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**Angels not souls:****Popular religion in the online mourning for British celebrity Jade Goody**

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**Abstract**

The presence of angels in contemporary western popular cultures has been noted, but not their presence in contemporary mourning. This study analyses online tributes for Jade Goody, a young British celebrity who died of cervical cancer in 2009; though a few of these tributes mention souls, many more refer to angels. Some refer to traditional Christian angels transporting Jade to heaven and caring for her there, while others draw on an unorthodox but popular tradition of the deceased herself becoming an angel, in which role Jade continues to care for her two young children. Ambiguity and fluidity of meaning are evident in many of the angel tributes. They portray neither a theocentric nor an anthropocentric heaven, but rather one in which the dead can continue to care for the living; for this the dead need agency, which angels have but souls do not. Through the symbol 'angel', Jade's lower class and theologically uneducated mourners succeed in linking three levels – pre-mortem identity, a broadly Christian notion of heaven, and the ongoing agency of the dead in the lives of the living – something that often eludes both religious and bereavement professionals.

**Keywords**

angel; soul; mourning; heaven; continuing bonds; popular religion; celebrities

Wherever else in the cosmos angels may be found, they are certainly manifest in contemporary popular culture, appearing in books, magazine articles, movies, websites and television programs. This massing of angels was evident in the USA in the 1990s (McDannell & Lang 2001, p.xiii; Taylor 2005, p. 6; Gardella 2007), thence moving to European countries such as the UK (Heathcote-James, 2002), Germany (Murken and Namini, 2007) and Norway (Gilhus, 2008, 2009). My local branch of the UK's largest bookseller has within its 'Mind, Body, Spirit' section two shelves labelled 'Angels', comprising 62 titles (e.g. Astell, 2006; Byrne, 2009; Cheung, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Cooper, 2007; Eason, 2009; Heathcote-James, 2002; Newcombe, 2002, 2006); by contrast, neither the shop's Theology and Religion section nor its Cultural Studies section contain any angel books.

Though this presence of angels has been observed and discussed by a number of journalists (e.g. Leonard, 2008; Measure, 2009), sometimes flippantly in broadsheet newspapers (e.g. Chaudhuri, 2009) and more seriously in downmarket papers (e.g. Mooney, 2009), I have found but two sustained book-length academic analyses of this contemporary phenomenon (Gardella, 2007; Murken and Namini, 2007). Gardella traces how American religious and popular culture has transformed and commercialised traditional Christian angels into useful adjuncts to practical living, comparable to Murken and Namini's depiction of German angels as 'heavenly service providers' providing guidance, healing, meaning, comfort and often simply a helping hand. British writer Heathcote-James produced a popular, and useful, account of her research into people's experiences of angels (2002). Clark's book 'From Angels to Aliens' (2003), on the spiritual life of American teenagers, contains disappointingly little about angels. Turning to articles, Keane (2009) analyses the representation of dead foetuses as angels in American online memorial sites to pregnancy loss. And Gilhus (2008) has analysed Norwegian responses to a member of its royal family opening an angel education centre. Academically, that is about all. Some encyclopaedias of religion (e.g. Swatos, 1998) do not even have an entry on angels. Most academic writers on religion, popular culture and bereavement seem not to have noticed what is obvious to those working in the media: the cultural presence of angels.

Though Gardella (2007) argues that the angels he discusses are specifically American, much of his analysis applies also to the many British-authored angel books I have perused. These books, along with other cultural manifestations of angels, are part of the self-help genre, showing readers how to use guardian and other angels for the purpose of living more effectively and positively. There is little in these popular books, nor in Gardella's analysis of similar American books and television shows, about death and bereavement. In the Biblical and Islamic traditions, however, angels have been concerned – among other things - with death: angels transport souls to the next life, and the archangel weighs the souls of the dead at the day of judgment. Does the present interest in angels exclude such post-mortem concerns? Though popular books, websites and television programmes about angels are this-worldly, are angels nevertheless available as a resource for today's mourners? Do mourners employ angels to articulate ideas about the afterlife and heaven? This article analyses one online tribute site in which they do, suggesting that there is more to popular contemporary angelology than self-help and positive living.

In the USA, Christianity is embraced by a remarkable proportion of the population, yet 'Life after death, for many Christians, means existing only in the memory of their families and of God. Scientific, philosophical, and theological scepticism has nullified the modern heaven and replaced it with teachings that are minimalist, meagre, and dry.' (McDannell & Lang, 2001, p.352) The UK population has experienced significant de-Christianisation in the past half century, with very few children now being taught the basics of Christianity, yet levels of belief in God (Davie, 1994) and an afterlife (Walter, 1996) remain high. With institutions such as schools and churches offering very little in the way of afterlife imagery in

either country, are mourners with religious or spiritual sensibilities using the contemporary rich palette of angel imagery provided by the media to colour in an otherwise colourless picture of the afterlife?

Angels - messengers between sacred and profane worlds, between heaven and earth, between God and humans - have historically been most fully elaborated in monotheistic religions based on revelation, notably Judaism, Christianity and Islam. 'These religions emphasize the distance between man and God and, consequently, have the greatest need for intermediaries between the two.' (Coudert, 1987, p.282) <sup>1</sup> A related issue is the distance between the dead and the living. Protestantism, with its unbridgeable gulf separating the two, has always had trouble with popular beliefs and experiences of ghosts, mediums and other intermediaries between the living and the dead (Finucane, 1996; Marshall, 2002, ch.6; Marshall & Walsham, 2006; Davies, 2007), though by the nineteenth century had come to accept paintings and sculptures of angels. Catholicism created its own intermediaries, in the form of prayers for the dead, the intercession of saints, and the elaboration of angel hierarchies. For secularists, of course, the concept of an intermediary is nonsense, since there is no other world. So are mourners in a contemporary culture that is predominantly secular / Protestant likely to find angels implausible or dangerous in linking them to their departed loved ones? Or an attractive bridge across the gulf dug by Protestantism and secularism?

This article addresses these questions by examining the, perhaps surprisingly numerous, references to angels in the online mourning for a British celebrity.

## **MOURNING A YOUNG MOTHER**

It is not hard to see the presence of angels in contemporary mediated mourning. Newspaper reports of the tragic death of a teenage female often quote the parents' perception of her as an angel (on earth, in heaven, or both). <sup>2</sup> Robbie Williams' 1997 song *Angels* was voted in 2005 the song Britons would most like played at their funeral. <sup>3</sup> American online memorial sites to babies who died before birth typically refer to them as angels, indeed several such sites define them as angels, with site names such as *Remember Our Angels*, *Angels Forever Loved*, *Born Angels*, and *Cherished Angels*; Keane (2009) argues that portraying their pre-term losses as angels, along with ultrasound images, enables mothers to construct their deceased as real.

This article examines another instance of online mourning, this time involving the death not of a young child but of a mother of two young children. The *Sun* tabloid newspaper invited tributes to 27 year old British celebrity, Jade Goody, following her death from metastasised cervical cancer on Mothers Day, 22 March 2009. Of the 1109 online tributes posted <sup>4</sup>, 167 (15 per cent) refer to angels. With only 13 tributes (1 per cent) referring to a soul, the Goody tributes offer an intriguing indicator of current afterlife beliefs, at least as expressed online after the high profile death of a young celebrity. This article analyses the 167 angel tributes. It thus contributes to the growing literatures on religion and the internet, and on mourning in a digital age (Gibson, 2006).

## **Method**

Having downloaded all 1109 tributes, I used Microsoft Word's 'Find' tool to isolate the tributes referring to angel. I then categorised them in terms of what kind of angel is involved, who the angel is, and what the angel is or is not doing; these categories evolved in the course

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is why angels need wings – to fly from heaven to earth and back. On the historical development of angels' wings, see Guzzi (2005).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. 'Angel who died in her sleep at 16', *Metro*, 27 August 2009, p.1

<sup>3</sup> 'Angels by Robbie Williams is the song Britons would most like played at their funeral, a survey has suggested', BBC NEWS: 10 March 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/music/4336113.stm>

<sup>4</sup> At <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/mysun/article2335754.ece>

of analysis, and the eleven final categories form the basis of the seven subheadings in the Findings section below. The tributes appear to be limited to 260 characters (about three lines), as a number were cut off at this point. This made them eminently manageable, compared to many online postings that can, for example, range from just a few words to thousands of words.

A common problem with using online postings as research data is that their authorship (age, gender, social class, ethnicity, even country of origin) is often unknown. In this instance, however, we are quite fortunate. We know that the tributes were posted in a thirty six hour period immediately following Jade Goody's death, and that they were written not by primary mourners (close family), nor by secondary mourners (extended family, friends), but by tertiary mourners who knew her only through the internet. (None made any reference to having actually met her.) Jade Goody had a very high media profile in the UK, but was hardly known elsewhere (contrasting with, for example, the international profiles of Michael Jackson or Princess Diana); the postings' language is clearly English English rather than American English, confirming that the posters were almost all British. It is highly likely that the vast majority of posters were *Sun* readers, whose profile is well known – British, working class, with relatively few years of education (confirmed by the postings' language, compared to postings to broadsheet papers), and tending toward right wing (indeed, Jade's rags-to-riches story is almost a fable of postmodern entrepreneurship, of how to make good in a media-saturated world).

Each tribute is signed by the author's online name, 51% of which are female, 4% male, and 45% unclear. This is more exclusively female than were tributes for Princess Diana, the only comparable young British celebrity mother of two boys who died tragically young in the age of the internet.<sup>5</sup> As will be clear later, the language is overwhelmingly female. This may reflect the intense pre-death coverage of Jade's dying, focussing on her particularly female form of cancer and her motherhood, contrasting with Diana's pre-death glamour coverage and her death through a high speed car crash rumoured to entail state-sanctioned murder (a typically male interest).

Having identified a number of types of meaning within the angel tributes, I then examined popular angel books as an index of more general popular angel discourse, as I anticipated that the angel tributes could be explained as simply an example of a wider popular angel discourse. I was surprised to find very little in common between the Jade tributes and the ideas found in popular angel books, which is itself a significant finding – something different seems to be going on in the Jade tributes. So I had to look elsewhere for the cultural roots of Jade's angels, which I argue may be found primarily in the romantic strand of mourning culture as it has developed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

### **Jade Goody**

Jade Goody, born 1981, was brought up in London in a family that was poor and multiply dysfunctional, with parents visibly involved in drugs and crime, and she left school with little education. Her life changed dramatically when she appeared in 2002 on the British television reality show, *Big Brother*, where she was vilified as ill educated, brash and prone to loutish behaviour. She was more successful, however, than other *Big Brother* contestants in subsequently developing a media and business career, though not without subsequent ups and downs that included charges of racism. Like many of her online mourners, she was British, white (though with a black grandfather), working class, poorly educated, and a mother – and proud of each of these characteristics. Audiences either loved her or loathed her. In August

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<sup>5</sup> An analysis of condolence book entries for Diana found similar proportions of female authors, but a greater proportion of male entries - 24% online, 16% paper condolence books (Jones, 1999, p.204).

2008, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer, confirmed to be terminal on 4 February 2009, and was very ill most days thereafter. Nevertheless, on 22 February 2009 she married Jack Tweed in an expensive and glossily reported celebrity wedding; on 7 March she and her two sons, aged four and five, were christened in the chapel of the hospital where she had been undergoing palliative surgery. She died at home on Mothers Day, 22 March.

In order to raise funds so that, after her death, her boys could have a better start in life than she had had, and also because she made her living by being herself, in public, she invited the media to detail her dying. This made hers the highest profile dying for many decades in the UK (Walter, 2010). (I mean coverage of her *dying*, i.e. the weeks prior to her death; post-death coverage after the sudden deaths of Princess Diana and Michael Jackson was more extensive than Jade's post-death coverage.) This process of dying was portrayed not only as heroic (typical of media coverage of cancer dying - Seale, 2002), but also and more crucially as redemptive; for the media, her last weeks finally and definitively transformed Jade from underclass dimwit and racist (Gies, 2009) to perfect wife and mother (Walter, 2010). By the time she died, many previous detractors had come to admire her. This provides one context for tributes that described Jade not only as now being with the angels, but herself now being an angel. She had, as it were, earned her wings.

Both Jade herself and the *Sun* had, before her death, used and invited religious language for her post-mortem existence. Her last interview was reported in the weekly *OK!* magazine (17 March, pp.53-4):

While Jade has never been particularly religious during her lifetime, she's always believed in God and heaven. 'It was really important for me and my boys to be christened so that when I'm not here they can feel they can speak to me whenever they want...I want my boys to know that when I do go, I am safe and looking over them...I will be the brightest star in the sky for them, always looking over them and protecting them.'

After discharging herself from hospital so she could die at home, the *Sun* reported (16 March):

She told the boys: 'Mummy's going to heaven soon. I'm going to be a star up in the sky, so when you are looking up you will be able to see me and know I'm there, always looking over you. Mummy's going to be up there looking over you. Close your eyes and you can talk to me.' .... When bewildered Freddie asked at her bedside: 'Why are you so sleepy?' she gave the heartbreaking reply: 'Because the angels are calling Mummy.' A priest also visited Jade yesterday to say prayers and blessings.

These words seem to be taken from Jade's publicist Max Clifford, who on ITN television news the same day referred to the boys' christening, 'She's hoping they'll get to know Jesus and through Jesus keep in touch with her.' On 4 February and 7 March, the *Sun* editorials were headed 'Pray for Jade', and one headline reporting her death (*Sun* 23 March, p.4) read 'Mummy's in heaven'.

Jade and her media were therefore offering audiences a religious, and in large part Christian, framework in which to interpret a post-mortem existence in which she would continue to relate to her bereaved children. Many of her online mourners had little difficulty couching their tributes within this framework. This alone is of interest since, though women are more religious than men in contemporary western societies (Walter & Davie, 1998), Jade's online mourners, like her, generally belonged to a group not usually noted for churchgoing: the contemporary white British working class. At the same time, this is not a group noted for its atheism (Bruce, 1995, pp. 42-4, 53-4). In other words, white working class British females are a likely group in which to find popular or folk Christianity. What then did their angel postings say?

## FINDINGS

Each of the seven subheadings below refer to a substantial number of tributes which to me share a certain meaning.<sup>6</sup> I do not provide exact numbers in each category, since they overlap and flow into and out of each other, but each is based on between 15 and 35 tributes. Quotes from the tributes are verbatim, including ‘text speak’ and typographical, grammatical, spelling and spacing errors; a final full stop within a quotation indicates it is there in the original.

Angels are found both in Christianity and contemporary spirituality, criss-crossing the border between the two (Ahn, 2006; Gilhus, 2009). Popular books on angels often present traditional Judaeo-Christian and Islamic angels as messengers between God and humans, before going on to re-present angels not as messengers from the divine but as a resource for positive living by humans (Gardella, 2007) who, in some books, are themselves portrayed as divine (Gilhus, 2008). Jade’s angels also move in and out of Christian tradition, but differently from the popular books. I look first at tributes that have Christian resonances, then those that move beyond this.

### Jade’s angels

Only one of the 167 angel tributes was clearly written in precisely identifiable Christian (in its case, Catholic) language: ‘May the choirs of angels come to greet you. May they speed you to Paradise. May the Lord enfold you in mercy. May you find eternal life.’ Nevertheless, many of the other angel tributes have a broadly Christian parentage:-

#### *Angels of death*

Several tributes describe Jade being taken by the angels to heaven, reflecting a long Christian tradition, expressed for example in Cardinal Newman’s *Dream of Gerontius* (Newman, 1916). Christian painting and memorial sculpture of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sometimes portrays just one angel, sometimes a number of angels, taking the individual from the deathbed. Some near-death experiences include a figure interpreted as an angel, accompanying the person to the other world (e.g. Fox, 2003; Sutherland, 2009).<sup>7</sup> In the Jade tributes, in every case it is ‘angels’ rather than ‘an angel’ that take her to heaven: ‘just saw the news that the angels came for you’. ‘i am so heartbroken that the angels came for you’.

In every case, Jade’s angels are loving, gentle, caring: ‘The Angels came and took you in their arms.’ ‘The angels came from heaven and gently called your name’. Though common in western art from the Black Death to the late nineteenth century, there is here no hint of ‘death and the maiden’ imagery in which death as a male skeleton seduces or rapes an unsuspecting young woman. A number of tributes portray the angels’ loving task as taking Jade from her painful pre-mortem cancerous existence to a place of rest and peace: ‘The angels came and took you to a place to rest above’. ‘The angels came from heaven last night and gently called your name. As your spirit rose up to heaven you left behind your pain.’ ‘im so glad the angels took you from ur suffering.’ ‘the angels that were with you in your room have finally taken you away, free from your pain.’

#### *With the angels*

Jade is not only transported by the angels from earth to heaven, but heaven itself entails being in their company: ‘your now with the angels’. ‘May all the angels in heaven surround you.’ ‘dearest jade enjoy mothers day in heaven with all the angels’. Though a number of tributes refer to God, as in ‘God bless you’ and ‘May God take you among the Angels, may he watch

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<sup>6</sup> I make no claim that authors or regular *Sun* readers read the same meaning into these texts as I do; that would be another research project.

<sup>7</sup> Whether such experiences are consequence or cause of the cultural idea of the angel of death need not detain us here.

over your family', very few refer to heaven as being in the presence of God. Rather, about forty tributes portray heaven as being in the presence of angels. McDannell & Lang's excellent history of heaven (2001) focuses on the oscillation over two thousand years between a theocentric and an anthropocentric heaven, between enjoying the company of God or that of loved ones; what these Jade tributes portray, rather, is an angelocentric heaven. Though God is looking after her, and she is still caring for her boys, Jade is in the immediate presence of neither. It is the angels whose direct company she now enjoys.

Actually, there are more references to the angels enjoying Jade, than to Jade enjoying the angels. The heavenly host of angels, as a company, are a pretty undifferentiated bunch, but Jade takes to heaven her very definite earthly character: 'You're...probably sharing your beautiful smile with the angels.' 'you'll make the angels smile in Heaven'. 'I imagine you up there making the angels laugh as you have made us laugh'.

As in the angel of death tributes, there is an emphasis on Jade no longer being in pain: 'Your out of pain now with the angels.' More specifically, Jade sleeps in the presence of the angels: 'may u sleep easy with the angels'. 'now is your time to sleep with the angels'. 'R.I.P Babes... Sleep Tight With The Angels!!!!' There is no hint of sleep as an intermediary stage before a day of resurrection, rather the emphasis is backward-looking, contrasting with the pain of her dying days.

Apart from sleeping and making the angels laugh, Jade's main activity in heaven, to watch over her boys, resembles that of a guardian angel: 'I hope your now up with the angels looking down on all those you love.' 'You are no longer suffering and have joined the angels up in heaven watching over your 2 precious boys.' This watching activity becomes central to my analysis later in the article.

### *Cared for by the angels*

Apart from being entertained by Jade, what do the heavenly angels do? Their main activities are to watch over her boys, and – in about 20 tributes – to care for Jade: 'the Angels will look after you now sweetheart.' 'The angels will guide and protect you.' 'Jade let the angels help u now.' One tribute considers Jade fully deserved to be looked after: 'Your are with the angels now - they will look after you the way you looked after your boys!' One tribute refers to a division of heavenly labour: 'The god are looking after your family and the angel are looking after you.' In another tribute, the roles are reversed: 'May god watch over you and the angels look after youre boys.'

### **Angel Jade**

A number of tributes depart from mainstream Christian angelology, portraying Jade not only *with* the angels, but also *as* an angel: 'An angel was needed and Jade was chosen', and more commonly, simply 'Heaven has a new angel.' Several add the word 'now', as in 'now an angel', implicitly differentiating her heavenly angelic status from use of the word 'angel' to describe a person's character on earth. Other tributes expand: 'God bless the brand new angel'. 'RIP Jade, you lived a wonderful life here now you must continue it in heaven along with the other angels inc my mum.' Angel Jade does a fair amount of flying, shining and watching: 'Heaven gained an angel yesterday. She will be shining down on you all!' 'Shine on and fly with the angels'. But, though traditional angelology requires angels to be constantly vigilant and certainly does not have angels asleep at their posts, angels who were once human are allowed that privilege: 'goodnight jade god bless,gods got u as an angel now,sleeptight sweetheart.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sleep may be taken as a metaphor for death. So for Jade to sleep, while being an angel, is to condense images, which Freud saw as a primary process of dreaming. (I am grateful to Dennis Klass for this connection.)



Heaven, it seems, consists not of souls (remember, only 13 soul references in the 1109 tributes), but of angels. This is of considerable theoretical interest. In official Christian angelology, deceased humans do not become angels; rather, angels are messengers between God and humans (Coudert, 1987; Guiley, 2004), and indeed Christianity has been hostile to the idea that deceased humans (other than Catholic and Orthodox saints) can act as intermediaries between heaven and earth. Throughout Christian history, heaven comprises God, angels and other heavenly orders, and human souls, but souls spend their time relating either to God in McDannell & Lang's (2001) theocentric heaven or to other deceased souls in an anthropocentric heaven.

The dominant view of the books I consulted in my local bookshop's Mind, Body, Spirit angels section likewise differentiates angels from deceased humans: 'Angels are pure spirit and have not had a physical incarnation' (Cooper, 2007, p.12); 'Angels...have never been, and never will be, human' (Conway, 2009, p. 69); 'The consensus is that, unlike spirit guides, who have once been human and chosen to return and help the living, angels have, in the main, never been human' (McGerr, 2001, p. 7); see also Byrne (2009).

There is, however, a minority school of thought generally presumed to derive from the eighteenth century Swedish thinker Emanuel Swedenborg, who taught that all angels were once living people; heaven starts immediately after death, continuing our earthly life and focussing on human love (Swedenborg 2000, first published 1758). McDannell & Lang (2001, ch.7) argue that Swedenborg's views strongly influenced artistic representations of death and loss in Victorian cemetery culture in which angel sculptures became popular. A tomb of a young woman in the Irish village of Myshall, dating from 1913, bears the inscription 'Earth holds one gentle soul the less / and heaven one angel more' (Hutchison, 2003). Hans Christian Andersen's 1844 tale *The Angel* depicts a deceased boy becoming an angel, who then accompanies to heaven the next deceased boy who in turn becomes an angel.<sup>9</sup> Gardella (2007, p.61) notes that humans become angels in nineteenth century Spiritualism and Mormonism, an idea that then seeped more widely into mid-twentieth century popular American culture,

Whatever the influence of Swedenborg in popularising the idea that humans become angels, the idea itself pre-dates him and may have other roots. Shakespeare's Laertes calls his departed sister Ophelia 'a ministering angel' (Hamlet, Act V, Scene 1), while for Gardella (2007, p. 54) winged figures on seventeenth century American headstones suggest that 'colonial Americans began to identify dead humans with angels', though he provides no evidence for this inference. A Calvinist Swiss colleague has an 1818 family Bible in which handwritten entries record the deaths of a one year old boy (1824) and his 28 year old mother (1831), both of whom 'became an angel of heaven'; these entries were written by peasant ancestors unlikely to have had close contact with Swedenborgian or romantic ideas.<sup>10</sup>

Two particularly prolific contemporary angel authors tend toward the human origin of angels: Jacky Newcomb (2002; 2006; 2009) and Theresa Cheung (2008a, b; 2009), see also Eason (2009, p.13). Newcomb and Cheung (both psychics and mediums) are not concerned with precise definitions, least of all about the composition of heaven; rather, their concern is to show how we are regularly helped and guided by spirit guides and angels: 'The afterlife is real. Our loved ones don't die. We are supported by loving spirit guides and angels.' (Newcombe 2006, p.45) Sometimes Newcomb and Cheung imply that spirit guides and angels are separate, sometimes they use the terms interchangeably. For Cheung (2009, p.12), angels manifest their love in many ways, such as through feathers or the help of strangers, but

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<sup>9</sup> Given the influence of Swedenborg and Andersen, it is possible that humans becoming angels is an idea particularly prevalent in Scandinavia. The Norwegian version of the Christmas carol *A Child is Born in Bethlehem* had until 1985 the line 'We become angels like them', a line missing in the English version.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Hauenstein, personal communication.

also ‘through the spirits of departed loved ones’; the dead are angels in the same sense that a helpful stranger is an angel, or manifests an angelic presence.

Though there seems, both in the Jade tributes and in popular discourse, support for the Swedenborgian view that deceased humans become angels, there is very little reference in popular discourse to adolescent or adult males being or becoming angels. Reference is typically to girls, young adult females, and babies of both sexes (Keane, 2009.) Historically over two millennia, depictions of angels have evolved from sexless, to fairly effeminate young males, to female, an evolution to which contemporary culture is heir (Coudert 1987, p.286; Zuffi, 2005, p.289).<sup>11</sup> One or two Jade tributes refer to Bobby and Freddy (her children, aged four and five) as angels, but not necessarily in a spiritual sense – one does after all hear people referring to another parent’s living child as ‘a little angel’. There is just one reference in the Jade tributes to an angel who was once a human male, namely the author’s own deceased little boy. Addressing Jade’s family, using the same imagery as Andersen’s tale, the post says: ‘to jackiey, jack, bobby, freddy and jeff, my thoughts are with you at this sad time jade was wonderful person. my little angel baby kanan george will protect and look after jade for you.’

### *A quality angel*

Jade is quite a distinctive angel. Several tributes show how her earthly character continues in heaven, indeed may even qualify her for angelhood: ‘heaven must be desperate for a beautiful angel’. ‘I hope heaven opens the gates for you, they have gained a selfless angel’. ‘heaven has just gained a truly gorgeous angel’. ‘he needed the perfect mother in heaven. Sleep well my angel’. ‘God now has a larger than life angel by his side to brighten up heaven.’ Gone are the negative feelings that Jade attracted earlier in her life as a celebrity, when even her admirers would not have called her an angel. In heaven, though, the redemption wrought by her brave dying (Walter, 2010) is complete.

### *Caring and cared for*

Other than sleeping, Jade’s predominant angelic activity is watching over her boys, for she has become their guardian angel: ‘Now she an angel watching over her boys!’ ‘you are no longer in pain and now a beautiful angel looking down on your loved ones.’ ‘your now with the angels where you can look down on your boys and guide them through life.’ ‘May your boys know that they have the best Guardian Angel God could give them.’ These tributes echo Jade’s own words quoted in *OK!* magazine and the *Sun* that she will be in heaven looking over them. One tribute goes further and asks Jade to be its author’s guardian angel: ‘Jade if you are looking down on us I would like you to be my angel to protect me from danger.’ In another, it is the whole world Jade now cares for: ‘Heaven needed an Angel to look over the world and you were the perfect choice.’ This is a Swedenborgian heaven where angels continue the enactment of earthly love.

As we have already seen, this love is reciprocal, for Jade is both receiver and giver of angelic love. What my brief extracts from the tributes have perhaps not fully revealed is a third element in this love, namely love from the tribute authors, often expressed just before the signature. The tributes are peppered with kisses and terms of endearment such as ‘sweetheart’. The tribute that ends ‘RIP my lovely xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx’ is typical of many,

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<sup>11</sup> In the 2009 anti-war movie *Lebanon*, about a Israeli tank crew in the 1982 war, dead male comrades are described as angels, as in ‘We have an angel here’, possibly used ironically given the film’s gory depiction of post-mortem decay.

while another that ends with 'Sleep well my angel x' could well be using 'angel' as a term of endearment, as to a young child at bedtime. Whatever else they are, the tributes express a loving bond between Jade, her boys, her fans, the angels, and God, a bond of ongoing care that continues beyond the grave. Indeed, beyond the grave, human love is amplified as the company of angels and God himself are added to Jade's fan club and/or her family.

Jones' (1999, p.208) study of paper and internet condolence messages for Princess Diana in 1997 found both star and angel motifs. 'Some messages express the belief that Diana is an 'angel' and will go to heaven in order to carry on with her unfinished duties caring for the sick. Her children are again offered comfort through the belief that their mother will be their guardian angel.' It seems from Jones' statistics, however, that angel references in the Diana messages (less than 4 per cent) were considerably fewer than for Jade. In these messages, Diana's work of love was seen to be evidenced less through motherhood (her children being aged 15 and 12 when she died) than through her humanitarian work (Woodhead, 1999).

#### *A star on earth, a star in heaven*

In the tributes, angels and stars have two things in common. They shine down from heaven. And they echo Jade's own reported words as she attempted to help her boys prepare for her imminent death. One hundred and one tributes speak of Jade as a star, almost all of them describing her post-mortem status, several linking this to her being an angel: 'They needed a beautiful angel in heaven and now they have her. Rest in peace Jade you are the bright star shining down'. 'god bless you angel jade the biggest star shining down on us from heaven'. 'heaven gained a new angel and the sky gained one of its brightest stars'. 'An angel was needed and Jade was chosen. I'll be looking for the brightest star and know that she's watching her sons. Shine bright Jade.'

Stars and angels shine, the light coming from within, rather than reflected from elsewhere. Dyer (1997, pp.116-121) argues that this is how women have been portrayed in western visual culture for some centuries, including in modern cosmetic advertising (nb Jade launched her own cosmetics line); this contrasts with men whose skin is typically portrayed as reflecting external light. Women, not men, glow. Visual culture thus portrays men, especially muscular men, as surface, but women as emanating light, in romantic love lighting up their man (or their children). Heaven has been seen as a place of light since the twelfth century (McDannell & Lang, 2001, p.80). Female beauty (not least beauty of character) and angels/stars lighting up earth therefore 'fit'.

Jade was also a star, in the sense of a celebrity, on earth, so the word 'star' links her heavenly to her earthly identity, as well as linking her to the angels: 'Twinkle Twinkle Big Brother Star In The Arms Of The Angels'. 'shine on jade, in everlasting light.'

#### *Ambiguity*

With 25 tributes it is difficult to know whether their mentioning of Jade as an angel refers to her new post-mortem identity, or to her pre-mortem character, or is simply a term of endearment: 'goodbye to our angel jade'. 'So sorry you lost your fight Jade. You are amazing, so so strong! You're an angel and have touched so many lives.' 'a true angel, now you can sleep in peace xxx' 'Your pain has now gone, now you can rest in peace at last angel!' The most common ambiguous phrase is 'sleep tight angel' (often followed by kisses), the next most common being 'R.I.P ANGEL'. In some tributes, there is a conscious quoting of Jade, as in: 'sweet dreams angel, yr da biggested star in da sky.' All this should prompt caution before assuming the authors hold a belief in angels transferable to other deaths. Although there are only 25 angel references which are puzzling as to whether they refer to the earthly or heavenly plane, many more of the angel references display an ambiguity, a potential double

meaning, or at least fluidity: Are the angels accompanying Jade to heaven, or in heaven? Is Jade an angel or with the angels? Who (Jade, other angels, God) is caring for her boys?

This ambiguity is evident also in Robbie Williams' *Angels*. Its chorus starts, 'and through it all she offers me protection / a lot of love and affection' and appears to be about the singer's faith in his guardian angel, but its popularity at funerals implies that for many the line 'I'm loving angels instead' may refer to the singer's beloved, possibly after death. This ambiguity may also characterise readings of the stone angels that adorn a number of Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century graves: do they represent an angel of death lovingly taking the deceased to heaven? Or the deceased being cared for by angels in heaven? Or a general affirmation of heavenly care for both living and dead? <sup>12</sup> At the end of this article, I will argue that ambiguity is at the heart of how the concept of angel works as a symbol of mourning.

## DISCUSSION

What is the parentage of the angel tributes? Immediately, they derive from the strong cues provided by Jade and her publicists in the days before her death. At one remove, one might suppose they reflect the current angel boom in publishing and other media, but the content of these media indicates the link to be, at best, tenuous. Angel books are a useful indicator of these media, since the better selling authors frequently appear on television, write in women's magazines, and so on. The majority of current angel books that insist angels have never been human make little reference to death, and none to mourning. They are a sub-genre of the self-help genre, with the focus on using angels to live positively, in this world. There is little or nothing in them to suggest that on death we go to live with the angels, still less that we actually become angels.

The minority – more spiritualist - strand, represented by Newcomb and Cheung, ambiguously mixes up dead humans, spirit guides and angels, but even these books are not primarily concerned with mourning or depicting heaven: their aim is rather, to use the language of spiritualism, to demonstrate the reality of 'the other side' and its influence on 'the earth plane'. The back jacket of *An Angel Called My Name: Incredible True Stories from the Other Side* (Cheung 2008a) advertises a

'brand new collection of heartwarming and inspiring real-life dramas about people who have had 'a little help' from the other side when they most needed it. Stories include: / The shouting angel whose playful antics saved a young girl from falling down the stairs. / The angel who prevented a woman's bad judgement becoming a tragedy. / The whispering angel who helped a serial dieter lose weight for good .....

Though the similar jacket of Cheung (2008b) includes 'A grieving daughter is comforted by the kiss of an angel', these books are not advertised primarily for mourners.

I think a stronger case can be made for parentage, or rather grandparentage, in popular Swedenborgian nineteenth century cemetery culture, and its links to romanticism. Stroebe et al (1992) and Walter (1999) have argued that romanticism is still influential in Anglophone mourning culture. Though the dominant idea, represented until recently in the conventional wisdom of bereavement counselling (Wortman & Silver, 1989) and seeping out into popular advice, is that mourners need to let go of the dead, there is a contrasting popular idea that love is eternal and that the dead are always in our hearts. This idea is found throughout the twentieth century in grave inscriptions, in memoriam newspaper columns, and pop songs. Just as the romantic movement's privileging of the heart challenged the Enlightenment's privileging of reason, so the twentieth century culture of grief has witnessed affirmations of eternal love challenging 'rational' advice that the dead are gone and must be let go of. And

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<sup>12</sup> On Victorian cemetery sculpture, see Heywood (2005). For images of cemetery angels, see <http://northstargallery.com/pages/AngelsHomePage01.htm> For other images of the female body in cemetery sculpture, see Robinson (1995).

just as romanticism's sentimental bonds to the dead were in part a feminine reaction to male industrial progress, so twenty first century public mourning is typically feminine in character (even if not always female in authorship). (Brennan, 2008)<sup>13</sup>

Explaining an idea simply in terms of preceding ideas, however, does not tell us very much. It does not tell us why the idea resonates with certain groups today, nor why some ideas are picked up and developed from the past, and others consigned to the dustbin of history. In the rest of this discussion section, therefore, I ask why now? Jade comforted her sons, telling them she would be a bright star looking down on them, words the media passed on to her fans, a significant minority of whom were clearly both willing and able to articulate this idea in their tributes. What chords did it strike with them?

It is important to note that angel talk, both generally and in the Jade tributes, is an overwhelmingly female discourse. The great majority of Jade's angel tributes (as far as I can tell) are by female writers. Of the 62 books in my local bookshop's 'Angel' section, 60 are by women, and they all appear to be written largely for women. Keane (2009) notes that the vast majority of contributors to online angelic baby memorial sites are mothers rather than fathers. This reflects, to an extreme degree, the female authorship of most 'Mind, Body, Spirit' books, of which angel books are a sub-genre, and of bereavement self-help books (Walter, 1999). Most mediums and their clients are also largely female (Skultans, 1974; Scheitle, 2005), as too are most grief therapists and their clients (Walter, 1999).

Jade's angel tributes are also a working class discourse, and do not reflect anything taught in formal education. (Jade herself celebrated her ignorance of formal learning.) This too is important for the analysis that follows.

## **Mourning**

A Japanese folklorist researching French war memorials commented 'You westerners remember your dead. We Japanese care for ours.'<sup>14</sup> Certainly the British speak of war *remembrance*, and rituals quote lines such as 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them' and 'Lest We Forget.' In British mourning culture, there is no official language of care. In much of the Far East by contrast, the relation between the living and the ancestors is officially one of mutual care: the living make offerings and prayers to the ancestors, who in turn guide and care for the living. Offerings are made to keep the ancestors happy, or at least to keep them from disturbing the living. This two-way relation is found in ancestor veneration around the world. It is also found to some extent in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity, with the saints as (a limited category of) dead humans to whom prayers may be made, and who in turn pray for the less than saintly familial dead. Protestantism then outlawed such intercourse between the living and the dead, and secularism rendered it theoretically impossible. So, if a secularised Protestant culture does not permit care for the dead, all the living can do is remember them. All I can do for you is promise not to forget you.

Memory and remembrance thus comprise the formal Anglophone discourse of mourning, and the more formal the mourning (as in war remembrance) the more dominant this discourse of memory. We will never forget. It is also reflected in the 1109 online tributes to Jade. There are 16 references to 'memory', 79 to 'remember' or 'remembered', 39 to 'never (or not) forget' or unforgettable, and 108 to 'never (or not) forgotten'. Several tributes include both memory/remember and never forget/be forgotten. The total number of 'memory' tributes is thus of a similar order to the number of angel tributes.

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<sup>13</sup> This polarisation may account not only for the heartfelt passion of those who mourned heart-icons such as Jade Goody or, twelve years earlier, Princess Diana, but also the equally passionate refusal to mourn by those with major psychological investments in rationality (Brennan, 2008, ch.6).

<sup>14</sup> Mayumi Sekizawa, personal communication, February 2007.

We have seen that the dominant discourse of the 167 angel tributes is one of mutual love and care, though several of these tributes include memory as well as care. This is typical of the romantic strand within contemporary mourning culture. Though memory is the official discourse, along with 'letting go', both of which fit secular rationality, care and love keep bubbling up at a more popular level. Bereavement research now acknowledges that many mourners rather than cutting ties with the deceased, continue the bond, 'moving on' with rather than without the deceased (Klass et al, 1996); and the language of continuing bonds is one of care for the dead as much as of memory. Francis et al's (2005) ethnography of visiting behaviour at London graves documents ritual acts of ongoing care for the dead. Likewise, Valentine (2008; 2009) shows that British mourners use a language of ongoing care, just as some Japanese employ the language of memory and of letting go.<sup>15</sup> McDannell & Lang (2001) argue that for two millennia an eminently understandable anthropocentric heaven of reunion with those one loves has existed in tension with a theocentric heaven in which the souls of the dead spend their time praising God. In today's more secular society, this tension is supplemented by another one: between the very human desire to care for those one loves, even though they have died, and the worldview of (Protestant-influenced) rationalism that teaches that all we can do for the dead is not forget them (and even not forgetting, if taken to excess, may be interpreted as the individual 'not having worked through their grief').

But if, as one mid 20<sup>th</sup> century grave inscription to an eleven year old boy in an English churchyard says, 'Life is short, but love is long', surely for love to be love it must be two way? Clearly the living can continue to love the dead, but perhaps mourners need to reassure themselves that the dead too can continue to love – especially when the chief mourners are little boys who still need their mother's love.<sup>16</sup> Jade's mourners frequently refer to her boys needing to know that she continues to love them and watch over them. The romantic dead therefore must have some agency, not just receiving our love but also loving us back.<sup>17</sup>

And here deceased *souls* are wanting. For millennia, souls have lived in heaven, praising God or enjoying the company of other deceased souls (McDannell & Lang, 2001). Souls who hang around on earth, initiating contact with the living become problematic – as ghosts or other manifestations of the restless dead. In the 1109 Jade tributes, all 13 soul references portray her post-mortem soul as passive. Nine of the 13 comprise the stock formula 'May your soul rest in peace', while the three references to Jade's soul as beautiful, caring, kind or loving seem to refer to her earthly character rather than to any loving activity in heaven. As an angel, by contrast, though certainly she does a fair amount of sleeping, Jade has agency – watching over her boys, not to mention entertaining the other angels.

Angels are traditionally messengers between heaven and earth. A deceased human who becomes an angel therefore has agency, directed in part toward earth, and is far better equipped than a soul to continue loving those on earth. As Hauenstein has argued (2009), though the *resurrected* Christ can have an ongoing relationship with his disciples, the ordinary deceased Christian who continues merely as a *soul* has little or no opportunity for any ongoing relations with the living. Being or having a soul may be theologically orthodox, but to today's theologically uneducated British public seeking to find heavenly expression of the continuing reciprocal bond of love linking them to the dead (Klass et al, 1996) or of the sense of being guided by the deceased (Marwit and Klass, 1995) that many mourners experience, becoming an angel is far more attractive. Even just being with the angels, who

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that memory and care are the only ways in which bonds may be continued - linking objects, religious devotion, and identification are some other ways (Klass et al, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> The assurance that the dead send their love is a standard message of contemporary spiritualist mediums (Walter, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> For this question of the agency of the dead, I am indebted to Hauenstein (2009) and Harper (2008).

can guard over loved ones on earth is pretty good. Unlike some other spiritual beings, angels have always been portrayed anthropomorphically (wings excepted), and this too may add to the sense that they have agency. If becoming an ancestor who protects us is largely outside of the Western cultural repertoire, appropriating the Judaeo-Christian angel might serve instead.

The functional equivalence of angels and ancestors is further suggested by Coudert's suggestion (1987, p.284) that Judaeo-Christian guardian angels were modelled on Zoroastrian *fravashis*, 'a cross between ancestral spirits, guardian spirits, and the immortal components of individuals'. Likewise in syncretic African religions some prophets 'proclaim that traditional ancestors and Christian angels are the same person' (Boyer, 2001, p. 301). Indeed, throughout the world, intermediary gods and spiritual beings have been identified with the ghosts of ancestors, for example the Chinese *shen* or Shinto *kami* (Coudert, 1987, p.283).

Another reason that an anthropocentric heaven comprising reunited souls is problematic for mourners is that it entails temporary separation between the living and the dead. The soul newly arrived in heaven may have to wait for loved ones to die before they can be reunited in heaven; those on earth are separated until they themselves die. In a society of instant gratification, a theology of yet-to-be-reunited-souls may not mitigate the pain of separation *now*, nor can it articulate the experience of a continuing bond with the dead (Klass et al, 1996) that many mourners experience. And though an older adult may be able to wait till she herself dies before she can be spiritually re-united with the deceased, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century of extreme longevity this is little comfort for a young child mourning his mother. So an angelocentric heaven is more attractive than an anthropocentric heaven, one full of loved-ones-now-become-angels that look after those left on earth is more attractive than one full of yet-to-be-reunited-but-in-the-meantime-separated souls. Angels abolish the temporary separation experienced by souls. As a mother, Jade could not bear to be separated from her young children; many of her female wellwishers could not bear this thought either; and how could a star that shone so bright suddenly be extinguished?

Though I can find no report of Jade saying she herself would become an angel, this notion was readily used by her mourners who wished to affirm the inextinguishability of maternal love. And certainly Jade got herself and her children baptised so that the mother-child relation could continue after her death. Becoming an angel is especially attractive for those who die prematurely, especially those with unfinished parental responsibilities. As an angel, the deceased mother can continue her work of care on an everyday basis; as a soul, she is powerless, other than to speak to the living through chance after-death communications (Bennett, 1987) or through the unlikely event of a medium managing to establish contact (Walliss, 2001). Jacky Newcomb, the most prolific of the angel authors who speak of angels and the dead fluidly and interchangeably, is according to the cover of one of her books (2002) 'the UK's leading expert on spontaneous afterlife communication – expert in direct contact from the other side without the use of a medium.'<sup>18</sup> Angels avoid the need for mediums.

Finally, we observe a gender difference, often breached but still discernible. In the West, it is men who, as architects and stonemasons, make memorials, and as war poets and as organisers of war remembrance promote a discourse of memory. It is women, as mediums and writers of online angel tributes, who promote a discourse of care. So, Jade's angels comprise a discourse of care that is female, as well as theologically uneducated. This last word I use factually, not derogatorily. I may not go so far as Jade in actively celebrating lack of education, but angelology provides a genuinely bottom-up popular religiosity that may serve some mourners today better than traditional theological concepts of 'soul'.

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<sup>18</sup> As a medium herself, Newcomb seems willing to put her own profession out of business by empowering lay people to experience the dead directly.

## Religion

If 'life after death, for many Christians, means existing only in the memory of their families and of God' (McDannell & Lang, 2001, p.352), Jade's mourners have articulated a richer picture of heaven, using the West's subterranean mourning discourse of care to displace the official mourning discourse (both Protestant and secular) of memory. In so doing, they have revived a Swedenborgian picture of heaven as the continuation of earthly love, in which only a thin veil separates earth and heaven. Discarding both the passive concept of the Christian soul unable to initiate action toward earth, and the culturally problematic notion of mediums calling upon the dead, they have appropriated the concept of angels, whether in John Henry Newman's sense of angels accompanying the dead to heaven or in Emanuel Swedenborg's sense of the dead themselves becoming angels. They have resolved the problem identified by Hauenstein (2009) that the Christian concept of soul cannot support the romantic desire for a continuing bond with the dead (Klass et al, 1996). If the ordinary dead cannot walk the earth and talk with the living as did the resurrected Christ, the next best thing is that, either as angels or through angels, they can continue to look after those on earth whom they love.

Thomas Quartier (2007) has argued in his study of Dutch Catholic funerals that they fail to connect cultural memory and personal memory. Mourners retain a cultural memory of Christian concepts (such as God, soul, afterlife, eternity), but struggle to link these with their personal memories of the deceased. Priests either give way to popular pressure to turn the funeral into a celebration of the deceased's life, or they struggle to rescue the funeral from the little story of the person's life and return it to the big story of God and his time frame. Other priests try both, recounting elements of both the deceased's story and the Christian story, aiming to place the former within the latter - but rarely succeeding. When they do succeed, Quartier suggests it is because a potent symbol is used to bridge the gap. Bridgman (2010), analysing 31 Anglican funeral tributes, considers a number to have bridged the gap quite successfully, but always through the use of key metaphors.

Remarkably, Jade's online mourners succeed in linking cultural and personal memory, precisely because 'angel' acts as a linking symbol. Her mourners draw on a cultural memory of angels that is three millennia old to pay tribute to Jade's unique individuality. It is precisely the ambiguity of their language – does 'beautiful angel' refer to Jade on earth or in heaven? is Jade an angel or in the company of angels? – that enables them to interweave her story and a broadly Christian story. They achieve in three lines what religious professionals in funerals throughout the West so often struggle to achieve. In using the fluid word 'angel', Jade's mourners bring together three different levels of identity and agency: i) Jade's pre-mortem identity, ii) a broadly Christian notion of heaven, and iii) the ongoing agency of the dead in the lives of the living.

Now in theory, 'soul' should bridge levels i) and ii) better than 'angel', in that the soul is generally seen as that part of a person that survives death, whereas an angel is something one becomes after death. The soul speaks of an identity that continues, after death, into heaven (Hauenstein, 2009), whereas 'angel' is a new form of being that one becomes after death. But such distinctions are too (theo)logical for making sense of how Jade's mourners use the words 'soul' and 'angel'. Jade's mourners' occasional mentions of 'soul' typically employ the formula 'May your soul rest in peace'; 'soul' is reserved for post-mortem identity. They use 'angel' frequently and fluidly, linking Jade's pre-mortem personality with her continuing post-mortem labours of love. Whereas the word 'angel' (like 'star') is used – often in the same sentence - to refer to both her personality on earth and her identity in heaven, the referent of the word 'soul' is effectively stuck in heaven. So in linguistic practice, 'angel' links the three levels, whereas 'soul' fails to. Though 'soul' is a resource that *could* be used to link heaven and earth, it is a resource Jade's mourners do not employ; instead, they use the linguistically slippery and therefore symbolically powerful 'angel'.



A number of observers of the contemporary religious scene have argued that a spiritual revolution (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) is under way in which duty to the teachings of authoritative religion is giving way to personal spirituality in which the individual seeks to connect with self and subjectivity: truth is what works for me rather than what is taught by revelation or by the church. The new spirituality, with its emphasis on taking control of your life, is well suited to those who are materially and socially well placed and able to believe they can control their lives. The self-help genre of angel books (use your guardian angel to help you live more positively) suits this market. As noted earlier, however, many of these books make clear that angels are not departed humans and the books make little reference to bereavement.

The angelology of Jade's mourners addresses very different concerns – not how to live positively, but what happens to the dead – so has little in common with the new spirituality of the self. (It does have some similarities to spiritualism, with angels playing the role of mediums between the dead and the living.) Those whose lives are insecure – materially, socially, or because of a rocky upbringing – are less likely to make the leap from religion to spirituality. In their global survey, Norris and Inglehart (2004) argue that insecurity and religion are closely associated. Security was not something enjoyed by Jade, nor arguably by many of her working class, female mourners. As Brennan (2008, pp.64-5) comments in his study of condolence books, religion provides a conservative structure of meaning that can assist at times of disaster or sudden loss: 'Short on what to say when confronted by death, religion provides people with ready made scripts upon which they can easily draw.' Jade's mourners are quite creative in their use of scripts made available by two centuries of romantic mourning culture.

Though Gilhus (2008, 2009) shows how contemporary Norwegian angelology draws on orthodox Christianity, the self-spirituality and New Age, Jade's angels have little in common with self-spirituality or New Age. What this article has been exploring, therefore, is not the new personal spirituality in which individuals choose from a menu of practices that help with this-worldly concerns, nor New Age with its association with astrology, ecology, reincarnation, and energies (none of which appear in the Jade tributes), but contemporary popular religion – a re-working of Christian symbols that deal with loss and life after death. It is genuinely popular, in that – unlike New Age, and unlike the self-help angels that are 'useful spirits in a material world' (Gardella, 2007) - it does not derive from published authors or other authorities. Rather, it is found and developed in popular death-related forums such as online websites, in memoriam columns, and funeral songs, just as once it was found and developed in cemetery sculpture. Doctrinally fluid and symbolically potent, post-mortem angelology is a popular religion which Jade understood, as does the *Sun* newspaper's editor, better perhaps than many academic observers of religion. In inviting his readers to pray for Jade and in printing some of these prayers, his newspaper functioned in place of the church in mediating prayers between Jade, her fans and the Almighty.

## CONCLUSION

Jade's angels provide a multivalent, flexible symbol that link heaven with earth, cultural with personal memory, and an informal theology with the continuing bond with the dead required by many mourners, especially after a death involving young children. It is precisely the undogmatic, fluid, ambiguous ways that Jade's mourners use the term that enable it to work as a multivalent symbol. Further research is needed into whether those mourning not a media celebrity but an intimate use angels in similar ways, and how this might vary by type of bereavement.

The term's fluidity and multiple meanings did not ease my search for previous research on the topic of angels. Put 'angel' into a general search engine, and you are as likely

as not to come up with Hell's Angels, Charlie's Angels, the name of a place (e.g. City of Angels, ie Los Angeles), or a person's first name (Angela, Angelo) or their family name (Angel, Angelo) - many people are not just metaphorically addressed as an angel! This is further evidence of the term's fluidity: originally a term to refer to a messenger from heaven to earth, it is embraced as the name by which to identify certain individuals, places and activities. This is just the kind of fluidity found in Jade's online mourning.

If angels are powerful symbols, is that all they are? McDannell & Lang (2001) observe that heaven has been reduced from a real place to a symbol, thus being emptied of its richness, leaving us 'with teachings that are minimalist, meagre, and dry' (p.352). So if angels provide powerful symbols of life after death and a religious language for speaking of continuing bonds, is this actually so rich and comforting if they are only symbols? As one popular angel author, writing in the positive living genre, puts it: 'To treat angels as symbols is to place a barrier between ourselves and the real possibility that is available to us - to feel and benefit from the loving touch of the Divine. Only by being willing to accept that angels have a real, and not merely a symbolic presence, can we access their powers within our lives.' (Astell, 2006, pp.14-15) On the other hand, Gilhus (2008) argues that angel language is often vague as to whether angels are real or a metaphor for human experiences. Robbie Williams' song *Angels*, is about love and protection, not belief. Whether Jade's writers see angels as real, symbolic, or simply a language that reflects and therefore honours Jade is likewise ambiguous, enabling mourners to use this language without worrying about definitions or doctrines.

Writing within the tradition of religious studies, I remain for the purpose of this article agnostic about angels' ontological status. All I can say here is that, whatever else they may or may not be, angels work remarkably effectively as symbols. But it is important to emphasise that angels are no *empty* symbol. Certainly many meanings can be read into them, but I have argued in the findings and discussion above that Jade's angel tributes contain a very specific constellation of meanings. Moreover, angels have very specific roots - in three millennia of Judaism and Christianity, in Victorian cemetery culture and the romantic strand in mourning culture, and in contemporary media. Howarth (2000) and Mitchell (2007) have noted that the romantic desire for a continuing bond with the dead challenges the modernist separation between the living and the dead; this article goes further to ask what implications this has for how romantic mourners construct the deceased's post-mortem identity. Constructing the dead as an angel allows love to be two-way, flowing from as well as to the deceased. Angels provide a simple theological language that is more able than 'soul' to express continuing bonds, at least for women mourning a loss involving young children.

This may seem a lot to claim from mere three line tributes that are often fluid and ambiguous. Yet the almost complete absence of references to 'soul' (inexplicable in terms of previous research into popular afterlife beliefs), along with analysis of the various types of meaning found in the angel references (clearly not derived from popular angelology as found in angel books), demands alternative explanation, which I have attempted to provide.

This study of Jade's angels causes us to question a number of received wisdoms. First, there may be more in the way of popular religion than is indicated by those scholars of religion who believe religion is being steadily replaced by secularity (e.g. Bruce, 2002) or by personal spirituality (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Second, popular religion is more important than you would glean from British academic work on bereavement, which (unlike North American work) either ignores religion or speaks vaguely about bereaved people's 'spiritual needs'. Third, this popular religion posits not an anthropocentric heaven of reunited souls, hitherto thought by scholars to be the most popular afterlife belief in the modern West (McDannell and Lang, 2001; Walter, 1996), but an angelocentric post-mortem existence in which angels allow care for both the dead and the living to continue beyond the grave. Fourth,

the UK's most downmarket tabloid newspaper may be more effective than the churches in bridging the gap between a cultural memory of Christianity and personal memory of the deceased. Fifth, there is more to public mourning than remembrance; even in the West, mourning can be as much about love and care as about memory and remembrance. And sixth, there is more to belief in angels than you will find in 'positive living' angel books; Jade's mourners show that angels can also provide a language for approaching death as well as life. While the 'positive living' books portray angels not as messengers but as 'momentary gods' who come to our aid (Gilhus, 2008), Jade's angels are, if not messengers, then at least mediators between this world and the next. Questions for future research include whether these findings would be replicated with deaths not including young children, with middle class mourners, and with mourners who are close intimates of the deceased.

Jade's angels bridge Quartier's (2007) gulf between cultural memory of Christianity and personal memory of one particular deceased person, and the gulf between traditional Christian notions of soul and the romantic desire for a continuing relationship with the dead. Just as England's educated establishment was dismayed that in the age of reality TV an ill educated and apparently talentless young woman could become a celebrity, just by being herself (Walter, 2009), so some religious professionals may be dismayed that Jade's theologically ill-educated female mourners have managed to link their account of the deceased's life with the sacred space of eternity - something that religious professionals themselves struggle to achieve.

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