calendars, kitchenware, trinkets, statues, paintings, posters, and much more. In his article “Angels” that was published in Newsweek Magazine in December of 1993, Kenneth L. Woodward wrote, “That jingle you hear this Christmas is not Santa's sleigh bells but the sound of cash registers ringing up sales of angel artifacts.” At one point in the nineties there were 140 stores in the U.S. that were in business specifically for the purpose of selling products that concerned angels (Schindler.) Many of these stores were not necessarily religious stores. According to Jane Bartholow, church administrator for Unity of Birmingham, a church that sold angel paraphernalia in nineties, angels were popular among all types of people from all types of religious backgrounds (Garrison.) Bartholow said in a 1999 interview with journalist Greg Garrison that angels are the “most accepted religious symbols.”

**Best-selling Products**

In 1999, angel jewelry was among the top-selling items of Baptist Book Store, according to the store’s manager at that time, Mike Jolly (Jolly.) Often time jewelry is symbolic of a
person’s beliefs. For example, it would be assumed that a person wearing a crucifix is Christian, or a person wearing the Star of David is Jewish. Perhaps people who often wore angelic jewelry believed in guardian angels, and perhaps the angels they wore were representative of the wearer’s personal guardians. During her husband’s time as president of the United States, Hillary Clinton claimed to wear angel wings in the form of a gold pin on the days she needed help (Gibbs and Allis.)

Books and collectible items were also among the most popular items sold in regards to angel paraphernalia. “A Book of Angels” written by Sophy Burnham in 1990 is recognized by many as the beginning of the angel craze (cited in Schindler.) Many of the 140 stores previously mentioned were bookstores. Even chain bookstores added full sections dedicated to the celestial beings.

It has been suggested that angel collectibles may have been of the best-selling products overall during that decade (Garrison.) Collecting angels was nothing new; the Angel Collectors Club of America was founded in 1976. The club became incorporated in 1986, just in time for the angel craze of the 1990s (“Angel Collectors Club of America.”) In 1992 the club’s membership increased from 200 to almost 1,000 (The Associated Press 2A), and by 1993 the club had nearly 1,600 members (Woodward.) Perhaps the most avid collector of angels in the nineties was a woman from Wisconsin who had reportedly collected over 11,000 angel relics by 1996 (cited in Schindler).

**Angels in Film**

In discussing the angel craze of the nineties, entertainment is a subject of vital importance, especially film. The director of the 1996 film “Michael” Nora Ephron said in a 1996 interview that movies with heavenly themes and/or angel characters have a history of doing well,
and the nineties were certainly no exception. In 1996, writer for the Arts and Entertainment section of the Palm Beach Post Michael H. Price wrote, “When they start selling side orders of wings at the concession stand, then you’ll know this thing the movies have for angels has gotten out of hand.”

From thought-reading and invisible to gun-wielding and threatening, angels in the realm of film are perhaps the most diverse of the decade. The following sections will contain detailed observations of how angels are illustrated in two films from the 1990s: (1) “City of Angels” from director Brad Silberling in 1999 and (2) “Dogma” from director Kevin Smith in 1999.

“City of Angels”

In “City of Angels,” Nicholas Cage plays an angel named Seth whose job it is to escort souls to Heaven. While on Earth Seth pays very close attention to human interactions; he even records simple observations in a journal. The angel becomes particularly interested in Maggie, played by Meg Ryan, and begins to follow her and listen to her thoughts. At first, Maggie does not know that Seth is watching her because as an angel, Seth is invisible to her, as he is to all humans. Another character in the film explains that angels cannot be seen by humans unless they want to truly show themselves. Eventually Seth becomes visible to Maggie because his desire to know and be known by her is so strong. Seth doesn’t seem in control of his invisibility; he seems shocked when Maggie acknowledges his presence and even asks, “You can see me?” (Silberling.)

Maggie describes Seth as strange, or weird. When she asks him what he does for a living, Seth tells her that he is a messenger of God. Instead of reacting in awe, Maggie simply chalks this up to his being weird. She notices that he never changes his clothes, never eats and never seems to stop asking her questions about everyday things such as how something tastes, or what
something feels like. Unlike Maggie, the audience knows through Seth’s conversations with another angel that angels have no need for clean clothes or food, and that they do not have the ability to see color or experience touch (Silberling.)

As his feelings for Maggie grow, Seth spends more and more time at the hospital where she works. On one such occasion, one of Maggie’s patients, Nathaniel Messenger, played by Dennis Franz, says, “I can’t see you, but I know you’re there.” This patient claims to have been an angel who chose to transubstantiate, or become mortal. Nathaniel explains that angels were given free will, and that to become mortal, Seth needed to make the decision to fall to Earth. According to Nathaniel, falling to Earth required some sort of literal fall, leap or jump. Nathaniel knows all of this because he made the leap when he fell in love with human whom he later married as a mortal (Silberling.)

At this point in the film, Seth is faced with a difficult decision - continue life as an angel of God, or become mortal to be with Maggie. He finally decides that being able to really see Maggie and to feel her touch is worth the fall from Heaven. After falling several stories, Seth finds Maggie and they seem completely happy with each other; however, their love is short lived. Maggie tragically dies in a bicycling accident only days after Seth falls. Seth wonders if he is being punished for his decision, but ultimately concludes that even if he is, the few days he spent in love with Maggie were worth the pain he will feel forever (Silberling.)

Most of Seth’s characteristics are theologically correct; however, some of his features including involuntary invisibility, telepathy, lack of particular senses and transubstantiation seem to come from a creative perspective rather than a religious one. Perhaps this is because the religious perspective was of little importance in this film compared to the romantic perspective. The topic of faith was brought up between Seth and the other characters, but it was hardly the
focus. It seems that a combination of a “good guy” angel and a positive message about love overshadowed any controversy concerning incorrectness of theology or religion.

“Dogma”

Perhaps the most controversial take on angels in the nineties comes from Kevin Smith’s 1999 film “Dogma.” The film is about two angels, played by Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, who are trying to reenter Heaven after having been sentenced to an eternity on Earth for disobeying God. Upon their reentrance, the two angels, Bartleby and Loki, will have proved God wrong, and because God is infallible, they will cause the undoing of the universe. The film follows both the journey of the angels as well as that of Bethany (Linda Fiorentino), the last living descendant of Jesus, also known as the Last Scion, whose job it is to stop them (Smith.) Along the way, much of Christian theology, as well as angelic mythology, is used to tell the story. However, Smith’s take on things is far from the traditional stories in the Bible.

Before being sentenced to an eternity on Earth, Loki was the Angel of Death and it was his job to “bare God’s wrath.” For example, Loki was responsible for the creating the Great Flood that wiped out everything not saved by Noah on the ark. At one point in the movie Loki recalls his destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and says, “Mass genocide is the most exhausting activity one can engage in, next to soccer,” (Smith.)

Loki quit his post as the Angel of Death on the advice of his friend Bartleby who argued that murder, even under the name of God, was wrong. The angels discussed this matter over a “post-slaughter drink,” thus resulting in the decree by God that angels could no longer imbibe alcohol. It was Loki’s resignation and Bartleby’s guidance to do so that caused God to sentence them both to an eternity in Wisconsin (Smith.)
After millennia on Earth, Bartleby finds a loophole in the system that may enable the angels to reenter Heaven. A Catholic priest in New Jersey had built an archway through which any person could who accepted God could walk and be wiped clean of past sin. Bartleby believes that he and Loki could get to Heaven if they became mortal, walked through the archway and died as saved men. Loki is skeptical of the plan at first, and points out that neither of them is sure if it is even possible for them to successfully die (Smith.)

When the plan is made, neither of the two angels understands that if it works, the fabric of the universe will unravel. The audience learns of this through an angel named Metatron, played by Alan Rickman, when he explains the situation to Bethany. Metatron visits Bethany in her bedroom while she is sleeping. He arrives in a ball of fire, announcing himself as “the angel Metatron!” Bethany does not believe him in the slightest and grabs a baseball bat to defend herself with. Metatron insists that he is an angel and proves it by extending his wings and turning Bethany’s baseball bat into fish. “So you aren’t going to rape me?” Bethany asks. Metatron laughs and points out that even he wanted to rape her, he couldn’t. The angel exposes his crotch and no genitalia are present; he compares himself to a Ken doll (Smith.)

At this point in the film, the journey for both sides begins; Bethany having three others along with her: Rufus (Chris Rock), the thirteenth apostle who was left out of the Bible because he was black, and Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith), modern prophets. On their way to New Jersey, Loki decides that he will continue to do the work of God during his last few days on Earth, which for him means killing sinners. He and Bartleby stop at a local gun store and Loki purchases a handgun, which he uses several times throughout the film. Eventually, the angels are warned by the demon Azriel, played by Jason Lee, to keep a low profile because the Last Scion has been called upon to stop them (Smith.)
The plot builds when Bethany’s group and the angels cross paths. Bartleby realizes how close they were to being stopped, and his desire to get home is given quite a boost. Angry, the angel explodes in a tirade to Loki about God’s unfair treatment toward the angels. He says that angels were created for a life of servitude under God and if they disobey, they are not forgiven as the humans are, they’re punished for eternity. Bartleby also points out that the angels do not truly have free will because they cannot ignore God after knowing His divine presence. He says that the fall from Heaven “pained” him and he could not ignore it; humans, however, have a choice to ignore the pain because they have not endured life without it. Loki makes a reference to Lucifer during Bartleby’s outburst, for it was ultimately Lucifer’s jealousy of the humans that resulted in his expulsion to Hell. “I’ve seen what happens to the proud,” he says (Smith.)

The climax of the story occurs when Bartleby and Loki finally make it to New Jersey. When Bethany and her helpers catch up to the angels, Bartleby still has his wings and is on a killing spree. Loki is mortal, but hardly coherent because he is heavily inebriated. A battle ensues, but is finally put to a stop when God, played by Alanis Morissette, appears to set everything straight. The film ends without clarity concerning the fate of Bartleby and Loki after death (Smith.) Did the angels simply stop existing? Did they go to Hell? Did God forgive them and allow them into Heaven? Perhaps these questions were left unanswered because they were not the focus of the film.

Rufus, while a supporting character, seems to carry the message. He claims that it was never the intention of Jesus for people to organize religion or create a system of beliefs that don’t have the ability to change. Instead, Rufus points out Jesus would prefer people to have a good idea; ideas can change, grow and progress unlike a belief.
Needless to say, this message was not received well by several groups of people, especially considering the profanity and violence that accompanied it. “Dogma” and its first home studio, Miramax Films met protest from several Catholic organizations, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights in particular, before it was even released. The president of the Catholic League dubbed the movie as “hate mail to God.” When their reputation seemed at stake, Disney, the corporate parent of Miramax, pulled the plug on “Dogma.” Lions Gate Films picked it up not too long after (Rodriguez D1.) The controversy followed the movie through to its release into theaters, where, in some cases such, it was protested again. One such case was in Topeka, Kansas where 30 Catholics stood outside the doors of a local theater reciting the rosary and quoting the Pope (Hrenchir E7.) Smith, a practicing Catholic, was surprised that the film was so ill-received (Rodriguez D1.)

When looking past the religious debate, the angels presented in “Dogma” possess many of the characteristics that are typical of angels including a lack of gender, the performing of God’s work, immortality and power. One of the characteristics of angels portrayed in this film is transubstantiation, which seems popular in a secular sense, but is questionable from a theological standpoint as is free will. The creativity shown in this film is not necessarily in angels’ abilities, but rather how those abilities are displayed—the Ken doll appearance of Metatron, Loki’s wielding a handgun to punish the wicked, etc.

**Common Themes**

Many directors who made films about angels in the nineties went down the path taken by Brad Silberling. These films carried a positive message, often concerning faith or love in favor of God. Angels were often portrayed as the good guys, making themselves present in times of
need. A very common theme was that found in “City of Angels”: The human experience is a gift and one to be envied.

The 1996 film “Michael” directed by Nora Ephron also emphasizes this message. The main character, Archangel Michael played by John Travolta, seems to be visiting Earth to serve himself just as much as he is there to serve others (Price.) While visiting Earth, Michael does not seem to be acting as a creature of purity. He smokes, drinks, cusses and even indulges in sins of the flesh. It seems the only characteristic of angels that Michael possesses is his wings (Ephron, Michael.) However, there is a message of faith in God that intertwines itself among the characters, and while this particular message seems secondary to the romance and the overall comedy of the film, there is no dispute in the existence of God or where faith should be directed.

Smith’s “Dogma” seems to be one of the only films that makes clear references to the Bible. It is arguably the one of the best researched films about angels during its time. Even though other films were just as incorrect from a theological standpoint, the non-religious message carried by “Dogma” yielded this film the most negative of feedback.
Causes for Angel Popularity

NEGATIVITY IN THE NINETIES

There have been several suggestions as to why angels were of such interest in the nineties. It seems that a majority of people who have studied the trend agree that angels are part of a solution to some sort of problem. While relatively peaceful, 1990s America saw several changes in social culture especially in regard to the AIDS epidemic and youth counter-culture.

AIDS Epidemic at a Glance

Before the nineties, few people in America knew what AIDS was or how it was contracted. Early information led people to believe that AIDS was only present in the gay community, as a majority of people who had reported contracting the disease were homosexual men. The disease was without a name until 1982 when the term AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was coined; before this, the illness was referred to as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), or less officially, “gay cancer” (“AVERT.”)

So little was known about AIDS in its infancy that when Ryan White contracted the disease from a blood transfusion at a child, he had not been allowed attend public school. Parents and students were terrified that AIDS was contagious and that Ryan posed a threat to the well-being of those around him. After years of fighting, Ryan was finally able to go back to school, but he hardly received a warm welcome. Until his death in 1990, Ryan spoke publicly about living with AIDS (“AVERT.”)

AIDS awareness began to pick up in the United States in 1991 when famous basketball player Earvin “Magic” Johnson announced that he was HIV positive. He retired from the game and dedicated himself to educating young people about HIV/AIDS (“AVERT.”) Though his and
other AIDS awareness activists’ pursuits were not in vain, Mary Fisher, an activist herself, claimed in 1994 that one of every four people in the United States was HIV-positive (Schindler.)

In order to spread the word about the dangers of HIV and AIDS, the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) changed its AIDS awareness and prevention approach in 1994 to include television commercials about the use of condoms, which had very rarely been given air time (“A VERT.”) Other prevention techniques included needle exchanges through which drug users could legally obtain clean needles. While this tactic was controversial and not federally funded, it was believed that such exchanges could lower the rate of AIDS cases in the U.S. (“A VERT.”)

By the mid-1990s, “AIDS” had become a household term; almost everyone knew about it, and almost everyone was scared of it. In January of 1995 the CDC announced that the disease had become the number one cause of death for adults aged 25 to 44. It wasn’t until 1997 that the U.S. experienced a substantial decrease in the number of deaths caused by HIV or AIDS (“A VERT.”)

**Teen Counter-Culture**

“So okay, I don't want to be a traitor to my generation and all but I don't get how guys dress today. I mean, come on, it looks like they just fell out of bed and put on some baggy pants and take their greasy hair —ew— and cover it up with a backwards cap and like, we're expected to swoon? I don't think so,” said Cher Horowitz, played by Alicia Silverstone in the 1995 film “Clueless.”

The grunge look that Cher is talking about was all the rage in the 1990s. Torn jeans, mismatched patterns and a general lack of personal hygiene was part of the slacker style that was so popular among young men during this decade. Sloppy attire was accompanied with an increase in tattoos and piercings, which began to enter mainstream culture in the late 1980s.
Before, if a person had tattoos or pierced body parts, he or she was often stereotyped as rebels of mainstream culture. In 1994, one tattoo and piercing artist claimed that navel piercings were perhaps the fastest growing trend in body modification, especially among young women. He said that the shop was open seven days a week due to the demand, which increased from about one request a day to about 20 every week day, and up to 50 per day on the weekends. His customers varied in age, race, financial background and occupation (Kaufman.)

Along with an unkempt or rebellious appearance, laziness and drug use were also viewed as problematic among youth. In the nineties, it was cool to not care. Green Day’s 1994 song “Longview” seems to be the teen anthem of it all; lead singer Billie Joe Armstrong sings, “Peel me off this Velcro seat and get me moving; I sure as hell can’t do it by myself... No time for the motivation; Smoking my inspiration.”

While Billie Joe was likely referencing marijuana, the nineties saw an increase in use of different types of drugs often referred to as “club drugs,” named for their reputation at parties and raves. Perhaps the most popular of the “club drugs” was Ecstasy, which is can be extremely addictive and can have severe long-term affects a person’s health. The nineties also experienced an increase in the use of methamphetamines, a relatively new trend in the drug scene (Robison.)

Style, the common perception of nonproductive activity and increased drug use implied a serious problem with America’s youth during the nineties.

TURNING TO RELIGION

It has been suggested that the increase in negative social issues in the nineties may be correlated to the increase in popularity of angels, especially in reference to religion and faith.

Karl Marx
Some people believe that if a problem cannot be easily explained or solved within the world which we live, it is seems natural for humans to look beyond the confines of the world. In his “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” Karl Marx wrote, “The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself.” Marx believed that religion, specifically a strong belief in God, contributes to humans’ “alienation” from their purpose as “producers” because of the dependence upon a higher being to fix what cannot be easily fixed (Marx.) It seems that Marx is saying that a belief in a higher power allows humans to abandon self-reliance, for a high power can be the source of a problem as well as the solution to it.

When applying Marx’s perspective to the angel craze of the 90s, it could be said that people were turning to angels to fix the problems they could not fix. From a Marxist perspective, angels are “no more than social constructs reflecting the material conditions and historically specific circumstance of human beings,” (cited in Schindler.) Thus, because humans had no logical explanation for why bad things such as AIDS and drug use were haunting society, and because they weren’t sure how to deal with these problems, they were turning to a higher being to help them, or even do it for them. Marx would say that turning to a supernatural force decreased motivation to find a solution in reality.

Marx and other young, radical thinkers of the time believed that the purpose of philosophy was to challenge all that exists including religious doctrine, which often became a targeted topic (“Marx, Karl.”) The tone of Marx’s work implies that reliance upon supernatural forces is a negative thing. Emile Durkheim, recognized as a founder of modern sociology (“Durkheim, Emile,”) seems to agree with Marx to a degree; however, Durkheim’s tone is much more positive.

Emile Durkheim
Durkheim would agree that angels were likely looked upon for, or as, answers, but not necessarily to questions about problems. Durkheim points out that religious concepts are often looked upon to explain things that are a regular part of life (Durkheim, 28.) For example, people will turn to their faith when asking questions such as “Why is there evil in the world?” or “Why are we here?” Belief in an all-knowing God is therefore a belief that there is a reason for things and that that reason is known. Durkheim also says that the “essential task” of religion is “to maintain, in a positive manner, the normal course of life,” (Durkheim, 29.) AIDS and counter-culture were becoming a part of the “normal course of life,” so in order to stay positive, people were turning to their religious beliefs for help or for answers. It seems that Durkheim is saying religion helped people during these hard times.

Angels v. Traditional Religion

From Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim we know that people turn to religion, faith and/or the supernatural, but why was the focus in the nineties on angels in particular?

In 1986 Ann Swindler, a professor of Sociology at Berkley, wrote that culture changes as people need it to in order to answer different kinds of problematic questions (cited in Schindler.) As religion is a part of culture, it is possible that religious beliefs shifted in the nineties to better explain the problems of the time. For example, AIDS predominantly affected the gay community; however, homosexuality is not widely accepted within the Christian faith. It may have been difficult for many people during the epidemic to turn to traditional religion for help, support and/or answers. An increase in the popularity of angels may be attributed to the fact that traditional religion left out certain groups of people.

Perhaps traditional religion failed to answer current questions because of its structured nature (Schindler.) In following a specific religious doctrine, one must adhere to a set of rules to
which there are almost always consequences. While it is Christian belief that God is forgiving, he also possesses a wrathful side, which is why phrases such as “a God fearing house” and “the wrath of God” are so well-known in the United States. Because angel-based spirituality was often without a set of specific rules, said rules could not be broken; therefore, there did not seem to be a fear of angels. In the nineties especially angels were almost always there to help, love and be friendly, but little was believed by way of punishment or judgment (Gibbs and Allis.)

Perhaps religious culture changed because angels were simply easier to understand in comparison to God (Gibbs and Allis.) Sometimes the idea of God is so big, so outside of reality that it may be difficult to fully digest. Angels, on the other hand, are not quite as far from Earth. Remember, angel sightings were quite popular in the nineties.

**Angels AND Traditional Religion**

There are differing opinions concerning the angel craze and the role it played within Christianity. Some people thought that the angel craze was a positive movement within society while others found it quite negative, even harmful to the Christian religion.

*Positive Views*

Many religious leaders were calling the angel craze a sign from God. One such leader was Jane Bartholow, the church administrator at Unity of Birmingham during the nineties. She said that the increase of angels as part of the marketplace in the form of products, entertainment and media is “part of the divine plan...to open up people’s awareness to God’s love.” Retired Rabbi Morris Margolies would agree with Durkheim and Marx in that in times of excessive disaster, people look for “simple answers.” The rabbi believed that the angel revival of the nineties helped find faith during such scary times.

*Negative Views*
Some people who viewed the popularity of angels from a religious perspective claimed that it was a reason to become alarmed, that the growing interest in angels, especially under a type of New Age spirituality, was trivializing, even threatening to the Christian faith. Some religious leaders believed that as angels in a secular context detracted from the attention to God in a religious one (Gibbs and Allis.) A professor of the New Testament in the nineties, Dr. Garrett, said, “Speaking from a Christian perspective, attention paid to angels ought not to crowd out the attention paid to God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.”
Conclusion

How Americans understand angels has changed vastly over time. Before their entrance into mainstream media and popular culture, angels were almost always viewed from a religious, especially Christian, standpoint. As the need to answer new questions and solve new problems grew, so did the interest in angels, and from that interest was born a cultural phenomenon in entertainment.

Through my research concerning the angel craze, I realized that people desperately want to understand themselves. I do not exclude myself from the masses, as I too wish to understand who I am and my purpose. I think it is this particular curiosity that triggered my interest in social culture.

Culture is a curious thing; it can change while staying constant, it can be the “here and now” or the “way it’s always been.” In short, our culture defines who we are and what we do; it gives us an identity. In answering “Who are we?” I think it is possible to begin answering “Who am I?”
Works Cited


