

Mark I. Wallace

When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World

New York: Fordham University Press, 2019

ISBN: 978-0-82328-131-2 (PB) \$29.95. 224pp.

Given Max Weber's famous articulation of the Protestant disenchantment of the world and Lynn White Jr.'s repeatedly cited condemnation of Christian dominion of the natural world and domination over animist religions, Mark I. Wallace's claim to a *Christianimism* in *When God Was a Bird* will likely be perceived as something of a curiosity. Contrary to Weber, White Jr. and others, Wallace argues that a sense of the world as enchanted, ensouled or filled with divinity are fully consistent with Christian belief – that if one reads the Bible 'from the perspective of the Earth as a subject unto itself' (p. 147) a Christian would arrive at the same conclusions.

One can appreciate the challenge of the task Wallace embraces head on. As he explains, both critics of Christianity *and* Christian defenders of orthodoxy 'argue outright or imply that foundational Christianity emerged *ex nihilo* from the ashes of conquered animism' (p. 44). In such binary frameworks a Christianimism is not just a curiosity but a contradiction in terms. Moving to disrupt these binaries, Wallace argues that Christianimism is not only possible as a contemporary constructive Christian theology, but that animism has been central to Christianity since its beginnings. The key to Wallace's claim lies in his interpretation of the doctrine of incarnation: Christianity did not eradicate but '*sublated* [animism] to its articulation of the one God now enfleshed within this world through the human person of Jesus' (p. 42). Moreover, according to biblical sources Christian incarnation should be embraced as dual, not singular. Wallace notes the overlooked significance of God the Holy Spirit manifesting as a dove, arguing that such avian manifestations of the divine are consistent with ancient animist avian divinities. Rather than a conquest of biblical over natural religion, this interpretation suggests a 'mutually transformative dialectic' (p. 45). In short, Wallace argues that Christianity's critics, like White, as well as its anti-animist proponents, like Rene Girard, 'falsely separate what biblical religion carefully blends and mixes together' (p. 73). The ambitious aims of *When God Was a Bird* are unreservedly ethical; Wallace suggests that this dual incarnation of both human and other-than-human also implies the divinity and sacredness of all creation. His hope is that Christianimism might foster a richer affective attachment to the world as well as a more robust environmental ethic.

One of the most impressive aspects of the text is Wallace's attention to consonance between form and content. In arguing for the ethical importance of affective connections with the other-than-human world, Wallace appropriately weaves into his reasoned arguments passionately written stories of transcendent natural beauty as well as environmental destruction, and beautiful illustrations by James Larson. Much of the text is written as personal narrative, including reflections on the author's own developed nature spirituality and those human writings, landscapes and other-than-human creatures that have shaped it.

The argument for a Christianimism is particularly interesting in its aim to disrupt the widely assumed Christian/animist dualism – assumptions Wallace adeptly brings to light. As a contemporary constructive theological move dual incarnation is a compelling proposal, but Wallace's claims to historical originality – and especially orthodoxy – remain problematic. Unfortunately, the relationship being proposed between Christianimism and orthodoxy is not dealt with consistently. In some places, Wallace suggests Christianimism is consistent with or internal to orthodoxy (see p. 108). In other places, he acknowledges Christian orthodoxy has rather baldly functioned to exclude and repress animisms (see p. 168). While Wallace draws

evidence and examples from several biblical sources, the author does not acknowledge tension with the limits put on incarnation in early creeds that came to define orthodoxy. The Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian definition, widely regarded as standards of orthodoxy, limit incarnation to the singular human, Jesus of Nazareth: 'We believe in one God, the Father Almighty... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God' (Nicene Creed). If Wallace had been willing either to set aside the question of historical orthodoxy and boldly claim a creative and constructive reinterpretation of the Christian tradition, or to deal explicitly with these tensions and provide clarity on the orthodox distinction between Jesus as 'only-begotten' and the Holy Spirit as 'proceeding' from God, these obstacles would not have been so prohibitive to the plausibility of his proposal.

Orthodox issues aside, the more unsettling concern with Wallace's argument is ethical. While Wallace does acknowledge a persistent history within Christianity of violence and oppression toward indigenous and animist religions, the severity of the issue needs to be dealt with more extensively and seriously. Reframing Christianity as animist not only has the potential effect Wallace hopes for (eliciting a more affective response to the other-than-human and thus a more robust earth ethic), it also can function to render an 'original' or 'core' Christianity innocent of historical animus toward animisms, thus potentially producing the effect (clearly unintended by Wallace) of erasing or invalidating the historical witness of violence against indigenous religions.

Wallace's employment of John Muir's nature spirituality needs further investigation and complication for similar reasons. He acknowledges the racist appraisals Muir makes of indigenous peoples and the ways the parks Muir promoted actively restricted the access of native populations to their lands. In the end, though, he regards 'Muir, warts and all, as the profoundly flawed patron saint of the American environmental movement'. He adds that, 'Muir's vision of a divinized world is desperately needed today – even though this vision is tainted by a racist imaginary of depopulated wilderness that has had, and continues to have, toxic reverberations that impact first peoples' cultural heritage, natural rights, and future well-being' (p. 118). Wallace's appraisal suggests Muir's depictions of native populations do not render his nature spirituality fundamentally problematic or incongruent with indigenous animisms. More questions emerge here than are answered: If Muir's was a Christianism, as Wallace claims, why did he not recognise greater affinity with indigenous animisms? Was there something particular about his animism that would allow such a repudiation of another animism?

This line of questioning leads to key questions that would be important for Wallace or anyone exploring such relationships in the future: what *kind* of animism? Is it clear that all animisms are inherently environmentally friendly? Might there be key differences – with important ethical implications – between various animisms? In this case, even if Christianity can be aligned with animism, how does or has this functioned in terms of environmental concerns? What happens, for instance, when late nineteenth-century Christian Americans embrace a kind of practical natural spiritualism to aid them in finding oil, and then consistently frame oil as animated with divine agency? These too might be characterised as Christianisms, but of a more environmentally deleterious type. In the end, Wallace's proposals remain intriguing and his work demonstrates the importance of further engagement with, and analysis of, the relationship between Christianity and indigenous religions, animism and environmentalism.

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