



Some philosophical angles on angels

In Luke's gospel we are told that an angel of the Lord brought the good news of Christ's birth to the shepherds tending their flocks near Bethlehem. References to angels can also be found throughout the Old Testament. For Islam, angels are one of the six pillars of belief, without which there is no faith. One website providing information on Islam describes angels as unseen creatures of light created by Allah to act as intermediaries between Him and the visible world. From other sources we learn that in Greek the word angel means "messenger," which fits nicely with the Jewish and Christian view of angels as messengers from God.

Many people believe in angels, even though they are defined as pure spirit; beings we cannot see. A recent Gallup poll found that 56 per cent of Canadians believe in angels. Another 19 per cent said they weren't sure. Which brings us to the question: Is it possible to prove the existence of angels?

It's a question that has occupied George Marshall, a professor of philosophy at Campion College at the U of R, for several years. In turn, he has challenged several classes of students to develop their philosophical skills by tackling the question.

"There was an explosion of interest in angels in the 1990s," says Marshall. "I estimate

that 800 books on angels were published during the decade. It seemed that people were willing to accept anything with a connection to angels, but academics were saying nothing about the subject," he continues. "I thought academics had a responsibility to respond to the glibility of people."

In 1990 Marshall proposed a course in the philosophical study of angels, which drew some skepticism from his colleagues at the time. However, the course is popular. Every time it is offered it quickly fills to the class limit of 35 students.

"The course aims to discover what can rationally be said about angels," Marshall explains. "The answer is, not a lot. As we develop the arguments for the existence of angels, I'm also encouraging the students to unpack the implications of those arguments. For example," he continues, "if an angel is a spirit that knows things, how does it know? If it is a spirit, it doesn't have eyes, so how does it see?"

These and other questions lead to lively discussions in his classes, Marshall says. By limiting the subject to angels, he adds, students are more willing to speculate than they would if the course were a philosophical inquiry into the existence of God. "Many people have a commitment to their belief in

God that would limit their ability to participate," Marshall observes.

While there are many problems in trying to prove by reason that angels exist, Marshall notes that the idea of angels certainly does. As early as the second century, the Fathers of the Christian Church were developing arguments about the existence of angels. In the 17th century the great mathematician Sir Isaac Newton argued that the study of angels belonged to the science of physics. And, of course, angels are a staple of every form of artistic expression through the ages.

Marshall has published a weighty bibliography listing academic works dealing with angels, and he's working on another book on the subject. In part, his interest stems from his concern about what he sees as a breach in the way people regard reason and faith today.

"Most people think of themselves as rational, and as people of faith. But they see reason and faith as separate elements," says Marshall. "By taking a peripheral element of faith—the existence of angels—and showing how it can be intelligible in terms of reason, I try to heal that breach. Reason and faith should reinforce one another, and help make the whole person," Marshall concludes.

Marshall will lead a discussion on Angels



Angel of the Christmas tree-top variety.

U of R photo by AV Services

and Reason at Chapters bookstore on Thursday, January 27, beginning at 7:30 p.m.

CAMPUS LIFE CALENDAR

Dec. 25-Jan. 3

University closed

Sun., Dec. 26 - 1 p.m.

Ninth Annual Alumni Association Family Skate

Alumni, family and friends are invited to turn some seasonal calories!

Complimentary beverage, prizes and free admission

Sherwood Twin Arena

Info: 585-4838

Jan. 6

Winter semester classes begin

Tues., Jan. 11 - 4 p.m.

Humanities Research Institute Profiling Scholarship Series

"Searching for the Historical David: The Human Reality behind the Traditional Stories"

Speaker: David Barnard

Rm. 215, College West, University Club

Info: 585-4304

Tues., Jan. 11 - 6:30 p.m.

Institut français/SIPP lecture

"Living in Interesting Times: The Political Dynamics of a Minority Government in Ottawa"

Speaker: Gilles Duppepe

Education Auditorium, Education Bldg.

Info: 585-5863

Wed., Jan. 12 - Noon

Saskatchewan Instructional Development & Research Unit seminar

"What's Critical in the Manufacturing of Road-Smart Squirrels?"

Speaker: Ali Sammel

Rm. 215, Education Bldg.

Info: 585-4309

Fri., Jan. 14

Centennial Seminar and Town-Hall Forum

"Heavy Hand of History/ An Analysis 100 Years in the Making" and "Examining the Future of Saskatchewan" will be discussed

University of Regina

Info: 585-5865

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For a complete Calendar of Events at the University of Regina visit our website at:

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UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

The story of Blessing for Christmas

Imagine only being allowed to sing Christmas carols in the daytime, because of the threat of attack from the surrounding jungle after nightfall. That was one of the things U of R student Blessing Moon recalls from his stay in a refugee camp a few years ago.

The story of how Blessing Moon came to be a student at the U of R, half a world away from his home country, requires a brief history lesson.

Moon was born in Karen State, an area of eastern Burma near the border with Thailand. Although Burma is overwhelmingly Buddhist, about half the population of Karen is Christian, the influence of British missionaries in the early 1900s. Karen people allied with the British in World War II, and they proved to be excellent jungle fighters. When Burma was granted independence in 1948 without any provision for a Karen homeland, many of those same soldiers kept on fighting for sovereignty, a struggle that continues today.

During these decades of civil unrest, a military junta seized power in 1962. When the junta lost an election to a democratic party in 1990, the self-styled State Peace and Development Council annulled the election and arrested many of the democratic leaders. The new leadership also changed the country's name to Myanmar, but many countries refuse to recognize the ruling junta and the name change.

Blessing Moon and his family were forced to move several times during his childhood and teenage years, as their villages were invaded by marauding soldiers looking for food or forced recruits. Eventually, they sought safety for a few months in a town in Thailand.

"We had crossed the border illegally and could not return to Burma," Moon explains, "so we settled in a refugee camp (in Thailand) where I completed my Grade 10 in 1998. I completed high school at another nearby refugee camp."

Because he did not have papers documenting his education, university appeared to be out of the question. For the next few years Moon helped his mother, assisting other refugees through an organization called the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People. At the same time, Moon was on the lookout for educational opportunities. He discovered that World University Service Canada (WUSC) has a program to help refugees continue their education in Canada.

"I found out about WUSC in 2002, but too late to apply then. I applied in 2003 and was called to an interview in March 2004." Moon says. Three months later he was looking for Regina, which would soon be his new home, on a map. His sponsor is a group of faculty and staff members from the U of R

who work through WUSC to select refugee students whose studies have been interrupted by political turmoil in their home countries.

The University of Regina Group for Refugees (URGR) was organized in 1979 to assist displaced Vietnamese seeking refuge, and it continues today. Through donations and payroll deductions the URGR provides a sponsored student with living costs for one year. The University contributes tuition and room and board in College West for a year.

URGR treasurer and professor in the Faculty of Administration David Senkow says it's gratifying to see refugee students have the opportunity to gain an education and a new life in Canada. "They face many challenges, but they have a great capacity to overcome adversity."

Moon is currently improving his English through the University's English as a second language program. He then plans to study human resource management. He keeps in contact with his mother by phone, and sends letters to his brothers and sisters still in Thailand. He will spend this Christmas-New Year's break with friends, either in Regina or Vancouver.

"This is an important step in my life," says Moon. "I plan to find a job here and help my family, and if I have a chance to go back to visit them, I will."



The U of R continues to integrate a national and international perspective into its teaching, research, and public service. University students represent over 50 countries from around the world. Here, students from far and wide come together for a yuletide photo. (Clockwise from far right): Tam Nguyen (Vietnam), Lindsay Jorgenson (Kindersley, Sask.), Garricks Etechi (Nigeria), Megan Karza (Medicine Hat, Alta.), Thang Za Hmung (Burma), Nathan Nunweiler (Redcliff, Alta.).

U of R photo by AV Services

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