A sample entry from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

Bron Taylor

materiality. As a point of entry into the study of religion and nature, the theory of animism presents a problem, bearing traces of nineteenth-century European imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, rather than a solution for our understanding of religious engagements with the natural world.

David Chidester

Further Reading

Bird-David, Nurit. " 'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology." *Current Anthropology* 40 Supplement (1999), 67–92.

Callaway, Henry. *The Religious System of the Amazulu*. Springvale: Springvale Mission, 1868–1870; Cape Town: Struik, 1970.

Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952 (original edition, 1871).

Guthrie, Stewart Elliot. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lubbock, John. *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*. London: Longmans, Green, 1889 (orig. edn, 1870).

Marx, Karl. *Capital*, 2 vols. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, trs. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974 (original edition, 1867).

Masuzawa, Tomoko. "Troubles with Materiality: The Ghost of Fetishism in the Nineteenth Century." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000), 242–67.

M'Lennan, John Ferguson. "The Worship of Animals and Plants." *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1868), 407–27, 562–82; 7 (1870), 194–216.

Pietz, William. "The Problem of the Fetish, I." *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985), 5–17.

Tylor, E.B. "The Limits of Savage Religion." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21 (1892), 283–301.

Tylor, E.B. *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1871.

Van Rheenan, Gailyn. *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991.

See also: Animism – A Contemporary Perspective; Anthropologists; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Ecology and Religion; Evolutionary Biology, Religion, and Stewardship; Hunting Spirituality and Animism; Magic; Magic, Animism and the Shaman's Craft; Noble Savage; Radical Environmentalism; Snyder, Gary; Zulu (amaZulu) Ancestors and Ritual Exchange; Zulu (amaZulu) Culture, Plants and Spirit Worlds (South Africa).

SP Animism – A Contemporary Perspective

Animism is a term coined to serve in an argument about the origins of religion, but it has survived the widespread rejection of that theory and now thrives as a label for a particular kind of religion. For E.B. Tylor (1871), the term "animism" summarizes his definition of religion as "belief in spiritual beings." In its new application, animism now labels a type of religion comparable to other types (e.g., monotheism and polytheism). It is typically applied to religions that engage with a wide community of living beings with whom humans share this world or particular locations within it. It might be summed up by the phrase "all that exists lives" and, sometimes, the additional understanding that "all that lives is holy." As such the term animism is sometimes applied to particular indigenous religions in comparison to Christianity or Islam, for example. It is also used as a self-definition by some indigenous people and some eco-pagans.

The application of the term animism no longer depends on notions about "spirits" or "supernatural" entities. It has been found helpful in drawing attention to ontologies and epistemologies in which life is encountered in a wide community of persons only some of whom are human. Certainly this new usage shares with Tylor's discussion a concern with materiality and, in this, links animism to wider contestations, for example, about environmentalism and the dichotomous opposition of culture and nature.

In the language of classical European philosophy "person" refers principally to humans and deity. At various times, the question of the personhood of particular groups of humans (Africans and women in particular) has been problematic (e.g., in debates about the recognition and increasing application of human rights). Other beings (animals especially) are problematic in as much as some might be more or less like humans in particular ways (e.g., the feeling of pain, the use of language, or some indicator of intellect or agency) that seem to some theorists to justify the recognition of personhood and thus the extension or recognition of rights. Similarly, Piaget's approach to childhood development (1933) seems to assume that reality is accurately described in English language's use of gendered pronouns ("he" or "she") for persons, in contrast to a wider range of inanimate objects ("it"). In this theory, children "naturally" project life onto inanimate objects until they reach a more advanced stage of development. Reference to European languages in which personal pronouns are applied to what native speakers of those languages also consider inanimate (e.g., chairs) may not necessarily falsify these notions, especially because the concomitant imputation of gender is neither considered nor meaningful. In these and similar ways, animism is problematic in European-rooted worldviews and discourse. It simultaneously insists on the veracity of Western notions about personhood and materiality, while deni-

grating other understandings as childish and/or primitive. Those indigenous and environmentalist perspectives that might challenge such positions are thereby disabled and marginalized.

In Anishinaabemowin, the language of Anishinaabeg or Ojibwe people (Native Americans indigenous to the Great Lakes area), the grammatical animism of some words is indicative of something more profound. Here, words are not gendered as they are in European languages, but they are necessarily either "animate" or "inanimate." This is certainly not a systematized or abstract complex, and speakers may not know why x is animate when y is inanimate, but it does arise from a broader culture in which one might speak *with* animate persons but only *about* inanimate objects. The possibility that gifts might be given to and received from those identified as animate persons is one indication of a "relational epistemology" (Bird-David 1999). Irving Hallowell's (1960) discussion of Ojibwe ontology includes an important discussion with an unnamed "old man" about whether all rocks are alive and, since he avers that not all rocks are alive, how one might know which ones are. Contrary to the theories of Piaget (1933) and Guthrie (1993), this depends on more than the projection of personality or human-likeness onto allegedly inanimate objects. It is not just that some rocks "look human" (e.g., appearing to have a mouth), or that some are said to have moved of their own volition, but that some humans relate to some rocks in ways that indicate the recognition of life. These ways might include recognition of expressions of agency, will, intellect and so on, but are fundamentally about engagement in a cultural system of respect and reciprocity. Rocks are not mere "nature" in opposition to "culture" but are, or might be, persons who engage with other persons in particular ways. If humans give gifts to rocks, rocks not only receive gifts from humans but also give gifts that initiate relationships.

Nurit Bird-David (1999) has brought Hallowell's discussion into relation with wider consideration of the relational constitution of persons and with her own research among the Nayaka of south India. Her exploration of this hunter-gatherer epistemology exemplifies the possibilities raised by the new use of the term animism as a challenge to previous approaches. Her work is parallel to that of Ken Morrison (1992) and other scholars of Native American religious traditions who point out that the privileging of spirit over matter, or supernatural over natural, has misdirected attention from the irrelevance of such dichotomies to those who engage religiously with this world. An even stronger critique is raised by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who contrasts the Western notion that there is a singular nature and multiple cultures (hence multiculturalism) with Amazonian indigenous perspectives that there is a singular culture and multiple natures and therefore "multinaturalism." While he sees "animism" as "the extension of [human] qualities to beings of other species" (i.e., a term compromised by its role in Tylor's theory), his own discussion clearly dovetails with those cited above. It further contributes the important invitation to consider that "culture" is not the preserve of humans, but is evident (when seen as these indigenous peoples see things) among other-than-human persons too. In this light, Western discourses about religions, especially shamanisms, in which "spirits" and "spirituality" are privileged, might be corrected from the animist perspective that everything that lives (and this is a wider category than is typically assumed in the West) is involved in culture.

In addition to anthropological research that discovers or theorizes animisms (in various ways) and categorizations of the world's religions that include "animists," it is instructive to consider animism in imaginative literatures. Three examples might suffice. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) the heroine, Celie, finally stands up to her main abuser and finds that the elements are with her. Her statement, "I am here" can be read as foundational for Walker's later autobiographical accounts of her own spiritual quest in which it is good to be "here." In a very different style, Daniel Quinn's didactic novels (beginning with *Ishmael*, 1995) provoke a consideration that the majority of human cultures are preferable to that of the West. These "leaver" societies assaulted by "taker" culture and its "totalitarian agriculture" demonstrate alternative ways to be human and encourage efforts to create better alternatives for the future. His animism is a principled evocation of the possibility that humanity might live as others live: leaving what is not needed now for others or ourselves to share in the future, going beyond the discourse of sustainability to the celebration of diverse modes of engaging with the world. Central to these novels, once again, is a debate about the commonalities and diversities of culture(s) and nature(s). Finally, in this brief introduction to recent literatures of animism, much Fantasy Fiction suggests that the world is inhabited by a wide range of autonomous living beings with their own interests and concerns. Whether these be speaking trees or elusive elves, it seems that life (including communication, intelligence, suffering, joy and so on) is to be found everywhere in this and any possible otherworlds. These literatures not only explore but encourage imaginative engagements with the world that can be labeled "animist."

Indigenous, anthropological, fictional and philosophical writings all provide material for a reconsideration of animism. Confronted by the diminishment of ecological diversity, by assaults on "natural environments" and by the seemingly ever-increasing dominance of humanity over this planet, there are those who find the term "animism" helpful in recognizing alternatives. Eco-pagans are significant among the environmentalists whose activism arises from animist perspectives. They are activist not

primarily because human life may become untenable if such anti-ecological lifeways continue, nor because a creator deity requires an account of how humans have executed their stewardship of the planet. Animist eco-Pagans are primarily on the front lines confronting road building, quarrying, clear-cutting and other exploitative actions, because the community of life is threatened. It is not that only humans can protest or act – although the sight of a human lying in the mud in front of a bulldozer may be a more powerful preventive of destruction than that of a mere animal or plant. In the understanding of many such activists, protest venues might be a location in which humanity confronts itself with conflicting assessments of its place in the scheme of things. Over against the notion that everything is a resource for humanity's benefit (provided either by God or nature) is the understanding that humans are only one species among those whose lives and cultures require sustenance and support. Animists may be inspired by experiences of the participation of elusive otherworld beings, but their primary motive is the celebration of seemingly more mundane relationships.

Tylor's theory of animism has been rejected by most. But contemporary animists do not offer assertions about the origins, development and true nature of all religion, but a focused discussion about particular ways of being related to the world. Like the earlier theory it is entangled with notions of materiality, but now this arises from a challenge to discourses that divide spirit and flesh, soul and body, subject and object, life and matter, supernatural and natural, culture and nature, people and environment, community and resources, and so on. In dialogue with particular indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and cosmovisions, the new animism contests modernist preconceptions and invites the widening of relational engagements generated and enhanced by gift exchanges and other forms of mutuality. In both indigenous and Western forms, animism encourages humans to see the world as a diverse community of living persons worthy of particular kinds of respect.

Animism is, however, more than the recognition of life in those otherwise considered inanimate. This would continue to prioritize what is exceptional to the West and ignore what is self-evident to those who might appropriately be named "animists." In the end, the recognition of life is far too simple to be generative. What is important is the mutual recognition of the ability to reciprocate, relate and engage. Animists are people who encounter other persons, only some of whom are human, as cultural beings. Their various engagements with what might otherwise be considered the environment or nature constitutes a complex of cultural relationships with a large and diverse community. Such worldviews and lifeways proffer exciting possibilities for underpinning relationships with the other-than-human world that contrast dramatically with what is now normal or natural in modernity. Animism promises the enrichment of human cultures by fuller engagement with what is too often taken as background or resource-available to the construction of culture. Instead, animists are those who seek cultures of relationship rooted and expressed in respectful relationships.

Graham Harvey

Further Reading

Bird-David, Nurit. " 'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology." *Current Anthropology* 40, Supplement (1999), 67–92.

Guthrie, Stewart Elliot. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Hallowell, A. Irving. 1960. "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View." In S. Diamond, ed. *Culture in History*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1952.

Morrison, Kenneth M. "Beyond the Supernatural." *Religion* 22 (1999), 201–5.

Piaget, Jean. "Children's Philosophies." In C. Murchison, ed. *A Handbook of Child Psychology*. Worcester: Clark University, 1933, 534–47.

Quinn, Daniel. *Ishmael*. New York: Bantam, 1995.

Tylor, E.B. *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1871.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

See also: Animism; Animism: Humanity's Original Religious Worldview; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Hunting Spirituality and Animism; Magic; Magic, Animism, and the Shaman's Craft; Radical Environmentalism; Snyder, Gary; Radical Environmentalism; Walker, Alice; Zulu (amaZulu) Ancestors and Ritual Exchange;

P Animism – Humanity's Original Religious Worldview

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the mere fact of evolution had been around for a good long while. Fossil evidence made it clear that species had undergone evolutionary change from ancient times to the present, and most thinkers of the time were perfectly content to leave it at that. The absence of a theory to explain evolutionary change was not felt by them, not experienced as a pressure, as it was by Charles Darwin. The fact alone wasn't sufficient for him. He wanted to know *why* species had evolved over time. He knew there had to be some intelligible mechanism or dynamic that would account for it, and this is what he went looking for – with well known