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Angels, Animals and Religious Change in Antiquity and Today*

Abstract: The theme in this article is the relation between humans, animals and intermediate beings and how alterations and transformations in these relations accompany general religious changes. The first part discusses how monks and ascetics aspired to become immortal and be like angels and how they considered some species of animals to be demons or demon-like. The second part considers the Norwegian New Age scene and especially Princess Märtha Louise, who said that she learnt to speak with angels through her communication with horses, and together with Elisabeth Nordeng created ‘the Angel School’. The two examples reflect two macro processes of religious change in parts of the Mediterranean and European world: from a multi-religious society to a Christian monopoly in antiquity and from a Christian monopoly to a multi-religious and secular society at present.

Keywords: angels, animals, the extended great chain of being, monasticism, multi-religious societies, ontological transformation, religious change

1 Introduction

Change implies modifying or replacing something with something else and to become different. It happens on a macro-level as well as on micro-levels, and is a continuous process. Categorical alterations and ontological transformations are among the more profound types of change. The theme in this article is the relation between humans, animals and intermediate beings and how alterations and transformations in these relations accompany general religious changes.¹ More specifically we ask:

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1 According to a frequently used definition, ‘religion is communication with superhuman beings.’ In this article, I presuppose a wider definition, namely that ‘religion is characterized by communication with and about superhuman beings’ (cf. Gilhus, Mikaelsson 2001, 29). I also presuppose that the religious imagination tends to blur the border between natural and supernatural categories.

- How and why did the conceptions of animals and angels change in late antiquity?
- How and why do they change today?

Men, women, demons, angels and animals are regarded in many cultures as part of the extended great chain of being, which includes natural as well as supernatural categories. Lakoff and Turner describe this chain in a cognitive perspective (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 166–181). The chain maps the relation of humans to other kinds of beings, real and imagined, as well as their relation to inanimate things. The extended chain includes god(s), intermediary beings like angels and demons, humans, animals, plants and non-living things. There are higher and lower sublevels. Among animals, dogs are higher-order beings than insects, and among plants, trees are higher-order beings than algae (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 167). And we can add, in antiquity men were on a higher sublevel than women. The chain becomes metaphorical when one level is used to understand another, for instance, when we speak about humans by means of animals (Lakoff, Turner 1989, 172–173). The point of departure in the present article is that alterations and transformations take place within the chain, and that the gaps between the levels are sometimes widened, sometimes made smaller.

Winds of religious change blew through the Mediterranean in antiquity when a globalizing religion, Christianity, replaced the ancient religions. Christian asceticism grew and flourished, and the Mediterranean became ‘dotted with something quite new, sexually frustrated readers, stretching from Egypt to the coast of Scotland’ (Fox 1994, 148). Among the solitary desert dwellers and in the monasteries, the ascetic project was pursued in systematic ways.

In comparison, the contemporary Western world is dotted with small-scale religious enterprises and specialists, though not necessarily sexually frustrated ones. But similar to how the ascetics and monks expressed dominant tendencies in late antique religious culture, contemporary religious entrepreneurs express dominant tendencies in present day secular culture such as cultivating the self, and focusing on personal relations and how to be successful in life. Because the ancient ascetics and the New Age entrepreneurs express new and culturally significant tendencies in the two periods and because both include categorical alterations, it might be fruitful to compare the relationships between humans, animals and intermediary beings in the two periods.

The examples in this article are from late antique Egypt and from contemporary Norway. The first example is how monks and ascetics aspired to become immortal and be like angels and how they considered some species of animals to be demons or similar to demons. The second example is the Norwegian New Age scene and especially Princess Märtha Louise, who said that she learnt to speak

with angels through her communication with horses, and together with Elisabeth Nordeng created ‘the Angel School’.

2 Monks, texts and religious change

In monastic circles in third and fourth century Egypt a radical education experiment took place. Young men who wanted to become monks and came to the monasteries from families of farmers, distant from contemporary book-culture, had, according to the Pachomian Rules, to learn to read (*Praecepta* 49).² The monks recited and memorized Scripture. Text- and reading-communities create alternative realities by means of texts, and reading was clearly an ascetic exercise and a gateway to an imagined world of superhuman beings. These textual communities were part of a more extensive cultural change whereby the external storage of memory systems in libraries and their intensive use created a new form of all-encompassing religious life (cf. Donald 2001, 305–308). The ritualized use of texts combined with pursuing the ascetic life was a profound source of individual change and change of social belonging. Along with it went a new type of gendering of culture and society expressed in a segregation of men and women in monasteries.

In addition to Scripture, the ascetics consumed other types of texts as well. Most of them were texts that in one way or another communicated with the Biblical world, like the treasure of buried codices found at Nag Hammadi, the heartland of the Pachomian monasteries. These treatises gave the biblical texts a background in a pre-cosmic world of transcendent superhuman beings. Narratives about ascetics and monastic leaders evolved in the literary genres of biographies and sayings – *vitae* and *apophthegmata*. That Scripture was best encountered in the examples of the ascetic heroes is implied by Amoun of Nitria, who says: ‘If you can’t be silent, you had better talk about the sayings of the Fathers than about the Scriptures, it is not so dangerous’ (Amoun of Nitria 2 in *Alph.*, cf. Harmless 2004, 253). One Father did not want to speak about Scriptures or about spiritual and heavenly things at all, but about earthly things and the passions of the soul (Poemen 8 in *Alph.*). The heroes of the biographical tradition were constructed as incarnations of biblical ideals and as having transcended the category of ordinary humans (cf. Goehring 2013, 213).³

² The demand to be literate continued in later monastic communities (see Peterson 2010).

³ ‘Indeed the holy men are always as if in heaven by their thoughts’ (G¹ 88 in Veilleux 1980, 358; cf. S Bo 73 in Veilleux 1980, 97).

3 The imagined otherness of natural and supernatural categories

In the biographies of the heroes there is a rich gallery of subordinate characters, who reflect how the ascetic self was constructed in relation to others. Constructing 'otherness' is a prerequisite for constructing self, because one defines oneself by defining others.⁴ Chief objects of otherness in the ascetic life were women, animals, demons and angels. In the desert and monasteries, the categories of women, animals and angels were twisted and transformed by the religious imagination. Monks might become like angels; women and animals frequently turned out to be demons or their close allies, while Satan sometimes masqueraded as Christ, and the sly demons appeared in the disguise of angels.

Arguably, male phantasies about women sometimes combine superhuman and subhuman characteristics. However, within the context of monastic life, female otherness gained an added dimension when a monk, who was raised in a monastery from childhood, 'did not know what a woman was' (*N.171/Syst.* 5.25).⁵ As the story goes, when one young monk became a man, the demons showed him the forms of women during the night. The first time the young monk actually saw a woman he identified her as similar to what the demons had shown him. His superior, however, told him that this was another species of monks, belonging to the villages: 'they have one form, while the desert-dwellers have another.' One might assume that the explanation did not permanently solve the woman puzzle in the monk's imagination. On the contrary, it probably contributed to keeping the category unstable, and this might have been one of the functions of this particular story.

Repressed and not so-repressed sexuality was an inexhaustible, sparkling source of the supernatural, and *porneia*, lust, a potent agent in the ascetic life. Four demons transformed, for instance, into a beautiful woman and wrestled with a monk to 'draw him into shameful intercourse' (*N. 188/Syst.* 5.41). In such dire straits something had to be done! Sometimes extreme measures were taken as in the story about a monk who walked into the tomb of a dead woman and mopped up her bodily fluids with the *leviton*, the sleeveless linen

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman comments on 'otherness' in this way: 'Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend' (Bauman 1991, 8, cf. Smith 2004, 256).

⁵ For the references to the different collections of the *Apophthegmata*, see the bibliography.

tunic, to help him in his battle against lustful thoughts (*N. 172/Syst. 5.26*). Another monk fought so hard against sexual desire (*porneia*) and with so little success that he went into the desert ‘to die like a beast rather than to behave shamefully because of a bodily passion’ (*Syst. 5.54*). The monk did his best to be eaten by two hyenas, but did not succeed. After a few days, he was again burning with desire. Desperate ills need desperate remedies: The monk went into the desert, found a little asp and applied it to his genitals, ‘as being the cause of my temptation.’ (*Syst. 5.54*, cf. *The Lausiatic History* 23). God protected the monk, he was not bitten – nothing more is said about the asp.

For the readers of these texts the desert was a theatre filled with animal extras, which played their parts along with the ascetic heroes. While angels and demons thrive in texts and images, animals have their natural playgrounds elsewhere. However, it is important to realize that animals in texts and pictures are never ‘real’. They too are creatures of the human imagination and constructed for specific purposes. ‘Animal’ is further a category that contains a wider number of species than humans, angels and demons, and therefore a rich source for speaking about supernatural things. The conception of animals was influenced by the views of a farmer society, an urban elite and the ascetic tradition with monks living in the desert or on its margins where they might confront wild and dangerous animals.

Sometimes a positive super-human force (God) moved an animal, but more often they served evil powers or were demons in their own right. When Pachomius was a child and his parents gave him a cauldron of antelope meat to take to laborers in the field, ‘the devil set on him a crowd of demons under the form of dogs bent on killing him’ (*Bohairic Life* 5, in Veilleux 1980, 25). When the monks in the monasteries of Shenoute wanted to re-hire an ascetic because of his skills to help them set up their loom, Shenoute did not want him back. Unable to persuade the others in other ways, Shenoute claimed that he ‘saw an unclean spirit mounted upon his shoulders in the form of a large dog’ (Naples fragments in Layton 2014, 17). A discourse of demons *cum* animals was part of monastic life and could be applied when useful.

In the ascetic texts the selection of animals is dependent on an interaction between the biblical and the Egyptian fauna. The unclean animals in the Septuagint, such as pigs and dogs, were usually seen as demons (Brakke 2006, 31). Dogs had an ambiguous position because they were close to humans, but low in the hierarchy of the household. The story about Pachomius and the dogs suggests that semi-wild flocks of dogs roamed about in the Egyptian countryside. On a more general basis, Origen detected ‘some sort of kinship between the form of

each demon and the form of each animal (*zoon*).⁶ Athanasius' *Life of Antony* made a distinction between demons that 'imitate beings without reason (*aloga*)' (9.9) and real animals, which serve Satan.⁷ The overlap between animals and demons is found especially in relation to lions, bears, leopards, serpents, vipers, scorpions and wolves as well as reptiles (*Vita Antonii* 9.6, cf. Gilhus 2006, 221). When God becomes man, Satan tends to become a beast and in line with this polarity, animals are employed to give credible and realistic shape to demons.

4 The battle of beasts

Processes of change – from pagan religious traditions to Christianity, from heresy to orthodoxy and from family-life to asceticism – were in Christian discourse constructed as battles. These battles made pagans and heretics into beasts, turned animals into demonic others, and monks and ascetics into saints and angels. In other words, processes of categorical changes and ontological transformations were acted out in mythical battle scenarios. According to Einar Thomassen, 'Ancient Christianity introduced the novelty of the "religious identity", which swallowed up all other sources of personal identity formation in a manner previously unheard of in antiquity' (Thomassen 2012, 201). This is why heresy mattered. A totalizing identity was among other things cultivated by a battle-discourse, in which battles were fought against pagans and heretics as well as against the negative impulses in the human soul.

4.1 Battle against pagans

Egypt went from a religious tradition wherein animals gave shape to gods, to Christianity where they did so only to a small degree. Christians accused non-Christians of animal worship and of believing in the transmigration of souls be-

6 *Contra Celsum* 4.93, cf. Crouzel 1956, 197–206; Brakke 2006, 31–32; Gilhus 2006, 226. For the use of animals and demons in Shenoute, see Brakke 2006, 107–110.

7 David Brakke has pointed out how the devil and his demons attack Antony first with thoughts, then his body and lastly by means of visions (Brakke 2006, 29). According to Brakke, the biblical model for this overarching scheme going from mental attacks to physical attacks to visions is the story of Job (Brakke 2006, 29–30). The martyrs fought against animals, seen as the helpers of Satan (Gilhus 2006, 183–204). Athanasius transfers the martyr scenario to Antony (cf. Brakke 2006, 37).

tween humans and animals (*Vita Antonii* 74.5 and 7, cf. 76.1). The power of the Christian heroes was strong and outdid the powers of the pagan world: the holy animals of Latopolis – the Nile perch (*lates niloticus*), fierce predators which could reach two meters in length and 200 kilograms in weight (Thompson 1928) and were associated with the goddess Neith – took fright and fled when they met the child Pachomius (he had been taken with his pagan parents to worship at Latopolis).⁸ Monks made crocodiles carry them over the Nile: which might be an imitation of one of Horus' ways of locomotion, but, more importantly, it was a victory over the powerful Egyptian god Sobek/Sobek-Ra, a crocormorph god, popular in the centuries before Christianity became dominant (cf. Frankfurter 2004). Shenoute, the powerful leader of a federation of monks, says that if a person looks at a cat with amusement, the cat will make ready to jump at the person and claw out his eyes (Brakke 2006, 107–108).⁹ Shenoute does not come through as a lover of cats, but, more importantly, his vehemence against these animals might be due to the status of cats in Egypt in the late period when they had attained a sort of emblematic sacredness (Smelik, Hemelrijk 1984).

4.2 Battle against heretics

Heretics were characterized as animals on a general basis. The classical example is the *Panarion*, the Medicine Chest against Heretics, authored by the influential bishop Epiphanius, one of the power-players in the last part of the fourth century, who describes and labels eighty heresies, sixty of them after species of animals, mostly reptiles and insects.

Specific doctrines made people into heretics. One example is the Eucharist, which was hotly debated. For instance, a monk had been tricked by Satan into believing that the ingredients of the Eucharist were not the body and blood of Christ. He had a vision of hosts of angels and of two illuminated persons with a small child between them. Over the altar in the church, the two 'held the hands and feet of the child between them, grasping a sword, slaughtered it, emp-

⁸ According to the Bohairic life, 'they raised their eyes in the water, saw the boy, took flight and fled away' (*Bohairic Life* 4, in Veilleux 1980, 25). *The Greek Life* (G¹) refers to the creatures as 'the phantoms of the demons of the river' (G¹ 3, in Veilleux 1980, 299). The divergence between the *Bohairic Life* and G¹ shows that the borderline between animals and demons was thin. The Coptic Church identifies the creatures as crocodiles (cf. Veilleux 1980, 266).

⁹ According to David Brakke, Shenoute 'routinely interpreted biblical references to "beasts" or specific animals as references to demons' (Brakke 2006, 107).

tying its blood into the cup that was set on the table' (*Syst.* 18.48, cf. *N.* 761b, Anastasius the Sinaite 52, in *Alph.*) The flesh of the child was transformed into the bread of the Eucharist in the hands of the monks. This grotesque story is part of the debate about the interpretation of the Eucharist. It presupposes one of the profound changes in the history of religion: from sacrificing animals and reading the secrets of their bodies, to a secularization of slaughter, to a symbolic human sacrifice and an interpreting of texts and human bodies (cf. Gilhus 2006, 262–270). According to Shenoute, those who deny the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist are 'more evil than the dogs and the pigs' – even 'more evil than the impure demons.'¹⁰

4.3 Internal battles

Animals characterized interior dispositions and desires and were part of the cosmic drama of salvation *within* the ascetic souls.¹¹ In Origen's and Evagrius' deliberations, demons are crosses between animals and thoughts (*logismoi*).¹² While Egyptian pharaohs and Mesopotamian kings conquered lions and showed their power by means of these conquests, the monks had power to chase away wild animals and make lions and hyenas behave like sheep (cf. Gilhus 2006, 222). In this way they made the internal landscape of the soul reflect the external landscape of the desert and made animals embody processes of individual transformations in which desires and ambitions were overcome.

According to Dan Sperber, representations of animals 'evoke a worse world, that of anomaly, and a better one, that of perfection. They provide a contrasted and contrasting imaginary background for knowledge of the world as it is' (Sperber 1996, 167). In line with his thoughts, the Christian battle-discourses sometimes had domestic or semi-domestic animals embody specific positive emotional values. The sheep is the paradigmatic good guy, with strong roots in the New Testament, used to describe monks as well as positive mental representations, in line with how people tend to classify themselves together with domestic animals. The more daring of the ascetics aspired to graze and live among antelopes and buffalo (cf. *N.* 62; *N.* 132 A; *N.* 516). These animals were sometimes semi-domesticated, and express in an apt way how ascetics were living on the

¹⁰ Shenoute, *I am amazed*. In: Tito Orlandi, *Shenute contra Origenistas*.

¹¹ *N.* 383, *N.* 535, cf. also Leyerle 2005, 157.

¹² Evagrius labels 'demons, which fight with the mind, birds; those who trouble the passions are animals; while those who fuel desire are called beasts' (*The Kephalaia Gnostica* 1. 53, referred in Sinkewicz 2003, xxix, n. 67).

margins between civilization and wilderness. Acting against cultural norms and normal human behavior was a sign of the holiness of the ascetics.¹³

These examples show that ‘animals are good to think with’, as Lévi-Strauss famously stated (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 127–128). However, thinking by means of animals should not be conceived of as merely an exercise in the logic of categories, but more as a tapping into the emotions which these animals tend to give rise to. Especially wild animals were conceived to be demons or demon-like, and beasts of prey were used to visualize and incarnate the battle against pagans and heretics as well as against external and internal opponents. The battle-discourse contributed to widening the gap between animals and humans and to giving animals a lasting connection to that which was considered to be negative and/or demonic.

5 Angels and ontological transformations

In the cults and popular religious traditions in late antiquity, the concept of angel, *aggelos*, referred to a mediator between humans and a supreme god. The term had several meanings, which derived from various local traditions, and implies that local traditions were expressed in a universal language (cf. Cline 2011, 104; Muehlberger 2013, 31).

Angels took over some of the functions of the participants in traditional panthea. Similar to the ancient Middle-Eastern religions, a lively assembly of super-human beings was present in Christianity. ‘Monotheism’ is among other things a polemic term, and one of its functions is to veil multiplicity.¹⁴ In this case the multiplicity consisted of angels, demons and divine and semi-divine humans.

According to Ellen Muehlberger, Evagrius of Pontus and others saw angels as flexible companions and guides in the cultivation of the ascetic life, while Augustine regarded them more as ‘divine drones’ (Muehlberger 2013, 5). Muehlberger describes two late antique discourses of angels: ‘In one, angels were one type of being among many in a shifting universe, and their primary purpose was to guard and to guide Christians who attempted to cultivate specialized bodily practices and types of prayer in order to return, like the rest of creation, to their orig-

¹³ This anti-civilization ideology is also found in Indian ascetic literature (see Oliville 2011, 94).

¹⁴ While the Nag Hammadi texts include many named angels and powers, the angels in the ascetic and monastic literature are mostly without names. Egyptian doxologies and hymns include the names of Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Suriel/Uriel. These and other named angels are abundantly present in magical papyri as well (Müller 1959, 59).

inal unity with God' (Muehlberger 2013, 8–9). 'In the other, angels were characters described in the emerging canon of Scripture and available to enable readers to transform the mostly narrative material in that Scripture into foundational proof for theological propositions' (Muehlberger 2013, 9). According to Muehlberger, this constitutes the first discourse developed in an Egyptian ascetic context.

In this context, angels had a panoptic function, seeing everything the ascetics did, and especially when the ascetics were tempted to sin. In line with their interest in wrongdoings angels acted as judges and hangmen. When, for instance, an angel took Pachomius to see the dead sinners who were tormented in hell, 'the torturing angels were quite filled with joy and gladness' (*Bohairic Life* 88, in Veilleux 1980, 115). Angels are present in the daily life of the ascetics, where they bring messages, take care of people who are ill and correct monks who are up to no good, for instance harboring heretical views. When the monks' talk is edifying, an angel is present, when not, 'a stinking filthy pig' (*Syst.* 18.43, 4 and 12). The saying reflects the potent tension in the monks' imagination between the superhuman category of angels and the subhuman category of animals.

In addition to showing themselves to humans, speaking with them and guiding them, and sometimes acting as the special companion of the monks, angels also offered an ontological transformation category, as already suggested. Some Christians in late antiquity had a strong wish to live the *angelikos bios* and become like angels. Fulfilling this wish implied a more profound change, a sort of categorical and ontological transformation of the category of human.¹⁵ This was a dramatic change, which aimed at lifting humans out of the life-world and away from other creatures.

The idea of the angel-like nature of humans was fueled by impulses from Scripture, and thrived, among other things, on a feeling of the superior origin of humans in relation to animals.¹⁶ Animals were, for instance, used as shaming devices in a *minori ad maius* argumentation: 'There is nothing filthier than a sinful human being, neither the dog nor the pig, for they are irrational and keep to their own status, whereas the human, being in the image of God, did not keep its own status' (*Syst.* 15.125). The desire to become an angel is sometimes made explicit as in this short saying, combining two interconnected mythemes about fall and salvation: 'Woe is me! We came here to become angels and ended up becom-

¹⁵ About 'ontological conversion', see Marshall 2014.

¹⁶ For the nuances of the discourse of the Angelic Life, see Muehlberger 2013, 148–176.

ing irrational, impure beasts (*aloga akatharta zoa*)' (*Syst.* 16.7; *Les Apophthegmes des Pères*, vol. 2, 396).¹⁷

A prevailing view with roots in Middle Platonism, further developed by Origen in the third century, was that angels, men, demons and astral bodies had a common rational nature. In a way demons are fallen angels, while angels are un-fallen demons. Humans, who previously shared that status, might aspire to re-join the angels. In this way, 'man' and 'angel' became titles of rank – as Benjamin Blosser has recently pointed out (Blosser 2012, 174. 210). As for animals, Origen stressed that they lack the faculty of reason. According to him, they have their irrationality in common with vegetables, even if animals are *psychei*, while vegetables are *apsychei* (*Contra Celsum* 4.83).

In these processes of change, the category of angel, *aggelos*, was developed and used positively, the category of animal/demon was used negatively, and the gap between humans and animals was widened, as well as the gap between men and women. In line with an axiomatic gender hierarchy, the idea circulated that women had to make themselves male in order to be saved (cf. Vogt 1991). Women, animals and angels were instrumental in promoting the new human/male/superhuman ideal where the goal was to move up in the hierarchy of being with the ambition of transcending the human category, and becoming immortal. The originally Stoic view of animals became dominant and intensified in Christianity and probably spread via Origen and the ascetic movement.

6 The Angel School

Angels have an impeccable biblical standing, being present at the conception, nativity and death of Jesus. When they encounter different people, times and places, they change. Angels travel light and easily slip through the cultural net. They have something in common with Darwin's finches and the North Sea cod and even more with the virus of the common cold (in a metaphorical sense) – because small changes in their environment make them change. We have seen how angels interacted with monks and ascetics in late antique Egypt, but they are also present in the mental landscape of many people in late modern societies in the twenty-first century.

Let us pause for a moment. When we compare angels in Egypt in late antiquity with angels in Norway in the twenty-first century, what are we doing? Are we

17 We are reminded of Nietzsche: 'Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch – ein Seil über einem Abgrunde' (*Zarathustra Vorrede* 4).

making a comparison based on genealogy or typology? Is it a homological or analogical comparison?¹⁸ Taking into consideration that there is a continuous tradition of angels from antiquity via Christian texts and medieval paintings to the present, and that it is often pointed out that New Age angels mostly have Christian roots, the ancient and late modern angels might be conceived of as distant cousins. One could even argue that in some respects we live in the latest antiquity: Christianity, for instance, got a lasting impression from the religious impulses of antiquity. However, it is also important to notice a structural similarity – the ancient Mediterranean and contemporary Norway took/takes part in processes of globalization and encounters between religious traditions, and both may be described as staging lively religious scenes. It is a reasonable hypothesis that intermediary beings thrive under such circumstances. Such beings are, for instance, very visible in contemporary popular culture and media. Unlike earlier periods when, in addition to angels, demons and scary monsters filled the popular imagination, contemporary popular culture, while still harboring demons, is mostly saturated with angels. It also seems that while the bestial Satan with his entourage of demons and hybrids have left the scene, angels and animals have found new opportunities to come together.

Contemporary angels are part of the American ‘angel craze’, which reached Norway in the 1980s and 1990s. These creatures are not only present in homes, churches and New Age fairs, they are virtually present everywhere because of a strong mediatization and because they are attractive objects in capitalistic markets (cf. Gilhus 2013). Angels are especially visible at Christmas where they connect the Gospel of Christmas day with Christmas sales. Angels have at the same time moved from a male to a female domain and are seen in the shape of women and children rather than in the shape of males (cf. Utriainen 2014, 250). The functions of angels as judges and hangmen have disappeared; they are no longer equipped with wings from birds of prey, but from swans; and they are mostly seen as companions, helpers and therapists. Angels have changed from being the opponents of demons/animals to sometimes using animals as their allies. These animals function as models for communication with angels and also as their vehicles.

In Norway the new fascination with angels is foremost associated with the spiritual mission of Princess Märtha Louise, the daughter of the Norwegian king. Together with her business partner, Elisabeth Nordeng, she published the book, *Møt din skytsengel: En innføring i å møte din unike kraft* (‘Meet your

18 Do we, with respect to wings, compare birds with birds or birds with bats? Egil Asprem has recently used this example in a fruitful way (Asprem 2014, 27–30).

guardian angel: An introduction in meeting your unique power’, my translation) in 2009.¹⁹ The picture on the cover of the book is a blue sky with some clouds and a huge white wing filling the picture, probably the wing of a swan. The name *Engleskolen* – ‘The Angel School’ – is printed on the cover of the book.

The book connects angels to the universal power of love, which in this case seems to be the supreme superhuman power. The authors encourage the readers to find their unique spiritual way, and the book offers ‘spiritual tools.’ The most important among these tools is meditation (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 9). The book’s message is that you should be present in the body, be connected with the earth and the universe and invite angels into your life (cf. Gilhus 2016). According to the authors, angels can be sensed in several ways as sound, light, taste, smell, feeling and color (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 164).²⁰ Similar to the ascetic project, the human body is still in focus, but this time the paradigmatic body is female. While the monks and ascetics had internalized the language of Scripture and spoke by means of it, the relationship with Scripture in the book by the princess and Nordeng is indirect and superficial. Here Scripture is present in the form of echoes from Sunday school, novels and literature.

Mainly because of the princess’ popular appeal and media attention (cf. Kraft 2008), angels have become a summarizing symbol for New Age spirituality in Norway, reflected, for instance, in a book by a professor in Theology at the University of Oslo, Notto Thelle (cf. Gilhus 2016). Its title is *The Angels of the Princess*, with the subtext, *An Invitation to a Conversation about Alternative Spirituality* (my translation).²¹ The cover of the book corresponds with the cover of the book of the princess and Elisabeth Nordeng. It sports the wing of an angel (swan) against the sky and uses colors similar to their book. However, only one of the chapters in *The Angels of the Princess* is directly related to the angels of the princess: the rest is about New Age spirituality in general. Thelle is especially concerned with the relation of New Age spirituality to Christianity and the Church of Norway.

In Princess Märtha Louise and Elisabeth Nordeng’s book angels are rooted in the emotional landscape of childhood, which is in line with a general contempo-

¹⁹ The book has been published in English with the title *The Spiritual Password: Learn to Unlock Your Spiritual Power* (2014).

²⁰ Elisabeth Samnøy later changed her name to Elisabeth Nordeng.

²¹ The Norwegian title is: *Prinsessens engler: En invitasjon til en samtale om alternativ spiritualitet*. Their second book about angels is *Englenes hemmeligheter: Deres natur, språk og hvordan du åpner opp for dem* (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2012).

rary conception of angels.²² In addition, these creatures have a strong tie to real animals. Bird-wings are still a visual characteristic, in line with angels' air-borne manner of locomotion. According to the princess, feathers found in unusual places reveal that angels have been present.²³ In a newspaper article, a professor in biology offered the princess to read the DNA of the feathers for her.²⁴ The princess admitted that the feathers were probably from birds. Still the episode shows that the relationship between facts and metaphors is not always straightforward, and, moreover, that how the idea of angels is conceived of offers a special perspective for the interpretation of the world.²⁵

The angels of the princess have a special connection to horses, because her contact with angels happened by means of them – 'through the horses I learnt to communicate with animals on a deeper level. It was while I was taking care of the horses that I made contact with the angels.'²⁶ In this way angels are directly linked to horses and to animals in general and to the human ability to communicate with other species. Twenty years ago, Harold Bloom spoke about what he called 'the domestication of angels' and sighed: 'Most quests for the angels seem nowadays to suppose that a guardian angel is rather more like a dog or a cat than like a husband or a wife' (Bloom 1996, 43 and 44).

The new and direct association between animals and angels also reflects a more general change of view regarding animals, partly formed by contemporary pet- and recreation-culture. Pets are the primary category of animals large groups of people have experience with. Pets are, for instance, depicted with wings; wing-costumes for pets are on sale as well as books about angel-animals. Cats, dogs and horses have obviously raised their status. Communication with animals as a way of communicating with otherness – that which transcends the ordinary and which exists on a deeper level – might include other animals as well. The princess met an eland antelope (*taurotragus oryx*) in Africa when she was on a retreat to get into 'deeper contact with myself and with the

22 Among the pictures in the book are an angel scrap, an angel in the snow and a gingerbread tin in the shape of an angel (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 160–81). Nordeng connects the angels to her childhood experience of a fantasy-friend (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 169).

23 www.magasinetvisjon.no/no/artikler/spiritualitet/Englenes+hemmeligheter.9UFRnGXx.ips (accessed February 19, 2015), cf. also Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 167.

24 <http://www.abcnyheter.no/nyheter/2012/02/18/146118/professor-la-meg-dna-teste-eng-lefjaerene-martha> (accessed September 10, 2015).

25 I am grateful to my colleague Lisbeth Mikaelsson for this observation.

26 'Gjennom hestene lærte jeg å kommunisere med dyrene på et dypere nivå. Det var mens jeg holdt på med hestene at jeg tok opp kontakten med englene' (Netpages from Astarte Education 2007).

earth' (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 102, my translation). According to her, the leader of the course had stressed that the elands always came near when the participants were occupied with healing. One afternoon when they were working with healing, an eland stood a few meters from the princess: 'We stood there for a long time, and watched each other. It was not afraid at all' (Princess Märtha Louise, Samnøy 2009, 102, my translation). The eland is used as an example of connecting with the earth. Nature, where animals belong, is a source of immanence and deep meaning, more important than a transcendent realm high up and beyond²⁷

7 Dynamic of religion: past and present

The changing conceptions of animals and angels in antiquity and today are, in both periods, part of globalization processes. The two examples above reflect two macro processes of religious change in parts of the Mediterranean and European world: from a multi-religious society to a Christian monopoly in antiquity and from a Christian monopoly to a multi-religious and secular society at present.²⁸

Asceticism and the monastic life became a spearhead for late antique Christianity and together with the martyr the ascetic became the Christian hero *par excellence*. In the ascetic and monastic texts animals were part of a battle-discourse. Especially wild animals, but also some domestic ones, expressed and sometimes incarnated evil in general and sexual desire specifically. In this universe, angels were God's messengers, the companions of the monks and guardians of a religiously controlled world. Humans might transcend their place in the hierarchy of beings and rise to the status of angels. Angels and animals were accordingly used in a development project where the goal was to transcend human nature and reach a higher existential level.

In contrast to ancient societies, contemporary Western societies are mostly secular, democratic and egalitarian. In these societies the development of New

²⁷ Pet-animals have, perhaps, more cultural focus than farm animals and wild animals, while, at the same time, views about those animals are influenced by contemporary pet-culture.

²⁸ One side of secularization is a re-enchantment, which the book by the princess and Nordeng reflects. Another side of secularization is a de-enchantment, which, similar to re-enchantment, is a process closely in dialogue with religion. In his novel, *A Time to Every Purpose under Heaven: A Novel of the Nature of Angels and the Ways of Man* (2004), the award-winning author Karl Ove Knausgård describes what happens to angels in a secularized world without god (Knausgård 2009). In this book, the angels became increasingly depressed and marginalized. Gradually they were transformed and finally turned into seagulls on the coast of Norway.

Age spirituality is promoted by means of small-scale religious enterprises (cf. Sutcliffe 2003), and religious ideas and practices are spread by means of electronic and social media and are virtually present everywhere. A pet-perspective of animals and a view of them as companions of humans is prominent. Angels are part of a global trend and frequently used and referred to by New Age authors and therapists. Their global dimension is stressed, for instance, when they are used synonymously with intermediate beings in other religions (for instance devas) or when they are converted to a higher abstraction level and described as spiritual energy. Female views and values are very visible in contemporary spirituality, not least in relation to angels. The battle-discourse from earlier times has changed into a communication-discourse where humans, angels and animals are constructed as partners in conversation. In New Age spirituality, animals and angels tend further to be part of a self-help scenario where the goal is to improve one's ability to deal with the world and one's personal relations.

Changes in the conceptions of animals and angels are in both periods closely connected to broader cultural and religious changes. Perhaps religions are at their most dynamic when they take part in processes of transformation and alteration of the basic categories in the human conception of the world?

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