

## **Animism: The Default Religion of the World**

*You're probably going to serve in an animistic culture*

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Introduction: If you're a missionary, you're probably going to serve in an animistic culture. If you go to Brazil thinking you're going to a Catholic country, you will be in for a rude awakening. If you go to Cambodia thinking you're going to a Buddhist country, you will be in for a rude awakening. If you go to Somalia thinking you're going to a Muslim country, you will be in for a rude awakening. If you go to Uganda thinking that you are going to a nominally Protestant country, you will be in for a rude awakening. And if, after being in one of these countries for a number of years, you continue in your misunderstanding, you will not be as effective as you could be in your missionary work.

Why? Because a strong case can be made that all of those countries are predominantly animistic, and that their "official" religion (Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism) is merely a thin veneer over a deeply ingrained animistic worldview. (Even the "secular" West is quickly turning to animism in the form of new age philosophy.)

Cambodia is a case in point. Ninety-five percent of Cambodians call themselves Buddhist, but like most Christians in America, their "main" religion doesn't impact their lives at all. Apart from going to the pagoda three or four times a year for a ceremony, the typical Cambodian's life is not affected that much by Buddhism. If he really wants to get something important accomplished, like succeed in business, or get a spouse, or make someone fall in love with him, or pass an exam, or take a curse off, or be cured of a disease, he doesn't go to the pagoda but to the local animistic shaman, the person who can really shake the unseen world that controls every single aspect of his life. And then he might give an offering of some kind to a demonic spirit. Even though Buddha himself taught against such superstition, every Cambodian home has a small god house in the front yard where incense is burned and offerings of food are presented daily. Even the Buddhist pagodas have god houses! This is pure animism. In Thailand it is even worse. The Buddhist priests themselves have become the shamans, and the Thai go to them to take off curses, exorcize demons, be successful in business, and receive healing.

How widespread is animism? Over 2 billion people are involved in animism of one kind or another, almost all of them in the part of the world that is considered "unreached." "The unreached world as a whole is animistic as its base."<sup>1</sup> You can't prepare for pioneer missions without being familiar with animism.

The missionary who doesn't understand the all-pervasive influence of animism in his target culture will be ill-prepared to understand what is going on around him every day in the lives of those he came to reach.

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<sup>1</sup> Gailyn Van Rhee, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1991, p. 25.

## I. What is Animism?

What is animism? Gailyn Van Rheenen *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*: “[T]he 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Although animism takes thousands of forms, from astrology charts to human sacrifice, missiologist Gailyn Van Rheenen lists some characteristics of animism that are generally true across the board.

### A. Animism is a belief *system*

Like all worldviews, animism is a complete and coherent system. It is a belief system that “assumes that the seen world is related to the unseen; an interaction exists between the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, the holy and the secular. Personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces everywhere are thought to be shaping what happens in the animists’ world. Animists live in continual fear of these powers.”<sup>3</sup> The animist believes that virtually every event in his life is affected by these powers, for good or bad.

Because animism is a complete system, it answers all the questions in a person’s life, just as your Christian worldview answers all the questions in your life: Where do you come from? Where are you going? How did everything get here? Where does sickness come from?

### B. Animism is a belief in *beings and forces*

*Beings* are personal spirits, like ghosts, demons, angels gods, and even God (Balaam). *Forces*, on the other hand, are impersonal powers, such as the power behind voodoo, astrology, and karma.

Does the animist believe more in personal spirit beings or in impersonal forces? Usually all of the above. The animist believes in the existence of so many beings and forces in the world that he lives in constant uncertainty and fear about which spirit he has offended or which power needs to be appeased or manipulated.

### C. Animism is a belief in *power*

“The essence of animism is power—power of his dead ancestor to control those of his lineage, power of an evil eye to kill a newborn or ruin a harvest, power of planets [and stars] to affect earthly destiny (astrology), power of the demonic to possess a spiritist, power of magic to control human events, power of impersonal forces to heal a child or make a person wealthy.”<sup>4</sup>

### D. Animism is *discovering* (divining) which beings or forces are responsible for the events in one’s life.

Unless one knows which particular being or force is responsible for any particular problem or event, he cannot hope to appease or manipulate that being to bring a solution. Therefore an important part of animism is to *divine* the source of a particular problem. “Who has caused this affliction to come upon me? Why has it happened to my family at this particular time? What power is troubling me? Has this been caused by an

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 21

ancestor? By some spirit? By witchcraft? By the evil eye? By the stars? Who can help me discover the cause and source of this evil?”<sup>5</sup> Often a village will have two kinds of animistic practitioners, a neutral diviner whose job it is to find the reason behind the sickness or problem, and a malevolent witch doctor or shaman who may either be the cause of the curse, or the only hope of lifting the curse. The diviner may depend on dreams, possession by a spirit, visitations from the dead, trial by ordeal, and astrology.<sup>6</sup>

#### **E. Animism is *manipulating or appeasing* spirit beings and forces**

Having discovered the source of the problem, the diviner may also prescribe a solution or a course of action, such as the payment of a fine, a sacrifice to an offended ancestor or a counter-curse. He may try to ascertain from the spirit a propitious day for a wedding, a business deal, or a trip, or the best location for an office or a house.

Van Rheenen emphasizes the contrast between this kind of impersonal *manipulation* of spirits and the very personal *relationship* with God that is the goal of Christianity: “[The Christian way] is based upon personally relating to sovereign God and giving to him glory and honor. Conversely, the animistic way is based on manipulating the divine to serve human needs.”<sup>7</sup> It often takes years for the convert from animism to completely shake his tendency to manipulate God for his own purposes as he did the spirits. (Indeed, the attempt to manipulate God is a problem in western churches as well.)

## **II. Animism and Christianity**

The good news is that animists are generally much more receptive to the gospel than those who claim adherence to one of the main religions of the world, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Marxism. “Historically the great growth of the Christian movement has been at the expense of animistic religions. . . . For example, when Adoniram Judson died after thirty-seven years of labor in Burma, he left only one hundred converts from Buddhism but seven thousand converts from the animistic Karens.”<sup>8</sup> The rate growth of Christianity in Cambodia is much greater among the animistic tribes than among the Buddhist majority.

Why are animists attracted to Christianity?

#### **A. Christians speak the animists’ language.**

We talk about God, about spirits, demons, angels, curses, healing, power. We’re familiar with spirit beings, and believe in their existence and power. We believe in a Creator God. We believe that curses can be real, and that spirit beings can heal, or at least do a pretty good job of faking a cure. We Christians are not secular materialists who can’t talk about the unseen world. We have the vocabulary and many shared beliefs. Once you can communicate with an animist, your shared beliefs bring instant resonance. (I’ve never once had an animist disagree with me that God created all things.)

**B. Christians respect animist’s beliefs.** We acknowledge that animists are basically correct in much of their worldview. There really is an unseen world that affects the seen world. There really *are* malevolent spirits

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

whose desire is to control and harm humans. There really is a Creator God. In fact, the animist has it more right than us secular westerners, and even more right than some of us Christians in the west who are blind to many spiritual realities. (The part that animists have wrong is the *solution* to their problems. The solution is not animistic manipulation of spirits, but loving allegiance to the “Father of spirits” made possible by the atonement of Christ.)

**C. Christianity offers freedom from the fear and control of evils spirits.** Since animists live in constant fear of numberless spirit beings and ancestors, a faith that promises complete release from that fear is quite attractive. And, as a corollary benefit, since animism is often expensive, eating up all available wealth to provide sacrifices to spirits and payments to shamans, a faith that promises freedom from this crushing economic burden will attract great interest. (Animistic converts to Christianity don’t try to hide the fact that many of them were initially attracted to Christ because of the financial relief it would provide, but they add that they later grew into a fuller understanding of the atonement.)

**D. Christianity offers reconciliation with the Creator God that they already know about.** Virtually all animistic belief systems already have the concept of the Creator God who made heaven and earth, so often animistic cultures are primed to believe in God. Virtually all unreached groups have a half-buried belief in the Creator God, though they also usually believe that at some point in the distance past their ancestors somehow offended this God and the way back to him is unknown to them. A wise missionary will find out the name of this Creator God. If the name is still usable, that is, if that deity has not yet morphed into a reprehensible being in their folklore, the missionary can proclaim “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you!” (Acts 17:23).

**E. Christianity provides real power.** You want to know power? Know God. All the powerful demonic forces in the universe put together are less powerful than a little ant walking across God’s scales. In fact, all of their power ultimately comes from Him. Christians exude this power in a humble way by not being afraid of spirits and demons and superstitions. This is impressive. Neighbors of Christians will call them to come when someone is demonized. This power is attractive in a bad way too. Remember Simon Magus in Acts 8 saw the power in Christianity, but he had a typically animistic response to it: How much money can I pay you to learn to give this power?

### III. Important Themes in Animism

#### A. Location

In animism—as in real estate—the three most important words are location, location, location. When an animist is crossing the river, he’s afraid of the river spirit, not the mountain spirit whose location is miles away. When he enters the deep forest, he doesn’t care about the river spirit anymore, but now he’s looking out for the forest spirit. This territorial feature of animism actually has its basis in truth, since demonic spirits can’t be in more than one place at a time. In that sense evil spirits are definitely territorial. So it should come as no surprise that scripture tells us that demonic spirits have jurisdiction over certain areas or “live in” certain idols or possess certain people.

The importance of location is illustrated in the story of Balaam. Balaak hired Balaam to come from a couple hundred miles away to curse Israel. (This fits with animism as well. Cultures always think that sorcerers

from a neighboring country are more powerful than their own. “A sorcerer is not without honor except in his own hometown.”) When the curse didn’t work in the first location, what did King Balaak do? He took Balaam to another location. (By the way, the story of Balaam is very effective in animistic contexts to help cure new believers of their fear of shamans and curses. In the west that particular application of the story never even occurs to us!)

So what’s the missionaries antidote to this emphasis on location? Obviously we need to emphasize the omnipresence of God wherever it comes up in the Creation to Christ story. The only cure for animism is Holy Spirit inspired theology.

Recently, both evangelical and Pentecostal Christians around the world have taken to spending much time and energy emphasizing the territorial nature of demons. We are told that we need to understand what the territories are, what demon is in charge, and even what its name is, if we are to have any hope of victory (spiritual mapping). But this emphasis doesn’t fit the pattern of Christ and the apostles who seemed to care very little about the minute details of demonic existence, and certainly did not tell us by command or example that we needed to be informed of these things in order to do spiritual battle. If Christ and the apostles forgot to tell us this key point to spiritual warfare, we can’t trust Christ and the apostles to tell us anything that we need to know. Those who stress these things forget that the territorial nature of demons is a sign of their *weakness*, not their strength. Territories really don’t matter to Christians since the God who indwells us and does battle on our behalf is omnipresent, (not to mention omniscient and omnipotent). What if, in a war, the generals found out that the invading army was so weak they were reduced to using just sticks and stones. Would the generals then hold seminars for their troops on the finer points of botany and geology? Would they make the soldiers memorize the three kinds of rock, metamorphic, igneous, and sedimentary? Of course not. A bullet at fifty yards will do the trick. This fixation on location can also be seen in the popularity of taking expensive prayer trips to certain locations—usually a place deemed to be a former or present stronghold of Satan—the idea being that prayer in that location will somehow be more effective than the long distance kind. But where did Jesus say to pray? A closet. Once again, since our God is omnipresent, the location of our prayer has nothing whatsoever to do with its effectiveness.

### **B. Size and height**

In animism, size and height are important. The Old Testament animists always chose the high places for their sacrifices. In animistic areas it is the high mountains, the large rocks, and the huge trees that have the strongest spirits. Size is important to animists and idolaters. I remember passing a massive statue of the Buddha near Tsukuba, Japan, that was vying for the title of the world’s largest Buddha. Just google “world’s largest Buddha,” and you’ll find at least five other statues that are in the running. As my Japanese Christian friend and I drove by the massive piece of concrete I said, It’s a pity they have such a small God. The universe can’t contain our God.

Of course, animism has so pervaded the church that you can do an internet search of “world’s largest cross” and “world’s largest Jesus statue” and get a lot of hits as well. I remember passing by the “Western Hemisphere’s largest cross” along Interstate 40 near Amarillo Texas. (A sign assured us that a gift shop was to open soon—which reminds us of another aspect of animism that has invaded Christianity, greed.) I’m sure it was a great disappointment for the folks in Amarillo when the First Baptist Church of Effingham, Illinois, inspired by the cross on I-40, built their own cross—eight feet taller! I wonder if their gift shop is larger.

### C. Rank

In animism, rank is important. If my spirit is bigger or stronger than your spirit, I will win in a battle of sorcery. Scripture does indeed imply that the evil spirits are like an army with ranks and divisions. This fact has taken on great importance recently in some Christian circles. We're told that we need to understand these ranks and especially which demon has the highest rank in our area (Charismatics call this "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare"). They claim that real, lasting victory in an area doesn't come from battling the lower "ground level" demons, but the "strategic level" demons who are in charge of whole areas and entire nations.

Evidently, Christ and the apostles forgot to tell us this key to spiritual warfare. The fact is, our advantage is so overwhelming that these rankings of demons are not important to us. My house in Cambodia is a frequent battleground between my family and invading hoards of ants. There are many types of ants, and each type has its hierarchy. I guess I could spend a lot of time studying the details of these creatures. Or, I could just buy some bug spray and kill them all at once.

Demons are as ants before God. Hierarchy is meaningless. Christians don't need to know the name of the "strategic level" demon in charge of that country. In fact, trying to ascertain names of demons is nothing less than divination, condemned in the Bible. The whole point of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12:28-29, about the strongman and his house, is not that we are to somehow divine the identity of the strongman (high ranking demon) in order to effectively bind him, but that the Lord Jesus has come in kingdom power, and through his death and resurrection has bound and chained the strongest enemy of all, Satan. How else could Christ be plundering the world today for His glory?

### D. Words

In animism (as well as in the teaching of the health and wealth televangelists) words are mainly containers of power. The meaning of the word is not so important as the fact that the word is proclaimed. And if proclaiming that word *once* brings a certain result in the spirit world, proclaiming it a hundred times is even better. And so the Lord Jesus warned the church against the "vain repetition" of pagan prayer.

### Conclusion:

Now that we've come to understand better what animism is, we need to learn how to best confront it and overcome it. We will explore that in the next seminar entitled, The Antidote to Animism.

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