

The Evangelization of Animists: Power, Truth or Love Encounter?

The successful evangelization of animists requires a correct understanding of animism as a belief system in conjunction with a combination of strategies that utilize the strengths of three encounters—a truth encounter, a power encounter, and a love encounter.

by Douglas J. Hayward

Missionary strategies in the evangelization of any given people group are the product of missionary understandings regarding the practices and beliefs of that people. When it comes to the evangelization of animists the history of missions reveals that a variety of strategies have been attempted. In this article I address three specific strategies that arise out of an understanding and response to animism. In particular, I shall argue that the successful evangelization of animists requires a correct understanding of animism as a belief system in conjunction with a combination of strategies that utilize the strengths of three encounters—truth encounter, power encounter, and love encounter. I begin with some introductory words regarding the anthropological and missiological use of the term animism.

Defining Animism

The term animism was first introduced by Edward Tylor in the late nineteenth century based upon the Latin word *anima* for soul. Tylor introduced the term in order to serve at least two important functions. First he wanted to refute the arguments of his contemporaries that primitive peoples lacked religion. To this end, Tylor argued that writers in his day failed to recognize “anything short of the organized and established theology of the higher races as being religion at all” (Tylor 1871:2:4). By establishing a new definition of religion, namely that “a minimum definition of religion” consists of a “belief in spiritual beings” (Tylor 1871:2:12), he was able to demonstrate that religion is universally present in all cultures. Tylor was then able to move on in his

arguments to build a case for cultural evolution which was a prominent sociological paradigm in his day.

I shall not, here, attempt to trace the history of the criticisms of Tylor’s position, but with the demise of the theory of cultural evolution the term “animism” has either been dropped by contemporary anthropologists, or it is referenced for its historical role in the anthropological study of religion.

The contemporary use of the term is evident in the following definitions of animism from three popular anthropological text books:

—“Belief in spiritual beings” (Peoples & Bailey 1988:443).

—“the belief in a soul or a personal supernatural force” (Plog & Bates 1980:381).

—“A belief in spirit beings, which are thought to animate nature” (Haviland 1990:361).

The problem with this use of the term is that it applies equally well to Christianity or other world religions which is, of course, what Tylor intended when he stated that animism was to be considered as a minimum definition of religion. However, for the purposes of scholars in comparative religion as well as missiologists, animism has taken on a more technical nature, namely that of referring to the religious beliefs of tribal peoples (or folk religion) who believe in the existence of multiple spirit beings. If animism is to be used in this manner, then, it must be modified from its original usage, or even its standard anthropological usage. Accepting, then, that such a use of the term is legitimate I would suggest the follow-

ing working definition for the term:

Animism is a belief in multiple spirit beings and souls that inhabit the universe, whose existence is found in people or in nature. As most generally conceptualized such spirits are semi-autonomous beings who represent distinct spheres of influence over nature (such as trees, water, animals, weather, etc.); or locations (such as mountains, depressions, forest glens, etc.); or human beings (that is by causing sickness, inducing possession behavior, evil behavior, or by becoming familial, helping entities, etc.).

This definition seeks to differentiate animism as a religion distinct from other religions, while at the same time acknowledging that a belief in such spirits often coexists with other religions. It is also a definition that seeks to be descriptive without adding pejorative, moralistic or theologically biased terminology.

K. Burridge brings further insight into the nature of animism as a belief system in his discussion of the function of religion when he writes:

...all religions are basically concerned with power. They are concerned with the discovery, identification, moral relevance and ordering of different kinds of power... whose manifestations and effects are observable, but whose natures are not yet fully comprehended (1969:5)

As he elaborates on this process (see especially pages 2-8) Burridge clarifies that religion is concerned with the truth about power, with the identification of the source of that power whether it comes from spiritual beings, whether it manifests in natural phenomena, apparitions, or abnormal behavior, whether it is beneficial or dangerous, and whether it has measurable attributes and ranges of power. Burridge continues to reason that taking these discoveries, and identifying those

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sorts of power, which, though sensed and affective, are currently not wholly comprehended, requires a combination of experience, working assumptions and faith which then become the shared truths of the culture. This interplay of experience, assumptions and faith is constantly subject to new experiences, understandings and challenges so as to be subject to a developmental process whereby old perceptions are tested, found faulty and abandoned while new truths are received and incorporated. From these shared truths are derived the moral imperatives, obligations and rules of conduct to which the members of a society are willing to subject themselves. Such rules enable individuals to identify their place in society, to discharge their moral obligations to the community and to engage in a similar process of identification and interaction with the culturally identified powers of the universe.

In light of this understanding regarding the nature of religion, it is evident that animism has the same objective as other religions but is unique as a belief system in that it postulates the existence of numerous spirit beings who function semi-autonomously in the universe, a domain they share with human beings and with whom they are capable of interacting. The origin, nature and manner in which they interact with human beings are distinctive to each cultural group's belief system and may be highly influenced by the presence of a religion from a major tradition such as Islam or Christianity. Whatever the variations may be, though, they arise from the common spiritual concerns of humanity, and from this perspective, we are able to understand animists, grasp the logic of their beliefs, and engage in inter-faith dialogue. A word of caution, as helpful as the above may be, we do well to take heed of the admonition of Marvin Harris who reminds us that religion is much more than simply a people's attempt to explain

puzzling phenomena (1991:284). Religion also serves many social and pragmatic concerns of a people or society.

Truth Encounters

It is obvious from the above that, well intentioned as they may be, animists are a people who do not have the full light of God's revelation and as a consequence suffer from spiritual ignorance and even Satanic delusions. One of the consequences of ignorance is fear which is a feature of animism that has been noted by evangelicals and missiologists. Van Rheeën states:

The animist lives in fear of the spiritual powers...[He] is overwhelmed by the many powers that might bring evil upon his life...He desperately searches for information to ward off evil and manipulate the powers to do his bidding. (1991:21-22).

In a similar vein, Nida and Smalley state that animists set about to resolve their fears in their religion, but that in their animistic practices they only end up in transferring their "elemental fear of the immediate, primary danger" to that of fear in "largely irresponsible spirits" (1959:58).

Having witnessed animists scurrying to their homes in the evening hours desperately seeking to be inside before the spirits of the night begin to roam the earth, I cannot help but agree with these assessments. However, as evangelicals we must be careful not to describe animism as a religion of fear while forgetting that the God of the Bible is also to be greatly feared, and that the fear of hell is legitimate for all people.

An appropriate response to these issues of ignorance and fear is truth and trust. Truth regarding the true nature of God and the spirit world, and truth regarding the fundamental spiritual questions they confront us as human beings including the six most common existential questions asked by people everywhere:

1. Can I find help in confronting the problems of living?

2. Can I find healing in times of sickness?

3. Can I find protection from malevolent beings?

4. How can I discharge my obligations to supernatural beings who may interact with me and my world?

5. How can I find meaning in life and in particular meaning to pain and suffering?

6. What is the source or origin of evil?

Teaching, preaching, Bible translation, discipling and other educational ventures, then, are appropriate missionary strategies in confronting ignorance. Indeed, these have been at the very heart of missionary strategies for decades, but we have also since learned that information alone does not dispel fear. The antidote to fear is trust, which is why a truth encounter must be accompanied by a power encounter which must be followed by a love encounter for effective evangelism among tribal animistic peoples.

Power Encounters

Since the decade of the 1960's it has been increasingly popular in missionary circles to talk about and plan evangelistic strategies around what has become known as "power encounters." This concept was first articulated and developed under the able leadership of Alan Tippett (1969). The concept has since undergone significant changes over the years since its first introduction, particularly under the influence of the so called Signs and Wonders Movement (see esp. Wimber:1992). However, at the heart of the whole concept is the recognition that truth must be accompanied by power and authority.

Strategies that incorporate power encounters have been particularly popular in the evangelization of animists because animism has increasingly been identified as being a religion that is focused, even obsessed, with gaining power. As examples of this under-

standing I turn first to the work of Nida and Smalley who state:

One basic assumption that is implied in all animistic practices is the controllability of the spirit power. If only one knows the right formulae, the spirit world can be made to do one's bidding, whether for good or for evil. The animist is not concerned about seeking the will of his god, but in compelling, entreating, or coercing his god to do his will... As animists come more and more into contact with the secularized views of urban centers, religion begins to lose its hold... But though an animist may lose his gods, he does not lose his basic orientation—that life should serve selfish ends. (1959:54-55)

Van Rheeën echoes this theme when he says "The essence of animism is power..." (1991:21).

In fact, for Van Rheeën this focus on power is so important he gives his own definition of animism that incorporates this concept.

Van Rheeën 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, frequently, to manipulate their power. (1991:20)

Steyne makes similar claims in a book entitled *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists*. He states:

...in animism...man needs power from outside himself to control his environment... Life's pursuit and religious motivation is... to compel the whole universe, both spirit and material, to do man's bidding and serve his selfish ends regardless of what they may be. Man is the focus of life and all forces (powers) are solely for his benefit. (1990:39)

These statements affirm what Burridge correctly noted, namely, that the essence of all religion is the concern for the truth of power. Missiologists need to take great care in this matter for the concept of power is not the same in all cultures. Concepts of power will differ in cultures depending upon their attitude toward nature and the land. As such foragers, pastoralists and even simple horticulturists may view them-

selves as living in harmony with nature and the land. They seek to use the land in a manner that recognizes the multiple demands upon it by not only man and nature, but also the spirit entities of the spirit world. Their quest for power, then, is more a quest for the authority and a right to engage in their particular activities. In contrast, to

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this attitude toward the land, more advanced agricultural societies seek to subdue the land, and their quest for power is driven by the desire to conquer and/or exploit for their own purposes.

When power comes from being in proper relationships, then human beings seek to form appropriate relationships with other sentient beings (both those that are seen and those that are unseen) that will assure their goodwill, cooperation, and if possible harmonious co-existence. These will include appropriate gifts, offerings and sacrifices of honor and/or appeasement.

Since the animistic world, in particular, is inhabited by a host of spirit presences who are ubiquitous, variable in nature or essence, and sometimes helpful, malicious, capricious, or distant and unconcerned, animists diligently seek to form appropriate relationships with the spirit world.

The relational character of power, and the fundamental difference in atti-

tudes toward power between animists and Westerners (in particular) is evident in a study of the topic of *mana*. It has been common in anthropology to identify *mana* as an impersonal power, and this identification has been picked up and repeated by missiologists. Unfortunately this misconception about the nature of *mana* as power has misled both anthropologists and missiologists in their understanding of both the concept of *mana* and the religious practices that surround it. In a seminal article on this topic entitled "Rethinking *Mana*," Roger Keesing argues that in Oceanic languages *manais*

...a stative verb, not a noun: things and human enterprises and efforts are *mana*. *Mana* is used as a transitive verb as well: ancestors and gods *manaize* people and their efforts. Where *mana* is used as a noun, it is (usually) not as a substantive but as an abstract verbal noun denoting the state or quality of *mana-ness* (of a thing or act) or being-*mana* (of a person). Things that are *mana* are efficacious, potent, successful, true, fulfilled, realized: they "work." *Mana-ness* is a state of efficacy, success, truth, potency, blessing, luck, realization—an abstract state or quality, not an invisible spiritual substance or medium. (1984:138)

In the hands of missionaries and anthropologists, though, *mana* has been misunderstood ever since Codrington first introduced the term into literature. Keesing argues that turning *mana* into a noun has been the invention of Europeans. He states:

Arguments in favor of understanding *mana* as a noun that labeled a diffuse spiritual energy or power [triumphed] more by virtue of rhetorical persuasiveness and the sheer intelligibility of such an imagined medium of spiritual potency to European philosophical imagination than because of solid textual, linguistic, or ethnographic evidence. (1984:137)

I believe that...*mana* as an invisible medium of power was an invention of Europeans, drawing on their own folk metaphors of power and the theories of nineteenth-century physics (1984:148)

Mana may metaphorically be substantivized: a magical stone may "have *mana*." But the interpretation by missionaries (and anthropolo-

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gists) that the stone thereby “contains” some invisible medium of power seems to me fundamentally erroneous. (1984:150)

Because of the way we metaphorically substantivize “power” the term was adopted to label quantifiable electrical energy as a medium whose flow could be channeled through cables and directed to human ends. The physicalist conception of electrical energy as power...has affected characterizations of *mana* (1984:150).

Keesing suggests that in order to more correctly understand the term we need to see

that a minimal first step toward a hermeneutic reinterpretation of *mana* in Oceanic religion would be to change every gloss of *mana* as “power” to “potency,” and every gloss of “powerful” to “potent.” “Potent” as stative and “potency” as derived abstract noun (and the parallel series needed to capture other senses of *mana*: “effective” and “efficacy”; “true” and “truth”; “realized” and “realization”; “sacred” and “sanctity”; “confirmed” and “confirmation”; etc.) begin to capture the linguistic, semantic, and ethnographic facts at hand. (1984:151)

If Keesing is right, and I believe he is, then all anthropological and missiological discussions on *mana*, not only for Oceania, but for other geographical regions as well, are highly suspect because the untested ideological assumptions, indeed the anthropologically orthodox view that we all learned in graduate school has blinded us to its true function in the religious systems of animists.

In respect, then, to the evangelical and missiological claim that the search by animists for *mana* is a quest for power, we do well to consider Keesing’s statement that:

Mana is a concept that addresses two circumstances of life... first, the essential unpredictability of the outcomes of human effort—in war, fishing, gardening, feasting, curing, and other activities; and second, inequalities among humans—in their attainments and success, in their rank, and in their access to the gods and spirits... (1984:148)

Mana, from this perspective, is an explanation for causation and arises out of a worldview assumption about the nature of cause and effect. The *mana* (empowerment, luck, effectiveness, etc.) may originate from familiar spirits or

other spirit beings who potentiate an individual or object. How this works is a question that animists rarely ask for that is a metaphysical question that is peculiar to Western thinking. The focus of the animist is not upon how it works but rather upon what Burridge described as the task of identifying and understanding the moral relevance of power (success?) that is perceived but not fully comprehended.

In addition to these concerns about unpredictability and inequality, animists are also concerned, as are people in all cultures, about the source of or cause for evil. Animists, given their particular worldview assumptions, often explain the presence of evil as being due to the activity of spirits and from this perception develop concepts of character and nature that they ascribe to these spirits. As such they may identify a god/spirit or class of gods/spirits as being tricksters, or believe them to be capricious spirits, or malevolent and/or angry. Making peace with such beings, or at least accommodating to them, is a part of animistic practices in the same sense that making peace with God is a dominant theme in all religious traditions.

From this perspective, the purpose of power encounters among animists is not so much the need to demonstrate the superiority of faith in Christ, but rather how faith in Christ brings peace with God, establishes a harmonious relationship with His eternal purposes, and empowers us for the tasks of everyday life. This is a much more positive use of the concept of power encounters and less destructive than what otherwise might be. As Hiebert has noted when power encounters result in confrontations the results are often persecution, suffering or even death (1993:173ff).

Love Encounters

I think it would be a fair paraphrase of I Corinthians 13 to say that “If I have all knowledge and power and have not love, I have nothing...” And so, it is that we come to the third encounter that

is essential for the evangelization of animists—a love encounter.

Love is foundational for establishing trust that is, as noted earlier, the antidote to fear. It is the climate by which new information can be incorporated and embraced, making it possible for an effective truth encounter to take place.

Love ensures that power is not abused, does not become abrasive, or in any way overwhelms the willing submission of a people to the claims of Jesus Christ. There is no room in love for an attitude of triumphalism such as was expressed in the following early description of animism:

[Another] weakness is that often the religious leaders—shamans, sorcerers, or mediums—are the “lunatic fringe” of society. They are often psychotic, mentally deranged, emotionally unstable... [These kinds of people] do not provide the kind of constructive leadership that any society needs... A [further] liability in primitive beliefs is the undue emphasis upon the physiological and infantile in religious practice... though such practices may appeal to people for a time because of their very elemental and mystic character, they are not fully satisfying, since they are essentially beneath man’s capacity for religious expression (Nida and Smalley, 1959:57-58)

Love ensures the preservation of human dignity for love is patient while it waits for another to weigh competing claims to truth. Love never ridicules ignorance, nor does it ever diminish that which is good and well-intentioned. Rather, love in both word (truth) and deed (power) are the key to the successful proclamation of God’s word to a blind and confused world in which allegiance of the heart toward God is our goal.

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- Dr. Douglas J. Hayward served 20 years in Indonesia as a church planting missionary. Currently he is associate Professor of Anthropology in the School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University located in La Mirada, California.*

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by
Douglas Hayward