Animism, Then and Now

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Animism is a term that many use; yet, few truly understand. Historically, it was the purview of missionaries working among tribal peoples, who soon discovered that it could easily lie beneath the surface of a religious veneer. Today, it has become more pervasive than ever imagined, with former mission fields reverting to traditional religions and the West embracing more provocative aspects of magic, witchcraft, and spiritism.[1]

In its purest form, Animism is defined as the belief that every living thing and, ostensibly, inanimate object, possesses a soul, or is *animated*. Early definitions of animism assumed that all primitive peoples believed every object possessed a soul and was "animated."[2] In 1871, Edward Tylor wrote *Primitive Cultures* and coined the term animism to describe individuals who believed in these other spirits, as he thought that spiritualism (his preferred term)

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[1] For a discussion of the movement of traditional Kikuyu Christians embracing and reviving their traditional animistic practices and beliefs, see Patrick Maina Kamau, "Cultural Revival among Kikuyu Christians: Impact and Implications in the 21st Century," *Spring Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, May, 2024, https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/items/644affdb-c2e3-4d2c-9a92-93d26ba46aa7.

[2] People groups and traditional religions that are labeled as animists are incredibly diverse. Some "animists" believe that certain rocks and trees possess a spirit or soul, but in this author's experience, others do not. Animistic beliefs are as varied as the people who hold them, and it is important to understand that early attempts to understand tribal people and traditional religions sometimes fostered gross generalizations. For more information on the evolution of the term, see Tiddy Smith, "Animism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/animism/.

would be misunderstood.[3] Because of Tylor's penchant to overgeneralize, animism might not be the most accurate term to describe the worldview of traditional religions steeped in spiritism and witchcraft. Yet, it has become the popular word to describe people worldwide who believe that unseen spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces influence every aspect of daily life.

Fascinatingly, as formal religions grow in some places and Western influence and secularism increase in others, animism is rising everywhere. Animism is a pervasive, syncretistic weed of a worldview that can thrive equally among the most religious or on atheistic college campuses. This article will argue that its influence can be observed from various ancient folk religions around the world to this generation's fascination with the supernatural, magic, and anime (an ironic word choice). These animists range from the religious constructs of Shintoism in Japan, which navigate the spiritual world of the Kami, to the Amazonian who offers sacrifices to ancestral spirits for a successful hunt, to the American who appeals to a fortune teller for guidance from loved ones who have passed away.

From Tylor to Today

Thirty-five years ago, Gailyn Van Rheenen penned his classic, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*.[4] Although the book has never been revised, it remains a seminal work for missionaries and Christian anthropologists

[3] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1871), 385. While Tylor uses the term animism broadly, he was trying to focus on what he believed to be the most primitive form of religion. He tended to speculate in armchair anthropology and relied on anecdotal evidence from missionaries and other observers. In the late 19th century, *Spiritualism* and mediums were quite fashionable in England, so he preferred the term animism to not conflate what primitive peoples were doing in other parts of the world with what some in Europe practiced. This would have interfered with his unilinear evolutionary hypothesis of religion.

[4] Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

studying animism worldwide. This work serves as an approachable primer on all aspects of animism, blending academic missiology with personal experience from his time as a field missionary among the Kipsigis in Kenya. Although this article is not intended to be a review of *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts,* Van Rheenen's work provides an appropriate springboard for discussing animism today.

One would be hard pressed to find a better definition of animism than what Van Rheenen offered in 1991: "*Animism is the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power*."[5] His definition holds several key themes that should be explored again in current animistic contexts. This definition emphasizes the concept of a *belief system,* the *holistic nature of beings and forces,* the *centrality of human affairs,* and the core tenet of *power* that binds the animistic worldview together.

The Animistic Belief System

Some would describe animism as a religion; however, this is somewhat of a misunderstanding.[6] While there are elements of religious belief in animism and some consistency among animistic expressions worldwide, animism is not a codified religion but rather a worldview perspective with a loosely held set of religious beliefs. For example, the expression of animism in

[5] Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ,* 20.

[6] Tylor was one of those who not only saw Animism as a religious expression, but also as the primordial form of all religions. However, Katherine Swancutt's excellent article argues that "Animism is a particular sensibility and way of relating to various beings in the world." While all animism has religious aspects, it is more of a worldview perspective and ontology than a religious system. See Katherine Swancutt, "Animism," *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology,* June 25, 2019, https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/animism#:/~:text =Although%20the%20term%20'animism'%20can,physical%20processes%20in%20the%20body.

Africa is often referred to as ATR (African Traditional Religion). Yet, ATR varies broadly across the continent of Africa, and the aspects of ATR that are consistent from people group to people group are often those that are more common to animism than to formal religion.

Winifred Corduan defines religion as "A system of beliefs that by practicing its cultus directs a person toward transcendence and, thus, provides meaning and coherence to a person's life."[7] Animism and Traditional Religions are systems, but they are so varied and contextually specific that it is difficult to classify or group them. Corduan reminds us that a formal religion has a system, a cultus or set of beliefs and practices, and a purpose (which he names transcendence). Formal religions are consistent and codified, possessing a history, a founder, and often a priesthood and sacred writings that define their theology. Animistic expressions (such as ATR, for example) typically lack those elements.[8] Traditional religions around the world are much more nebulous and contextually determined. They often manifest syncretistically within other formal religions, creating constructs like Folk Islam or Folk Christianity. Yet, the animistic concepts found in Van Rheenen's definition of beings and forces, the centrality of human affairs, and the tensions between fear and power are fairly consistent across all animistic, traditional religions.

This raises the question, if animism is a system but not a religion, then how is it systematic? A survey of animistic cultures worldwide reveals remarkable similarities in certain worldview characteristics.[9] *First, animism posits that the unseen world is as real and relevant as the physical world in which we live*. In fact, animists believe that the spiritual realm impacts all aspects

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[7] Winifred Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religion,* 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2024), 16.

[8] Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists,* (Columbia, SC: Impact International Foundation, 1996), 44.

[9] Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ,* 27. He remarks that "animism is not a consistent worldview, but a multiplicity of worldviews with similar characteristics."

of the physical realm. *Second, animists tend to have a holistic worldview.* They see no distinction between the seen and unseen; all coexist in cosmic harmony. Western Platonic dualism resists that notion. Paul Hiebert called this tendency the "flaw of the excluded middle."[10] This refers to the fact that the post-Enlightenment West has historically maintained a scientific perspective on the physical world and a sterile, distant perspective on the unseen world, which involves God, heaven, and the afterlife. Animists, Hiebert would argue, believe in a middle realm where spirits, ancestors, magic, and other forces influence daily life in the present, physical realm.

In recent decades, evangelical missionaries have attempted to address this *flaw of the excluded middle* by being more thorough in contextualization and resisting the influences of their own Western, scientific worldview. Many teach a biblical cosmology in tribal contexts, which includes biblical emphases on the reality of the spiritual world and the cosmic connection of the seen and unseen realms. This unseen realm is rightly populated with biblical examples of spiritual beings, such as angels and demons, and the focus is rightly centered on God and the spiritual battle being waged in the heavenly realms. Yet, for some animistic peoples, this attempt to address the *excluded middle* has only resulted in an "expanded middle."[11] Instead of replacing their animistic cosmology with a biblical one, they have syncretized biblical Christianity with animism and simply added to their existing worldview.

[10] See his original treatment of this phenomenon in Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* 10, no. 1 (Jan 1982).

[11] A. Scott Moreau, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Reference Library, 2000), 363. Hiebert mentions two possible extremes when dealing with the excluded middle: one was to reject it altogether, and the other was to attribute every circumstance to spirits and magic. Moreau coined this second excess as "the expanded middle."

The Holistic Nature of Beings and Forces

Besides identifying animism as a belief system, Van Rheenen's definition emphasizes the reality of spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces that work in tandem. He says, "Beings are personal spirits that include God, gods, ancestors, ghosts, totemic spirits, nature spirits, angels, demons, and Satan."[12] Additionally, he continues, "Forces are impersonal powers. They include the power behind the use of magic, astrology, witchcraft, the evil eye, and other related phenomena."[13] While these concepts vary widely in animistic contexts, they are consistent in that aspects of spiritual beings and magical forces are found in every animistic society worldwide.[14]

Animists believe both beings and forces tend to be ambivalent toward the physical world. Magic can be either good or bad, used for healing or for harm. In Zambia, nothing occurs by coincidence because all physical issues have a spiritual origin.[15] When someone in the village dies, there is a spiritual reason and a person responsible. Typically, a person dies because someone employs evil magic to kill them. It is then necessary for the bereaved family to hire a Witchfinder to determine who is responsible. Yet, the Witchfinder uses magic to find the witch accused of committing murder through magic, and sometimes the witch who used the evil magic purchased the magic charm from the very Witchfinder employed to uncover him or her. Magic is

[12] Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts,* 21.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid. 19. Van Rheenen notes that in animistic societies, beings and forces tend to blend, and there is not always a clear differentiation between the two. R.H. Codrington (a missionary and contemporary of Tylor) first posited the idea of this impersonal spiritual force in his work among the Melanesians. [See R.H. Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891)]. He utilized their term *mana* to describe this impersonal spiritual force, akin to the English word *magic*. Tylor's and Codrington's differentiation between beings and forces led to this popular distinction in anthropology.

[15] All examples noted from Sub-Saharan Africa are derived from this author's twenty-seven years of experience on the continent as a church planter, educator, and cultural anthropologist who engaged in ethnographic research among animistic peoples.

a force that can be used for good or evil, depending on the character of the one who wields it.

Other forces are often contextually specific, like *Baraka* in East Africa or the "Evil Eye" in Central Asia. *Baraka* is the Kiswahili word for blessing, but it is a loaded term in an animistic worldview. It is common in Kenya for people to ask for a blessing or to give a blessing, and the power of the blessing is often connected to the power of the person more than the power of God. This worldview aligns seamlessly with Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. The "man of God," or prophet in a local church, is often paid to pray for people and bestow *baraka* upon them because he has some spiritual quality that ordinary Christians do not possess. Often, the practices of faith healers in Africa are indistinguishable from those of the witch doctor before Christianity came. The "evil eye" is another animistic concept where someone has the power to curse you through a malevolent glare. Blue amulets are prevalent across the Muslim world, which are said to protect the owner from the evil eye and will often absorb its power, breaking in the process, indicating that a new one needs to be purchased.

Personal spiritual beings can include God or gods, but they are often more accurately described as ancestral spirits, clan spirits, nature spirits, or angelic beings such as demons or jinn.[16] While these beings can be ambivalent toward people in the physical world, they do interact with them. Therefore, it is necessary to appease them if one has wronged them somehow, or to appeal to them if one needs something specific. These personal spiritual beings often serve as guardians against the breaking of taboos. In the Northwestern Province of Zambia, it is common for the spirit of a recently deceased person to inhabit their coffin during the burial, leading the pallbearers to find the offender who cursed them, and confronting them from beyond the grave. The accused must pay a fine to the deceased's family and confess before they can be released, and before the pallbearers can be

[16] See Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts,* 237-273.

freed from the influence of the ancestral spirit controlling them. In many parts of the world, people make sacrifices to placate offended spirits or offer gifts to appeal to the living dead to meet their needs or intercede with God, who will then resolve their problems.

Animistic people reside in the delicate liminal space between the physical and the spiritual, often navigating their lives as if they are traversing a minefield. They carefully avoid upsetting the spirits that govern their lives while thoughtfully selecting the right means to appeal to them for assistance. These personal spirits and impersonal forces are whimsical, capable of causing harm as easily as providing help. Consequently, the power of fear influences the animist in their day-to-day existence. These beings are not worthy of worship and certainly cannot be trusted, yet they remain indispensable to daily life. Life becomes a delicate balance between placation and manipulation of forces that transcend human control.

Centrality of Human Affairs

Another subtle nuance of Van Rheenen's definition is the centrality of human affairs. At the end of the day, selfishness drives animism and folk religion as much as fear does. This is why animism is more of a worldview than a religion, though it has religious overtones. The heart of animism is not about worshipping a God who is worthy or about the beauty of grace and the power of His love. The question at the heart of animism is, "How can I get what I need today?" It is not just about figuring out which spiritual force or being is affecting me, but "how can I ensure they are working for my good, and even, how can I manipulate them to ensure my success?"

For the animist, problems are always spiritual in origin, even if they are physical in manifestation. Problems like hunger, sickness, poverty, etc., are real-world problems with an unseen world source. Additionally, they also have a spiritual, unseen realm solution.[17] Thus, the animist navigates his

[17] Steyne, *Gods of Power,* 37.

day-to-day earthly affairs by operating correctly in the spiritual realm. The right charm or fetish, avoiding taboos, placating ancestors who are watching, and following all relational protocols using traditional means are the kinds of earthly actions that ensure spiritual success. This focus on human affairs means that jealousy is a huge hurdle for most in the animistic world, and the most important thing one can do is live a layered, secretive life in a complex, high-context, indirect world.

Core Tenet of Power

One final aspect of Van Rheenen's definition that must not be overlooked is the importance of power. Fear has already been mentioned as a significant motivator in animistic societies. The opposite force of fear is power.[18] Animists tend to fear what might happen, and they live their lives cautiously to prevent that fear from becoming a reality. These spiritual forces and beings are not benevolent unless properly manipulated, so one must be mindful of how they live. This proclivity for fear and the feeling of powerlessness are likely contributing factors to the success of the gospel among some tribal peoples.

The gospel offers a relationship with the Supreme God of the Universe, who loves us and died for our sins. His gift of salvation is one of grace that cannot be earned. This is good news for those who spend their lives trying to be good enough to elicit benevolence from spiritual beings they do not personally know or trust. Jesus provides power over sin and death, as well as abundant life today. These are compelling answers to the questions that animists are asking, and it is no wonder that historically there was significant

[18] See Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures*. (Middletown, DE: Time Press, 2017), 25. This book covers the recent missiological discussion of cultural paradigms that influence various parts of the world. Those constructs include shame/honor, guilt/innocence, and fear/power. Contrasts of fear and power are significant in the tribal, animistic world.

gospel advance in places like Africa, South America, and even ancient pagan Europe. Yet, as this article has already mentioned, there were also pitfalls.

One major pitfall is syncretism. Often, animists and followers of traditional religions will add Jesus to their existing religious worldview, making Him one of many spiritual beings they appeal to. This is especially true in polytheistic traditional religions like Folk Buddhism and Folk Hinduism. Additionally, the quest for power over life's circumstances has led many animists to view the gospel as another magic charm or the sinner's prayer as a magic incantation rather than as an expression of repentance and faith. This author has personally observed believers in African churches respond to multiple invitations and pray to receive Christ several times, just to cover their bases. This not only exposes the weakness of their faith but also reflects a misunderstanding of salvation.

This approach to the gospel sees it much like a magic charm that might work for a while but must be renewed if one sins again. Animism is a works-oriented worldview; you are rewarded by the spirits for following the rules and punished by them for breaking the rules. They have their own reasons for helping you, and so there is no grace involved, only mutually aligned interests between you and the spirits. When this worldview is translated into a commitment to Christ, it is challenging for the new believer to grasp concepts like grace, the love of God, or that Jesus does more than just temporarily cleanse you; you are actually reborn as a new creation. Animistic cosmology has no space for concepts like this, so while it seems that many respond in faith, some are seeking power for living and are not truly being converted.

Even the animist's perception of sin is not always biblically aligned. Sin is not the violation of biblical principles and offending a holy God, but instead, it is the violation of cultural norms and doing things that displease the spirits or others in the community. Thus, if something is done secretly and no one knows, it is not a sin. However, once the sin becomes public, one becomes guilty. In many cases, animistic people are driven by shame and honor, and

sin is not sin unless it brings shame to the individual and his community. When sharing the gospel with someone from an animist background, one must emphasize personal responsibility and the holiness of God. There is a difference between worldly repentance, which comes from being caught, and godly repentance, which comes from a broken heart that realizes it has offended the holy God.

Conclusion

The worldview perspective of animism is fascinating and complex; however, it is not one to take lightly. Christianity has made significant advances among tribal, animistic peoples and folk religions with traditional, animistic undertones. Yet, as Christianity has spread, there is a growing sense that, beneath the surface, little has changed. In some areas, we observe individuals returning to traditional religions and labeling Christianity as colonial Western oppression rather than the faith of the one true God. In other regions, we see a thin veneer of Christianity overlaying a deep-seated syncretistic worldview where animism flourishes unchecked by the gospel message. Still, in other locations that have become fully secular, there exists a revival of latent animism influencing those who have no confidence in the Bible as the word of God but who hold every confidence in the constructs of magic, werewolves, vampires, and Eastern mysticism.[19]

[19] This author contends that Animism is currently reviving in the secular West, particularly in the United States. If one agrees with Van Rheenen's perspective that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces are the central tenets of animism, one can observe a growing fascination with those things in American society. The influence of the New Age movement is a growing desire for spirituality that satisfies one's emotional needs, divorced from accountability to and a relationship with Jesus. This has been coupled with animistic constructs (beings and forces) that reside in our pagan history. Magic, werewolves, witches, vampires, and other monsters are not recent Hollywood inventions, but aspects from America's pagan, European prehistory. Japanese Anime leans heavily on the animism of Shintoism, and even Zombies and the living dead are embedded in the mythology of African Traditional Religion and Voodoo. While Hollywood and Western secularism often attempt to tie these storylines to plausible scientific or alien phenomena, the forms employed are almost exclusively animistic in origin. It appears the West is returning to

Some of this is driven by Hollywood, and some by idle fascination with New Age ideas. Yet, one wonders if there is not a bit of latent animism worldwide. The quest for power and the fear of the unknown are universal, sinful conditions, and the focus on self and the desire to succeed through one's own cleverness and strength are characteristics of every lost person who ever lived. Perhaps the tribal, pagan groups of today are more culturally inclined to be openly animistic. Yet, if you dig far enough back into the history of any people group, you find animistic roots. This is why animism and paganism were rife in the Bible, and perhaps why they are so universal today. Animism existed then and still exists now. The only answer to the deep, pervasive roots of animism is genuine life change through repentance and faith. Without true conversion, animistic peoples will simply be inoculated to the gospel instead of being changed by it.

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its animistic roots of paganism, with a good dose of hedonism thrown in as well. For connected research, see https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/