

Daddy, Why Do Angels Have Wings,?

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“Well, dear, it’s -- er-- because -- that is -- so they can fly to earth from heaven, sort of . . . I guess.”

“But daddy, why don’t they just take an airplane like everybody else?”

From here, this conversation goes deeper in the “not exactly” direction, and the best exit strategy is often to say: “Hey, how would you like a nice cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows?”

Adults chuckle among themselves: “Kids sure ask some strange questions,” but sometimes such questions only mask a far deeper issue. This question goes to the core of the way we understand God, our images of God, and the way our entire system of thought changes over time.

It’s not hard for an adult (or even older children) to understand that it is our images of the angels that have wings. It is a big mistake to confuse images with reality; indeed, the Eastern Orthodox faiths dislike images specifically because of this risk. We know so little of supernatural reality that the temptation to devise images is irresistible. There are very few ways to communicate other than by using images.

But why do angels have wings? Why not astronaut rocket back-packs? Why not nuclear-powered roller blades? Where did the wings come from?

Art historians can trace the origins of wings on angels back many centuries, well beyond the renaissance artists, indeed before the time of Christ. The ancient Greek legend of Icarus and Daedalus features humans with artificial wings attached so as to fly toward the sun. Throughout the great majority of recorded history, mankind was constrained to live on the surface of the planet, with no chance to rise above it. It was out of the question for a natural human to travel in the air, and, hence, (by weak but typical reasoning) only supernatural beings could do so. The image of angels with wings follows immediately from assigning a natural mechanism (wings, as found on birds) to explain this supernatural capability. It is a very basic error even to try to do this.

Along with this came several other notions, plausible enough to be taken for granted: for example, heaven was “up there” in the sky. This notion persisted for millennia. There were other examples where images evolved into “facts”. During the renaissance, Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling showing God as a bearded old man, reaching out his finger to Adam to transmit the spark of life. Although people understood it as imagery at the time, a few centuries later, when electricity was discovered, there were clergymen of limited scientific acumen going around calling electricity the “spark of life,” a notion derived from Michelangelo’s artwork. What had begun as an image, pointing to a higher reality, had been slowly transformed into an explanation of that reality: and thus the reality was cheapened by being compressed into terms of mere human existence.

Rapid advances in engineering and astronomy have brought us in the 20th century to a point where it is widely agreed that heaven is not “up there”; in fact, it is not a “place” at all. Rather, it is a new and different state of being. Still, we yearn for some kind of images, and are left unsettled in the absence of adequate images. That’s where we stand today. This condition has led to very adverse consequences.

A substantial fraction of the scientific community has abandoned religion altogether, via a four-step process: first, realize that the description of an image (of something spiritual) is inadequate to give a natural explanation of it; second, reject the image; third, confuse the image with the reality; fourth, conclude that the underlying reality does not exist. Many other people, impressed with the learned demeanor and authority of scientists, go along with this line of thinking.

The truly well-educated scientist, who has a command of a particular field, sees more clearly the limits of his/her own knowledge, and is less susceptible to the arrogant presumption that knowledge of everything is attainable. A certain humility before the awesome expanse of science is an important step toward developing humility before God. And once achieved, the foremost application of that humility is to realize that all our human minds will ever grasp are images of God, which fall far short of the reality.

Each time God allows the mind of man to unlock another secret of nature, He reveals a little more of Himself; collectively, we call this the “Progress of Science.” Going on in parallel, there is an advance in our

understanding of the spiritual side of life, as God reveals more and more to the developing human mind. Both paths to knowledge are a gift from God. Surprises along either path are part of the bargain, but this should not be alarming. In science, we adapt by revising our models our images of reality. If we trust in God's goodness, we can accept without fear the similar task of revising our very limited understanding of God. That is exactly what Jesus Christ invited us to do, nearly 2000 years ago. The Gospel of Mark is a testimony to how surprised the disciples were, again and again, at the new understanding that Christ offered to them.

Lately, the progress of science has been extremely rapid. We have seen in this century the overthrow of several long-cherished assumptions about nature. Einstein's Theory of Relativity challenged the most basic structure of human thought and language, wherein time had seemed utterly immutable. All conventional languages fail us when we try to discuss the interchangeability of space and time. As we advance toward the 21st century, we can be confident that there will be further advances in science, which will repeatedly undermine our man-made images of reality. When we cast aside an obsolete image, where is the replacement, that better, more fitting image that still points to the higher reality? If it is slow in forthcoming, then a lot of people who equate images with reality will experience severe challenges to their beliefs. It doesn't have to be that way. The essential point is that images are intended to point to a higher reality. The danger is that, by taking an image too seriously, people will forget the fundamental distinction between what we can grasp and the higher reality of God.

If we can accept that every image is ultimately inadequate, then even old images can remain helpful. "Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plain" still points to God's message that the birth of Christ is worthy of celebration. "No room at the inn" still conveys the idea that the natural tendency of humans is to think only of short-term expediencies, rejecting the message of Christ. The three wise men from afar still indicates that Jesus came for everyone on earth, not just his immediate neighbors. Dwelling on these old images, as we do each Christmas, should serve as a reminder that God's reality goes well beyond our grasp.

The 1990s child who considers wings irrelevant to angels is actually just like the rest of us. We are all struggling with inadequate images. Fortunately, God's love is unconditional, and doesn't depend on our human struggles and weaknesses.