

COMMON THREADS OF ANIMISM

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INTRODUCTION

Animism is most often described as a simple, unevolved religion. Although it lacks the strict creeds and descriptive doctrines of many major religions, animism can be extremely complex. The word “animism” has its roots in three Latin words. *Animare* – means to vivify; this is the same word from which “animation” comes. The second and third words are similar in meaning: *anima* means “soul”, and *animus* is translated “spirit”. From this etymology, the most basic definition of the religion is found: to believe that souls or spirits give life to nature. Anthropologists, who believe in evolution, espouse the idea that, as the caveman became aware of the world around him, he began to search for a way to explain things like fire, wind, thunder, illness, and death. What this primitive man concluded was that there were spirits or souls that gave these things life. The primitive man then sought a way to control the forces around him, by controlling the spirits that animated these forces.

This is where the diversity and complexity of animism is found. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of animistic cultures around the world, and each one seeks to control the spirits in a slightly different manner. Within local geographical regions, there are only slight differences, but, with an increase in distance, comes an increase in disparity. The variations between two tribes in the lowlands of Papua New Guinea may be hard to detect, but,

comparing a tribe in Papua New Guinea to another tribe in Africa will reveal great anomalies.

Even so, the basic structure of the religion remains the same. These similarities are too striking to ignore, and these are what this article will focus on. An anthropologist, who adheres to the evolutionary standpoint, would claim that animistic religions developed from a common starting point – the efforts of a primitive race attempting to explain the world around them. Christians would agree that there is a common origination of the religions; however, that source is the deceptiveness of Satan. Satan's devices are not new, and he is not infinitely creative, but he is a master of contextualisation. He has carefully adapted a set of common beliefs and methods to individual people groups to give each one its own traditional religion.

A COMMON DEFINITION

At its heart, animism is not a primitive religion, conjured up by a primitive mind, with too much time on his hands. In its essence, it is a depraved mind, refusing to see the revelation of God all around him (Rom 1:18-23). Into this fertile soil, Satan plants a religion that gives man a sense of control. Humankind bristles at the idea that there is something that orders man's steps that he cannot control (Prov 20:24). Therefore, a system of controlling the forces, which cannot be explained, is eagerly grasped. In practice, animism has become focused on controlling those forces, for good, or for evil. If one man becomes very angry with another man, he may go to a magic man to work divination on his enemy to make him ill. The family of the sick man may then go to a magic man themselves; they would attempt to persuade the spirit or spirits to make the sick relative better, and to reveal who caused the illness. Each side of the conflict is using magic for its own purposes to bring about its own desired results. The practical definition of animism is simply trying to get the spirits to do what one wants them to do.

ONE SUPREME BEING

A core credence among most animistic people is the belief in one god, who is more powerful than the others. Quite often, he is seen as the creator-god,

even to the point of creating the other gods. He is also typically seen as transcendent, having created the world, and then leaving it in the control of lesser gods, not really any of which are entirely reliable or good. Therefore, this god is generally unpopular, and goes largely unworshipped. This god is often seen more as a first among equals, but quite unknowable. In the Ningerum tribe of Papua New Guinea there is such a god. His name is *Ahwaaman*, but little is known of him, except that he is the creator, and that he does have at least one “offspring”. He is very much like the altar, dedicated to the “unknown god”, which Paul found on the way to the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22-34). It is unlikely that this altar was there just in case a god was overlooked; on the contrary, it seems that this altar was dedicated to a specific god that was known to exist, but was otherwise unknown (v 28). Just as Paul associated this “unknowable god” to the Christian God, *Ahwaaman* is also considered to be the Christian God. This existence of one high god, who, in theory, equates to the Christian God, is a common thread among many animistic religions.

THE MAGIC MAN

He is known by many names around the world: witch doctor, sorcerer, wizard, priest, medium, medicine man, shaman, and magic man. In animism, a typical person does not usually have the experience or knowledge needed to properly address the spirits. Since the spirits themselves are somewhat unreliable, and prone to trickery, they must be approached properly, if they are going to do what they are asked to do. Additionally, the spirits generally do not speak in audible voices from thin air, so, to hear them, an intermediary, who can speak for them, is needed. Or, if the circumstances call for a ceremony to be performed, someone is needed, who can read the signs that the spirits give. This is the job of the “magic man” (literally, *the one to whom magic belongs*). How the magic man gets his job varies widely. In some cases, the rituals, ceremonies, and objects of divination have been passed down from a near relative. In other cases, the person has had an encounter in the past with the spirit he works with, and this familiarity allows him to call on that spirit. Still others have in some

way, been “chosen” by the spirits. Perhaps they were contacted in a dream or vision, and they may even be working with several spirits.

However they acquire their position, their relationship with the spirit is usually quite direct. In some cases, the spirit possesses them, and the spirit speaks through them. In other cases, they induce a trance in another person, who then speaks for the spirit. Many times, a ceremony is used. In the Ningerum tribe, mentioned previously, a disgruntled person may have “magic” worked on a person, so that he gets sick, and possibly dies. Many times, there are several people considered likely to have done this, so a ceremony is used to determine which one is guilty. All of the accused sit in a circle, and a small fire is lit in the middle of them. The magic man will then use a stick, about two to three feet long, with a string tied to the end of it. At the end of that string, a bone or other object of divination is tied. The magic man then holds the bone in the smoke above the fire. The bone will begin to swing, and as it does, it “points” to the person who is guilty, much like a swinging magnet being drawn to a nearby steel rod.

The fact that the magic man is paid for his services, and by the very nature of the religion, itself, opens it up to conflict. Firstly, a magic man will normally know how to do magic for good and for evil. For instance, one such diviner may work with the spirit of a venomous snake. He is paid to send a snake to bite an unfaithful wife. After she is bitten, her family may go to another magic man to make her well. It is even conceivable that both parties will actually end up paying the same magic man for opposing services. Some types of magic are both good and evil. When a chicken is stolen, the owner of the chicken may go to a magic man to have a ceremony performed to find out who is the thief. The ceremony calls on a spirit to make the thief sick unto death, if they do not repent. That’s good for the owner of the chicken, but not for the thief! The thief will normally come running, once he hears this ceremony has been performed, for fear that he will die. Either way, the magic man has done his job.

From a Christian point of view, this may seem incongruous. The Christian knows that there is only one God, and that these spirits are actually demons,

working for one master, Satan. Therefore, it would seem inconsistent that one demon would make a man sick and another – or even the same one – could be called on to make him well. How can a house that is divided against itself stand (Mark 3:25)? The answer is that the goal is to keep people ensnared in their furtive attempts to control the spirit world. One person goes to a magic man to make someone sick, and it works; that person feels he has successfully manipulated the spirits. The person, who is ill, then goes to a magic man to be made well, and it works; that person feels he has gotten the spirits to do what he wants them to do. As a result, both are more firmly mired in this deception of Satan.

MAGIC DEVICES

The animist has many tools to choose from in his attempt to reach the spirit world. One of the most basic is the use of magic words. Because this is such a simple method of gaining the spirits' favour, it is not limited to the magic man. When a person is planting a garden, he may say a short incantation, in order to procure a good harvest. When building a house, an animist will normally have some blessing announced, to ensure the health of the occupants. Conversely, words can be used, in a diabolical fashion, to injure others, or to cause illness to come upon them. Again, these methods are not limited to the magic man. The reason for this is that the words spoken equate to prayer. These "prayers" may be spontaneous and informal, or planned and rote. One common belief is that the words gain power with repetition, and, if they are repeated often enough, the spirits are virtually required to comply. However, ultimately, words are cheap, and, if a person wishes to be more certain of the spirits' compliance, then more serious steps need to be taken.

Several years ago, a very healthy and educated young Ningerum man became psychotic. Suddenly, this very gentle and soft-spoken man became a raving lunatic, to the point where he had to have his hands bound to prevent harm to others. The man's relatives began looking for causes, and it was determined that the likely culprit was the spirit of his dead father. In order to appease the spirit, the relatives were told that they needed to make a blood

sacrifice. Eventually a pig – their most valuable of animals – was procured, and the blood was poured on the father's grave. (In the meantime, the young man had gone to a mission hospital, and was given medicine for the psychosis, so, at the time of the sacrifice, he was fine.) In the minds of the people, words were not enough to free the young man from his ailment, so a blood sacrifice was needed.

It is interesting to note that, once the ceremony was performed, the pig was cooked and eaten. One would think that, since it was sacrificed to the ancestral spirit, it should have been taboo, but this was not the case. The belief held is that the part of the pig that is valuable to the spirit is the life force, which is contained in the blood. The life force is the part that the spirit consumes. Since spirits do not eat as men do, the carcass of the animal is of little value to the spirit, so the people are free to eat it.

Symbolic designs also play an important part in animistic cultures. Often, a traditional drum, or the prow of a wooden canoe, is decorated with designs that have significance to the clan. These designs can also be used to ward off evil spirits, or bring good luck. Often, it is evident that a person has gone to a magic man to obtain relief from an illness, or to be protected from becoming sick, because designs are commonly painted on the face or chest by the magic man.

Magic is often imitative and contagious, and this opens up the use of several other items for use in performing magic. In imitative magic, some type of liquid and a fire may be used in a ceremony to bring rain. The liquid, representing the rain, would be poured onto the fire, and the resulting smoke would represent clouds. In contagious magic, something that had been in contact with the intended victim – a nail filing, an article of clothing, a bit of unfinished food, or even a footprint – could be used in a ceremony to make that person ill. Other devices, which are commonly used among animistic peoples to gain favour, avert evil, or, in some other way, control the gods, include costly offerings, avoidance of certain areas, charms, and fetishes. All of these things are viewed as items, which can give the animist some control over the spirits, and, hence, the world around him.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

The widely-viewed film, *EE-taow*, is the story of a missionary family with New Tribes Mission, and the astounding success they had with the Mouk tribe in Papua New Guinea. Their approach was to learn the language, and then teach through the Bible, using the chronological approach. Initially, it appeared that virtually the entire tribe turned to God. It was a wild success, and missions and missionaries flocked to the chronological method in droves, hoping to imitate the sensation among the Mouk tribe. Unfortunately, many of those who initially claimed allegiance with Christ quickly turned back to their old ways. To be sure, there are many, who were genuinely converted, but it seems the majority were just along for the ride.

Wycliffe Bible Translators have similar stories. Several times, when a newly-finished translation of the New Testament is presented to a tribe, there are apparent mass conversions. In the final analysis, though, only a few are found to be true Christians. Even in tribes, where evangelism happens more slowly, the results are similar. The Ningerum tribe was initially introduced to the gospel in the 1970s, through contact with a neighbouring tribe, who had missionaries. A few members of the Ningerum tribe became Christians, and they took their new faith back, and spread the good news to many of the Ningerum people. Until the 1990s, there was little missionary activity in the tribe, and, although it was very questionable how many Ningerum people were actually Christians, it seemed that it was a significant percentage. After ten years of missionaries living and working in the tribe, the final conclusion of the Christians and the missionaries was that very few were actually trusting in Christ alone for their salvation.

A major problem is that most of these tribal people would still claim to be Christians, and it is a danger for the missionary or missiologist to believe the people understand the claim they are making. Many missiologists believe that animistic people are turning to Christianity in droves. If each person in an indigenously animistic culture, who claims to be a Christian, is assumed to be one, the percentage of conversions is, indeed, very high. The missiologists look at these percentages, and conclude that the problem of

tribal religions is all but solved. From this has come a multitude of ill-formed assumptions. Animism is thought by many to be a very weak religion, since so many have supposedly turned away from it so easily. In looking for reasons, they hypothesise that, because there is no firm foundation or standard of truth, the religion is unstable. Also, there is a decided lack of absolutes in animism, other than a basic belief in the reality of the supernatural, and that the spiritual realm is interrelated with the physical realm. This, too, is thought to make traditional religions weak, but, in reality, it appears to have made them adaptable.

One missiologist, Eugene Nida, has done just this. In his book, *Introducing Animism*, he assumes that animistic people are, indeed, turning to Christ in high percentages, and he, therefore, concludes that animism is a weak religion (Nida, 1959, pp. 59, 56-58). In conflict with this, he initially states that animism exists, not only as a dominant religion in some areas, but also as an underlying belief system in many major religions (p. 5). He quotes a saying in Southeast Asia, “Scratch a Muslim Javanese and you find a Hindu. Scratch the Hindu and you find a pagan” (p. 6). The fact is that the biggest danger in working with animists is syncretism. The adaptability of their beliefs allows the beliefs to remain at the core of a person’s worldview, regardless of what is professed.

When Christians come and tell the animists about God, the animists are able to easily assimilate this new religion. Animists often have a traditional god that is higher than the rest. Also, they are familiar with spirits, so, when they hear of the Holy Spirit, they are very accepting. The Holy Spirit is a good Spirit, in contrast to the dubious spirits they try to control; they like that. Also, He can do anything, again, in contrast to their spirits, which have limited powers. Thus, the Holy Spirit is seen as simply the first choice in a line of many spirits they can go to, and if He cannot be convinced to do what they want Him to do, they will simply try another spirit. The way to manipulate this good Spirit is rather familiar as well. They “pray” quite often to the spirits, so, asking the Holy Spirit to do things is not difficult. Setting up a worship house (church), meeting for ceremonies (services), and sacrificing something of value (giving), are also quite common. Beyond

that, crosses are similar to charms, and pictures relate to symbolic designs – especially if they have no idea what the picture is supposed to represent. Hence, the animist may appear to be a very good Christian, when, in fact, he is being a devout pagan.

So, how does the missionary combat this? Firstly, the gospel message must start at “the beginning”. Chronological Bible teaching is still extremely valuable, because, even though it can result in insincere “conversions”, it has also resulted in a great number of people truly understanding the gospel. When presenting the gospel, the epistemology of the animist must be taken into account. He does not know the high god of his religion, and it is often the case that he believes God cannot be known. The Christian must show the animist that God can be known, and, in fact, wants to be known. From there, an explanation of God’s holiness and justice is necessary, so the animist can understand why sin separates him from God, and why Christ had to die for that sin. The good news is still good for the animist, but the presentation of the good news must start where *he* is.

One of the most difficult things for the animist to comprehend is the exclusivity of the Christian God. It is not that the animist has an alternative view of how to reach heaven, but he does have dozens of alternative views on how to live this life. Animism generates a great deal of fear, but its follower also retains a great deal of control. If a person is ill, and the spirit, to whom he goes first can’t make him well, then there is usually another magic man, and another spirit. To put all hope on one spirit seems foolish at best. To the animist, casting all his cares on Jesus is just plain stupid. To trust in God, to the extent of saying, “If You won’t make me well, then I will be content to remain sick”, is beyond anything he has ever tried before. The tendency of the animist is to simply add God – or more specifically, the Holy Spirit – to his long list of spirits. He must be confronted gently with the truth that God will not share His allegiance.

The truth of the matter is that God often chooses not to work until the person totally gives himself over to Him. God does not play power games. He is not happy to simply be first in line. And, even if He is the only One a person

will trust, it does not mean He will do as He is asked. God will do His will. A Bible school student in Papua New Guinea once faced this dilemma. His young son had been ill for years, and Western medicines had been inadequate. He turned to God and prayed, he had others pray, and many people asked God to make his son well, all to no avail. Finally, in frustration, he took his son to the magic man. The boy quickly recovered, and remained well for years afterward. God was not willing to play the game, but the spirits were more than happy to oblige.

Slowly, with much teaching, the animist's worldview can begin to change. One of the original Christians in the Ningerum tribe, who is now a pastor, asked at in-service training, "When I plant my garden, is it okay to say words over it (make an incantation)?" This was evidence that he was beginning to understand. Another of the original Christians has come much further, and will grudgingly give mental assent that someone could die of natural causes, but he is not sure if it has ever happened! The main problem in dealing with animism is syncretism, and the primary weapon against syncretism is a proper presentation and teaching of the gospel. These things, combined with fervent prayer, can change the animist's worldview.

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