

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 1 May 2017



### Angel Spirituality

Podcast with **Tehri Utriainen** (5 June 2017).

Interviewed by **David Robertson**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/angel-spirituality/>

**David Robertson (DR):** *I'm here in Edinburgh today. I'm joined by [Tehri Utriainen](#), from the University of Helsinki, where she is Professor in the Study of Religions. And today, we're going to be talking about angels in kind-of popular spirituality, particularly in Finland, but hopefully also in a slightly larger context as well. So, first of all, welcome to the Religious Studies Project.*

**Tehri Utriainen (TU):** Thank you so much David.

**DR:** *Let's start just with . . . Tell us a little about these angel practices, angel spirituality. You know – who are we talking about, what are the practices? Just set it up for us.*

**TU:** Ok. Well my context, of course, is Finland but, as you said, it is more wide – you can find it elsewhere. You can find it in the UK. There's been studies done in the UK, the US, in Norway and in Estonia, for instance, recently. Whom are we talking about? We're talking about women. This is really the most extremely women-dominated religiosity that you can imagine. Usually people say that: in grassroots religion the practitioners are 60% female; in holistic spiritualities (if you want to use that term) it's like around 80% – this was the [Kendal Project](#) numbers, for instance; and with angels the figures go much higher. They are over 90%, as far as my research is concerned. So we're talking about women interested in angels.

**DR:** *What kind of women? Are we talking about the same sort of women that we would expect to find in holistic spiritualities, for instance? You know, generally, from the Kendal Project, for instance, mostly . . . kind-of middle class, fairly well-educated, fairly well-off – these kinds of things?*

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**TU:** “Fairly well” women! Yes. Yes, more-or-less, we are. Well, when we go to Finland it's perhaps a little bit different society from the UK. We like to think that we are more equal in the social way. We don't have these social strata as much as you have here. But it's a kind-of, you know . . . . We fool ourselves, of course, with these things, always. But it is middle class . . . I would say that it's mostly lower to mid-middle class, but all middle classes. But very varied educational backgrounds. A lot of women who work in caring and education professions, for instance. These women are also interested in other practices, not only angels, and all sorts of holistic practices. Something that all my interviewees mentioned, really, was like Reiki. Reiki healing is one form of energy healing which is now so popular in all of the Western world, I guess. It comes from Japan, and through Hawaii, but it's become popular all over. But these women with angels tend to be, I would say, a little bit more towards Christianity, because there is the central figure. But I see quite a variation with the people that I have interviewed. And I have made, also, a smallish survey and some of them consider themselves Lutheran – Lutheranism is our like home religion in Finland. But then, there is the other end who are kind-of completely disconnected from the church and have their background, for instance, in esotericism, theosophy, spiritualism, anthroposophy. But then, there is a third group of women who come from secular families and, at least, tell me that they don't really have very much religious background at all. And they got into religion through this.

**DR:** *What sort of religious make-up are we talking about in Finland, just for the benefit of our listeners? I mean here, obviously, we're somewhere between 70-55%, depending on what part of the country you're in.*

**TU:** Like, Church of England or those big churches, or altogether?

**DR:** *Yes, well, the sort-of state churches, yes. I mean, England's sitting at about 65% and Scotland's a little bit lower about 58%.*

**TU:** Yes. So the numbers go down regularly all the time in Finland, at the moment. And last year's survey gives us something like 72%, and the women a bit more than men. And then the next biggest church in Finland would be the Orthodox church, but that is a very low number of participants or members. **(5:00)** So we are a very Lutheran country, still, but the figures are going down.

**DR:** *Part of the reason I asked that is that I have a kind of personal interest in this subject. Some people in my family are involved in this kind of stuff. My grandmother and my aunty – her youngest*

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*daughter – both do these kind-of angel cards. Now my family is not a strongly religious family, but have become so over time. My granny is now in her early eighties and she converted to Anglicanism when my grandad died, a couple of decades ago . . .*

**TU:** Yes

**DR:** . . . *whereas my aunty converted to Catholicism because she married an Irishman. So they're the two . . . they're really the only two properly Christian members of the family. They're different – you know, one's Protestant, one's Catholic – but they have these angel practices in common. Now, they're a little bit secretive about actually what it is. The few things I've been picking up is that there are some cards . . . . But as much as I got was that they sort-of identified with particular figures, and these figures were associated with various qualities, and colours, and things like that. Could you fill us in, a little bit, about that kind of aspect of the practical side of it – what it involves?*

**TU:** Sure. First of all I want to say that I'm pleased that now, through my research, you get the possibility that you can learn something about your family members!

**DR:** *Yes.*

**TU:** I've had several men tell me, “Now I understand my mother better!” “Now I understand my sister better!” Or something like this, you know? Because they kind-of get a little glimpse of it. And then the women tell something about it, but don't open up the whole stuff, immediately. Yes, there are these practices and, the angel is a Christian figure, and we have all this Christian sort of mythology, and narrative, and image traditions on angels, the idea in Christianity is that angels are like Godly power and God gives us angels and angelic power when he wants to do [something]. [Whereas], this contemporary practice is much more practical for the women. It is practical religion: an everyday practical religion that uses several kinds of techniques and means. You mentioned cards – angel card reading is quite popular, and the first angel cards I met in Finland were cards coming from your country, in fact, or the US. Now there are also some indigenous Finnish angel card traditions, too. That goes a bit like Tarot card reading. You can either make a table of them, or you can just take one card for the day, or one card for a puzzling question that you have in your mind. And so, you read an enigmatic answer, just a word: the word might be like, “happiness”; the word might be, like, “balance”; or, you know, these kinds of things that you also might find in horoscopes. So that is one thing, but they also have their imagery. And, like you said, certain angels might be linked to certain

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colours, for instance, which might give this woman a kind of glance into her life. In the sense that when she learns – either through cards or through somebody – that her colour is linked to the colour green [for example], which would then, perhaps, be the colour of the Archangel Raphael, then, every time she's drawn to green she gets a message. So, it could go like this. But then there are meditations, several kinds of angel meditations, often like a visual journey: you are led to a sacred garden where you meet your angel; you talk to your angel; you ask something; your angel gives you a symbol or a word, or something; you are led back from the meditation; and then you are there, either with yourself or a group of friends - angel minded friends. And you integrate this thing that you got, and you relate it to your life's bigger or smaller things. And then, of course, this more-or-less . . . the thing that connects with this holistic milieu even more is the angel healing aspect. **(10:00)** There are angel healing courses, and you can learn to become a healer – a bit like a Reiki healer – who heals others or who heals yourself. The angel healing, as far as I know, is mostly used for what we might call emotional issues and emotional problems. And I think that this highlights the topic of emotions, and how important emotions are – perhaps particularly to women in the contemporary world – is extremely interesting because, then, it's related to the high numbers of depression and emotion work in very many ways.

**DR:** *Yes. Which also might . . . . I think there's quite high rates of depression and suicide and stuff in some of the Northern European countries. But that trajectory of women and the kind-of therapeutic culture is very, very common. You see that a lot in . . . . Well, you see it a lot in the holistic, mind-body-spirit kind-of world, here. Particularly female, but you also see the same trajectory with men and also in the conspiracy theory world. I looked at this in [my work](#), for instance, [David Icke](#): his passage into conspiracy theory world was looking for alternative therapies to treat his arthritis. He ended up going to a medium who channelled messages to him.*

**TU:** Yes. Mediumship is present here.

**DR:** *But those discourses on healing, and on holistic healing as well – the idea that your emotions and your body are linked – are found right across that kind-of cultic milieu, not only in the more overtly spiritual aspects of . . .*

**TU:** Definitely. I think of one other notion that is very, very closely connected to emotions- another “e” word is energy: emotions and energy. And the way that you can sort-of manage them, or you can make use of them, but you can also sort-of control them – like you said, channelling or something.

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Emotions, in my materials, are often considered as one sort of type of energy, one type of energy that works a lot in the human world. And as energy it's power and it can be used into good. But it can also be, sort of, if it's like all loose, it can do bad things.

**DR:** *Yes. And, when we were talking about the colours earlier on, that's immediately what I thought of was the rays of the theosophical tradition – where the colours represent different frequencies of energy or different energies, you know. And that, by selecting a particular colour, you can encourage that particular emotion or energy. Which leads to my next question, which is: all of this stuff that you've been describing so far, from using cards for readings, healings, visualisation, the idea of correspondences of colours attracting particular energies, you know – even the use of cards themselves, and the association with therapeutic culture – this all seems taken exactly from 19<sup>th</sup> century esotericism, what we would call Western esotericism nowadays. Yet [it] has this Christian kind-of – I don't want to say veneer – but it's a Christian framing of those practices.*

**TU:** Yes, well, there always was a kind of Christian esotericism as well. They have never been completely apart – even though, probably, some ruling churches and ruling theologies would like them apart – but there have been much more linkages. But I might also say that – particularly in the context of Finland perhaps, but maybe this applies even larger settings – esotericism earlier on used to be a bit elitist. It was not for everybody, for all the people in Finland, anyway, and openly, anyway. But now, what we see is something like the democratisation and popularisation of this esotericism, and bringing it openly in connection with Christianity.

**DR:** *Yes.*

**TU:** And this, of course, has to do with many things – like things that are marketed to us and how popular culture circulates. **(15:00)** But it also has to do with the grip of the church loosening: the church doesn't have the normative power any more in people's everyday lives. In Finland, for instance – perhaps here too, but in Finland – where the ruling church was the Lutheran Church, Lutheranism meant . . . . For those people who were not very religious or very pious, Lutheranism was mostly a normative system, saying what you do in public life, what you don't do, but this is less so now.

**DR:** *I wonder if it's not only its normativity in the society, it's also the normativity of the scholars in the categories that we're looking at. I wonder if this stuff was always going on, but it was kind-of hidden from our view, because it wasn't considered suitable for us to look at, and so on.*

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TU: For the scholars of religion?

DR: *Yes.*

TU: Yes: because it was not funded, and it was not taken seriously; because it was not the serious religion, it was the fringe stuff. And I have seen a lot, and I suppose a lot of people have seen it, that bigger money always goes to religion which is considered as cultural heritage stuff, kind-of elevated, sublime thing, more-or-less. Whereas these hobby-level religions with their crazy knowledge systems . . .

DR: *Yes. Well, there is a sense in which you get the impression that people think: "Well, we don't really want to encourage this . . ."*

TU: Yes

DR: *"If we pay this too much attention it might be seen that we're taking it seriously."*

TU: Yes. Exactly!

DR: *So tell us, then, how did you get to looking at this stuff? What was your passage into this?*

TU: My complete passage into this was that I was involved in a larger project, that was led by Professor Peter Nynäs in Abo Akademi university, which is a Swedish speaking university in Finland, in Turku. And I was lucky enough to jump on that project when it started. And the project was called [Post-Secular Culture and the Changing Religious Landscape in Finland](#). And we wanted to look into the margins and outside fields from Lutheranism, and what was happening there. And we were several people and we had several case studies. We started to pick something that we were interested in, or something that somebody was already engaged with, or something, anyway, that could sort-of give us a good palette, a sort of mosaic-view to things that were happening. And since I was more-or-less kind-of a specialist, if you like, in women's popular religion . . . . It was not my own idea at all, but we started to think about: what is it that happens in this type of religiosity today? One possible thing would have been, like, healing and Reiki and stuff. But then we decided that angels were, just at that time, becoming so popular in Finland that we thought, "that opens up a window, through which we can see some interesting things". And so it happened. And [some books came out](#) and people got really interested in the angel stuff. And I had a lot of fun doing this for a couple of years. And still have,

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writing on it, fun in many ways. Not only in the hilarious way, but also that I had very nice fieldwork experiences and I learned very much about both the serious sides of religion and life, but also about the less serious sides of it.

**DR:** *Tell us about how you went about the study, then. Was it predominantly kind-of ethnographic work?*

**TU:** It was ethnographically oriented, multi-method stuff. I love working ethnographically, well. I went to . . . I collected . . . sort-of . . . just went to see what happened. And I took myself into those happenings and situations. Like, for instance, there was a yoga school, when I started my ethnography. In one yoga school they have their yearly “angel week”. So I went through that week and saw how the angels popped into the yoga classes! Which was a good start, in the sense that it brought me into meeting young people – mostly young people – who were interested in this. So I couldn't work only with the idea that this is only middle-aged women, or women in their late-middle age and stuff. So I started with that and started to contact people. I used the snowball method to get interviews. I went for courses, I contacted people and said, “Can I come?” (20:00) And then there was this very popular Irish – I don't know how popular she is here, but – woman who writes autobiographies and the books where she recounts her life with angels, [Lorna Byrne](#), whose books, just then, became translated in Finnish and who paid visits to Finland. And all the visits were sold out, there were 1000 women with a handful of men who came there (hand-in-hand with their female friends ) to listen to how this Irish . . . contemporary Irish mystic tells how she sees the place full of angels and describes people's angels. Well, I made a survey in one of her visits, wanting to know about the backgrounds of these women who came to listen to her, etc, etc. Then I sort-of followed the media reactions, I followed the church reactions. I did sort-of a multi-angle thing.

**DR:** *So it was very much ethnography, then, in all of the senses it can be, so: sort-of qualitative interviewing, but participant observation and media discourse analysis as well.*

**TU:** Yes and also the smallish survey – I had 263 answers, so that I could see the demographic things and stuff.

**DR:** *And how did they take to you? I mean, how open about your research were you? And how interested . . . ?*

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**TU:** I was very open about my research. I was open even in the bigger settings. Particularly when I was distributing the questionnaire, of course, I told them what it was about. And I was open when I went to study an angel healer – that was the most participant part of it.

**DR:** *Right.*

**TU:** And well, they were . . . everybody was, at that time, so happy about this thing happening. And they probably considered me as a possible advocate for them, and taking the whole thing to the academy. I remember . . . may I tell you one nice interview situation where there was this woman who channelled angels?

**DR:** *Yes.*

**TU:** I knew that she channelled angels, and that was one of my reasons for contacting her. And she also wanted her husband to be in the interview, so I interviewed the two of them. Before we started the interview she said to me – we had a cup of coffee, we were at their home – she said to me: "What if my angel also wants to become interviewed?" – the angel that she channelled.

**DR:** *Oh, so the angel was present, then?*

**TU:** She said, "What if she comes?"

**DR:** *Oh, what if? Yes.*

**TU:** I said, "Well, I'm very happy of course . . ." and I tried to make a joke. I said, "I probably don't have the informed consent for the angel!" (Laughs).

**DR:** *(Laughs)*

**TU:** Because I wasn't prepared. I had two copies, you know. I had one for the husband and one for her.

**DR:** It would be an interesting subject to come up at the ethics commission . . .

**TU:** Well what happened after some time of interview, maybe one hour – it was one of the longest interviews that I made – she says, "Now, I think she wants to come, my angel wants to come." And I said, "OK." It was kind-of exciting, I have to admit.

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**DR:** *And did the angel contribute to the conversation?***TU:** Yes! Then I have 40 minutes of interview with the angel in my tape.**DR:** *Oh fantastic!***TU:** And after that the angel goes away, and the woman comes back, and we continue. And while the woman has a bit of difficulty – as her husband tells me – in coming back, resuming her own like mortal role, the husband gives me the explanation that, "Well it often is a bit difficult for her to come back after the angel has gone," because there is this liminal period. Well, what I have there is a sub-chapter in a book that I'm going to publish – in Finnish, unfortunately. But I have one sub-chapter interview with an angel!**DR:** *Fantastic.***TU:** But that is kind-of a . . . that is interesting also, in the sense of: "What did the angel say, in the interview?" Well several things, but one important thing was that I had my small recorder on the table and the angel goes very close to the recorder and says, "And I want to say this to science, and please go and tell this to Abo Akademi of science!"**DR:** *(Laughs)***TU:** So, it was a very intricate dynamics that was going on there. **(25:00)** Because was she making fun of me? Or was she really, like, making the angel meet science, not through just meeting the people, but mediating it. It was interesting. I haven't really found a way to talk about this so far.**DR:** *What that suggests to me is that, you know . . . The spirit guide is often . . . there's a kind of yin/yang relationship, so they're like the animus and the anima in Jungian psychology or, you know, the various sort of spirit animals are often the opposite gender. So, if she is existing in the modern, rational, secular – well, supposedly so – world, then her spirit companion is the opposite.***TU:** Yes**DR:** *So, represents to her the spiritual world and that is one which is often set up against science: science as the disenchanting . . . you know, the "black iron prison".***Citation Info:** Utriainen, Tehri 2017. "Angel Spirituality", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 5 June 2017.

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**TU:** Yes, that's true.

**DR:** *Whereas the spiritual world is the enchanted one and so, naturally, would be pitted against the rationalism represented by science.*

**TU:** But there I had the two coming together, and the enchanted world coming directly to shout at the disenchanted world represented by the recorder.

**DR:** *Yes. So the recorder is actually representing that as well, yes.*

**TU:** The recorder is there as a hard fact there, and the angel goes into that hard machine.

**DR:** *But happy to use science to make a point . . .*

**TU:** Yes, but also . . .

**DR:** *And capable of doing so . . .*

**TU:** And very capable of doing so. Even considered that it was a small girl angel!

**DR:** *Oh, ok!*

**TU:** Six years old, or something like this. But, nevertheless, very skilful in that.

**DR:** *So, for this woman, the angel was a child? That's interesting.*

**TU:** Yes, this was a woman in her 50s and the angel was a female child.

**DR:** *That's interesting. Because that's not usually the case, is it?*

**TU:** Ah, the angel asked me that!

**DR:** *(Laughs)*

**TU:** "Do you know . . . Can you guess why I appear as a small girl?" And the answer was . . . Well, I was a bit silly – I offered the answer. I offered my guess and she took it. I don't know, maybe I should

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have done something else, but I said, "Maybe it is because we are not afraid of children or small girls?" And she said, "Yes. The enormous power that I bring is kind-of less feared when . . ."

**DR:** *She was in her 50s , you said? Had they had children?*

**TU:** They had a child together: a boy – early teens. And one of them – I don't remember which one of them – had bigger children, too.

**DR:** *Ah right, ok. But, generally speaking, the angel is a male figure.*

**TU:** Often, in my material.

**DR:** *And in my experience, as well. What is the appeal, then? Why is it the angel that's at the centre of this, not fairies, or dragons, or Thor, or Spiderman?*

**TU:** It is . . . . Well, some of these women have a lot of things going on with a lot of other spirits, as well. But some – I might say that those who consider themselves mostly as Lutheran – they don't take other spirits as easily, but an angel is something that they allow in their lives. Well angels . . . I wouldn't mind having a male angel in my life, considering how beautiful they are, how wonderful they are depicted!

**DR:** *(Laughs)*

**TU:** They come with their baby faces, but they have strong, wonderful wings and things. And I sometimes play with this idea. Because, you know, in Finland we have . . . like, we think about the mortal men, like the normal, ordinary men. We have a big number of engineers. Engineers are considered, in Finland – this is a bit jokingly said – but men [who are], like, reliable and practical, but not so good always in talking about emotions, with the women.

**DR:** *(Laughs) Yes. I don't think that's unique to Finland, to be honest.*

**TU:** Maybe. So these women sometimes even talked about their men who sometimes really were engineers. And they were, sort-of, not replacing these husbands with these male angels, but complementing the scene with this figure which had something male, something masculine in it – a

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protective sense, for instance, but which was also the perfect male, in the sense that he understood their emotions. Isn't that good?

**DR:** *Yes. It does make sense, absolutely.*

**TU:** It does make sense. And yes, not all of them were male, but a lot of them were and it appeared that the Archangel Michael, who is the protector of soldiers, was pretty much popular.

**DR:** (30:00) *Yes. There's going to be a class in here shortly, so we should wrap up. There are so many other questions I could've asked. I literally have a page of them written down in front of me, but I'm afraid we're out of time. Thanks so much for taking part in the Religious Studies Project. If you're interested in Tehri's work, do seek out her publications. And best of luck when the book comes out. I hope it comes out in English as well, later on.*

**TU:** If you translate it!

**DR:** *I'd have to learn Finnish first. We'll see . . .*

**TU:** There are articles in English. Plenty of them came out recently: some related to ritual studies; some related to ritual and healing; and some related to more to general aspects, various theoretical angles.

**DR:** *Fantastic. And if you're on the website, then the [links](#) below will guide you to them. But in the meantime, thanks for taking part.*

**TU:** And thank you.

**DR:** *Thank you.*

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