

“Christian Animism” by Shawn Sanford-Beck

Preface

They found that they were looking at a most extraordinary face. It belonged to a large Man-like, almost Troll-like, figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck. Whether it was clad in stuff like green and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say. At any rate the arms, at a short distance from the trunk, were not wrinkled, but covered with a brown smooth skin. The large feet had seven toes each. The lower part of the long face was covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends. But at the moment the hobbits noted little but the eyes. These deep eyes were now surveying them, slow and solemn, but very penetrating. They were brown, shot with a green light. Often afterwards Pippin tried to describe his first impression of them. “One felt as if there was an enormous will behind them, filled up with the ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present; like sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don’t know, but it felt as if something that grew in the ground – asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between root-tip and leaf-tip, between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years.” (The Two Towers, 452)

Unlike Pippin and Merry, two jolly young hobbits from Tolkien’s Middle Earth, not many of us will be blessed in our lifetime with such a vivid and gripping encounter with an Ent, or “tree-shepherd”. However, if we carefully search out the recesses of memory, it is entirely possible that, at some point in our childhood, each of us was given a taste of the “aliveness”, the sentience even, of the natural world around us. Perhaps it was a favourite tree in the backyard, or a special boulder in the field; maybe it was even a momentary glimpse of a faery, a water kelpie, or some other inhabitant of that mystic land just beneath the surface of things. For some, the early experience of animate nature was mysterious or even a little scary; for others it was simply a calm and quiet sense of being held by a presence, a personality cloaked in green leaves, clear flowing water, soft brown earth, moss and fern. As children, we experience the Earth as alive.

But how quickly we forget. Or rather, how quickly we are initiated and indoctrinated into the cult of reductionism ...as in, “the tree is just a tree”, “the rock is just a rock”, “the Earth is just earth”. In the reductionist worldview of scientific materialism, it is imperative that the cosmos is stripped of every vestige of personality, agency, soul. And before a child is finished elementary school, she has been effectively robbed of a way of experiencing the natural world which is immediate, imaginal, and utterly relational. By high school at latest, living nature has been transformed into mindless matter, a resource waiting to be exploited for human gain.

So is there a way back (or forward) into Eden? Is there a path we can take which will lead us deep into the primordial forest, where we can rediscover our original connection to all the wonderful creatures with whom we share this planet? So many of us are haunted by a

collective memory of the Dream Time, the days of the First Parents, when Eve and Adam could talk to the animals and understand the languages of all the plants and trees, when the wind told us secrets, and the water sang melodies which were already ancient by the time humans arrived on the scene. Are these days utterly lost to us? Or is there a way to reconnect to “all our relations”, to our cousins in the animal, plant, and mineral realms?

Ironically, on a personal level, it might be easier for me to find such a pathway were I not a Christian. If I was a Wiccan or a Taoist or a traditional Cree, I would be immersed in a worldview and a set of spiritual practices designed to facilitate and enhance my relationship with the living Earth and the spirits of nature which surround us. As a practising Pagan, I would have access to teachings and psycho-spiritual technologies which would help me find my place, once again, in the web of energy and consciousness which permeates the entire universe.

As a Christian, however, I find that these life-ways have been all but cut off from me. Now don't misunderstand – there are many good things about the Christian faith, and many reasons why I remain a convinced and convicted believer in the Way of Christ Jesus. But let's face it, in the contemporary mainstream churches of modern western society, we no longer have a functional spiritual cosmology. We have all kinds of engaging theologies – that is, words about God – but nothing that serves us well as a map of the spirit world. North American and western European culture is dominated by the presuppositions of scientific materialism, and the church has imbibed this reductionist worldview as if it were gospel truth. We've found ways to smuggle in God and the human soul, but anything “spiritual” beyond that is pretty much treated with scorn and intellectual contempt.

Surveying the long history of Christian thought and practice, we find of course that it wasn't always so. There were exceptions and marginal traditions which opened doors for Christians to step out onto the green paths. Early Celtic forms of Christianity were one such example; the Spirit-drenched *viriditas* of Hildegard was another. Francis of Assisi, in his own unique way, invited the church to pay closer attention to the rest of creation, and there are others who have followed in his footsteps. But these brilliant examples of “green faith” seem to be exceptions to the normative path of ignoring, or even denigrating, the non-human world.

I expect that this present work will be met in many quarters by incredulity and open hostility. “Christian animism”, for many, can suggest nothing more than crude syncretism, a blasphemous oxymoron. I hope to challenge that view, though my intention is more apologetic than polemic. I write from my own experience, and I draw on the experiences and reflections of many who find themselves on the fringes of church and society. I pay attention to Witches, Buddhists, faery-watchers, deep ecologists, and Elders. I also search out the fertile places of my own tradition, seeking to hear a Word of healing for our Earth, a Word of grace for the trees and the animals, a Word of invitation back to the garden of Creation, our once and future home.

For those who are interested to know such things, I want to acknowledge the work of two primary guides in my intellectual formation of Christian animism: Walter Wink and Starhawk. Wink, in his masterful trilogy on the Powers, introduced me to the biblical

category of the “angels of nature”, and provided a conceptual framework which made sense of the relationship between spirit and matter, heavenly and earthly. Starhawk challenged me to keep moving from the head to the heart, from “talking self” to “younger self”, from theory to practice. Thinking about the spirits of land and woods is one thing; encountering them, communicating with them, ministering to them, is quite another. Starhawk and Wink both held up a warning as well: the work we do with the multiplicity of beings in creation is never simply personal; it is simultaneously political. Mere sentimentalism is blind to the real powers at work in the destruction of the Earth and all her children, and gives us no tools to resist the war-makers, stripminers, clear-cutters, and polluters around us and within us. A truly green spirituality will engage us in the work of Earth-protection and Earth-healing, in many forms and venues. It is my hope that these reflections on Christian animism will make at least a small contribution to that larger work of which we are all a part.

Part 1: Introducing Christian Animism

Definitions

So what exactly is "Christian animism"? It's a valid question, as these two words are rarely held together, and more often placed in stark opposition to each other. It may be helpful to begin with a working definition of the term "animism". The Shorter Oxford claims that animism is "the attribution of a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena." The term emerged during the early stages of nineteenth-century cultural anthropology, as a way to describe "primitive" peoples' understanding of religion. In many ways, it was a subtly derogatory term, implicitly suggesting that animism was a stage in the evolution of religion, which would "grow up" into polytheism, then henotheism, and finally culminate in a "mature" monotheism. There are other problems with the term as well, one of which is the misunderstanding that animism describes essentially "disembodied" spirits which inhabit or possess otherwise "inanimate" things, such as rocks or trees. This view is a product of a mechanistic and dualistic understanding of the universe, and as such distorts the actual beliefs and practices of the various animist traditions in question.

Furthermore, animism is often confused with other concepts such as ancestral reverence and polytheism. Certainly, all of these phenomena are related to each other, and often co-exist in a given religious worldview; in this work however, we will concentrate primarily on the nature spirits, or "spirits of the land".

These weaknesses aside, I still find that animism is a useful term. Set in the context of a worldview which sees spirit as the "interiority" of matter, rather than its dualistic opposite, animism can be reclaimed as a concept which sees the natural world as sentient, personable, and much alive. It helps us to experience and understand each created entity, from a prairie gopher to a Rocky Mountain range, as a person, someone to whom we are related. That is basically what I mean when I use the word animism. Later in this essay I will develop more fully the cosmological worldview which enables and supports this type of understanding.

Christian animism, then, is simply what happens when a committed Christian engages the world and each creature as alive, sentient, and related, rather than soul-less and ontologically inferior. However, that's not really "simple", is it? This type of stance vis-à-vis the natural world would have enormous implications for all aspects of Christian belief and practice. What would liturgy look like, for instance, if we knew that plants, animals, and whole ecosystems were co-worshippers with us? How would our eschatologies change if we had to "make room" in heaven for the entire created order? Would our ethical processes morph if "love your neighbour" now included cows, plankton, and all manner of creepy-crawlies? And what does pastoral care look like for trees anyways? All of these, and more, are questions with which a Christian animist perspective must engage.

A few words are in order at this point about the relationship between Christian animism and various forms of theological cosmology. It is very easy to get these things mixed up: I consider Christian animism to be a type of *spiritual* cosmology (dealing with the nature of the spirit world, and all its various entities), whereas *theological* cosmology deals with the relationship between God and the universe. Of course, the two categories overlap, but it is important to note the difference. Many contemporary theologians are doing very good work in the area of theological cosmology, critiquing traditional forms of supernatural theism (which stresses the utter transcendence of God), and moving toward more of a trinitarian panentheism (a worldview which seeks a balance between divine immanence and transcendence, asserting that all things are in God and God is in all things). Sally McFague's model of the universe as the body of God is a prime example of this type of theological cosmology. This is good work and reflection that is extremely necessary for the church as we move into an ecological age, where our models of the God-world relationship must be able to uphold an eco-friendly praxis. But still, this is not the same as spiritual cosmology. In fact, throughout much of Christian history, various forms of theological cosmology and their attendant practices of piety and mysticism have functioned to subsume actual created entities into the human quest for God. In other words, even "Earth-friendly" forms of Christianity such as Franciscan spirituality or Meister Eckhart's Rhine Valley mysticism, have tended to see other created beings as a means to an end. Nature is contemplated in order to lead us to God, rather than to engage in relationship-building with our non-human neighbours. We have inherited from our neo-platonic heritage a distinct prejudice against "the many" in favour of "the One".

A spiritual cosmology such as Christian animism helps us to experience, understand, and relate to "the many" that is, the actual created beings which constitute the universe. My sense is that while panentheism is the natural ally of Christian animism, it is not impossible to embrace Christian animism as a classical theist, or even as a pantheist or atheist (although there may be considerably more discussion about whether these worldviews are compatible with Christianity). The point is that Christian animism recognizes that there is ultimately more to our faith than God and the human soul. Christian animism is a perspective and a path that allows us to navigate the spirit world, the "interiority" and energy of Indra's Net, the vast web of beings with whom we share this fragile Earth, our island home, and to whom we are intimately related.

Oppositions

Frankly, however, not everyone is going to be convinced. I know that there will always be those who believe that Christianity and animism are utterly incompatible. Since people rarely shift worldviews through argument, I am not going to spill a lot of ink trying to convince anyone who does not want to be convinced. On the other hand, it is important to engage at some level with those who are opposed to the idea of Christian animism. The objections come primarily from two different perspectives: the scientific and the theological.

Many modern western people can relate to the poster which Agent Molder has hanging on the wall in his small dingy office in the popular '90s TV show, *The X-Files*. The poster shows a UFO in flight, and contains the caption "I want to believe..." The problem is that the worldview into which we are sold has no room whatsoever for belief. It only has room for scientifically verifiable "knowledge". This is not a diatribe against science per se, but rather an acknowledgment that the reductionist model of scientific materialism is an ideology which has captured the collective imagination of the west, and will not allow us to believe in that which cannot be quantified. "Religious" people can sometimes manage to get some sort of "exemption" for God and the human soul, but then to relate these amorphous entities to the actual physical universe becomes a bit of a stretch, to say the least. Religion is reduced to the production of meaning, rather than the facilitation of a bodily encounter with the Living God and Her world full of wonderful creatures.

It seems to me that the Newtonian model of the universe is entirely adequate for the tasks of architectural design, billiards, and the like, but when it begins to function as an epistemological ideology, policing the borders of what we can know, it oversteps its bounds. While objectivity may be a laudable goal within scientific research, there comes a point when "objectivism" becomes an idol. There is no such thing as "value-free" science, even less so the more scientific research is hijacked by globalized industry. 16 The problem is not science, nor even scientific materialism. The problem is a phenomenon called reductionism a philosophical tendency to subdivide an entity into its smallest components, cut it off from its inherent relation to a larger context, and "reduce" it to a quantifiable analysis. Whenever you hear yourself or someone else say "well, it's just some bad pizza I ate last night", or "it's just the wind in the trees", or "don't worry, it's just hormones", you are dealing with reductionism on its popular level. Whenever we seek to provide simple analysis of complex phenomena, we run the risk of falling into reductionism.

When it comes to our relationship with the world of nature, reductionism teams up with scientific materialism and industrial pragmatism to create a deadly ideology which not only cuts us off from any meaningful form of communion with the non-human world, but also sets the stage for a full-scale blitzkrieg of exploitation of "natural resources". In *Unmasking the Powers*, Walter Wink observes that:

the idea of living matter was simply economically inconvenient. In the participative worldview of Medieval Europe, one could certainly mine nature's ores, but only with care and devotion. Metallurgy was deliberately compared to obstetrics, and new

mines were sunk, until by religious the fifteenth century, accompanied by ceremonies in which the miners fasted, prayed, and observed a particular series of rites. But if nature is dead, then there are no restraints on exploiting it for profits (155).

The contribution of scientific materialism to ecological biocide is staggering and profound. This connection alone should make us step back and re-evaluate the prominence we give to science in determining our worldview. It is important to note that some of the strongest critiques of materialist reductionism are coming from within the scientific community itself: quantum mechanics, chaos theory, ecology - each of these disciplines are recognizing the limits of the Newtonian model for observing and describing reality. As theologians rediscover the word "energy" as a synonym for "spirit", scientists are simultaneously developing an openness to questions almost religious in nature. Is the war between religion and science coming to an end? Well, that might be a bit optimistic, but at least there are, here and there, small signs of ceasefire.

Of course, I am quite aware that none of this will change the mind of anyone ideologically committed to a worldview based on scientific reductionism. But for those who, like Agent Molder, "want to believe", I would simply suggest that belief is possible. Scientific scepticism need not cut us off completely from the chance to experience the world around us as alive, sentient, and "personable". In fact, a healthy dose of scepticism is absolutely necessary in all forms of spiritual exploration; let's just remember to be sceptical about our scepticism as well!

The other main source of objection to the idea of Christian animism comes, not surprisingly, from the theological perspective. Christianity does not have a great track record when it comes to making room for dialogue with animist positions, and there are many reasons for this. My sense is that the root cause however has been a confusion in the relationship between animism, pantheism, and polytheism. This is not surprising, since in many of the cultures which Christianity has encountered, these three categories have been functionally interchangeable.

Let's define the terms as simply as possible. Animism is a belief that non-human creatures are alive, sentient, and "personable". Pantheism is the belief that God is the totality of all things, and that all things are God. Polytheism is the belief that there are many gods to be worshipped. Although each of these terms has a distinct meaning, in practice they have tended to overlap. So in any given pagan culture, there is a sophisticated and complex pattern of religious thinking that recognizes divinity spread throughout the universe. Divinity wears many "masks" and manifests itself in a multitude of gods and goddesses. These deities are to be respected and related to in various ways, and often worship or reverence is directed toward the deity through a living being such as a tree, or through a totem animal, or through an "inanimate" (by some definitions) entity such as a rock or a spring of water. Although this is a generalization, and the actual religious matrix would vary from culture to culture, we can see how the three categories of pantheism, polytheism, and animism overlap.

For Christians, it has been extremely difficult to tell the difference between these strands of thought; in fact, the church has been polemically conditioned to not see the difference. With unrelenting consistency, early Christian teachers employed the strategy, inherited from Jewish monotheism as well as Greek philosophy, of labelling any form of relation to a spiritual entity (other than God or an angel) as superstitious, idolatrous, or demonic. Pantheism, polytheism, and animism were three aspects of the same religious paradigm, and it was a paradigm attacked mercilessly by the church, sometimes with very little comprehension of the complexity of the religion involved.

While in no way trying to justify the religious bigotry and imperialistic violence unleashed by the church on pagan cultures throughout the Constantinian era (that is, from the fourth century CE to the present), I can understand why Christians have been wary of pantheism and polytheism (although there could have been other ways to interpret these categories more respectfully than the typical crude polemic against idolatry and demon-worship). But it seems to me that animism, separated from the other two strands of the paradigm, does not in and of itself pose a problem to basic Christian convictions. Let's take an example: the apple tree in my backyard. I believe this tree is alive, that it is conscious and sentient, and that I can relate to it, in some sense, as a "person". I can commune and even communicate with it. I believe it to be a fellow creature, a being both physical and spiritual, as I am. But I don't worship it, and I don't consider it a god. It is simply a neighbour. Now, while you may think me a bit off my rocker for holding this belief, you cannot accuse me of being a heretic. And in fact, this perspective may be even more "biblical" than our modern scientific worldviews. The psalms are filled with references to the created world being alive and sentient, full of praise for the Creator. It is we who are deaf, not the world which is mute!

At some deep level, we know this to be true. In fact, I believe that one of the reasons why Tolkien's Middle Earth and Lewis' Narnia have been so wildly popular is that they both present fictionalized and narrative examples of Christian animism. Both worlds contain a multitude of beings, including elves, dwarves, talking trees, water spirits, river gods, talking animals, and a host of other creatures, each of whom breaks down our simplistic categories of "person" and "nature".

Ultimately, there need be no theological objections to Christian animism. It is no more pantheistic nor polytheistic than the Bible itself. Christian animism certainly accords to the non-human creation much more sentience, agency, and "soul" than has typically been the case within the Christian tradition, but it is well within the boundaries of doctrinal orthodoxy. More than that, Christian animism can even contribute to the authentic development of orthodoxy, as the church grows into the ecological challenges of a new millennium.

Implications

So what do we gain by adopting for ourselves the worldview of Christian animism? Does it further the mission of the church? Does it intensify our quest for justice? Does it deepen our spiritual discipleship? Or does it simply open us to fear and scorn from within our own tradition?

Christian animism, as perspective and practice, has many implications for the future of the church. There are three areas in particular which deserve attention as foci for discussion of the benefits of Christian animism: ecology, inter-faith dialogue, and personal spirituality. In each of these areas, Christian animism opens doors for the church which have been tightly closed in the past.

Ecology is probably the most obvious field engaged by a Christian animist perspective. It may also be the most important as well, since the church seems to have precious few conceptual and practical resources when it comes to relating responsibly to the rest of creation. We have seen the damage caused by a long-term commitment to the "human-dominion" model, especially coupled with modern utilitarian versions of corporate control. The contemporary Christian shift to "stewardship" as our preferred means of relating to the Earth is only marginally better, a sort of soft-core dominion approach, which still privileges the human species above all others as chosen and competent to make wise and just decisions about the "use" of "natural resources". Both dominion and stewardship models are rigorously anthropocentric, leading many ecological philosophers to question the ability of Christianity to become Earth-friendly. In *Ecology and Religion*, David Kinsley asserts that:

the critique of the Bible and Christianity as constituting primarily negative influences in the advent and development of contemporary ecological crises usually makes three general arguments to support its point of view. First, in the Bible and Christianity nature is stripped of its gods, goddesses, and spirits and ceases to be regarded as divine. Second, the Bible and Christianity are strongly anthropocentric and teach that human beings are divinely ordained to rule over and dominate all other species and nature generally. Third, many Christian writings, and much Christian theology, relegates nature and matter generally to a low status relative to the divine, which is equated with spirit alone (103).

There are many contemporary theologians and practitioners working hard to rectify some of these ecological shortfalls in the faith. Ecological, eco-feminist, process, creation-centred, and green-liberation theologies (as well as the more evangelical "creation care" movement) have all begun to challenge the status quo of "toxic" Christianity. Individual believers are also finding ways of "greening" their faith, sometimes even blending Christianity with other religious perspectives such as Buddhism, Wicca, or traditional Indigenous spirituality.

Christian animism adds another perspective and set of practices for the ecologically-minded believer. It has the added bonus of engaging ecologically with the world by forming direct relationships with the actual created beings who surround us on a daily basis: our animal companions and houseplants, the trees on the block, the local watershed, birds and animals in the park or woods nearby. Sustained and energized by a network of real neighbours in the natural world, our ecological disciplines become less abstract, less duty-driven, and much more personal, concrete, and even fun!

Closely related to the subject of ecology is that of inter-faith dialogue. It is a well-known fact that we live today in a pluralistic society, and that for this society to become peaceful,

just, and ecologically sustainable, we will all have to find ways of working together. Christians, on this front, have much to learn from the "green" religions - that is, those faiths which have not cut themselves off from the natural world in favour of an exclusively anthropocentric soteriology. Christian animism can go a long way toward building a sense of "common ground" with these religious perspectives. Although we may have different ideas about God/dess, there can at least be a shared experience of relating to the natural world as alive, sentient, and personable. In the next chapter, we will spend considerable time looking at several examples of "green" religious traditions, with special focus on how each of them "do" animism in their own context. Learning in this manner, from other religions rather than directly from our own tradition, is a good skill to have when it comes to fruitful inter-faith dialogue. It is something we seldom do, but could benefit from immensely.

Finally, it is my hope that Christian animism will help Christian believers deepen their own faith and spirituality. So much of our piety is focussed on "heaven", or on the human community of the church, that we miss out on developing real relationships with the rest of creation. Christian animism can give us some tools so that we might begin to open our hearts and minds to the "spirit world", not as a realm far removed from day-to-day reality, and not as a synonym for heaven (as an eschatological reality), but rather as the world of energy and consciousness intricately bound to the physical creatures whom we encounter in our real lives. It is the world of interiority, accessed through own interior imaginal (not imaginary!) sensibilities, as well as our physical senses. Christian animism helps us engage the depth dimension of the world around us, and in doing so, opens up incredible realities and vistas of spiritual "terrain" which have been largely inaccessible to us in the past.