**CHRISTMAS ANGELS**

Luke, in Chapters 1 and 2 of his Gospel, reports conversations between God’s angel messengers and Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds.

The angel said to Zechariah, “I am Gabriel, who stand in God’s presence, and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news” (Lk 1:19). The same Gabriel answered Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (Lk 1:35). An unnamed angel of the Lord stood over the shepherds and said, “Look, I bring you news of great joy” (Lk 2:10).

To meet and converse with an angel was not unheard of in the Greco-Roman period, although in the three instances just mentioned, it did surprise the recipients and cause them to fear. Zechariah and Mary were “disturbed.” The shepherds were “terrified.”

How are we to understand these conversations with angels? Did they really take place?

There is an answer to this question in the studies of authors such as Bruce Malina and John Pilch (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press Minneapolis, 2003, pages 328 and 329) and others. They study altered states of consciousness or alternate states of awareness. This is not the same as conscience, which is the moral sense of right and wrong.

Altered states of consciousness are conditions in which perceptions and emotions are altered, so these states are characterized by changes in perceiving and feeling. When a person is in such a state, the experience modifies the relation of the individual to the self and to the environment of time, space, or other people.

Altered states of consciousness include sleeping, nocturnal dreaming, daydreaming, deep meditation, hysteria, trance, and many other conditions. In any of these states, the person enters another aspect of reality registered in the brain in the same way as “normal” experiences are. Normal reality is that dimension of reality that a person is most commonly aware of most of the time.

Alternate reality is that dimension of reality in which the person’s deity and spirits reside, which the person, from his or her culturally “normal” reality, can visit in an alternate state of consciousness. “Normal” reality is what the person experiences as real, together with others who share the same culture. Those who don’t share the same culture very likely do not believe that the experienced reality of the person is normal.

Before and after the Gospels were written, countless persons reported a range of visions and appearances involving heavenly messengers. There is no reason not to take their experiences seriously, at their word. Their experiences have to be interpreted within the framework of their own culture’s consensus or acceptance of reality, rather than of ours.

We in the West are very curious about non-rational dimensions of human existence, but we tend to label all such occurrences as irrational. One researcher, Erika Bourguignon, compiled a sample of 488 societies in all parts of the world, at various levels of technical complexity, and found that ninety percent of these societies evidence alternate states of consciousness. She concluded that societies that do not utilize these states are historical exceptions that need to be explained, rather than the vast majority of societies that do use these altered or alternate states of consciousness.

So, it would be anachronistic to take our post-Enlightenment, post-industrial revolution and our society obsessed with technology as normative for judging anyone other than ourselves. For the non-Westernized world, even today, a report of alternate states of consciousness would be considered as normal, or as possible at least, and would not be rejected out of hand.

A comparison of different cultures suggests that the Gospel authors describe experiences of altered states of consciousness. This may be difficult for us to believe because we have been inculturated to be selectively inattentive to such states of awareness, if not to reject them outright, except when they are experienced in dreams or under the influence of drugs, whether controlled or uncontrolled.

Arthur Kleinman, a physician-anthropologist, explains the West’s deficiency in our inability to accept the reality experienced by cultures other than our own. He writes that only the modern, secular West seems to have blocked our access to commonly experienced human dimensions of the self. What is the Western problem? The advent of modern science in about the Seventeenth Century disrupted the body-mind-spirit unity of human consciousness that had existed until then. We have developed an “acquired consciousness” whereby we dissociate self and look at self “objectively.” Only what can be measured is real to the scientifically minded. Western culture socializes the individual to develop as a critical observer who monitors, measures and comments on experience. That type of individual does not allow the total absorption of lived experience that is the very essence of highly focused alternate states of consciousness. The modified self stands in the way of unreflected, unmediated experience that now becomes distanced.

If we recognized that our so-called “objectivity” is simply socially learned and conditioned subjectivity, we would have more empathy with persons of other cultures who report perceptions that we find incredible just because they are socially dysfunctional for us.

It is not the individual who decides to experience an altered state of consciousness. In the Israelite tradition expressed by St Paul, for example in 1 Cor 12:6, 10, it is God who endows prophets with their abilities. They are “inspired by one and the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1Cor 12:11) Most calls come unbidden, but the person must respond, or serious problems can result. Zechariah was struck dumb because, in an altered state of consciousness, he did not respond at first positively to the angel Gabriel.

Back to our original questions. How are we to understand Zechariah’s and Mary’s and the shepherds’ conversations with angels? Did they really take place? In the context of the Israelite culture at the time, those who had these conversations and those who heard about them would have considered them as normal and real experiences.

People in the West who heard or read the Gospels before being affected by the scientific and industrial revolutions would have had no problem believing that these conversations really took place. It’s not surprising that we of the Twenty-first Century do have a problem.

We modern Westerners who are culturally conditioned by scientific and industrial technology have to suspend our negative judgment of what people accepted as real, not only in ancient times but also up till the Seventeenth Century, and today in many parts of the world.

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