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Animism, the Occult, and Mission

This article presents animism as the larger religious system in which what we often call spiritism or spiritualism in its many forms is located. Animism is frequently used as a “synonym for traditional, tribal, folk, or primal religions as opposed to major world religions” like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity (Moreau 2000:63). Gailyn Van Rheen defines 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 and . . . [then to] manipulate their power” (2000:20).

The word animism refers to a religious system in which humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects of a “lower zone” are understood to interact with a “middle zone” occupied by lesser deities, spirits, ancestors, and impersonal forces which have animated interaction with the other zones. The “upper zone” is occupied by the High God who is theoretically interactive but actually aloof (see table 1). Paul Hiebert (1982) uses the term “middle zone” in his discussion of “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle.” This article uses the terms “upper zone” and “lower zone” to locate the “middle zone” in the makeup of the cosmos.

Animism is found on every continent, in countries at all stages of economic development, among both rural and urban peoples, and among both illiterates and the educated elite. Some animistic tribal peoples have had little outside influence but such groups have shrunk dramatically in the last century. The largest presence of animism is found where it is intertwined with the four largest world religions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—especially Islam. The world religions all have minority groups of adherents who hold “formal,” orthodox beliefs and practices; however, the majority of their adherents belong to the “folk”

sectors which are animistic. Thus, animists comprise a very large portion of humanity and are highly relevant for world mission.

Animism and False Religion

The impulse to worship comes from the inner longing for God which he implants and cultivates in all people; however, that impulse to worship has also become distorted by sin. The origin of false religion can be traced back to the Fall and to Cain's perversion of the God-given sacrificial system that foreshadowed the saving work of Jesus Christ. As humans departed from faithful worship of the only true God, they developed elaborate idolatrous substitutes. At the core of those false religions was human self-sufficiency. "The class of worshipers who follow the example of Cain includes by far the greater portion of the world; for nearly every false religion has been based on the same principle—that man can depend upon his own efforts for salvation" (White 1958:73).

The departure from God's true religion continued through the centuries. "After the dispersion from Babel idolatry again became well-nigh universal. . . . But the true faith was not to become extinct. God has ever preserved a remnant to serve Him. Adam, Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, in unbroken line, had preserved from age to age the precious revealings of His will" (White 1958:125).

Through the centuries, the manifestations of evil in the great controversy between Christ and Satan fit the broad profile of animism. Many of its features (like sorcery, divination, séances, magic, witchcraft, etc.) are sensational and dramatic. However, animism is best understood as a comprehensive system of opposition to God rather than as just a collection of sensational practices. Ellen White's frequent references to "spiritualism" (410 references under "spiritualism" in the Ellen G. White Estate database) and its role in end time events refer to more than sensational phenomena.

For example, White says, "Spiritualism asserts that men are unfallen demigods; that 'each mind will judge itself;' that 'true knowledge places men above all law;' that 'all sins committed are innocent;' for 'whatever is, is right,' and 'God doth not condemn'" (1952:227). Spiritualism teaches "fanciful views of God" (White 1948:291), the doctrines "of consciousness after death, that the spirits of the dead are in communion with the living" (1946:603), and of "eternal torment" (1950:588). Spiritualism "numbers its converts by hundreds of thousands, yea, by millions" (1950:556). I think Ellen White would approve the use of "animism" to refer to what she had in mind when she wrote of "spiritualism."

Van Rheeën makes a statement that resonates well with Adventist beliefs. "In the animist context the message must center on the cosmic conflict between God and the gods, between Christ and the demons,

between the church and the principalities and powers. . . . In this great confrontation with the forces of Satan, Christians will overcome because Christ, who dwells in them, is greater ‘than he who is in the world’” (Van Rheeën 2000:61).

Basic Features of Animism

Animism is a comprehensive system embodied in forms, rituals, and beliefs that are attractive to specific human cultures, whether traditional, modern, or postmodern. Many animists believe in a High God but their religious life typically has little to do with the High God. The focus of animistic religious life and practice is rather on the middle zone between the High God of the upper zone and the everyday human life of the lower zone (see figure 1).

UPPER ZONE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High God	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Theoretically imminent, actually aloof• Little or no interaction with humans• Unseen by humans
MIDDLE ZONE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lesser gods• Good and bad spirits• Impersonal forces• Saints• Ancestral spirits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Main focus of religious life• Highly interactive with Lower Zone, both for good and evil• Provides linkage and mediation between Lower and Upper Zones• Commonly seen or experienced by humans
LOWER ZONE <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Humans• Animals• Plants• Inanimate objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has constant interaction with Middle Zone• Unborn, living and deceased humans form an interactive community• Sub-human animals, forces, and objects interact with humans and Middle Zone

Figure 1. The animistic view of the cosmos

The middle zone is occupied by personal beings like ancestors, spirits, and lesser deities who are believed to be more accessible than the High God. Humans live their lives in constant interaction with the middle zone. Unborn, living, and deceased humans constitute a family that interacts within and beyond itself. Middle zone beings share many human attributes, including unpredictability and fallibility. Middle zone beings link humans with the High God and provide mediation. An important part of the middle zone are the impersonal forces and powers that interact with humanity. These powers can be compared to gravity or electricity.

The forces and beings of the middle zone can and must be made to work for human good lest they work for evil. Therefore, a successful life strategy is one that manipulates the beings and powers (and, by implication, the High God) in a way that wards off evil and brings blessing. Public manipulation is usually beneficial for the community while private

or secret manipulation is often harmful for individuals or the community. Humans are wholly self-dependent in manipulating the religious system successfully. When people suffer calamity or misfortune others assume they have neglected their duty to manipulate spirits and powers or have done so in an unskillful manner. Therefore, in animistic societies human suffering receives little sympathy or empathy.

When an animist practitioner is paid, the remedy or intervention simply “must work” because of its power—like gasoline. If it does not work the failure is blamed on an incorrect procedure or incompetence by the practitioner or on stronger counter-balancing magic. Animists usually do not subject the whole animistic system to a critique when it fails but they keep thinking “maybe next time it will work.” When the remedy does not work people feel fully justified and even obligated to seek alternative remedies.

Animism posits an unfailingly accurate, impersonal, cosmic recording system of good and bad deeds that gives every person precisely what they “deserve,” either in this life or in another life. There is no solution to a bad score other than to add meritorious deeds to the cosmic scales. Humans who apparently suffer in excess of their known bad deeds are understood to be suffering for hidden bad deeds in this life or a previous life. Those who seem to have easier lives than they deserve can be assured of receiving their just rewards eventually. There is no forgiveness or grace in animism. The system produces generalized fear of being cursed and of not being able to manipulate the powers successfully.

Animists have a pragmatic focus on obtaining immediate, practical benefits for the here-and-now, for “me” and “us.” Ethics are relativistic—“If it works and I don’t get caught it’s OK.” There is thus no room for absolute laws or principles.

A system that lacks both absolute ethics and grace is a vastly different system from Christianity with its Decalogue and Cross. Thus, animistic Christians are trying to practice two religious systems that are contradictory at the deepest level.

A Christian Critique of Animism

From the Christian perspective, animists get it wrong about the component parts of the cosmos and how they interact. The Bible portrays a universe (see figure 2) divided into two main categories—Creator and creation. The Triune Creator God is utterly unique and transcendent from his creation but was present through God the Son during the incarnation and is immanent and interactive today through God the Holy Spirit.

The realm of creation is divided into a middle zone and lower zone in this model, with the lower zone being subdivided into human and sub-human

The lower zone includes humans, sub-human creatures, plants, and inanimate objects. Only humans are morally-ethically responsible and capable of relating to the Bible's middle and upper zones. Unborn humans do not have an existence in any zone. Deceased humans exist only in God's memory.

	Creator
UPPER ZONE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Triune God 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both transcendent and immanent • Heavenly mediation provided by Jesus Christ • Earthly guidance and empowerment provided by Holy Spirit • Believer's main focus for faith and practice • Visible to humanity during the Incarnation • Normally unseen by humans
	Creation
MIDDLE ZONE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angels • Demons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angels: Real, interactive messengers, God's agents in great controversy • Good: Bible, prayer, angelic appearances, prophecy, visions, dreams, miracles • Demons: Real, interactive deceivers, Satan's agents in great controversy • Evil: Demonic influence, impersonations, many types of manifestation • Angels and demons seen occasionally by humans
LOWER ZONE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral-ethical, spiritual beings • Stewards of the earth and sub-human world • Primary earthly locus of the great controversy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animals • Plants • Inanimate Objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-moral-ethical-spiritual • No independent role in great controversy • Sometimes used for good (Balaam's donkey; Apostles' handkerchiefs and aprons) • Frequently used by demons to deceive humans

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The Bible describes human access to the Father through the heavenly mediation of the Son and the earthly mission of the Spirit. Humans are to be God-fearing, God-glorifying, God-centered, God-serving, and God-loving. The first angel's message says "Fear God, and give glory to him" (Rev 14:7).

The middle zone facilitates the believer's relationship with God but Scripture does not validate a religious experience focusing primarily on the middle zone. The Bible and prayer are the middle zone elements that are to have a daily focus for Christians. Angelic appearances, prophecy, visions, dreams, and miracles are provided by God's providential grace.

One of Christianity's strongest critiques is on animism's manipulative posture toward God through the middle zone. The Bible prescribes a posture of humble, faithful submission toward God. The animistic assumption that rites and remedies "must work" (like gasoline) implies that when a Christian keeps the Sabbath, returns tithe and offerings, and lives a good ethical-moral life God is obligated to grant her prayer requests. If God does not grant the prayer requests, the animistic leaning Christian may feel justified in seeking animistic remedies, saying, "What else can I do? I must help myself somehow." Thus, a pathway to dual-allegiance is opened. Such a Christian has an allegiance both to God and to evil spirits and powers of the middle zone.

The Bible teaches that no good deed nor the avoidance of any bad deed can create an obligation which coerces God to act. The quality of life is not related to human behavior as a direct equation. Some good people suffer much more than some bad people. The truly Christian response is to submit humbly to the providence of God, whatever the condition of one's life may be.

Animists tend to be obsessed with power. Power is seen as being theologically, morally, and ethically neutral—like electricity or gasoline. Successful living requires staying "plugged in" or "tanked up," wherever power comes from. In contrast, the biblical view is that power always has a theological, moral, ethical character, depending upon its source. Demons are capable of using their power for apparently good ends but their ultimate purposes are always evil. Christians can rejoice in God's power and receive his power but should choose even death itself over any benefits from an evil power source.

A Christian Critique of Modernity

To complete the critique of animism it is also important to make a very brief critique of the cultural and worldview of modernity because it impacts almost the whole world. By modernity, I refer to the culture that

started in the North Atlantic under the influence of the Enlightenment. Through globalization the scientific worldview of modernity has spread far beyond Europe and North America. Modernity has been reshaped or replaced by postmodernity but that is beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant here is the view of the cosmos as illustrated in figure 3.

	Supernatural
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High God• Angels• Demons• Lesser gods• Good and bad spirits• Impersonal forces• Saints• Ancestral spirits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unknowable by scientific study, therefore, unknowable to humans• Part of pre-scientific folklore• Not really real• Matters of personal faith, opinion and conjecture• “Superstition”
	Natural
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Humans• Animals• Plants• Inanimate objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowable by scientific study• Really real• The only knowable realm for humans• Everything exists on the same level

Figure 3. The modern, enlightenment view of the cosmos

The Western scientific worldview divides everything into two zones—natural and supernatural. The natural zone is open to science but the supernatural is not. Therefore, only the natural zone is considered really real. Postmodernity is more open to the supernatural but maintains the two-zone model.

Some Christians take the pathway of modern science and deny everything that science cannot prove. The Bible thus becomes merely a human document and all accounts of spirits, angels, miracles, the virgin birth, and God himself become matters of personal opinion or superstition. In other words, the middle zone is excluded, denied, or ignored. The model constitutes a Christian heresy because it puts the Creator into the same category with created beings (angels and demons) and the beings and powers of other religious systems.

Christianity that adopts the modern worldview is syncretistic and is caused by a biblically unfaithful contextualization to Western culture. Christianity thus becomes powerless in the believer’s own confrontation with temptation, illness, and evil powers. When missionaries having a strictly Western scientific worldview encounter peoples with an animistic worldview they are ineffective in addressing issues of spiritual warfare.

Animism, Modernity, and the Christian Faith

Christians should be sobered when they recognize that their own practice of the faith can become syncretistic because of their cultural perspectives. Each Christian should accept Paul's exhortation to "examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor 13:5). Every true believer is called to be countercultural in various ways, depending on their particular culture. Globalization has intermingled peoples from traditionally animistic societies and those of modern and postmodern societies. Most people are cultural hybrids of some variety. Those on the side of modernity might be less inclined to engage in animistic practices but they in turn are less experienced in engaging the powers of darkness. Thus, Christians from all cultures and backgrounds have a great deal to learn from each other.

The hold that animism has on Christians differs in nature and intensity. Some refuse to participate in the rituals or use the symbols of animism, but they still hold animistic assumptions that deform their Christian faith. The animistic concept of an impersonal cosmic scale of merit was implicit in a recent story that originated in North America. A tornado swept through a large Adventist community, leaving some houses untouched but demolishing others. The Adventist who reported the event explained that the Adventists whose houses were destroyed were not living good lives while those whose homes were untouched were true Adventists. I wonder if this person ever read the book of Job?

Some believers use animistic forms like good luck charms or horoscopes in ways that do not intrude deeply into their Christian lives, even though these items are not healthy. Having said that, it is important to avoid a magical worldview that causes a person to label everyone who wears a good luck charm as an animistic Satan worshipper. Some people who use animistic forms do not participate in the dark meanings of spiritual warfare.

Other believers mix animistic meanings with Christian forms, like using the Bible, or communion bread and wine, or anointing oil in magical ways. One pastor told me about a church member who maintains a bedroom shrine where she regularly communes with Jesus, whose image appears on the blank wall. Others put themselves intentionally into perilous situations where Satan is directly at work through various manifestations.

Animism persists in the global church because of various factors. Some younger indigenous Christian groups lack an adequate biblical foundation and stray into animistic practices because of the appeal of animism to the masses. Other groups are committed to biblical doctrine but lack adequate faith or courage or procedural skills to lead the church away from animism.

Shortcomings in missionary practice can also leave new converts unprepared to face the powers of evil. While the church must necessarily identify human shortcomings in missions, past and present, we must also realize that the confrontation between true Christianity and animism is part of the Great Controversy. The very best missionary and leadership theory, strategy, and methodology are not enough to avoid the battle between good and evil.

Some Christians, including some theologians, are cessationists who believe that the Holy Spirit ceased working with power when the last Apostle died or when the New Testament canon was formed. Others believe in the power of the Spirit theoretically but are functional cessationists. They do not expect or experience the power of God because of modern scientific assumptions that relegate such matters to superstition, or they react against the excesses of Pentecostalism. Others reject some of the imbalances in spiritual warfare literature and practice. Whatever the cause, cessationism denies believers the power they need to overcome personal temptations, receive and minister healing to others, and confront demonic manifestations.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the engagement of Adventist mission with animism occurs on different fronts. First, there are Adventists who believe and practice elements of animism in a way that constitutes dual allegiance. Second, there are other Christians who believe and practice elements of animism that constitute dual allegiance, notably a non-biblical view of death that opens the door for many manifestations of spiritism and constitutes a crippling missiological challenge for their mission to non-Christians. Third, there is a wide variety of peoples who constitute the animistic majority among the non-Christian world religions. Fourth, are the tribal animistic peoples who are not part of any world religion. Fifth, there is the growing secular-postmodern-new age peoples whose newly developing religions often include animistic elements.

Addressing the challenge of animism needs to include the following features (and more). First, Adventists need to challenge animistic tendencies within its own members. Some animistic tendencies are easy to identify but others are more subtle. Challenging animism within will require a deeper study of cultures and worldviews and will necessitate more patient biblical teaching.

Second, Adventists need to embrace a missiology that makes a deep, worldview-level focus the norm. The dual allegiance that is found in the church today is often caused by shallow evangelism that focuses on surface-level cognition and behavioral change. In many cases the traditional

evangelism paradigm has been adopted for global use with only superficial adjustment made when used among non-Christian peoples. What is needed is comprehensive discipleship training designed for specific peoples and contexts.

Third, the Adventist Church needs to make a recommitment to long-term missionary service as the most effective mode for mission among unevangelized peoples, notably Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhist animists. This recommitment implies the need for comprehensive and focused missionary education. In an era when Adventist missionary service is truly “from everywhere to everywhere,” missionary training must be specific to address both the home culture and foreign service contexts of the missionary. History shows that Western missionaries have struggled to address animism in their places of service because of their cultural baggage. Today’s missionaries who come from many cultures bring a wide range of cultural baggage that must be addressed in missionary education.

In view of the wide reach of animism, I believe that it presents one of the great mission opportunities of the 21st century. The similarities that unite the diverse peoples identified above present a thrilling opportunity. If Adventists could “get it right” for missions among animists the church could potentially reach billions of people.

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