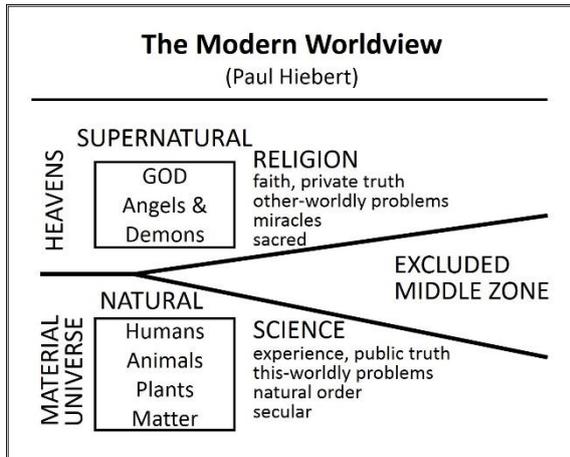


Understanding Animism

The Excluded Middle



The distinction of the Creator from the creation demands that we distance ourselves from all conceptions of nature that personalise it and treat it as animate. However, balance is needed. For the Bible takes seriously the fact that there is a supernatural world, though the word ‘supernatural’ is misleading since – and this is where the Western worldview falls down – spiritual powers are present in this world of nature, forces in conflict. This evacuation of spiritual forces from space is what Hiebert calls “the excluded middle.”

[For a fuller treatment see Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (eds. Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne; William Carey Library / Paternoster Publishing, 1999) 414-421]

Whitehead draws a significant contrast between the religious experience of Westerners and that of those in animistic societies:

Depth interview research shows that slightly more than 60% of western people report having religious experiences of the more dramatic type, many of them perhaps only once or twice in their lives. Many people in the agnostic west expressed surprise that religious experience is so common. But in the animistic societies that I am going to talk about today, people have religious experiences all the time, or at least once or twice a week, and virtually everyone has them, though they many choose not to.¹

Terminology

The term *animism* was coined by the anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) and is one of anthropology’s earliest concepts.² When Tylor used this term he was not thinking of a particular kind of religious expression. Focusing his attention on contemporary indigenous religions, he used this term to explain his view that all religious belief can be traced back to a single primordial mistake, the error of attributing life, soul, or spirit to inanimate objects.³ Indeed, primitive animistic thought in Tylor’s mind included the notion of a soul or individual self that is detachable from the body and capable of individual existence after the physical body has experienced death and destruction.⁴

It is likely that use of the particular term animism arose from the observations of people such as Charles Darwin that dogs at times seem to attribute life to inanimate objects.

By extending this term to include animate but non-human creatures, we can define animism as the belief that non-human entities possess a spiritual essence. However, it is incorrect to think that animism necessarily involves the belief that everything has a soul. Indeed, animists typically only ascribe personhood, intentionality and agency to non-human entities on a highly selective basis and subject to particular conditions.⁵

Sitton defines animism as “the belief that non-living objects have souls (life) and that natural phenomena possess supernatural or magical power.”⁶ He cites Gailyn Van Rheenen’s explanation:

Animism is the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that human beings must discover what forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.⁷

The term *fetish* is derived from a Portuguese word, *feitiço*, which refers “to nefarious instruments of magic and witchcraft.” It was originally used by European Christians to refer to African ritual objects. The term *totemism* describes the situation where a community (and sometimes an individual) believe they have common kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal or plant. The term *mana* is used widely to denote the spiritual power animists believe to be indwelling certain objects or people.

Animism and Materialism

Tylor’s understanding of animism as the original error involves the assumption that all matter is ‘dead’ matter. There continue to be those who maintain that “religion originated in the basic animistic propensity to project human characteristics of life, thought, and feeling onto the natural world.” Indeed, so-called “new animism” reconceptualises animism as a “relational epistemology”, maintaining that “indigenous people gain knowledge by entering into humanizing relations with the natural world.”⁸

Daniel Dennett observes:

People who lovingly cajole their cranky automobiles or curse at their computers are exhibiting fossil traces of animism. They probably don’t take their own speech acts entirely seriously, but are just indulging in something that makes them feel better. The fact that it *does* tend to make them feel better, and is apparently indulged in by people of every culture, suggests how deeply rooted in human biology is the urge to treat things – especially frustrating things – as agents with beliefs and desires. But if our bouts of animism today tend to be ironic and attenuated, there was a time when the desire of the river to flow to the sea, and the benign or evil intent of the rain clouds, were taken so literally and seriously that they could become a matter of life or death – for instance, to those poor souls who were sacrificed to appease the insatiable desires of the rain god.⁹

He continues:

Much as our ancestors would have loved to predict the weather by figuring out what it *wanted* and what *beliefs* it harboured about them, it simply didn’t work. It no doubt often *seemed* to work, however. Every now and then the rain dances were rewarded by rain.¹⁰

He goes on to reason that the “built-in love for the intentional stance” of our ancestors would tend to encourage them to add invisible agents or other homunculi to be the secret puppeteers behind the perplexing phenomena. Clouds certainly don’t *look* like agents with beliefs and desires, so it is no doubt natural to suppose that they are indeed inert and passive things being manipulated by hidden agents that do look like agents: rain gods and cloud gods and the like – if only we could see them.¹¹

He contends, “The memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.”¹²

It is also spuriously argued by some that animism is childlike thinking. It is observed that all children, even if they are brought up in modern societies, have strong animistic tendencies. Oesterdiekhoff

maintains, “Animism starts to diminish with rising ages and is replaced by causal-empirical forms of thinking at the beginning of the second decade of life, however, only in modern societies.”¹³ But this is plainly far too simplistic. One has only to think of extremely well-educated Africans, Hindus and New Age thinkers who find no difficulty in continuing to hold strong animistic views.

Many modern voices, in their concern for the environment, are opposed to the so-called disenchantment of nature:

In a disenchanted world, there is no meaningful order of things or events outside the human domain, and there is no source of sacredness or dread of the sort felt by those who regard the natural world as peopled by divinities or demons (Stone 2006). When a forest is no longer sacred, there are no spirits to be placated and no mysterious risks associated with clear-felling it. A disenchanted nature is no longer alive. It commands no respect, reverence or love. It is nothing but a giant machine, to be mastered to serve human purposes.¹⁴

Accordingly, “new animists” want to see not only humans, animals and plants, but also mountains, forests, rivers, deserts and even planets viewed as “living nature.” The biblical view avoids both extremes. Materialism struggles to provide a basis for treating nature as other than that of an exploitable resource. Of course, since it is a valuable resource it makes sense to take measures to prevent those things which threaten its ability to continue to serve as such. Nevertheless, awe and reverence for nature are not the natural fruits of materialism. The Bible teaches that creation is God’s handiwork and is to be treasured and admired as such. It must not be worshipped since worship must be directed to its Maker. The re-animation of nature is not a step forwards but a falling backwards into the disaster that is idolatry.

Animism and Cultural Evolution

Tylor’s view of animism as the original error also involves the assumption that a history of belief systems shows evolutionary development. Impressed as he was with the ever-growing achievements of science, he assumed that only science yields a ‘true’ knowledge of the world.¹⁵ He therefore believed that science represented a higher evolutionary stage than monotheism and that monotheism in turn was a higher stage than polytheism, with *animism* constituting the most primitive level. Other social scientists sometimes used alternative terms such as fetishism or totemism. But Tylor’s influence was such that it became standard for adherents of indigenous religions to be called animists. Sometimes indigenous religionists object to be calling animists, though on other occasions some have sought formal recognition as animists.

Animism and Spiritualism

Major religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity) and animism stand in contrast to philosophical materialism. The vast majority of the world’s population are spiritualists, that is, in the sense that they believe that ultimate reality is spiritual, not physical or material.

Animism and the Nature of the Universe

Adeyemo observes that in African traditional religions, “salvation is portrayed as cosmic equilibrium and community acceptance of individuals.”¹⁶ The Jaba people of Northern Nigeria illustrate this with their view of salvation consisting in being accepted “first in the community of the living and then in the city of the dead.”¹⁷

It is common for animists to believe in cosmic levels, with some below ground, some above ground and then also a sky level. Both in the ancient world and still in many animistic societies, including neo-pagan and New Age groups, there is strong belief in the cosmic or world tree. The idea is of roots in the underworld, the trunk in our world and a canopy of branches and leaves in the sky world.¹⁸

Sprenger describes the world as seen by the Rmeet (Lamet) people of northern Laos.¹⁹ Persons have a body (*to*). There is a living movement which is only characteristic of humans, animals and plants, expressed in growth and breath (*pääm*). There is “soul” that only occurs among humans, buffaloes, and, according to earlier usage, rice (*klpu*). The human soul enables communication with the spirits (*phi*) and often sees the world from their perspective. The human soul turns into a spirit after death. Illness and death result from the separation of body and soul and so need to be integrated. To this end, people must relate well to their ancestors, relatives and spirits. The spirits of ancestors are located in the forest graveyard. However, the patrilineal ancestors of any particular household combine to constitute that house’s house spirit. Both the house spirit and the village spirit are protective spirits which must be kept happy through sacrifices. The spirits are not simply former humans but also include non-human beings of the earth and sky.

The Hmong are a people group found in the mountainous regions of southern China, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. They divide the universe into the seen world (*yaj ceeb*) and the unseen world of spirits (*yeeb ceeb*). The latter includes ancestral spirits. They believe that all natural objects in the seen world have a spirit, e.g. rocks, trees, streams. Such spirits may have a positive or negative influence. The Hmong believe that each person has multiple souls, but three primary ones. One soul stays with the body. A second wanders at night while a person is sleeping – the cause of dreams. The third protects the person from harm. A person remains in good health when these souls are in harmony with each other and when he or she positively relates to the non-human spirit-invested objects of the natural world and one’s spiritual ancestors. The Hmong also believe that a person’s life-span is determined by a celestial being known as Ntxwy Nyug. When a person dies he or she returns to the unseen world of the ancestors.²⁰

The Senoi, an indigenous people group in Malaysia, believe that everyone has two souls: a head soul and a heart, liver or blood soul. The former rests outside the body on top of the hair and the latter under the base of the sternum. Inanimate objects also have two souls. Animals have an upper and a lower soul. Plants have a leaf soul and a root soul. Mountains have a summit soul and an underground soul. River rapids, houses and deceased humans also have two souls.²¹

Animism and Magic

Daniel notes the continuing use of what is called *sympathetic magic* in North Africa. Such magic assumes that one can influence what happens to another person by creating a model or representation of the intended victim and then performing ritual acts upon it. So a knot might be tied in a ribbon or a piece of hair to bind and frustrate that person’s supposed intentions or to seal the womb of a female rival. A jackknife might be symbolically closed to cause impotence for the person whose name is written on the blade.²²

In PNG sorcery-related murders are frequently reported on the front page of PNG’s major newspapers.²³ Humble recognises, “Animism is a major undergirding belief of sorcery.”²⁴ He also finds that jealousy is a key contributor to sorcery. He cites Brian Aufilu’s claim that “when somebody nearby or a neighbour is having an improvement in their standard of living, people will feel inferior.

This is when they try to look for sanguma or puripuri sorcery in order to kill the person. For instance, when someone builds a new house made of expensive materials, and they own cars and run PMVs (Public Motor Vehicles or mini-buses) the neighbour will feel inferior and cast a spell on the person or on their possessions” to destroy their wellbeing.²⁵ As Humble observes, “This process instils fear of success within the community and discourages entrepreneurs. It reduces people to sameness due to the fear of being different, and thus a target for sorcery.”²⁶

Kaima observes that if someone is seen to have produced more yams which are of a higher quality then it is common for Wantoat yam farmers of PNG to launch a sorcery attack on the successful farmer, with intent to kill him. For this reason, if a Wantoat farmer does succeed in producing the best yams he will give them surreptitiously, often at night, to his in-laws.²⁷

In PNG the family of a murderer will often resort to sorcery to “cool down the heart of their enemies” and thus prevent payback.²⁸ People may also plant around their houses plants such as ginger (*kavavar*) and cordyline (*tanget*) to counter sorcery.²⁹ It is also common to use sorcery to gain power, maintain one’s status and suppress those who might otherwise supersede them. Many in PNG find it natural to think of sorcery as the cause of accidents, disease or death. The Wantoats believe that it is pointless to go to a medical centre for treatment because all sickness is caused by traditional means – sorcery, poison ill-feeling towards the sufferer, or the sufferer’s own worries about others’ intentions. So the Wantoats depend on sorcery to heal sickness and wounds, which involves first finding out who bears ill-will towards the sufferer.³⁰

Common Assumptions of Animists

1. *All of life is spiritual.* Animists believe that the spirits are everywhere and control everything or almost everything in life.
2. *Ancestral spirits control the living.*
3. *The material world is subservient to the spiritual.*
4. *Spiritual power is gained through secret knowledge and magic.*
5. *Spirits are able to cause sickness.*
6. *Spirits are often evil and unpredictable*
7. *Particular places have special spiritual qualities and powers*
8. *What matters is not trying to realise some future purpose but preserving spiritual traditions and dealing with present, daily needs*

Animism and Distinctiveness

It is common for animists to think that distinctive objects possess supernatural power. It might be a stone. If, for example, it looks like the fruit of a tree or plant he might lay that stone at the foot of such a tree or plant. If much fruit is then produced he will attribute this to the power in the stone.

There is one particular example in history of a stone that has been treated with immense reverence right through to the present day, namely, the Kaabah. Veneration for this stone predates the advent of Islam. But now this stone stands at the very heart of Islam. When pilgrims mass together in Mecca, the central event is circumambulation around the Kaabah, with all who are able to do so, touching and kissing the Kaabah in the belief that they will receive extra blessing for doing so.

Animism and Body Parts

In PNG cannibalistic tribes believed that the personality was contained in that person's bodily parts. So they would eat an enemy warrior believing that by so doing that supernatural power was being transmitted.

When the Buddha died his remains were divided up and placed in a number of different burial mounds called stupas. The storing of the remains of venerated figures in stupas has continued and pilgrimages are made to many of these sites.

The most tragic modern example concerning belief in the magical properties of body parts is that of child sacrifice. This is far more prevalent, especially in West and South-East Africa and in India than is recognised in the Western world. Children are abducted and body parts removed, often while the child is kept alive. Sorcerers who do this have created a market for such body parts, having persuaded many that the body parts and the blood of such innocents has special magical power to enable those willing and able to pay for the privilege to enjoy greater wealth and status and power.

Animism and Tapping Impersonal Supernatural Power

The animistic understanding is that behind all human activity there are not only personal spirit-beings but also an impersonal supernatural force at work. It is completely distinct from physical power. It can act either for good or for evil. It is the explanation for success or failure. One can improve one's lot by learning to possess and control this force. Various names are given to this power, e.g. *mana*, *toh* (many parts of Indonesia), *baraka* (Muslim world), *wakan* (e.g. Sioux), *orenda* (Iroquois) or *universal life energy* (New Age). Compare this with the concept of 'the Force' in the Star Wars movies. The success imparted by this 'medicine' or 'ritual' power is "obtained by time-honoured ritual mechanisms, which can be privatized by an exclusive group and defended by secrecy."³¹

If a man is a successful warrior it will be because of this power. It will not be due in the first instance to his physical strength or skill or the quality of his weapons. Similarly, this power is the primary explanation as to why a net catches many fish. It is the reason why an influential person is able to hold his position. This power can be transmitted in various ways, e.g. an amulet that was once in contact with a person or spirit who possessed this power. A chief is often thought to possess this power and will seek to transmit this to his son by such things as charms, magical songs, mana-laden stones, and secret knowledge.³²

Taboos

The word *taboo* is derived from the Polynesian word *tapu*. If something is taboo then it is prohibited. To violate what is prohibited is not normally considered to involve supernatural consequences. But to violate that which is taboo will offend ancestors or gods and will bring negative supernatural consequences for the individual or community.³³

For the Akan of Ghana it is taboo for a man to have sexual relations with his sister. Were he to do so he would need to placate the ancestors, otherwise fearful supernatural consequences will be experienced. Afriyie observes that African taboos are similar to biblical prohibitions. She reasons, "The fact that these people [sc. non-Jewish people] knew that certain acts destroyed their relationship with the divine should make us aware that God does indeed reveal himself to humanity"

(see Romans 2:13-15).³⁴ While taboos are not necessarily wrong in themselves, not all are physically or spiritually beneficial. For example, the Mamprusi of Ghana have a taboo on children eating eggs that may adversely affect children's health.³⁵

*Feng Shui (Geomancy)*³⁶

Feng shui is Mandarin for "wind water." It presupposes that the only way to live a harmonious and prosperous life is by mirroring the balance of nature in daily life. Feng shui is an ancient Chinese art which especially involves the concepts of Yin and Yang, Chi (Qi) energy, and the five elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water.

All the capital cities of China have followed the rules of feng shui for their design and layout, as do graves and tombs. It is no accident that Beijing was chosen to be the capital of China. It was chosen for this purpose because of its great feng shui. For example, it is surrounded by mountains which is a very important criterion in feng shui theory. This is somewhat ironic since it is precisely this fact that significantly contributes towards Beijing being one of the most air-polluted cities in the world: pollution is unable to escape. Also ironic is the fact that the winds that might drive such pollution away are adversely viewed in feng shui theory, because they are thought to scatter chi ("energy" or "energy flow").

In Hong Kong that when one of the main, highly reputable banks builds a branch or moves into a new office they have to employ an expert to come and tell them where the doors should be situated. In Hong Kong it is very common to consult Feng Shui experts. Even some Chinese architects for big hotels in Sydney are doing this.

Feng shui is an occult practice, "a highly complex scientific and magical system of divination... which is still used to find lucky sites for towns and buildings (dwellings for the living), and cemeteries and graves (dwellings for the dead)."³⁷ Groves notes that the Bendigo Joss House, built in the 1860s by Chinese gold-diggers, was constructed according to feng shui principles. For example, to attract as much chi (the breath of nature) as possible, the joss house faced south.

Poulston notes that in Vancouver, Canada, Henry Wu, the owner of the Metropolitan, has placed black stone lions at the entrance to guard against evil spirits and bring good luck.³⁸

Animism and Personal Spirit-Beings

Animists distinguish between those spirit-beings who have been embodied and those which have not. It is common for the former to be the spirits of ancestors.

We must not assume that animists think of 'personhood' in the same way as Westerners. As Clifford Geertz recognises, the standard modernist view is to think of a person as 'a single entity', 'bounded and integrated, and set contrastingly against other such wholes and against a natural and social background.'³⁹ Maurice Leenhardt contends that "Melanesian persons are not constructed the same way as persons are imagined in the West... [T]he person is more 'outside of himself' than inside; that is, the person is constructed of relationships with other, including beings in the spirit world."⁴⁰

Evil Spirits

Animistic tribes typically assume that spirits are essentially evil and unpredictable and must be approached with extreme caution. Children are raised to share this fear and submission to a variety of spirits.

Implications:

1. To discover which evil spirits are dominating at any particular point in time.
2. To identify and perform the right rituals to temporarily satisfy them.

Methods:

1. Seek secret knowledge through mediums
2. Approach ancestors for help through various rituals, e.g. elaborate dances and festivals.

Ancestral Spirits

One of the great modern problems confronting the Church in the West is that of individualism. There is, of course, immense emphasis in the Bible on the importance of community and the Church itself is *the* community par excellence, the community of salvation. But recognition of the importance of belonging to community sometimes leads to an over-emphasis on the importance of community. For this too has its own set of problems. Indeed, one of the central characteristics of animistic societies is that they are very much community-centred societies. Sadly, this has led to the unbiblical view that the individual *only* has meaning in the context of the community. It has led such societies to unduly value the importance of their own particular community and, along with this, the ancestors who once belonged to this community. For many tribal groups the ancestors are treated as living, accessible beings and, therefore, the land or territory associated with the community and its ancestors becomes all the more important. However, the Chinese illustrate how veneration of ancestors need not be tied to particular territory.

Humble notes the considerable gospel challenge that arises from the fact that many PNG folk “do not feel the closeness and protection of the Holy Spirit and Jesus as they did with their ancestral spirits.” Their extra confidence in ancestral spirits is reinforced by their interpretation of past experience which has convinced them that their ancestral spirits have helped them to win tribal wars and in difficult times.⁴¹ Humble recalls a particular occasion when Hula villagers left food at the grave of a good canoe skipper, with some of them going and talking to the spirits to come and help them win a canoe race.⁴²

Turaki points out that in traditional African thinking, those who die at a mature age continue to function as members of the community and to play an active role in the lives of their descendants.⁴³ Indeed, when a person is dying he or she may be asked to take a message to those who have died before. It is further expected that after death this person will be able to keep on communicating with the living. One reason why it is regarded as crucial to observe burial ceremonies and rituals properly is to ensure the deceased don't return to haunt the living in unpleasant ways.⁴⁴

Turaki further notes that ancestors “are believed to be the custodians of kinship, religion, morality, ethics and customs and are expected to bless the community when traditional customs and beliefs are upheld.” So, on the morning of the 2002 elections in Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, a presidential candidate, offered prayers at his father's mausoleum. Many speculated as to whether by showing such reverence for his ancestor this would give Kenyatta victory.⁴⁵

Turaki also observes that in traditional African religion venerated ancestors are typically male. The Kikuyu of Kenya and the Yoruba of Western Nigeria are notable exceptions to this. But especially venerated ancestors, whether male or female, are “either progenitors of a whole tribe, clan or community, or they are national liberators and defenders of the nation.” So the following liberation fighters now are treated as national ancestors: Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Mnamdi Azikwe (Nigeria), Samora Machel (Mozambique), Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela (South Africa). Sometimes such figures are venerated as if they were gods.⁴⁶

Ancestor worship operates on the premise that ancestors must be well-treated if people are to expect that they will beneficially influence the destinies of the living. Ancestor worship may involve a simple pouring of palm wine accompanying a petition or it could involve animal sacrifices with festivities. When the Yoruba experience drought they declare a national day of repentance, assuming they must have angered the ancestors. To remedy the situation animal sacrifices are made. There are stories that once this is done heavy downpours of rain have followed.⁴⁷

Also reflecting on African cultures, Nkansah-Obrempong observes:

Some people think demons are the spirits of deceased people. However, it would be more accurate to say that demons can impersonate deceased people by appearing in a form that resembles them. Many people in Africa claim to have received messages from deceased family members, delivered either physically or in a dream. Many such incidents actually involve impersonation by demons.⁴⁸

Animism and Shamans

A shaman (‘witch doctor’) may be a man or a woman. He or she is initiated into a line of succession of people who have special or esoteric knowledge of the spirit world. The shaman knows what needs to be done to please the spirits and they guide the people in doing this. Communication with the spirits may take one of two forms:

1. Spiritual possession.
2. Spiritual journey.

Spiritual Possession

Example, state oracle of Tibet.

Entering into the state of being possessed or entranced may be effected through a variety of means, e.g. incantations, familiars, special clothing or paraphernalia (amulets, medicine bags, etc.), special songs or words, fasts, self-flagellation, ingesting alcoholic drinks or hallucinogenic drugs, the application of extreme heat or cold (sweat lodges or chills from immersion).⁴⁹

Possession is often public. Shamans have differing levels of self-awareness and self-control.

What might happen during possession?

1. The shaman communicates with spirits.
2. The shaman offers sacrifices to idols that represent the spirits.
3. The shaman learns of offences that have been committed.
4. The shaman learns of new taboos.
5. The shaman gains more power.

It would be easy to assume that shamans are self-seeking charlatans. However, a shaman may have very altruistic motives and may take considerable risks to serve the community which may be convinced that they are very dependent on the shaman's actions for their own success. Shamans are typically associated with 'white magic' in contrast to witches and sorcerers who exemplify 'black magic.'

Spiritual Journey

The shaman leaves the group or village to travel to the spirit world and this often involves an actual physical journey. The shaman may go to "a special mountain or high place. In societies where the spirit world is distant, the journey involves some type of ladder, cosmic pillar or world tree around which the world revolves. This passage is used to reach the sky or upper levels of the world."⁵⁰

Animism and Mediums

As Bae and van der Merwe observe, following Eliade, "Shamanism is inextricably intertwined with the ancestor cult." It is assumed that shamans are the experts in communicating with the souls of the dead.⁵¹

In the Hebrew Bible the word *ob* is used to refer to a necromancer who professes to call up the dead. This same word is used to describe a bottle made using animal skin. Evidently, the medium was compared to such a bottle, filled with a spirit: "From the belly of the medium come the gurgling, bubbling sounds of the spirit which possessed him/her." Bae and van der Merwe note that this Hebrew word is translated by the Greek word *engastrimuthos*, that is, "ventriloquist", referring to "a person who has the ability to project his/her voice so that it appears to be coming from another person or puppet."⁵²

Concerning King Saul's visit to the medium at Endor, Gbile Akanni comments:

The type of divination in which this medium engaged was common in Palestine and the Middle East and is still common in Africa. Here [sc. 'in Africa'] the spirits of the ancestors are often invoked in times of trouble or difficulty, or by those who want to know what the future holds. The spirits consulted are demonic, but they usually take the shape of someone familiar, impersonating that person in order to oppress others or demand a sacrifice. The spirits also play a role in fortune-telling through astrology and palm reading, and in the Yoruba masquerades of Nigeria and other nations. Their presence is felt in the belief in reincarnation that underlies some names we give babies, as if a deceased person has returned. They are also invoked in ceremonies to call forth the dead at critical times of war in our various cultures. But the Bible strictly forbids any attempt to consult the dead (Deut 18:9-14). God is the only spirit we may seek.

A session with a medium is described in 28:11-14. A familiar figure appears, who may genuinely have been the spirit of Samuel, but who could equally well have been a demon taking on his appearance.

Animism and Divination

Divination involves practices that seek information not available by ordinary means. It may be employed to discover how a person has offended some spirit or to find out who has placed a curse on the enquirer. It may be used to find out how to resolve the problem being addressed, to find out

what the spirit requires or how to respond effectively with a counter-curse. It is also practised as a means of getting guidance concerning important decisions, e.g. when to get married, when to start constructing a building, sign a contract, or make an investment.⁵³

Methods of divination are many: astrology, tarot cards, palm reading, the I Ching, tea-leaf reading, observing how feathers fall, the throwing of cowry shells, omens, dowsing, necromancy (contacting the dead), and interpreting dreams and visions. Adeyemo comments:

Across Africa, it is... believed that serious dreams are a means of communication between this world and the spirit world of the ancestors, divinities and the High God. The living communicate with their ancestors through sacrifices and divination, and the latter respond through dreams and visions, and sometimes through mediums.⁵⁴

Animism and Shape-Shifting

In the southeastern US live the Choctaw people who have told stories of a deer woman (lower half deer and upper half woman) who lures men into the woods and then tramples them to death.⁵⁵

In the original Buddhist Pali scriptures the Buddha's nephew, Devadata, maliciously opposes Shakyamuni and at times seeks to kill him. It is interesting that Devadata is portrayed as someone who can transform himself into a snake and then change himself back to human form. This is but one small example that indicates what any reader can easily discover, namely that Buddhist scriptures presuppose a highly animistic world.

Animism and Death

Sillar observes that Andean people in Peru make a distinction between *ánimo*, "the vitalizing social energy" latent in many entities, and *alma*, "soul", which only humans possess. They believe that unlike *ánimo*, the *alma* continues to exist after death and revisits former communities and fields at the start of each rainy season. Indeed, it is their belief that the *alma* ultimately become part of a community of the dead who do essential agricultural work which complements what the living themselves are doing.⁵⁶

You will find it difficult to sell your house to Chinese if it is the number 4 house in your street, because the Chinese pronunciation of the number four is the first letter in their word for 'death' and, therefore, is considered to mean that it is very unlucky to live in such a house.

Samuel Waje Kunhiyop observes:

In most African societies, witchcraft is the traditional way of explaining any untimely death, particularly that of a young person. Even if the immediate cause of death is disease or a traffic accident, these are regarded as merely material instruments. Similarly, witchcraft is held to be ultimately responsible for such things as infertility, the break-up of a friendship or marriage, failure to win promotions, and political setbacks.⁵⁷

Simfukwe points out how many African rituals associated with burial reflect a fear of the deceased: ...in Zambia the body must be buried with the head pointing in the right direction to prevent the deceased from returning to haunt the living. The burial may be followed by other rituals designed to protect the living, such as passing through the funeral house and washing in medicated water before dispersing. Many tribes have an inheritance ceremony where the name and status of the deceased are passed on to some chosen relative. Ritual protection of the widow or widower is common, with the widow sometimes being inherited by a relative

of the dead husband. The ritual cleansing may even require the surviving spouse to have intercourse with a relative of the deceased in order to protect himself or herself from the spirit of the deceased coming to seek sexual union, which is believed to be both possible and dangerous. The cleansing ritual is also a way of releasing the surviving partner so that he or she may safely enter new sexual relations with the blessing of the family of the dead relative.⁵⁸

In the light of this, Simfukwe counsels,

Because of the spiritual and psychological power of such rituals, Christians should not simply ban them, but should thoughtfully and sensitively replace them with alternative rituals that will meet the spiritual and psychological needs of the fearful widow or widower.⁵⁹

Animism and Social Implications

When the government of PNG first tried to establish a blood bank they faced a problem. People would not give blood, because they feared that by collecting and storing their blood the government would have power over them.⁶⁰

Culture is deeply engrained in each of us. In African society this has meant that not merely nominal Christians but also committed Christians continue to perform animistic rituals. So, commenting on the situation he observes in Africa, Samuel Waje Kunhiyop remarks,

Christian rituals are sometimes seen as little more than a form of protection against witchcraft. Thus mothers 'cover' the beds of their children with the blood of Jesus to ward off witches and evil spirits before putting them to bed. It is also 'poured' out on roads to ward off the witches who cause accidents.⁶¹

Kunhiyop notes the ignorance of professing Christians concerning what the Bible teaches about demons, evil spirits and witchcraft. He attributes this to a "tendency to interpret the Bible in terms of established opinions and beliefs." Accordingly, church leaders and missionaries have tended to simplistically dismiss witchcraft as mere superstition. But they have avoided developing an adequate biblical understanding of witchcraft rooted in the doctrine of evil.⁶²

Animism and Folk Religion

Hiebert defines folk religion as follows:

Folk religion is an *ad hoc mix* of the local expressions of *high religions*⁶³ and *animism*...It is a set of loosely related practices, often mutually contradictory, used not to present a coherent view of reality, but to *produce immediate results*. It provides various courses of action for those facing immediate problems such as drought, plagues, bad fortune, and sudden deaths; for those seeking success in love, farming, business, and school; and for those wanting guidance in making important decisions.⁶⁴

Folk religions typically involve a great deal of animistic thought and practice. It is common in folk religions to see spirits as intermediaries between humans and a higher god.

It needs to be recognised at the outset that all religious ceremonies that involve the worship or veneration of physical idols are necessarily animistic. For, apart from a minority of more philosophically minded devotees, such idols are universally understood to possess the breath or fluid

or spirit of the deity being worshiped. Indeed, after idols are made it is standard for rituals to be performed by priests that seek to animate the idols and effectively make them living beings.

Buddhism and Animism

(See Mike's booklet and separate notes)

<https://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/books-and-booklets>

Hinduism and Animism

(See Mike's booklet)

<https://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/books-and-booklets>

Islam and Animism

See *Spirit World of Islam: 6 Practices*: <https://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/web-resources-on-islam>

Catholicism and Animism

Adherents of Santeria, an Afro-American religion of Caribbean origin, are typically nominally Catholic and their rituals contain Catholic elements. But central to this religion is building relationships with powerful but mortal spirits called Orishas. An Orisha is understood to be a manifestation of God (Oludumare). One major ritual is *bembé*. The Orisha is invited to join the community in drumming, singing and dancing. During the ceremony the Orisha may 'seize the head' of a person or 'mount them' as if they were a horse. The possessed person is then able to perform spectacular dances and to pass on various messages from the Orisha to community members.⁶⁵

On Cerro Rico mountain near Potosi in Bolivia 38 businesses run mines employing some 15,000 miners, including up to 400 children. This mountain is known as "the mountain that eats men." It is estimated that as many as 8 million people have died in these mines since mining began. Every one of these mines has a statue of El Tio, the Devil, in their tunnels. A mining boss, Grover, explains, "[El Tio] has horns because he is the god of the depths." He adds, "Usually we gather here on Fridays to make offerings, in gratitude because he gave us lots of minerals, and so that he will protect us from accidents." What is particularly disturbing, however, is this remark from Grover: "Outside the mines we are Catholics, and when we enter the mine, we worship the devil."⁶⁶

Animism in the Ancient World

The ziggurat and pyramids of Mesopotamia and Egypt were essentially animistic, it being thought that these possessed the power of the cosmic mountain or world pillar and enabled the earthly physical world to be connected with the heavenly spiritual world.

Animism and the Bible

Examples of Animism in the Bible

- The Exodus is cast as spiritual warfare between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt. In the context we see God's power via Moses pitched against and far transcending the animistic sorcery practised by the Egyptian court magicians. It is notable that this animistic sorcery does have real power. In this context the gods of Egypt have a substantial reality. While elsewhere in the Bible it is apparent that there is only one true and living God and that idols have no real existence, it remains the case that idolatry always presupposes demonic presence and activity (1 Corinthians 10:18-22).
- In 1 Samuel 18 we see Saul resorting to animistic practices in seeking to communicate with Samuel via a medium (see above under "Animism and Mediums").
- In Acts 19:18-19 a massive number of scrolls of those who had practised magic but had now turned to Christ are burned.
- In Acts 19:35 it is widely believed by the Ephesians that an image of Artemis fell from heaven, from Jupiter and, accordingly, this has become an object of worship.

A Biblical Response to Animism

At the outset it needs to be recognised that a number of biblical texts demand that God's people utterly shun attempts to resort to divination, sorcery and communication with the dead, e.g. Leviticus 19:26, 28, 31; Deuteronomy 18:9-13; Isaiah 8:19-22. Job recognises that when a man "goes down to the grave" he "does not return" (Job 7:9-10). Further, Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) clearly teaches that it is impossible for the living to communicate with the dead. See too Ecclesiastes 9:4-10.

The Bible begins with the distinction between God as Creator and the reality he creates ("the heavens and the earth"). Prior to creation God is the only Person in existence, a Triune Person: Father, Son and Spirit. The creation of "the heavens" is not to be limited to the creation of the skies or the creation of the material universe beyond the earth. It includes the celestial heavens and the creation of angelic personalities. God does create plants and animals, but while they possess God-given life or breath, they are not persons. The biblical universe only presents us with three types of persons: God himself, angelic beings (good and evil) and human beings.

The creation account is clearly polemic and in sharp contrast to other ancient cosmologies, it refuses to associate natural phenomena with personality. It is patent that the created order, what many now call 'Nature', is most certainly not invested with personality.

Turaki sees some merit in treating Jesus as an ancestor in that "like the ancestor... people can take their problems to him and he does guarantee a better future for those who follow him." Still, Turaki does recognise the danger in treating Jesus as an ancestor, namely the downplaying of Jesus' identity as the Risen Lord of Lords and God himself. Turaki, seeing a parallel in the book of Hebrews, proposes that Jesus be regarded as the one who has fulfilled the African ancestral cult and taken the place of the ancestors, replacing them with himself, so that he becomes the Mediator between God and African society. Consequently, all African veneration, worship and respect for ancestors should now be solely addressed to Jesus as the Mediator.⁶⁷

It is certainly the case that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man and this alone rules out treating ancestors as mediators. However, Turaki, in using the language of fulfilment, is treating such supposed parallels between Jewish religion and the African ancestral cult as what Don Richardson called “redemption analogies.” This is an error, for the relationship between New Testament fulfilment in Christ and the preparatory practices and institutions of Old Testament Jewish religion are utterly unique. Serious damage is done to our doctrines of revelation and salvation to pursue the line recommended by Turaki (and Richardson). In my judgment, Nwankpa, reflecting on Paul’s association of idolatry and demonic activity, sets out the situation correctly:

Unlike Paul, some African theologians have called for the accommodation of African traditional religions, claiming that the High God worshipped in those religions is the same as the God of the Judeo-Christian religion. Some even refer to Jesus as ‘a paramount ancestor.’ By doing this, they validate traditional religious beliefs and worship that the Bible condemns (Exod 20:3-4; Matt 4:10).”⁶⁸

A fuller biblical response also involves understanding and appropriately applying to African culture the reality of what Jesus achieved on the cross, disarming the principalities and powers (Colossians 2:13-15).

Comparisons and Contrasts: Animism and Christianity⁶⁹

Differences Between Animistic Spirit-Beings and the God of the Bible

<i>Animism</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
Limited to one geographical location	Not limited geographically; God of all the earth and the universe (Acts 17:24)
Have power over various aspects of nature	Has power over all things (Acts 17:24)
Depend on our sacrifices	Doesn’t depend on our sacrifices because he has created all things (Acts 17:25), and because he has provided on our behalf the ‘once and for all’ sacrifice (Heb 9:24-10:14)

Differences Between the Animistic Impersonal Force and the God of the Bible

<i>Animism</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
The spiritual forces can be manipulated according to the person’s will	God is not moved or manipulated by charms or by rituals. That which moves God is a repentant and humble heart before him (Ps 51:16-17; Prov 21:3)
The spiritual forces can be used for either good or evil purposes	God is holy and hates that which is evil (Ps 5:4). The Bible teaches that the sacrifice of the wicked is detestable (Prov 21:27).

Animistic and Biblical Worldviews Contrasted⁷⁰

<i>Animism</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
If ‘God’ exists, he is beyond our abilities to know him or communicate with him	God exists, and although he is beyond our comprehension, he is nevertheless knowable. He has made himself know to us through Jesus and the Bible (Heb 1:1-2).

Formal religions are concerned only with the ultimate issues of sin and salvation; but animism offers the power to cope with the immediate, everyday needs.	The God of Christianity is concerned both with the ultimate and immediate issues. God desires to provide not only for our eternal needs but also for our daily needs (1 Pet 5:7).
The spirits are seen as being either intermediaries between us and God or as being representatives of God.	The spirits are deceptive; they seek to take the place of God in our lives.
The spirits and the instruments of magic have the power to do harm to others or to bring benefit to ourselves.	The spirits do have power, but our utilizing such power leads to bondage. God has demonstrated through Jesus Christ that he is greater than the spirits and magic, for 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 John 4:4; see also Ex 8:18) and he has "disarmed the powers and authorities' (Col 2:15). Submitting to God brings freedom (John 8:32-36), not bondage.

Commonalities:

1. Both Christians and animists believe in the existence and the influence of the supernatural.
2. Both believe that offending the supernatural carries consequences.
3. Both have hope of a way to escape the consequences of our sins and errors.
4. Many animists do believe in some form of supreme Being who stands above the spirits and spiritual powers.

Animism and Mission

It is tempting to think that what is needed to bring animists to faith is a conclusive power encounter. Undoubtedly, many have indeed been brought to Christ through power encounters. So, for example, missiologist Alan Tippett notes how during the 19th and 20th centuries many peoples of the South Pacific were converted after experiencing that God's power exceeded that of their ancestral gods. But we need to be wary. As Ott, Strauss and Tennent point out,

Those who choose Christ because they believe he is more powerful may also believe that they can manipulate him – as they tried to manipulate their old gods – to give them the benefits of power that they seek. As soon as they believe the power of another god is more accessible, they may be quick to turn away from Christ.⁷¹

Ott et al., recalls how Israel quickly returned to their old gods, notwithstanding the spectacular defeat of Baal on Mount Carmel. They comment:

While demonstrating the superior power of Christ may stimulate a church-planting movement, any church established solely on that basis is likely to view Christian faith as simply a new form of animism: a way of manipulating God to gain power and material advantage. New converts who believe that they have simply exchanged one source of power for another are likely to slip into syncretism.⁷²

[See too: Alan R. Tippett, "The Evangelization of Animists" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (eds. Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne; William Carey Library / Paternoster Publishing, 1999) 623-631]

Advice for Ministering to Animists

Halverson offers the following counsel:

1. Discuss how dependence on animistic powers is an addiction that leads to bondage.
2. Demonstrate through our lives that God is intensely interested in every aspect of our lives.
3. Point the animist to Scripture.
4. Be prepared to see God work in ways beyond our previous experience or limited expectations.
5. Turn their hearts towards desiring a relationship with God.
6. Address their fears.
7. Point out the deceptive nature of the spirits.

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- ⁶³ High religion is essentially that which is considered orthodox with respect to belief and practices. On this basis "folk religion" or "low religion" is that which deviates from that which is orthodox, with animistic belief and practices especially expressed in such deviations. In practice, the distinction is often forced. Is there any such thing as an orthodox Hinduism that can be distinguished from the particular multitudinous expressions that constitute Hinduism anyway? The same might be said of Buddhism, though an argument might be made that the religion according to the original Pali Scriptures should be regarded as marking orthodoxy. But this too is problematic. It is true that wherever Buddhism has been transplanted it has absorbed pre-existing animistic religions, but this is quite natural given that the original texts are themselves suffused with animism and that Buddhism, for all its philosophy, began as an animistic religion. Also, how are we to regard Mahayana and Vajrayana versions of Buddhism? Where do they stand with respect to orthodoxy or are we going to try and define something that represent orthodox Mahayana and orthodox Vajrayana? Clearly, it will be exceedingly difficult to isolate anything that can be called high religion in Buddhism.
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