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13 Matter challenging words

From ‘angel talisman’ to ‘prayer ornament’

Terhi Utriainen

Introduction

Angels – traditional Christian figures that every now and then descend among humans – can be circulated to become present, materialised and embodied today in many creative and intriguing ways. Angel practices documented in my ethnographic material collected among Finnish women include healings, meditations, angel card reading, photographing angels and angel visitations.¹ These sometimes involve clearly framed rituals, such as angel healing, visitation and meditation. However, some of these practices are much more vague, momentary and fleeting. Despite being intimate meetings with the extraordinary, they are very much embedded in the everyday profane life that they seek to affect (Luhmann 2004; Utriainen 2013a, 2014a). An example of these often quite quotidian lived religion (Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008) practices can be found in an interview with one young mother, who told that she often imagined herself dressing her children in a blue or pink protective overall provided by the archangel Michael before sending them to school in the morning and that she purified her home of negative vibrations with the energy of angels. Another example would be how (bird) feathers, which one can find practically anywhere, have come to be interpreted as a manifestation of an angelic sign that something good will happen soon. In many ways – more or less material – everyday life can become ‘touched by an angel.’

Angel practices are reflections of how some people in a secularised and pluralising (but culturally still Lutheran) society, such as Finland, clearly seem to be seeking and enacting new variations of substance, experience and practice in contradistinction to what mainline religiosity has offered as the default option (on religious change in Finland, see Kääriäinen, Niemelä and Ketola 2005; Nynäs, Illman and Martikainen 2015). Most of those engaging in angel practices – the clear majority of whom seem to be women – are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, but have found these new practices outside the church context to be attractive and, in many ways, helpful in their lives (on women’s religion in Finland over time, see Utriainen and Salmesvuori 2014). It would appear that an increasing number of people in Finland are not completely content with the traditional version of vicarious religion (e.g. Bruce

and Voas 2010) and the relatively passive practitioner role it offers laypeople as merely listening subjects and receivers of rituals enacted for and in front of them by a pastor. Instead, many seem to want to act and practise in different and often quite concrete ways, in order to thus feel the presence of the transcendent/otherworld within the immanent (Haastettu kirkko 2012: 35–46; Ketola, Martikainen and Salomäki 2014).

One example of this in the Lutheran Church of Finland would be the popularity of the so-called St Thomas Mass, which combines ritual elements from various Christian cultural models and invites participants to take part in several active roles in and around the service. Another example that takes place within and in the margins of the church is different versions of charismatic meetings, including the service called ‘Healing Rooms,’ which brings active Christians together in concrete and practical worship and provides them with a variety of actor roles to choose from. Furthermore, many people – both outside and also very much inside the church – have become drawn towards forms of alternative spirituality that they find more holistically engaging than standard Lutheran practices. Both Western and Eastern alternative practices and networks are welcomed, in that they provide new combinations of commitment and freedom, as well as emotional intensity. One thing that seems to count in these alternatives is a sense of doing and practising in often concrete and multifaceted ways that suit the practitioner’s personality and style. This does not, however, mean doing things only individually, but also in many ways and varying degrees of collaboration with others (Hovi 2012; Ahonen 2014; Ketola, Martikainen and Salomäki 2014).

It could perhaps be said that the most important religious practice in many forms of Protestantism, and very much so in the Lutheran tradition, has been the combination of word, text and listening. Indeed, words and listening are so important to traditional Protestant religion that in the anthropology of Christianity, Protestantism has been characterised by its distinct and highly emphasised language ideology or, wider still, semiotic ideology (Keane 2007: 16–21). This is a historical and normative way of understanding language and its key role in achieving transcendence and salvation, which not only privileges language itself over other material sign systems and forms of divine mediation, but also valorises the content of a word or text over its form, texture and social performance. This ideology also poses moral guidelines for a particular way of conceiving of agency – that is who and what is to act and make things happen (Keane 2007: 59–82; Robbins 2012: 15–18).

Many people, however, find an appeal in variegated ways of doing and feeling instead of or in addition to relating to words. The mediation of otherworldly power has become more openly diffuse and pluralistic, and material is being used in ways that are not orientated to and focused on language (Utriainen et al. 2015). Furthermore, in this somewhat novel mode of practice – which Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (2012) call the new post-Reformation style of religion – both outside and inside Christianity, *material and sensory pluralism and hybridity* become important, as well as the experiences of sacrality

and enchantment that this pluralism can bring. This pluralism and enchantment may be further accompanied by new forms of subjectivity and agency in comparison to the traditional Lutheran listener of words.²

Sensational forms and enchanted matters of concern

The anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2006, 2008) asks scholars to pay closer attention to the ways in which culture-specific material and 'sensational forms' (such as many kinds of images, sounds and tangible artefacts, as well as the accompanying rituals and senses they engage with) mediate between the immanent and the transcendent. This mediation can take place both vertically and horizontally, often in dynamic, complex and delicately power-laden social contexts. Moreover, she claims that these sensational forms, as carriers and mediators of religion, become attractive and potentially incorporated in the subjects in compelling ways – ways that can also bring considerable and even unexpected changes in people's lives. More than many other scholars, Meyer puts special emphasis on the power of the specific *aesthetics* in these materials and processes of engagement. Aesthetics should here be understood in a broad way that comprises all possible forms of experiencing beauty and pleasure, as well as their counterparts.

Vernacular and lived religion is, of course, often noted as highlighting this material side and element of religion much more than some official and normative religions (Ammerman 2008; McGuire 2008; Bowman and Valk 2012; Whitehead 2014). What Meyer's notion of sensational forms adds to this is, above all, the importance of the particular concrete and also often mixed, hybrid engagements between human senses and non-human matter. This hybridity connects sensational forms to the dynamic of powers that can become lived as religious, magical or enchanted and that may sometimes become socially, culturally and politically very sensitive (at least this is the way I read her predicament). These material practices and sensational forms are often – in private lives and sometimes in the public sphere – involved in complex, dynamic and mutually interacting power plays of concealing and revealing (see Meyer and Pals 2003). These power plays may in many regards bring different religions or religious and secular enchantments together into a mixed representational economy (Keane 2007: 18–19).

Sometimes interesting instances of sensational forms appear in fleeting moments and quite small material practices or rituals. In the case of my research, they are not always found in the interview accounts themselves, but are documented in field notes from (sometimes participant) observation of several kinds of angel events. While anthropology can be described as studying moments (Siikala 1997: 46) (i.e. carefully chosen moments when something important happens), a researcher inspired by actor-network theory might add that we should try to identify and focus on *moments of gathering* (coming together) of the various actors and actants that together make agency and create difference, in order to analyse how these gatherings become composed (Latour 2005; see also Piette 2003; Orsi 2005; Harvey 2012; Lassander 2012). Bruno Latour (2004)

also writes that, besides gatherings and associations, we should focus on ‘matters of concern’ instead of ‘matters of fact’ – that is matters that matter, that are of importance and that change something in the contexts and lives studied (even if that change may be only for a short moment). In my ethnography, an ‘angel that happens’ is approached as an example of such moments of difference and gathering. I approach these as sensational forms that are also socially, temporally and materially mediated and located matters of concern.

Instances in which an angel happens can be conceived of as an open and dynamic form or mode of ‘religioning,’ a specific mode which I call *enchantment* (Nye 2000: 467). In this context, enchantment is understood as an activity, a mode of gathering or creating associations that allows or brings together a variety of things, including the extraordinary or ‘something other,’ in order to allow some important difference, such as healing or a ‘touch of magic’ (Utriainen 2013b). Enchantment – or re-enchantment – in modernity has often been linked to the special mediating power and allure of popular culture, such as entertainment and art (e.g. film), as well as to alternative healing and well-being practices (e.g. Partridge 2004; Elkins and Morgan 2007). In her ethnography, Jone Salomonsen (2002) uses the term ‘enchanted’ to define the particular kind of spiritually inspired and enacted feminism of witches in San Francisco. Sometimes – particularly when emphasis is placed on special attempted outcomes or *effects* – enchantment may be further described as ‘magic’ (Meyer and Pals 2003).

In the following, I attempt to identify and disassemble some examples of *enchanted moments and sensational forms in which an angel happens*. My guideline in understanding enchantment has been the already classic perspective of Jane Bennett: ‘To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday’ (2001: 5). Bennett also notes that enchantment is not always a spontaneous happening; it can also be fostered through deliberate action. Enchantment engages bigger or smaller alterity or transcendence (‘the extraordinary’), either as a surprise or as something desired, summoned and invited (see Luckman 1990; Csordas 2004; Utriainen 2013a). In my case, an exemplary small and intimate enchantment is the ‘touch of an angel,’ which can be said to make considerable and delicate cultural work (see Morgan, this volume) through women’s creative activity.

Old tradition circulated by new practices

My chapter draws on observations concerning the intricacy of material practices and accompanying words in one contemporary locus of intersection between Christian and what is often called ‘alternative’ spiritual practices and beliefs. It brings together and circulates elements from different religions and their practice and language, and it takes place in intersections between ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular.’ Thus it is related to the issue of religious plurality (simplifying things, one might even describe this as religion of the word meeting religion of matter). On the surface, the example of making an angel talisman,

which is discussed in greater detail ahead, is merely about one enchanting or even entertaining micro-ritual that took place among a handful of Finnish women one winter evening. However, when investigated more closely, it can be shown as bringing together and touching upon many serious and significant issues, both on the level of personal lives and changes in society, as well as some problems that belong to the field of agency and religious authority (and how to deal with the latter). We might also argue that this spiritual practice, which is both merely entertaining and aestheticised in a particular way, comprises aspects of what Martin Stringer (2008) calls ‘coping religion,’ in that it opens towards serious, everyday lived life matters of concern.

Today angel practices are quite popular, particularly among women (e.g. Gardella 2007; Draper and Baker 2010; Walter 2011, 2016; Gilhus 2012; Uibu 2013). Most of them (according to my survey, $N = 263$; 73.8%)³ are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland,⁴ who are also to varying degrees open to more esoteric and alternative spirituality, especially various forms of healing provided by it. However, not only women are interested in these practices. Recently different media, in particular women’s magazines but also occasionally the news media, are reporting on them in relatively positive tones (Utriainen 2013b). In December 2013, two influential women – the bishop of Helsinki and the president of the Social Democratic Party – announced in the headlines of the tabloid *Ilta-Sanomat*, ‘We believe in angels’ (2015). In the interview itself, when asked if angels have appeared to her personally, the bishop answered in these words: ‘For me, angels are ambassadors of God’s goodness, angels are invisible. Angels are in the service of the goodness of God. I don’t need to know more than this.’ The president of the Social Democratic Party answered that ‘I believe in the care and guidance by God that people can experience. Angels are symbols of this.’ Interestingly, both women thus embrace angels (as may also be expected because of the context of the holiday season), but also take some distance from the possibility of their materialisation as spirits.

Furthermore, the actors of and around the Lutheran Church of Finland have noticed this new attraction and, consequently, have started to pay closer attention to the new forms of circulating the traditional figure of angel. This attention is taking the form of some corrective measures; for example Lutheran (male) theologians and Christian writers have been reminding ordinary people about how angels should and should not be understood in Christianity and Lutheran thinking – that is metaphorically and not as independent spirits (e.g. Seppälä 2003; Kuula 2011; Miettinen 2012). Another indication of this growing interest is that scholars (myself included) are invited to talk about this new form of spirituality in seminars (Utriainen 2014b came out of one such seminar organised by the Church Research Institute).

The attention given by the Church to angel practices and practitioners is understandable, since the people involved represent an important segment of its members. They are women 30–70 years old, who are not altogether satisfied with what the church has to offer for them personally (even if, at the same time, they may highly value the social work done by the church) and who want,

as they often say, ‘something more,’ or something different in their personal spiritual lives. In the interviews, some of these women also state that they have hesitated about continuing their church membership, because their beliefs – and also, in some cases, concrete experiences about the way in which they want to think, feel and practise – do not get a positive response from church employees and are often considered to not be Christian in the right way. One of them noted how she thinks that the church should open its doors to angel spirituality:

I think that the church would do wisely if it opened up to angels and the fact that people will be able to grasp spirituality through angels. It is much easier to approach angels than, for instance, Jesus – let alone God, who is such a high and remote notion for a human being to understand.

(IF mgt 2011–011)

I might summarise that angel practices (together with many other spiritual practices, of course) have become for certain people something that either complements what the church offers or provides an attractive and plausible alternative to it. This situation might be compared to the approaches of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in relation to mainstream medicine. In terms of religious change and continuity, an issue may be whether these practices should become interpreted as complementary (like many charismatic trends and movements are understood to be) or alternative and exclusive to the official Christian institutions and the wider society. The outcome remains to be seen.

What is important in my treatise here is that these new practices and their sensational forms take place in a complex and pluralistic social world where traditional religious forms (like the Protestant word and language ideology) also still very much exist as models and reference points. As already mentioned, most of the informants were members of the Lutheran Church and connected in some ways at least to its cultural, social or spiritual influence. Indeed, one explanation behind the popularity of belief in angels may well be the fact that angels are a traditional – and for many also a beloved and nostalgic – Christian motif, which is now increasingly being circulated into the pantheon of alternative spirits and gods. For example in a focus group interview, three women who clearly and explicitly identified themselves as Lutheran discussed that if it was not for angels, they might not have been drawn to alternative spirituality in the first place. However, since an angel was for them a safe and traditional figure from their childhood (in particular, guardian angels have been very popular in children’s religious culture and education in homes and Sunday schools), these three women had taken part in an ‘angel visitation.’ This is a ritual practice in the form of a chain letter that circulated on the Internet. In an angel visitation, one invited angels to visit one’s home for a few days, during which time one would concentrate on one’s wishes for the future. What is new in these practices is not so much the figure of an angel in itself, which is part of the Lutheran imagination and chain of memory, but some of the (occasionally

‘magical’) ways in which it is communicated and integrated in the present culture.

Making a talisman and surrounding matters of concern

Belief in angels can be further contextualised by the practice of making an angel talisman – or ‘amulet’ as it was also called – a jewel in the shape of an angel made to include a prayer or request. This practice of making a talisman, an intimate mode of production, was learned during an angel healing course that was organised during the winter of 2011–2012 in the home of a female teacher and healer in Helsinki. The course took place over two long weekends with more than a month’s pause in between, allowing participants to do individual homework. A diploma of ‘angel healer’ was given to those who not only participated in the meetings and exercises but also passed exams that included, for example, the traditional Christian angel hierarchies alongside the Indian energy system of chakras. The diploma can be seen as a credential in the field of a pluralising and potentially competing spiritual market, as Marion Bowman (1999) has shown: with the diploma, one can prove (in a specific social world) that one has learned to contact the otherworld.

Angel healing can be practised in several ways. It can, for instance, be administered to oneself or to another person, by means of face-to-face contact or as a remote healing. In the version that I observed closely, the healer invokes angels one by one to come and spread their healing energies. The healer acts as a human channel for these energies, and the basic ritual gesture is rhythmically opening and closing one’s arms to mimic the wings of the angels over the body of the person being healed. The different energies of the angels can be visualised as different colours. Any sensation or mental image experienced is noted and can be interpreted as a healing sign or message. The six female participants who took part in the course were also taught other techniques of making contact, such as meditation and creating a talisman (see Utriainen forthcoming).

The making of angel talismans was structured and guided by the teacher. It started by thinking about the content of one’s request or prayer (i.e. what it was that one wanted to ask or say to an angel). This was followed by learning to write the letters and words of one’s request in the special alphabet of angel language, following the model provided by the teacher, first in normal-sized letters on a larger sheet of paper and then in very tiny size on a small piece of thin, white silk paper. Language was thus anything but unimportant; however, not only the content of the words but also all the specific forms and material aspects mattered. After this, the small paper was folded into a tight parcel in a neat way. This was followed by choosing from the teacher’s collection an approximately three-centimetre-tall angel talisman made of stained glass in the colour of one’s liking (with the colour indicating a specific angel with its particular energy). The folded paper was then attached behind the talisman. The participants were instructed in how to maintain and recharge the power of the talisman over time by placing the talisman in a special place (in this case, inside a hollow lantern).

Sitting around a table on a darkening winter day, the women engaged in this exercise mostly in deep silence and concentration, carefully listening to the instructions of the teacher. The talismans, when ready, were given to everyone to keep. I still have mine at home with the prayer attached to it. We were also told that it was not necessary for the talisman to be made with a stained-glass figure, but that the prayer could also be attached, for example, to an angel card, which could be kept in one's purse or handbag – or, alternatively, put in one's car – for everyday protection and guidance.

After this exercise, the group talked. The discussion ranged from the enjoyable details of making the talisman (e.g. the beauty and strangeness of the special angel language and how and why one was drawn to a particular colour) to larger issues, such as how to earn a living and organise one's life. While some of the participants of the course were actively planning on starting their own angel healing, life-coaching small businesses or including angel healing methods in an already existent healing practice (this was why some participated in the course, which included a fee), one of them began to seriously consider the possibility of including angel practices in her work as a counsellor of young people in a Lutheran congregation. This woman found making the talisman to be a charming practice that might also have potential appeal in a church context. The teacher reacted to her plan in a very supportive way and considered it a real innovation. However, she also gave her a piece of advice that in that setting it might be better to talk in terms of a 'prayer ornament' instead of an 'angel talisman.'

This advice and the accompanying set of terms ('talisman' versus 'ornament') were immediately understood and acknowledged by all the women in the group, even with some shared hilarity. The women laughed and nodded; someone said, 'Of course!' Everyone seemed to recognise that the words reflected an important issue, potentially pointing to such categories as paganism and magic on one hand and Christianity and faith on the other. The terms 'talisman' and 'ornament' also highlighted an understanding of the ambiguous and sometimes critical relationship between material practices and words in a religious context. These women, raised in a Lutheran culture, thus had a shared understanding of the paramount importance of (correct, legitimate and authorised) words for Lutheranism. In this case, Lutheranism was defined indirectly and more tacitly than argumentatively; nonetheless, it was characterised quite spontaneously and unanimously by taking words – possibly not only the particular words of 'talisman' versus 'ornament' but also words in the larger and more far-reaching sense of carriers and condensations of sincerity, belief and dogma – extremely seriously. It is interesting that the women seemed to simultaneously think that today's Lutheran Church in Finland might be potentially open to new kinds of innovative material practices, provided that they were accompanied by well-chosen and correct verbalisations.

Words referring to anything even potentially associated with 'magic' are suspect in a Lutheran context. This is the case even if 'magic' has always been an intimate other of Protestantism and often practised in everyday activities.

Practices related to ‘magic’ – in the sense of emphasis on human agency and initiative in the communication with the divine, as well as in the sense of the instrumental use of a material practice such as prayer – have been scrutinised with suspicion. This tension has also surrounded the idea and figure of an angel for centuries after the Reformation. A strong belief in and vivid experiences of angels have often been seen as a result of heretical influences (e.g. Sulavik 2006a, 2006b). On the other hand, many Protestant churches are currently struggling to provide new practices in order to attract passive members; for instance yoga and dance have been given space in the Lutheran Church in Finland (although it could be argued that yoga and dance can perhaps be understood in a non-magical and purely expressive way, compared to talismans).

What I find interesting is that this small group of women, in their process of learning angel practices to change something in their lives, seemed quite perceptive about this delicate issue and were resourcefully – and not without a certain hilarity and sense of irony – together preparing to meet the challenge. There was a common understanding that although angels are part of Christian Lutheran belief and tradition, there are rules about how they should be approached in the Lutheran space. This *sensitivity to the importance of materiality on one hand and language and words on the other* is an example of very subtle and yet practical reflexive knowledge about the delicate and shifting limits of possible and credible agency in different religious contexts – that is knowledge of what makes a difference in a particular setting. This kind of reflexivity may be taken as a token of religious dynamism and plurality.

Meeting of matter and words

Thus, the ritual practice of making an angel talisman also describes a situation in which a novel and (for the practitioners in the documented example, at least) appealing material practice with sensational form and corresponding conceptions of agency meets the old, very familiar religion of childhood in the form of a traditional motif. In the traditional Lutheran system, certainly angels can be prayed to and contacted, but as some theologians emphasise in their contemporary writing, they should not be addressed too directly or in a summoning or commanding way, since angels act only in accordance with God’s wishes and not when and how people want them to. One theologian wrote on the website of the Lutheran Church on St Michael’s day in 2011 that ‘[angels] follow a certain order in a chain of command which leads up all the way to God.’ Furthermore, he continued, ‘angels are not private entrepreneurs who run their own errands – except for, perhaps, fallen angels’ (Kuula 2011). In this way, even the figure of the fallen (dark) angel is included in this Lutheran corrective.

Also, angels should preferably be understood as metaphors rather than as spirits (Seppälä 2003; Miettinen 2012). A critical issue is that, according to official Lutheran dogma, the role of humans – and angels as well – is considerably more submissive than some people today would like it to be (to the extent that with the emphasis on the multiplicity of angels and their many effective

powers, the role of God becomes less clear and active, thus stretching the limit of monotheism). In the contemporary practices that I encountered, the idea of human agency was indeed sometimes very strong, while the practice itself was explicitly material and also, to different degrees and in innovative but potentially challenging ways, 'magical' (in the sense of seeking direct efficacy). The level of 'magic' varied greatly, however. Sometimes angels were invoked to help in finding a parking place or lost object, but at other times they were merely asked to listen to one's worries.

A challenge for the women in the talisman-making was that the traditional Lutheran regime was considered to be very tightly bound to the importance of words. The use of right words – words that were not understood to bear magical connotations – was often considered a serious religious matter for the Lutheran faith. If the women wanted to remain in good standing with the tradition, they could not simply ignore this, but had to take it into account. We might even say that the women were tacitly aware of the Lutheran language ideology. Perhaps this awareness was not active and conscious (they might not have said they had it, if asked directly), but unconscious and embodied in their Lutheran cultural memory and habitus, which were learned already in childhood (cf. Kupari 2015). Interestingly, the case also shows how these angel practitioners – as a group of women engaging in (what was for them a new) embodied spiritual pedagogy (Shilling and Mellor 2007; Mellor and Shilling 2010), learning to talk a new kind of language and together appropriating new material and imaginary things that they could integrate in their everyday lives – were preparing to meet the challenges posed by the traditional religious institution and respond to it in a creative way, as well as with a good sense of humour.

A noteworthy perspective on the issue of how such spiritual practices may be perceived from the other side – that is from the viewpoint of the church – was provided during a relatively early stage of my project when I was invited to speak about angel spirituality at a seminar organised by the Research Network for the Study of New Religions in Finland (USVA) and Church Research Institute in Finland. One highly positioned administrator of the Lutheran Church in the audience reacted to my presentation with keen interest. He responded that the church would be wise to 'baptise' angel practices and rituals, suggesting that the church could perhaps include some of these in the churchly setting if people wanted them. My reply to him was that the idea sounded interesting and that some of my interviewees would warmly welcome it. However, the practices might also include other ideas that are not easily compatible with church belief and dogma, and some of these ideas might be so important for people that they would perhaps not be willing to compromise them. Aside from everyday enchantments, one can point to the frequently mentioned belief in reincarnation, as well as the idea that angels and other spirits may be approached in matters both large and small, from finding a parking place to communicating with the dead. Material practices, words and ideas exist in a dynamic and sometimes complex set of interactions and interdependence.

Angels as volatile, intimate and shared sensational forms

In the accounts and observations of my interviewees, angels can be circulated and mediated via variegated forms and practices, as well as sometimes through very concrete material objects, such as a talisman or a feather. The mediated angels are very diverse in how they appear and what they can mean, which can also change from one context to another. They are sometimes intimate personal spirits and at other times messengers between humans and divinity or an aspect of cosmic energy; they can also be understood as one's inner voice or as figures of speech, symbols or metaphors (e.g. of God's grace, friendship, intuition, goodness or light). For instance, Siân Reid similarly describes how her Canadian pagan research participants understood the many aspects of the Goddess in a dynamic way:

Some believe that divinity is personal, some an aspect of one's own higher self, some that all the various divine personalities are expressions of one ineffable divine force, some in a true and competitive polytheism. Practitioners will describe their relationship to the divine and their beliefs about its nature differently, at different times and different contexts.

(2008: 125)

Angels can in many ways and through different practices be seen, heard or felt on the skin (e.g. the 'touch of an angel' during a healing ritual or in the course of everyday life in the form of a breeze). They may become known, imagined or visualised in the mind during meditation, as well as featured in the words guiding the meditation. Materialising as balls of light ('orbs'), angels can also be photographed and captured in digital pictures, as was recounted to me by three separate interviewees; these images were then sometimes circulated on the Internet. Candles can be used in order to prepare the energy of the air for the arrival of angels. Sometimes angels are not seen by the practitioner herself, but instead become visible in the mind's eye through other people's visions and accounts (both as read in popular books and as recounted by friends); angels can even be communicated with through pets, such as cats and dogs, as I was told a couple of times (Utriainen 2013a). As very powerful and extraordinary angel moments are often materialised in some ways, as well as shared with others, they exist and become meaningful in social networks and via both horizontal and vertical relationships (see Day 2012; Walter 2016). Realising angels thus often describes shared rather than solely individual matters of concern and agency. This relationality of concern and agency was also evident in the depiction of the making of the talismans. To further stress my point, the following provides an ethnographic example of together making an angel 'happen' in a very concrete way.

During one angel evening, there was a newcomer who told the other participants that she did not know if she knew or felt angels in any way, but that of late she had nevertheless developed a strong interest in them. Very soon

thereafter, the empty place beside her on the couch became occupied by an angel. How did this happen? First, the hostess of the evening took note of this empty seat and said that she was quite sure she had just seen somebody sitting in it and that it must have been an angel, since all the other seats were occupied, and only this one – a very good seat – was vacant. One by one, the other participants started to give support to this, either through words, smiles or by nodding their heads – that is by visible and audible signs of affirmation. In this way, they accepted the invitation of the hostess to see an angel on the couch and supported its being there. Thus, the angelic presence became commonly shared situational knowledge (which did not lack a degree of friendly social pressure). In this case, the very sensational form of angelic difference (the presence of an angel on the couch) was a product of collective making: a communicative, embodied act of enchantment around an empty seat. This example describes the power of a sensational form that is simultaneously in many delicate ways material, imaginary, intimate and social.

Conclusion

Despite a certain amount of laughter at the moment of translating ‘angel talisman’ into ‘prayer ornament,’ that moment (like others briefly discussed here) revealed important matters of concern. These matters show the richness of cultural work that circulating a traditional religious image can achieve. The sensational and aesthetic form of composing an angel talisman in the context of an angel healing course was – for some of the women more than others – about how to care for oneself and significant others, how to create meaningful work and income, and how to reorganise and relate to one’s life again in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. The issue of the increasing unpredictability of both work and the personal life was also a frequent topic in the interviews; many women recounted that the presence of angels was a big help in getting through difficult moments and phases. The talisman-making process also involved learning to be open about issues in one’s private life in a new social network in order to find new perspectives and openings together. In many ways, the group worked as a peer-support network, jointly creating moments of intimate transcendence and solving problems. These moments of transcendence were not solely escapist and entertaining, but also firmly rooted in harsh everyday realities.

The example of the making of an angel talisman also shows interesting dynamics related to religion today, revealing how two different sensational forms – a language-orientated one and a more material one – meet, entangle and become negotiated. In moments in which the Protestant language ideology and its mostly metaphorical idea of an angel meet a new sensational form, such as an angel talisman, there is also a meeting of different concepts and practices of agency. The agency involved in talisman-making is hybrid, in that it mixes the human, the extraordinary and material enchantment (even ‘magic’) in ways that for some may compromise the Protestant idea of transcendent God and

the manner in which the human subject should relate to that idea. And yet the women studied here were very much attracted and persuaded by this enchanting hybridity.

Through a glimpse of this kind of meeting and the potential tension of ideologies and practices, perhaps this example can also provide a point of reflection, like a raindrop can reflect its surroundings, on some more general issues and the kinds of expectations that people may have for religion/spirituality today as a resource and inspiration in everyday life. This example may also serve as a reminder about the potential spiritual importance and meaningfulness of matter. Lastly, I hope that focus on the angel talisman has also shown the ethnographic richness and potential of even the smallest material objects and moments.

Notes

- 1 This research is part of a larger project, Post-Secular Culture and a Changing Religious Landscape in Finland (PCCR), in Åbo Akademi University (2010–2014). The material consists of interviews, observations, a survey and media material. The interviews are kept at the Cultural Archive at Åbo Akademi University.
- 2 While many anthropologists of Christianity observe processes in which people turn from traditional religions to Christianity (e.g. Keane 2007; Robbins 2012), my observation concerns a case in which people from Christian backgrounds and culture become drawn to different degrees to alternative religious ideas and practices.
- 3 The survey was conducted at a lecture event by the Irish writer and angel-healer Lorna Byrne organised in Helsinki in 2011. The number of the audience was approximately 1,000 (94% of them being women). The survey material has been analysed by Elisa Mikkola in her master's thesis (Mikkola 2014).
- 4 In 2011, 77.2% of the population of Finland belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

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