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## Book Review

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Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 224 pp., \$29.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9780823281312.

Mark I. Wallace's book *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* takes its inspiration from Luke's statement that, after Jesus was baptized, 'the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove' (Luke 3:22). This is not a metaphor or a simile, Wallace argues, but an incarnational event: 'Woven into the core grammar of Christian faith...is the belief in the Spirit as the *animal* face of God, even as Jesus is the *human* face of God' (p. 3). Based on this text and others, Wallace writes that 'hidden in the bedrock of Christian theology is a grounding *animist* sensibility that construes all things—including the sentient and relational biomass that makes all life possible—as living enfleshments of divinity in this world' (p. 3).

Wallace combines biblical exegesis, historical theology, philosophy, and nature writing. Chapter 1 outlines Wallace's reading of the Spirit's incarnation as a pigeon and explores instances of shamanistic practices and snake totemism by Moses and Jesus. Conversation partners include George E. 'Tink' Taylor, Lynn White Jr., and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In Chapter 2, Wallace describes Heidegger's distinction between technologies whose relationship is a 'setting-upon' nature and ones that are 'bringing-forth' nature's latent possibilities. Using the story of Jesus healing with mud and spit in John 9, Wallace argues that Jesus modeled the bringing-forth posture towards nature. Chapter 3 focuses on Jesus' relationships with birds—rooster, raven, sparrow—as totem beings in his teaching ministry. In Augustine and Hildegard von Bingen, Wallace found examples of theologians who wrote about the 'maternal, birdy Holy Spirit' (p. 18). Chapter 4 explores John Muir's writings as examples of 'a paradigm of the dialectic between Christianity and animism' (p. 18). Wallace argues that Muir operated with a two-books theology in which nature and scripture are equally revelatory. Finally, in Chapter 5 Wallace claims that the earth is a sentient organism. Drawing on biblical texts that ascribe emotion to the land and his own experience of two 'thin places' (the Cape of the Crosses national park and the El Camino De Santiago, both in Spain), Wallace parallels Jesus' suffering on the cross and the suffering of the world caused by anthropogenic environmental degradation.

Wallace uses his reading of the birdy presence of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism as a starting point to explore ecologically engaged individuals and texts in the Christian tradition. This, together with his personal narratives, the wood cuts that head each of his chapters, and his descriptions of his pedagogical approach, communicates a visceral and intimate sense of meeting God in the world, in birds, plants, stones, and people. Wallace models a theology committed to a specific place

(Crum Woods in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania), to the joy and value of bodies, and to the sacredness of all things. Ecology is not an afterthought, but at the center of his theology. Wallace's God is one you might meet on a walk, a God who is with us in more than metaphorical or metaphysical ways, a God that might visit your bird feeder. This is why theologians and lay readers should pick up his book. It is a bold and unembarrassed love letter to God in the world.

The book could be improved by more attention to recent anthropology research on animism. Wallace writes that 'the full realization of Christianity's historical self-definition as a scriptural, incarnation, and Trinitarian belief system is *animotheism*—the belief that all beings, including nonhuman animals, are imbued with divine presence' (p. 2). This is a more accurate statement of the book's focus than animism. Wallace describes animism as 'the infusion of Spirit or spirits into all things', a phrase that bears unfortunate similarity to the long-standing Western confusion of animism as the imputation of soul or spirit to inert matter (p. 8). Animism does not recognize a Cartesian distinction between matter and spirit, and is concerned with things in themselves, with how pigeons see and experience the world, and how we ought to relate to pigeons, not with God's incarnation as a pigeon. Animism is a key concept in the book, and more careful attention to the difference between God's incarnation in the world and animism proper would be helpful.

Wallace writes that

once we forge an emotional bond between ourselves and nature—once we develop a heartfelt kinship between our kind and all other kinds as hurting and vulnerable members of a common family—then we will have the vision and energy to enter the public fray, to bind up the wounds of an injured planet, and to fight the long-term battle to save our own and other species as well. (p. 145)

Wallace encourages this bond by helping us see God incarnate in the world. He builds a bridge between that which we love, God (his audience is primarily other Christians), and that which we do not love, or love less, the world. One of his most astute statements on animism is an invitation.

As an 'orientation' toward, and not as a 'proof' about, the world, I regard animism as an *incantatory gesture* toward the natural order: by opening myself to the possibility of animating spirit within all things, I subsist in the fragile hope that I can summon the presence of numinous realities within the everyday. (p. 60)

Wallace takes aim at a long-standing Christian discomfort with mixing nature and worship, with the sense that getting too close to nature is to risk idolatry and heresy. As such, he is paving the way for an inner-Christian 'worship of divinized nature' (p. 108), a love of the world that takes its inspiration from Christianity's own traditions. My guess is that the book will spark productive discomfort, and that theologians, biblical scholars, and lay readers will find much to challenge and engage. It is suitable for undergraduate, graduate, and seminary classes on theology and ecology, as well as church reading groups and book clubs.

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