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A Beaked and Feathered God

Rediscovering Christian Animism

BY MARK I. WALLACE

TODAY THE WOOD THRUSH returned to the Crum Woods. I have been waiting for this event for months. I first heard the thrush's strange and wonderful birdcall three years ago, when I moved to a house in the woods outside Philadelphia. My friend Adrienne announced, "That's the thrush! It's back." She explained that the thrush, while wintering in Mexico and Central America, spends the rest of the year in the eastern United States eating grubs, raising its young, and singing its beautiful song.

The Singing Monk of the Crum Woods

The song of the wood thrush is unlike anything else I have ever heard—liquid, flute-like, and perfectly pitched. The thrush vocalizes a kind of duet with itself in which it simultaneously produces two independent musical notes that reverberate with each other. To me it sounds like throat singing, the vocal technique that Tibetan monks use to sing two notes at the same time—a baseline and a melody line in contrapuntal balance—by amplifying their harmonic overtones. So I think of the wood thrush as the singing monk of the forest.

In the spring and summer I wake up, and often go to sleep, to the vocal pleasures of a bird that I cannot see, but I know that—like God's Spirit—the thrush is there. I hear its lilting cadence from dawn to dusk, but I've seen only one wood thrush during the time I've lived in the Crum Woods. I creep around the forest floor looking skyward, hoping for a sighting, but the wood thrush always escapes my gaze. Instead, I keep my window open at night as a vector for the thrush's call. Bathed in its music, I find it hard to distinguish between waking and sleeping, between twilight, midnight, and early morning.

Thrushes prefer just the right habitat blend for sustenance and breeding: running water, dense underbrush, and moist soil full of fruiting plants and insects to eat. Like other neotropical songbirds, it is threatened by habitat loss through



A wood thrush raises its beak in song.

continued development of its home range. It is also endangered by brood parasites, such as brown-headed cowbirds, which lay their own eggs in wood thrush nests, crowding out the host's eggs and hatchlings. The perdurance of the thrush in the face of these obstacles gives me hope in a time of despair about the world's future.

Thoreau wrote in his journal that whoever hears the song of the wood thrush enters a "new world" where the "gates of heaven are not shut against" the listener. For me, the earth comes alive with mystery and wonder when I hear this bird's ethereal song. In my own particular bioregion, the thrush opens to me the beauty of the Crum Woods as a vital habitat—indeed, as a sacred forest—whenever I am graced by its haunting polyphony.

Sacred Nature

To call the Crum Woods a sacred forest may seem odd if one is using traditional religious vocabulary. I will focus on Christianity in this essay, but the other global monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, would also find the ascription of sacredness to particular landscapes out of character. In the case of Christianity, classical theologians avoided ascribing religious value to natural places and living things, restricting terms such as *sacred*, *holy*, and *blessed* to God alone. In general, historic Christian opinion desacralized nature by divesting it of religious significance. While the Bible is suffused with images of sacred nature—God formed Adam and Eve from the dust of the ground; called to Moses through a burning bush; spoke through Balaam's donkey; arrested Job's attention in a whirlwind; used a great whale to send

Jonah a message; and appeared alternately as a man, a lamb, and a dove throughout the New Testament—Christianity evolved into a sky-God religion in which God was seen as an invisible, heavenly being not of the same essence as plants, animals, rivers, and mountains.

But in the earth-centered narrative arc of the biblical stories, this historical evaluation of nature as devoid of sacred worth is entirely absent. In the Bible, God is not an invisible sky-God but a fully incarnated being who walks and talks in human form, sprouts leaves and grows roots in the good soil of creation, and—clothed in bright plumage and airy flesh—takes flight and soars through the updrafts of wind and sky. An astoundingly rich variety of natural phenomena are charged with sacred presence in the biblical accounts, with God appearing alternately in human and plant forms—and in animal form, as I will highlight here.

God's Avian Spirit

The feathered bird God of creation is the central figure in the Bible's inaugural creation story. In the beginning the earth was formless and empty, and God's Spirit swept across the dark waters of the great oceans. The Hebrew verb used by the Genesis authors to describe the Spirit's movement in Genesis 1:1–2 is *merahefet*, alternately translated as to “hover over,” “sweep over,” “move over,” “flutter over,” or “tremble over.” This verb describes the activity of a mother bird in the care of her young in the nest. One grammatical clue to the meaning of this dynamic verb can be found in Deuteronomy 32:11, where God is said to be a protector of Jacob in a manner akin to the way “an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers [*merahefet*] over its young.” Using the same winged imagery deployed by the author of Deuteronomy, the writer of Genesis characterizes the Spirit as a flying, avian being—a bird or something like a bird—to describe its nurturing care over the great expanse—perhaps we should say the great egg?—of creation. Analogous to a mother eagle brooding over her nest, God's avian Spirit hovering over the face of the watery deep is a divine-animal hybrid that challenges the conventional separation of the divine order and the animal kingdom in much of classical Christian thought.

In the story of Jesus's baptism in the four gospels, God as Spirit comes down from heaven as a bird and alights on Jesus's newly baptized body (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; and John 1:31–34), much as in the Genesis account. All four accounts tell of the same gospel memory, namely, that as Jesus presents himself to be baptized by John the Baptist, and is baptized, the Spirit descends on Jesus as a dove from heaven, and then, in the synoptic gospels, a voice from heaven says, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” I suspect the people who came to John for baptism were not surprised to see the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. In biblical times, doves—in addition to other divinized flora and fauna—figured prominently in the history of



The Holy Spirit takes the form of a dove in this painting, *Coronación de la Virgen*, by Diego Velázquez.

Israel as archetypes of God's compassion. Noah sends a dove out after the flood to test whether dry land has appeared (Genesis 8:6–12). Abraham sacrifices a dove to God to honor God's covenant with him to make Israel a great nation (Genesis 15). Solomon calls his beloved “my dove,” a heartfelt term of longing and endearment (Song of Solomon 2:14, 4:1, 5:2, and 6:9). And Jeremiah and Ezekiel refer to doves' swift flight, careful nesting, and plaintive cooing as metaphors for human beings' pursuit of nurture and safety in times of turmoil and distress (Ezekiel 7:16; Jeremiah 48:28). As divine emissary and guardian of sacred order, the dove is a living embodiment of God's protection, healing, and love.

Luke's story of Jesus's baptism and concomitant announcement of the God-dove is a thoughtful summary of the gospels' overall narrative of Jesus's ritual immersion. After highlighting Jesus's baptism by John and then the opening of the heavens, Luke says, “and the Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in bodily form [*somatiko eidei*], as a dove [*hos peristeran*]” (Luke 3:22). In this phrase, the Greek adjective *somatikos*, from the noun *soma* (body), signifies the shape or appearance of something in corporeal form. Here the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Christian Godhead, comes into full bodily *animal* existence—in the same manner that the second member of the Godhead, Jesus, bodies forth himself in fully physical *human* form.

In all four of the gospel baptism stories, God as Spirit becomes a very specific type of animated physical body: a

seed-eating, nest-building, flying member of the avian order of things. The particular beak-and-feathers body that Luke's spirit-animal becomes is defined by the phrase *hos peristeran*, which means "as a dove," "even like a dove," or "just as a dove"—that is, the Spirit's body is thoroughly bird-like. Some English translations of the Lukan and other gospel accounts of Jesus's baptism miss this point. While the Revised Standard Version says, "The Holy Spirit descended upon him *as* a dove," the New Revised Standard Version prefers, "The Holy Spirit descended upon him *like* a dove" (emphases mine). But the preposition *hos*—from *hos peristeran* in the original Greek text of Luke 3:22 and elsewhere—does not operate here metaphorically or analogically, but predicatively. The phrase "as a dove (*hos peristeran*)" in this context is not a simile that says that the Spirit descended in bodily form *like* a dove, but rather a depiction of the physical being the Spirit has become. In other words, the Spirit descended in bodily form *as* a dove. In the grammar of predication, the Spirit *is* a dove, not *like* a dove. Luke 3:22, then, is not a figure of speech to connote the temporary bird-like appearance of the Spirit in this one instance, but a literal description of the actual bird-creature God has become.

Christian Animism

The parallelism between the bird God of Genesis and the one in the Gospels makes clear that God is flesh—in this case, animal flesh. God embodying Godself as a cosmic avian being, on the one hand, and as a nest-building dove with bones, beak, and feathers, on the other, contradicts the anthropocentric chauvinism of traditional Christianity. A recovery of these accounts about divine avifauna in Genesis and the Gospels shows that Christianity is rooted in the physical reality of God in all things. In its core essence, Christianity is closer to the spiritual animism of first peoples—the belief that everything is alive with sacred presence—than to the *contemptus mundi* (contempt of the world) bias of some strains of religious life and thought. Could it be, then, that Christianity, ironically, is not an other-worldly faith but a fully embodied form of so-called animist religion?

The term *animism* has its origins in the early academic study of the vernacular belief systems of indigenous peoples worldwide. Sharing resonances with the Latin word *animus*, which means "soul" or "spirit," it was advanced by the nineteenth-century British anthropologist E. B. Tylor, who used it to analyze how indigenous traditions have often attributed "life" or "soul" or "spirit" to all things, living and nonliving. In his book *Primitive Culture* (Gordon Press, 1871), Tylor quotes Finnish ethnologist Matthias Alexander Castrén as saying that in animism "every land, mountain, rock, river, brook, spring, tree, or whatsoever it may be, has a spirit for an inhabitant; the spirits of the trees and stones, of the lakes and brooks, hear with pleasure the wild man's pious prayers and accepts his offerings."

The study of animism emerged out of an occidental, Victorian perspective on the panspiritist practices of first peoples—the ancient belief that all things are bearers of spirit. While the term is tainted by colonial elitism, the concept of animism today carries a certain analytical clarity by illuminating the fact that indigenous communities, then and now, generally envision nonhuman nature as "ensouled" or "inspired" with living, sacred power. As contemporary religion scholar Graham Harvey writes in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Continuum, 2005), animism

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.

I question the common assumption, inherent within Harvey's definition of animism, that monotheistic traditions such as Christianity should be regarded as distinct from animism. On the contrary, Christian faith offers its practitioners a profound vision of God's this-worldly identity. Harvey's presumption that Christianity and animism are distinct from each other is at odds with the biblical worldview that all things are bearers of divinity insofar as God signaled God's love for creation (*continued on page 66*)



Noah sends a dove out after the flood in this mosaic from the Basilica di San Marco in Venice.