Moments after hearing a sermon on Jesus Christ as being the only true way to access the power of God, one of the oldest ladies in the congregation told the pastor about the buckeye she keeps in her pocket for good luck. This woman did not have war paint on her face, a life-force pack on her waist, or a crystal ball at home, but she was nonetheless flirting with animism. Contrary to popular belief, “Animism . . . is not merely the religion of tribal societies. Animism is prevalent in every continent and is part of every culture, although it is more formative in some than others.”¹

Animism is alive and well today, even after secularists declared it dead, a remnant, as they said, left behind as the world evolved culturally and such ‘primitive’ beliefs only resided in the history books. Animism must be dealt with everywhere on earth in order for the pure gospel to go forth. This paper will show the need to understand and minister among animists by describing the issue of animism, then explaining the significance of the issue for missiology today, and concluding with a survey of current missionary practices dealing with animism.

**Describing Animism**

Animism is probably the most diverse worldview that can be encountered by a world traveler. In order to proceed with a discussion of the topic, a succinct definition needs to first be laid down. Next, a survey of the historical study of animism will be examined in order to show

---

the progression of understanding and classification of the topic. This section will conclude by unpacking the animistic worldview so that ministers of the gospel might recognize its tendencies.

**Definition and History of Animism**

Animism first came to be spoken of as such in an 1873 book called *Religion in Primitive Culture* by Edward B. Taylor. Taylor’s definition called animism “the doctrine of Spiritual Beings.”

Using such a basic definition would mean that even Christianity must be classified under animism. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s anthropologists and missionaries began to understand more and more about the spirit realm of the people they studied. Further insight led to animism becoming associated next with impersonal spiritual beings. Later it was discovered that many people spoke of personal and known beings such as recently departed ancestors having magical powers and influence on the living. Animism was becoming more complex than was first thought. As evolutionary science bled into other disciplines such as anthropology, animism was classified as the most primitive religion, the one from which higher religions like Hinduism and Buddhism evolved.

Early terminology like primitive, savage, pagan, and heathen beliefs have fallen out of favor, however and ‘animism’ or ‘folk religion’ are the preferred terms today.

Animism is a wide and complex subject so Van Rheenen’s definition will be used for the purposes of this paper. He describes animism as “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.

---


Animism is a belief system or worldview just like naturalism, Hinduism, and the biblical worldview. Animism is about power and fear. Rivers, mountain peaks, trees, trails, and the spirits that inhabit them all have power to influence human events. People living under the animistic worldview need to discover which spirits are doing what and then how to manipulate them for gain. For example, the first inclination when one is sick is not to perceive a germ to be the cause, but rather some spiritual influence or imbalance. Animism comes in many forms and blends easily with every other worldview and religion.

Animists will not agree that all spirits are evil and can only be manipulated for harmful purposes. One atheistic anthropologist turned shaman realizes that modern western medicine is not always adequate to completely solve the problems of those who are ill or wish to avoid illness.\(^5\) Into this middle ground between cause and disease, between spirit and material, one finds the animistic worldview.

**The Animistic Worldview**

There are three main levels or realms that compose the animistic worldview. These levels, from top to bottom, are 1) belief in some cosmic high god, 2) belief in the spirit middle where several kinds of spirits reside and exercise control, and 3) everyday life issues such as farming, having children, or being successful on the job. For most animists the spirit middle and everyday life co-mingle so closely that it can be difficult to distinguish one from the other.

First, the cosmic high god is present across the animistic world. This being created the world and is responsible for all things that exist, but is often depicted in an impersonal, distant, 

---

\(^4\)Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, 20.

and unknowable way. The cosmic creator may live in the heavens or the sky, is powerful, and is the giver of the rain, crops, game, children, and success in life. The high god was usually once close to earth but some act of folly by the ancestors caused him or her to depart in anger, leaving humans to fend for themselves. People may still remember him but any attempted interaction is rare. The high god is often not worshipped directly as he has left the world to be managed by lesser gods, spirits, and humans.

The next level comprising the animistic worldview is the spirit middle. Here the familiar spirits reside. Most small communities have their own list of deities that inhabit their land. These spirits often mediate between the transcendental world of spirits and the flawed and material world of humans. Spirits can be grouped into categories of good or malevolent and additionally according to the power sphere they control such as wealth, health, fertility, or crop success.

Cooperation must exist between the spirit world and the human material world. In the arctic, for example, the Inuit must partner with the spirit of the animal being hunted. An Inuk never says he killed an animal. Rather, he catches it. The partnership with the animal’s spirit allows the animal to be caught and used for food or skin. Elaborate rituals and appeasements must be carried out by animists in order to keep this partnership healthy. If a rift occurs in the relationship the animals may disappear.

Spirits may be further classified as departed ancestors, ghosts, demons, angels, or the

---


7Ibid., 52.

8Ibid., 53.

9Interview by the author of an Inuk elder in Iqaluit, Nunavut June, 2009.
unborn. Each type of spirit may require specific appeasement rituals in order to gain the favor and goodwill of the spirit. Ancestor worship often requires the entire family to participate and if one member does not, everyone is affected. This makes it difficult for a singular Christian in the family to continue to live in a household of animists.\(^{10}\) Ghosts are the spirits that result from unfulfilled lives, sudden, or strange deaths. Ghosts may cause sickness or bad luck until something is done to appease them and allow them to enter the afterlife or travel to the land of the ancestors.

In addition to these spirits, which are typically personal in some way, the middle level of the animistic worldview contains impersonal forces. Forces are distinguished from spirits because of their impersonal nature. Forces can be described as powers like astrology, the evil eye, charms, amulets, or the life pack.\(^{11}\) These items or relics are used to exert control over the spiritual realm by causing a wanted action to take place or repelling an action inflicted by someone else’s manipulation of the spirits.

The lowest level in the animist’s worldview is the realm of everyday life. Nature is alive with spirits, either something being a spirit in itself or harboring a spirit. Matters like health, wealth, fertility, and success can all be influenced by the spirit world. Animists believe in the inner life force, the pervading energy giving health and strength. When the life force departs or is weak, the person will feel weak, forgetful, sick, or unlucky.\(^{12}\) Successful living results from a constant search for appeasement of the spirit world. This appeasement occurs by some sacrifice, ritual, or perhaps by the use of magic.

\(^{10}\)Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 61.

\(^{11}\)Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ*, 21.

Magic is used to control supernatural forces by the use of chants, amulets, or rituals. Animistic magic comes in two forms: homeopathy and contagion. Homeopathy, or sympathy, is the magic where like produces like. Actions done to a voodoo doll inflict the same pain on the person the doll represents. The shaman pours water in order to cause rain, or the crowd at the football game leans left in hopes that the field goal attempt will be successful.\textsuperscript{13} The second form of magic, contagion, works when things come in contact with each other and then carry continuous residual effect. Putting a powerful item in someone’s house or cursing someone in their presence are examples of magic by contagion.\textsuperscript{14} Success when dealing in magic depends on the strength of life force of the shaman or other person enacting the ritual. Magic is used for pragmatic purposes and can be good or bad.

In summary, the animistic worldview is composed of a high cosmic god, a middle level of spirits and forces, and the level of humans who seek to live among the spirits. Animism is based on fear of spirits and efforts to acquire the knowledge and power to manipulate the spirit world for personal gain. The following list shows how a power driven animism has blended with Islam and suffices as a good summary of the worldview.

Components of Animistic Islam:\textsuperscript{15}
1. Power Beings: Demons, Angels, and Jinn
2. Power Persons: Imam or Shaman, family patriarch or matriarch
3. Power Objects: Quranic verses, life pack, amulet, or charms
4. Power Places: Mecca, saint’s tombs, rock outcrop, waterfall, field, hut, or a deceased person’s bedroom
5. Power Times: Muhammad’s Birthday, pilgrimage time, festival days, or a ‘day of the ancestors’
6. Power Rituals: Formulaic prayers, ceremonies like sword ladder, sacrifices, or a prayer rug

\textsuperscript{13}\textsuperscript{Ibid., 69.}
\textsuperscript{14}\textsuperscript{Ibid., 70.}
\textsuperscript{15}\textsuperscript{Based on a table in J. Dudley Woodberry, “The Relevance of Power Ministries for Folk Muslims” in Wrestling With Dark Angels, C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Pennoyer, eds. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 319.}
Significance of Animism for Missions

The most important reason for missiologists to understand animism is because most of the people coming to Christ in the world come out of an animistic context. Western missionaries are not as familiar with animism as are ministers from other backgrounds. Because of animism’s pervasive syncretistic nature missionaries are likely to encounter its tendencies in almost every culture. Stephen Neill estimates that at least 40% of the world bases its lives on pure animistic thinking and Parshall believes 70% of all Muslims are in fact animistic folk Muslims. Animism is worldwide and must not be neglected.

Another reason that understanding animism is important is because many animistic legends have similarities with the biblical narrative and can serve as bridges to the gospel. It is said that the python is sacred in parts of West Africa. The Fon and Ashanti peoples have a myth linking the python to the original man and woman. In one story, the python opened man’s eyes to the world and in another similar story the snake made the first people aware of sex. There are surprising links between the animistic worldview, the legends found therein, and the Bible. Don Richardson wrote a book called *Eternity in Their Eyes* that examines gospel bridges in animistic cultures worldwide. Missionaries would do well to learn as much as they can from the creation and cultural legends of the people with whom they work.

Furthermore, Christians have every answer to the animistic worldview, however Westerners often do not possess the tools necessary to detect and analyze the worldview.

---

16 Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, 11.


Missionaries need to learn the right questions to ask and when to ask them. Good questions are why certain clothes are worn, what colors mean, and what places are to be avoided and why. Good occasions to ask such questions are in times of crisis, during illnesses, at weddings, funerals, dedications, and rites of passage. Westerners may view the world in terms of High and Low religions, God and man, but have a hard time understanding how they fit together. Often, it is thought there is not much interaction between the levels or, if so, in a mysterious and removed sort of way. Paul Hiebert broke new ground in this area in his now famous work ‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle.’ Hiebert shows that animists do not make the typical western dichotomy between natural and supernatural and that the middle level of the spirit world plays a crucial role in the lives of animists.\(^\text{20}\)

Without a significant understanding of the animistic worldview, syncretism is bound to occur in the indigenous church. Oftentimes the western missionary is the last to know about the blending of religion because he has no category for understanding the spiritual world of his target people. The wide distribution of animism makes it a significant issue in missions today.

**Current Missiological Trends Dealing with Animism**

There was a time when missionaries gave no concern for the animistic practices encountered on the field. Western cultural baggage was added to the gospel as converts were made to speak English, dress like westerners, and sit on wooden pews in church singing out of a hymnal. As an overreaction to the lack of contextualization some missionaries began to uncritically contextualize the gospel as pagan and animistic rituals were ‘baptized’ by the missionary and allowed to continue. Today many missionaries rightly see the danger in uncritical contextualization and have begun to critically contextualize the gospel. Critical

\(^{20}\text{Van Rheenen, Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts, 55.}\)
contextualization is the first point of importance with current missiological trends. While Christianity is above the criticisms of other religions theologically, it is important for missionaries to humbly listen and learn as much as they can as they enter a new culture. As noted above, animists seek practical answers to everyday life issues. If missionaries fail to understand the complexity of these issues syncretism will occur.

There are two types of encounters often used in the fear and power driven animistic context. These are the power encounter and the truth encounter. The classical biblical power encounter is the Mount Carmel context in 1 Kings 18. God shows He is more powerful than the Baal priests and their gods. Current missiological practice involves teaching missionaries to cast out demons and defeat evil spirits and witchcraft. One African witch turned Christian claims to now be a witch in the Holy Spirit and has great power over the spirits that oppress people in his village. Other examples of power encounters are entering homes or buildings known to be controlled by demons and destroying animistic relics such as amulets and life-packs. Current proponents of power encounter are Peter Wagner, Tom White, and Charles Kraft.

While power encounter involves the direct physical presence of a Spirit anointed believer, truth encounter involves the use of scripture to overcome demonic influence. A believer may be plagued with persistent evil thoughts, so a pastor will recommend certain Bible passages to be memorized and meditated on. The Word of God is said to be powerful in and of itself and as the promises found in scripture are claimed, the evil thoughts and Satan must flee. Truth encounters are common in counseling sessions in the United States and abroad. One must

---


be careful to not manipulate scripture for one’s own gain however or reduce Bible verses to magical formulas guaranteed to produce results. Neil Anderson is a current practitioner of the truth encounter and regularly writes on the topic.

Missiologists, like theologians, tend to be drawn toward areas of personal preference, sometimes to the exclusion of the broader picture. Those set firmly on using power encounters may fail to address deeper issues of sin in the lives of animists. The gospel and Jesus Christ can be reduced to just another spirit in the animist’s world, albeit the most powerful spirit. The gospel speaks to the spirit world, certainly, as Jesus regularly shows Himself to be Lord of nature, sickness, spirits, and death in the Gospels. Jesus did not come just to free captives from bondage to spiritual powers, He came to seek and save sinners. Sin separates people from God and Jesus is the remedy. If one is not careful, animists may overlook this essential element of the gospel in order to gain power over the spirits.

The answer to avoiding leaning too far towards power evangelism and syncretism is to present the gospel with a wholistic approach. The missionary must understand enough of the culture to select Bible stories that both address sin and give animists a biblical context for dealing with everyday life issues like fertility, crop success, and gaining a spouse. Excluding the middle level of the spirit realm and moving straight to the creator will allow for animists to continue practicing their rituals required for successful cooperation with the intermediary spirits. Wholistic ministry does not stop upon conversion. The missionary must be willing to stay and invest in the lives of the people and help them sort out cultural issues in a contextualized way. The missionary must teach the former animists how to address cultural issues themselves, applying scripture to their lives, and coming to a consensus to biblically deal with the issue. Anything but a wholistic approach to evangelism will likely result in syncretism and the
missionary may be the last to know about it.

**Conclusion**

Animism is a crucial topic for missionaries to understand today. Many of the peoples coming to Christ around the world come from an animistic context. Animism blends so well with other religions that one will find animistic tendencies in nearly every mission context on every continent. Westerners are often ill equipped to deal with the animistic context in a wholistic way. The principles described in this paper form the beginning steps a missionary must take to understand animism and be an effective church planter. Contrary to early evolutionary sociologist’s predictions, animism is alive and well and will sour the whole of the gospel dough if the source is not understood and rooted out. Missionaries who desire to see a pure gospel produce a pure church will heed the warning and become adept at ministering to animists, whether they work in New Guinea or New York City.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Articles
