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When God Was A Bird: Christianity, Animism, And The Re-Enchantment Of The World

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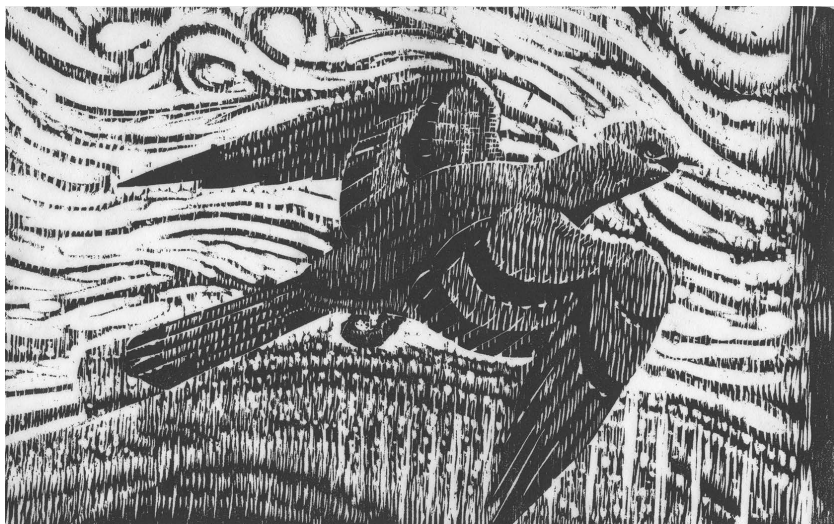
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Introduction

Crossing the Species Divide



The Animal God

In a time of rapid climate change and species extinction, what role have the world's religions played in ameliorating, or causing, the crisis we now face? It appears that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, bears a disproportionate burden for creating humankind's exploitative attitudes toward nature through otherworldly theologies that divorce human beings and their spiritual yearnings from their natural origins. In this regard, Christianity today is viewed as an unearthly religion with little to say about everyday life in the natural world. Because it has focused on the salvation of human souls, it has lost touch with the role the verdant world of animals and plants, land and water, plays in human well-being. In principle, Christian belief in the incarnation of God in the human Jesus renders biblical faith a fleshy, this-worldly belief system. In reality, however, Christianity is still best known for its war against the flesh by denigrating bodily impulses as a source of temptation and by dismissing the material world, while not fully corrupted, as contaminated by sin and inimical to humans' destiny in a far-removed heaven of bodiless bliss. As

Sean J. McGrath puts it, in traditional Christian thought, “matter was no doubt good, but not that good, and in its tempting quality it posed a grave threat to the soul: best to have as little to do with it as possible.”¹ My book argues that this picture of Christianity as hostile to the creaturely world, while accurate to a point, misses the supreme value biblical religion assigns to all of the denizens of God’s good creation, human and more-than-human alike.

Moreover, I argue that this picture, in particular, misses the startling portrayals of God as the beaked and feathered Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity who, alongside the Father and Son, is the “animal God” of historical Christian witness.² Appearing in the Christian scriptures as a winged creature at the time of Jesus’ baptism, the bird-God of the New Testament signals the deep grounding of archi-original biblical faith in the natural world. But due to the age-old bias in world-denying Christianity that God is divorced from mortal existence, this reality of God in creaturely manifestation—not only in the mode of the human Jesus but also in the form of the birdy Spirit—has been missed by most Christian thinkers and practitioners alike. This lost truth is a hidden pearl of great price. In *When God Was a Bird*, my aim is to correct this oversight in contemporary religious thought and pave the way for a new Earth-loving spirituality grounded in the ancient image of God as an avian life-form.

In the history of Christian thought, Trinitarian portrayals of the Spirit eloquently make this point: the Father and Son are depicted in human familial terms, while the Spirit is figured as the avian divinity who mediates the relationship of the other two members of the Godhead. My recovery of God’s animal body within biblical and Christian sources might be startling, even sacrilegious, for some readers at first. Even though the Bible speaks directly about God as Spirit becoming a winged creature (“When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove”; Luke 3:21–22), religion and biblical scholars alike have oftentimes dismissed the descriptions of God’s Spirit as a bird in the New Testament as a passing allusion or figure of speech. These critics do not regard this and similar texts as actual descriptions of the avifauna that God became and is becoming: testimonies to the Spirit’s enfleshment (or, better, enfeathering) at the time of Jesus’ baptism. Nevertheless, I maintain here that the full realization of Christianity’s historical self-definition as a scriptural, incarnational, and Trinitarian belief system is *animotheism*³—the belief that all beings, including nonhuman animals, are imbued with divine presence. Buried deep within the subterranean strata

of the Christian witness is a trove of vibrant bodily images for God in animal form (as well as in human and plant forms), including, and especially, the image of the avian body of the Holy Spirit. Woven into the core grammar of Christian faith, then, is the belief in the Spirit as the *animal* face of God, even as Jesus is the *human* face of God.

Though I will note in Chapter 1 one expression of the vegetal embodiment of God in the Exodus story of the burning bush, my overall focus in this book is on the premier animal form of divinity in the Bible and Christian thought, namely, the Holy Spirit, the bird-God of classical evangelical witness. But to focus on the Spirit as God's animal modality is not to deny God's many botanical incarnations within Christian scriptures and traditions. For the botanist Matthew Hall in *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, Western religion is unreflexively "zoocentric" because it appears only to value certain sentient beings (human and non-human animals) over and against the numerous plants that populate our daily lives.⁴ But there are many scriptural counterpoints to Hall's broadside. To take one, consider Jesus' paean to the spectacular wildflowers that graced his pathways in biblical Israel/Palestine: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they neither toil nor spin, and yet I say that Solomon in all of his glory was not clothed as beautifully as these lilies" (Matthew 6:28–29). Modern biblical scholarship assumes "Solomon" in this instance is a metonym for the lavish tenth-century BCE Jerusalem Temple and Palace attributed to King Solomon. If this is the case, Jesus' analogy is stunning: the beauty of commonplace lilies is a more fitting expression of God's earthly habitation than the actual built tabernacle that housed Yahweh's presence in biblical Israel. As the site of divinity, Jesus' green religion valorized the vegetable world as much as the animal world. Hall's posthumanist analysis of some forms of Earth-hostile religion is much needed. But his overall critique of biblical spirituality misses the point. 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 the world.

I will call this new but ancient vision of the world *Christian animism* in order to signal the continuity of biblical religion with the beliefs of Indigenous and non-Western communities that God or Spirit enfleshes itself within everything that grows, walks, flies, and swims in and over the great gift of creation.⁵ I hope to revitalize Christian theology with a blood transfusion from within its own body of beliefs and also from global religious communities whose members encounter divinity in all things.

I suggest that this blood transfusion is a genetic match with the deep cellular structure of Christianity because it is a product of that structure itself—as well as being borrowed from other compatible religious traditions. Is it possible to restore Christianity’s primordial experience of the world as the enfleshment of sacred power? Can God be seen as ensouling every life-form with deific presence, rendering all things consecrated family members of interrelated ecosystems? This Janus-faced effort recovers the once-lost and now-found essence of the Christian religion. So my question is, is my *ad fontes* effort consistent with Christianity’s historical self-understanding, even though the religion today has largely forgotten its primordial beginnings and thereby its originary vision of the world as sacred place, as holy ground, as the body of God?

In Christianity’s practiced forgetfulness of its earthbound origins, it has recast itself as a footnote to Greek philosophy. As a vassal to Plato and Aristotle, it has operated within a graded hierarchy of Being in which plants and animals, rocks and rivers, are denigrated as soulless matter, while human beings are elevated as godlike, intelligent creatures—mired in the muck of corporeal existence, to be sure, but still able to shake off the mortal coil that binds them to the lower life-forms and realize their true *imago Dei* natures and destinies. Today, Western Christianity continues to function within this anthropocentric universe and has become a pale and distant echo of its biblical-animist origins. It is for this reason that Christianity has endured, and continues to endure, a centuries-long “Babylonian captivity”⁶ to ossified *contemptus mundi* philosophical categories and divisions. This captivity has consistently led Christian thinkers into a Neoplatonic cul-de-sac in which the world is maligned as a dead and fallen place wherein the human soul, divorced from its body, strives to transcend its physical drives and passions and, in so doing, return to the disembodied Source from which it originated. But Christian animism interacts with the world differently—not as a sinkhole of corporeal lust and confusion to be battled against and overcome but as the privileged site of God’s daily habitation. *In short, Earth is God’s natural home.* Or as the theologian Shawn Sanford Beck puts it, “*Christian animism, then, is simply what happens when a committed Christian engages the world and each creature as alive, sentient, and related, rather than soul-less and ontologically inferior.*”⁷

But labeling Christianity as an animist belief system—the conviction that all things, including so-called inanimate objects, are alive with sacred power and worthy of human beings’ love and protection—is a misnomer for Christian believers and religious scholars alike who regard biblical

religion at odds with, and distinct from, the pagan religions of primordial people. In spite of Christianity's animist origins—or perhaps *to spite* its vernacular beginnings—Christianity viewed itself as a divinely inspired religion of the book that is categorically different from the commonplace forms of religion that showed special regard for sacred animals, tree spirits, revered landscapes, and hallowed seasons of the year. In this telling, Christianity replaced the old gods of pre-Christian animism with the new revealed religion of Jesus, the saints, and the Bible. Correspondingly, it saw itself as a type of pure monotheism vis-à-vis alternative forms of so-called primitive or polytheistic religions that were based in fertility rituals and nature worship. Then and now, Christianity regards itself as an otherworldly faith that superseded heathen superstition insofar as its focus was on an exalted and unseen Deity who is not captive to the vicissitudes of mortal life on Earth.⁸

Challenging the conventional wisdom that Christianity and animism are contradictory traditions, I make reference here to the “religious turn” within contemporary Continental philosophy as a background resource in new studies about God's animal body within biblical sources.⁹ As well, the related fields of *posthumanism* (the antispeciesist disavowal of human chauvinism) and *new materialism* (the analysis of the agential subjectivity of nonhuman material realities) are also sotto voce dialogue sources in my return to animism.¹⁰ The suggestion that the nonhuman animal is the face of divinity within the plurality of God's many corporeal expressions is characteristic of this religious turn in modern philosophy and related fields of study. The suggestion begins with everyday animals—in particular, cats and dogs—as hints of divine presence in the world. Martin Buber's *I and Thou* sets forth a relational ontology wherein Buber “looks into the eyes of a house cat” and catches the breath of eternal life wafting about him, because in “every You we address the eternal You.”¹¹ Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas asks whether the faces of all others—including all animal others—are intimations of divinity in the world: “One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal, . . . for example, a dog. . . . But it also has a face. . . . It is as if God spoke through the face.”¹² And echoing Buber's encounter with a house cat, Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* marks his own vertiginous elision of a cat's discriminating stare and the penetrating gaze of God. Derrida says that standing naked in front of a cat, he hears the cat—that is, he hears God—address him at the core of his personhood: “I often wonder whether this vertigo . . . deep in the eyes of God is not the same as that which takes hold of me when I feel so naked in front of a cat, facing it, and when, meeting its gaze, I hear the cat or

God ask itself, ask *me*: Is he going to call me, is he going to address me?”¹³ What ties these philosophical ruminations together is the phenomenon of *being addressed* by other-than-human beings whose yearnings for relatedness is consistent across different orders of being—that is, relatedness among animal others themselves, between animal others and ourselves, and between animal others, ourselves, and the divine Other. These philosophical reflections about the eyes or the faces of animals as mediums of the sacred has informed my attempts to place into conversation Christianity and Indigenous traditions’ celebration of signs of the *anima mundi* within all things.¹⁴

Animism

In philosophy and theology, innovative attempts at forging connections between biblical religion and primordial belief systems marks a sea change away from earlier comparativist studies of “revealed religions” such as Christianity vis-à-vis preliterate religious cultures. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century and continuing into the present, a profound shift has taken place toward a critical understanding of the centrality of animal bodies and subjectivities in the formation of all of the world’s religions, including Christianity. This shift moves away from the hoary opposition between pure monotheism and nature- and animal-based religion—an opposition that is bedrock to all of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British anthropology of religion, including E. B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, William Robertson Smith’s *The Religion of the Semites*, and James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and *The Worship of Nature*. At the heart of this opposition between the modern and the primitive in early Victorian studies of religion, the notion of animism was deployed as a proxy for the benighted epistemologies of first peoples who envisioned the cosmos as an intersubjective communion of living beings, including animal beings, with shared intelligence, personhood, and communication skills. As John Grim writes, “During the late nineteenth century colonial period interpretive studies described communication with animals among indigenous peoples as a failed epistemology. The assumption that only humans know, or a least that only humans report on their knowing, resulted in the long-standing critique of indigenous ways of knowing coded in the term animism. As a means of actually knowing the world, animism was dismissed as simply a delusion, or a projection of a deluded human subjectivity.”¹⁵

Sharing resonances with the Latin word *animus*, which means “soul” or “spirit,” the idea of animism was significantly advanced in the modern

West by Tylor's analysis of how first people attributed "life" or "soul" or "spirit" to all things, animate and inanimate. In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor writes, quoting another theorist, 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 . . . man's pious prayers and accepts his offerings."¹⁶ Tylor's study of animism emerged out of an evolutionary, Occidental mind-set that described, at least for Victorian readers, the unusual panspiritist beliefs and practices of first peoples—the ancient sensibility that all things are bearers of spirit. Operating from a settler-colonialist mind-set, Tylor denigrated animism as the superstitious worldview of childlike tribes whose beliefs eventually gave way, in his thinking, to the march of reason and science in "civilized" societies. He writes, "Animism characterizes tribes very low in the scale of humanity, and thence ascends, deeply modified in its transmission, but from first to last preserving an unbroken continuity, into the midst of high modern culture."¹⁷ For Tylor, while animism was characteristic of "low" precivilized cultures, its influence slowly weakened over time as "high" cultures became more literate and scientific.

While the term is tainted by Tylor's colonial elitism (animism is characteristic of "low humanity" rather than "high culture"), the concept of animism is being recovered today based on its analytical capacity to illuminate how traditional people, then and now, envision nonhuman nature as "ensouled" or "inspired" with living, sacred power. An excellent example of this rethinking is the analysis of the sacred personhood of trees in ancient and contemporary India by the Hinduism scholar David L. Haberman. In *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India*, Haberman redeploys the idea of animism in order to efface the hierarchical boundary lines between human and nonhuman and thereby to position South Asian tree worship as a meaningful exercise in cultivating a holistic relationship with the nonhuman world. For Haberman, Tylor and his ilk's dismissal of animism as childish superstition has bequeathed to modernity the debilitating idea "that we now live in a dead world that is truly animated only by human beings."¹⁸ But Haberman notes that many contemporary social scientists are undermining this in/animate binary by reversing the relegation of animism to primitive ignorance and the elevation of materialism as the agreed-on worldview of enlightened, Western societies. By assigning humanlike capacities to other-than-human life-forms, the natural world now becomes a living field of complicated relationships rather than a dead world of lifeless objects. For Haberman et al., animism

trumps empiricism as a superior way of knowing and experiencing the totality of existence. Haberman writes,

As these anthropologists demonstrate, any earnest consideration of the personhood and consciousness of nonhuman beings leads to a reconsideration of animism, once rejected as illusory primitivism. Without the judgmental and cultural evolutionary perspective of Tylor, which disparages (embodied) animism with the pejorative label “primitive” . . . we find many cultures that treat natural phenomena as “proper persons,” [and] the sharp divide between human and nonhuman beings cannot be taken for granted. It also cannot be assumed as universal; other possibilities clearly exist. Nor can it be regarded as part of superior civilized culture, unless we wish to maintain the colonial cultural evolutionary perspective of Tylor.¹⁹

Arguably, no contemporary thinker has done more to rehabilitate the nomenclature of animism than the comparative religions scholar Graham Harvey. Like Haberman’s recovery of animism in the South Asian context, Harvey writes that 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.”²⁰ In Harvey’s formulation of animism, nature is never dull and inert but inherently alive with the infusion of Spirit or spirits into all things. Here there is no distinction between living and nonliving, between animate and inanimate. Harvey’s use of the phrase “all that exists lives” means that nature is not brute matter but always full of life and animated by its movement, weight, color, voice, light, texture—as well as its relational powers and spiritual presence. Nature’s capacity for *relatedness*, its proclivity to encounter us, as we encounter it, in constantly new and ever-changing patterns of self-maintenance and skillful comportment, is the ground tone of its vibrant and buoyant energy. As the philosopher David Abram similarly argues, nature or matter is not a dead and lesser thing that stands in a lower relationship to animate spirit but a self-organizing field of living, dynamic relationships: “Yet as soon as we question the assumed distinction between spirit and matter, then this neatly ordered hierarchy begins to tremble and disintegrate. If we allow that matter is *not* inert, but is rather animate (or self-organizing) from the get-go, then the hierarchy collapses, and we are left with a diversely differenti-

ated field of animate beings, each of which has its own gifts relative to the others. And we find ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this living field, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape.”²¹

Abram and others analyze how Indigenous peoples celebrated, and continue to celebrate, relations with other-than-human communities of beings that are alive with spirit, emotion, desire, and personhood. This ascription of personhood to all things locates human beings in a wider fraternity of relationships that includes “bear persons” and “rock persons” along with “human persons.”²² At first glance, this is an odd way to think, since Western ontologies generally divide the world between human persons, other animals, and plants as *living things*, on the one hand, and entities such as earthen landscapes, bodies of water, and the airy atmosphere as *nonsentient elements*, on the other. But the Native American religions scholar George “Tink” Tinker argues that even “rocks talk and have what we must call consciousness,” and then continues, “The Western world, long rooted in the evidential objectivity of science, distinguishes at least popularly between things that are alive and things that are inert, between the animate and the inanimate. Among those things that are alive, in turn, there is a consistent distinction between plants and animals and between human consciousness and the rest of existence in the world. To the contrary, American Indian peoples understand that all life forms not only have consciousness, but also have qualities that are either poorly developed or entirely lacking in humans.”²³ Glossing scholars such as Harvey, Abram, and Tinker, I am suggesting that animism flattens commonplace ontological distinctions between living/nonliving or animate/inert along a continuum of multiple intelligences: now everything that *is* is alive with personhood and relationality, even sentience, according to its own capacities for being in relationship with others. As Harvey says, “Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is lived in relationship with others.”²⁴ *All* things are persons, only *some* of whom are human, because *all* beings are part of a community of relationships, only some of whom are recognizable as *living* beings by us.

In general, however, most scholars of religion regard animism as far removed from Christianity, both culturally and theologically. In Graham Harvey’s definition of animism, recall his assumption that monotheistic traditions such as Christianity are categorically distinct from animism: “the term *animism* is sometimes applied to particular indigenous religions *in comparison to Christianity*.”²⁵ Likewise, the comparative religions scholar Bron Taylor writes that in spite of attempts to bring together

animism, which he calls “dark green religion,” and the major world religions, such as Christianity, these traditions have different origins, share different worldviews, and cannot genuinely cross-pollinate with one another in new paradigms of Christian animism such as mine. He writes, “For the most part, in spite of occasional efforts to hybridize religious traditions, most of the world’s major religions have worldviews that are antithetical to and compete with the worldviews and ethics found in dark green religion.”²⁶

This book, however, will argue the contrary, namely, that while the Christian religion largely evolved into a sky-God tradition forgetful of its animist origins, its carnal identity is paradigmatically set forth in canonical stories about the human embodiment of the historical Jesus, on the one hand, and, provocatively, the animal embodiment of the avian Spirit, on the other. Writing as an ecotheologian—or as the history of religions scholar Thomas Berry referred to himself, a “geologist”²⁷—my reading of the biblical texts and Christian history will cut against the received misunderstanding of Christianity as a discarnational religion. Brushing against the grain of biblical faith’s pronounced opposition to Earth-based religion, I attempt to return it to its true animist beginnings and future prospects. Far from Christianity supplanting animism as a foreign or corrupting influence, I maintain that the religion of Jesus both sprang and continues to receive its vitality from its dynamic origins in and interactions with the animist center of its founding vision. Animism is not peripheral to Christian identity but is its nurturing home ground, its *axis mundi*.

Feral Religion

I first began to speak of “Christian animism” in 2010 in *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature*, where I wrote,

Surprisingly and paradoxically, Christianity, which historically waged war against “heathen” fertility and Goddess cultures, can now recognize itself as the bearer of the very earth-centeredness that it initially inveighed against. That Christianity *is* animism and animism *is* Christianity is an insight that is now possible as a result of a new, healed relationship between biblical religion, on the one hand, and earth religion, on the other. The Spirit and the earth are one, the Sacred and the planet are one, God and nature are one—so begins the new adventure in the return of Christianity to its green future as a continuation of ancient Pagan earth wisdom.²⁸

Returning Christianity to its “ancient Pagan earth wisdom” reflected an earlier call for a “*revisionary paganism* as the most viable biblical and theological response to the prospect of present and future environmental collapse.”²⁹ But I found in conversation with readers that linking Christianity with paganism, while historically accurate to a large degree, led to confusion. In 2010, I turned to the idea of animism, and generally stopped using the term *paganism*, as a more precise analytical category for making sense of the elective affinity between the broad-based assumptions of both Indigenous communities and Christian theology—namely, that the natural world is a vibrant community of living beings, including seemingly inanimate formations, all of whom are sacred and deserving of care and protection.³⁰

I am aware, however, that the notion of animism is a difficult candidate for retrieval because it was invented as a derogatory proxy for the pre-modern (read: barbaric) worldviews of primordial people. As we have seen, the category seems to be hopelessly contaminated by colonial-era white-supremacist assumptions about the evolutionary differences between first peoples and latter-day Euro-Americans. Is a loaded term that has functioned as an ethnic slur against nonwhites, under the guise of social science, still recoverable today? But like similar religious studies’ technical terms that have productively entered the mainstream notwithstanding their pejorative origins—for example, the adjective *queer*, in spite of its long-standing homophobic connotations, has emerged as the preferred nomenclature for the analysis of nonbinary and same-sex relationships in religious studies³¹—the concept of animism now appears to be an important methodological tool for analyzing the *vitality* and *sacrality* of all life-forms within Earth community.³²

In addition to the conceptual work the term *animism* performs—its insight into the relational character and common personhood of material existence—the term has two other advantages. On the one hand, it is increasingly being deployed by scholars of Native traditions themselves, effectively repurposing the category as a postcolonial mode of inquiry, at some remove from its racist origins, vis-à-vis the variety of relational ontologies that underlie complementary lifeworlds. In this regard, for example, consider the history and philosophy of Native science work by Gregory Cajete. Cajete offers, in my judgment, a nuanced study of the ambiguity and the promise of the notion of animism. He analyzes the negative connotations of the term and its potential for generating productive insights into the common subjectivity of human and more-than-human communities in relationship with one another. Cajete writes, “The word ‘animism’ perpetuates a modern prejudice, a disdain, and a projection

of inferiority toward the worldview of Indigenous peoples. But if, as the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty contends, perception at its most elemental expression in the human body is based on participation with our surroundings, then it can be said that ‘animism’ is a basic human trait common to both Indigenous and modern sensibilities. Indeed, all humans are animists.”³³ Cajete’s insight that “all humans are animists” underlies a second advantage to the term being rehabilitated for religious studies today: its counterdiscursive capacity to invert the hierarchical power relations between the notions of “Christianity” and “Indigeneity” that characterize popular thinking along with traditional academic study of religion and culture. As Darryl Wilkinson puts it, “The new animism is therefore widely presented as a turn to an indigenous (and particularly hunter-gatherer derived) sensibility vis-à-vis the world, and a potentially corrective model for the West to follow.”³⁴ The model of reality as an animate communion of sacred beings is emerging as a paradigm, distinctly characteristic of originary people, that supersedes the experience of alienation and isolation characteristic of the modern West and the Western Christian imaginary as well. It is this “man bites dog” reversal of epistemological priority—it is the truly global religions of Native societies that perceive the common relatedness of all beings, not the religions of the book—that effectively positions first peoples’ spiritualities as archi-original and better able to articulate the intersubjective nature of reality as opposed to historical Western Christianity’s dependence on a dualistic, animate/inanimate worldview.

The Chickasaw scholar Linda Hogan writes similarly about the return of animism in Western curricula,

The introduction of the studies of animism to academe was a surprise to me. I left university to work for my own tribal nation, for the people and for the land. Since then, classes in Paganism and animism have been offered in universities. Hearing this for the first time at a conference, I was horrified. We were killed in great numbers for being called Pagans and animists. Now one of the very institutions that disavowed our original relationships with the environment has studies in its return. Those of us who suffered from the colonizing forces in our lives, and from “cognitive imperialism,” are now no longer ostracized. What once victimized us is now a special area of religious studies. And yet to know that any small part of our knowledge is being taught in colleges and universities is significant, even if it is only a small portion of the intellectual knowledge of our traditionalists. It is, in some way, the fulfillment of the circle of life, as painful as it may feel to many of us.³⁵

Like Cajete, Hogan's appreciation and suspicion toward the reintroduction of animism in university settings is significant. But in spite of the gradual recognition of the importance of Native understandings of intersubjective ontologies within the academy, many people of Christian faith today struggle to come to terms with the claim that all things are bearers of sacred personhood. In particular, Christians are uncomfortable speaking about the *animality* of God, even though the belief in the *humanity* of God is basic to everyday Christian discourse. In part, this discomfort likely stems from believers' tacitly ordered separation between humans as intelligent and nonanimalistic, on the one hand, and animals as instinct driven and subhuman, on the other. But it may also be, as some scholars suggest, that animals are held in poor esteem, and certainly not elevated to the prestige of divinity, because they are accorded very low value, if even mentioned at all, in the founding canonical texts of the Christian tradition. Is it the case, then, that the world of animals is relatively insignificant in the Bible? Many contemporary scholars in the emerging field of religion and animal studies seem to think so.

As Laura Hobgood-Oster puts it in her otherwise luminous analysis of animals and Christianity in *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition*, "Although animals are not prominent in either the canonical or the extracanonical gospels, powerful stories emerge from the relatively unknown extracanonical traditions."³⁶ Barbara Allen in *Animals in Religion: Devotion, Symbol, and Ritual*, her excellent and comprehensive study of religion and animals, comments similarly on the relative paucity, in her judgment, of animal stories in the New Testament. In concert with Hobgood-Oster, she also writes that while there is considerable animal material in books that were left out of the canon, the Christian scriptures themselves make only minimal reference to animals: "In Scripture animals are present at the birth of Jesus. Within the canon, their role is at times small, but in extra-canonical texts their presence is greater, especially at the Nativity and during the early years of Jesus."³⁷ Allen concedes that the "Holy Spirit, one of the persons of the Trinity, is represented by a dove,"³⁸ but it is clear from the context of this reference that she is referring to symbolic and pictorial representations of the Spirit—not that the Spirit, as I have suggested here, is a winged animal and, in that sense, that God in Godself is a dove. Like Hobgood-Oster, Allen suffers from a certain blind spot regarding the thoroughgoing descriptions of God-as-avian-Spirit in the New Testament.

God of Beak and Feathers

It is odd to me that animal theologians such as Hobgood-Oster and Allen appear not to recognize that each of the Gospels and, by extension, all Christian traditions testify to the same reality: at the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry during his baptism by John, the Father spoke and the Spirit enfolded itself as a dove, forever enshrining in Christian belief the Trinity of the cosmic Father, the human Son, and the animal Spirit. So my book's thesis: Christianity, at its core, is a carnal-minded, fleshly, earthy, animalistic system of belief just insofar as its understanding of the human Jesus (*christology*) and the avian Spirit (*pneumatology*) is rooted in its divinization of human and nonhuman creatures (*animality*). In this telling of the Christian story as *animocentric*,³⁹ God is an animal, without denying the difference between God and animals, because the primary Trinitarian grammar of biblical religion centers on the double enfleshment of God in human and avian modes of being, the Son and the Spirit, respectively.

My suggestion is that divine incarnation is not limited to the person of Jesus but includes the person of the Spirit as well, what I call *double incarnation* or what one might call *libertine* or *promiscuous incarnation* insofar as God in Jesus and the Spirit embraces the fleshly reality of all interrelated organisms.⁴⁰ Initially, this perspective that the whole expanse of creation is suffused with divinity seems also to be the case in David L. Clough's thoughtfully detailed and insightful Christian animal theology *On Animals*. Affirming the Johannine maxim that the Word became flesh, Clough writes, "The doctrine of incarnation does not therefore establish a theological boundary between humans and other animals; instead, it is best understood as God stepping over the boundary between creator and creation and taking on creatureliness."⁴¹ But does God's assumption or adoption of creatureliness extend as far as God becoming bird flesh in the dovey Spirit at the time of Jesus' baptism? Apparently, Clough thinks not, by agreeing with an interpretation of Augustine that says, "Augustine rejects the idea that the Spirit becomes incarnate as a dove at the baptism of Jesus," while acknowledging, nevertheless, that "it seems hard to escape the idea that the dove is at least an image of the Spirit at this point."⁴² So the dove is an "image" but not an "incarnate" manifestation of Spirit? In spite of Clough's call for a theology of animal incarnation, I find his demurrer on the question of the Holy Spirit's full-bodied enfleshment of God in Jesus' baptismal dove to be confusing.

I do not, however, want to overstate my critique of Hobgood-Oster, Allen, and Clough. Their silence or hesitancy to ascribe full animal identity to the Holy Spirit is understandable in light of many historical Christian thinkers' unwillingness to make a similar ascription. I believe the fear that underlies this unwillingness is the specter of pantheism that haunts all attempts to correlate corporality and divinity. But *Christian* animism is not pantheism—nor is it unadulterated animism per se.⁴³ On the contrary, the model of animism in a biblical register I am suggesting alternately sounds two different but complementary notes: the enfleshment of God in the world vis-à-vis Jesus' humanity and the Spirit's animality, on the one hand, and the alterity of God in God's self as heterogeneous to the world, on the other. Christian animism does not elide the differences between God and the world—as can happen in some pantheistic and animistic formulations of the God-world relationship—insofar as God and world are not collapsed into the same reality without remainder. Instead, it sets forth both the continuity and disparity between the divine life and earthly existence. The paradoxical logic at the heart of Christian animist grammar can be put, in philosophical terms, as dialectical monism or, in theological terms, as *coincidentia oppositorum*. By creating all things in the divine image, by becoming human and animal flesh and living among us, by pouring Godself out into the world, God is wholly “the same” as us. But God in God's ineffable and unknowable mystery—indeed, is this not the meaning of the crucifixion wherein God, the “courageous God who dares to commit suicide,”⁴⁴ traumatizes Godself by abandoning God's son in the moment of Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross, “My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?”—is also “other” from the world and, at times, or so it seems, strangely divorced from mortal affairs, human or otherwise.

Otherness and sameness. Unity and multiplicity. Transcendence and immanence. Aseity and kenosis. Contemporary theologians have used a variety of paradoxical phrases—“nonoppositional dualism,”⁴⁵ “sacramental embodiment,”⁴⁶ “apophatic entanglement”⁴⁷—to articulate the aporia of God's alterity and inseparability from creation. Their point is that the world is a continuous self-expression of divinity with no a priori restrictions attaching to this self-expression.

In the Chalcedonian christology of early creedal Christianity, the humanity and divinity of Christ fully circulate together in one person without confusion or separation. In turn, this grammatical formula generates the theological syntax for parsing the omnierotic relationship

between God and the world: without division, both now intertwine each other in unbounded love and intimacy, but without any confusion in the identities of the two distinctive orders of being.

Martin Buber makes this point well by poetically spelling out the restless longing both God and humankind have for each other. Buber says, “That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don’t you know also that God needs you—in the fullness of his eternity, you? How would man exist if God did not need him, and how would you exist? You need God in order to be, and God needs you—for that which is the meaning of your life.”⁴⁸ For Buber, God and ourselves—and I would expand this God-human relationship, as Buber himself does, to include God and *all* beings—share a common longing for fulfillment in the being of the other. Softly with feeling: opposites fuse into a tensive parity with each other. Softly with feeling: polarities flow into a differentiated unity between the one and the other. Softly with feeling: God (erotically charged) and the world (achingly amorous) caress each other in mutual attraction and filiation. I regard Buber’s model of God’s passionate need for a mutually affirming relationship with others, which is neither pantheist nor reductively animist, to be deeply resonant with the model of commensality between God and the Earth in Christian animism.

In sum, this book turns on a simple but I hope groundbreaking question. Could it be that Christian faith, at its core, centers on belief in God as a fully incarnated reality not only in the humanity of Jesus Christ but also in the animality of the Holy Spirit, even though this core insight has rarely been recognized as central to Christian identity? Could it be that the basic system of Christian belief is founded on a permeable and viscous God becoming not only human flesh in the person of Jesus but also animal flesh in the person of the Spirit and that, if this is the case, is not the wide-ranging world of nonhuman nature—the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the field, the trees of the forest—the focus of God’s interest, not just human well-being? And if this is the case, should we not, as human beings, comport ourselves toward the natural world in a loving and protective manner because this world is the fullness of God within the life of every creature?

To this end, *When God Was a Bird* weaves together biblical interpretation, historical theology, philosophical analysis, and my own nature writing in a tapestry of Christian animist vision. In telling my story, I am inspired by the American naturalist and theologian John Muir, whose larger-than-life narratives of wild nature, as Brian Treanor puts it, have “successfully induced many people to value and, after a fashion, to love

places that they themselves would in all likelihood never see or experience in person. . . . John Muir's narratives about Yosemite and the High Sierra *did* induce people to love, and consequently preserve, these natural treasures."⁴⁹ Relying on personal narratives underscores my practical aim in this book: to inculcate in readers a deep feeling of belonging with our terrestrial kinfolk so that we will want to nurture and care for them as common members of the same family. And in order to give life to this model of kinship relations I envision here, I preface each chapter with an original woodcut illustration by the contemporary artist James Larson of particular wild birds that I or, in one case, John Muir have met in our journeys within Earth's sacred landscapes. I offer these drawings as testimonies to the numinous wonder of commonplace birds—feathered traces of divinity—within daily existence.

I conclude with a précis of the book's overall structure. Chapter 1 opens with my encounter with the song of the wood thrush and then focuses on divine animals in the Bible. It examines the Gospels' "pigeon God," in which the Spirit-bird alights on Jesus at the time of his baptism, signaling the unity of all things: divine life and bird life, divinity and corporeality, spirit and flesh. And it argues that the Bible's seeming prohibitions against animal deities is vitiated by Moses' and Jesus' ophidian *shamanism*, which privileges snake totemism as a source of salvation in the book of Numbers and the Gospel according to John, respectively. It examines intimations of Christian animism—the belief that all things, including so-called inanimate objects, are alive with sacred presence—in George E. "Tink" Taylor, Lynn White Jr., and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, a second-century CE avian-spirit-possession narrative. I conclude that insofar as the Spirit is *ornithomorphic*, it behooves us to care for the natural world as the site of God's daily presence.

Chapter 2 begins with me and my students taking a hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") tour of northern Pennsylvania to witness the devastation wrought by extreme energy extraction. In Martin Heidegger, this type of technology is an exploitative "setting-upon" nature, rather than "bringing-forth" nature's latent possibilities in a manner that is site appropriate and organic. Healthy interactions with nature are resonant with the "incantatory gesture" characteristic of Christian animism: summoning the presence of the numinous within the everyday. Glossing Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva, this chapter shows that Jesus, the good shaman, is a model of "bringing-forth" when he mixes saliva and dirt together in a poultice to heal the blind man in John 9. According to René Girard, however, nature is a site not of healing but of dangerous boundary violations. The chapter

concludes with a vignette about my viewing the pileated woodpecker, sometimes called the “Lord God!” bird by awestruck onlookers, in the Crum Woods near Swarthmore College. Like the aerial Spirit at Jesus’ baptism, I suggest that catching sight of this avian deity reconciles the two orders of being—*divinity* and *animality*—that Girard seeks to drive apart.

Chapter 3 starts with a *visitation* by a great blue heron to my Religion and Ecology class taught in the Crum Woods. Is the Crum Woods *holy ground*? Some ecotheologians (John B. Cobb Jr., Richard Bauckham) caution against this way of speaking, but I propose that Christianity is a religion of *double incarnation*: in a twofold movement, God becomes flesh in both humankind (Jesus) and otherkind (Spirit), underscoring that the supernal and the carnal are one. The chapter focuses on historical portraits of Jesus’ relationship to particular birds (sparrows, ravens, and roosters) as *totem beings* in his teaching ministry; Augustine’s repudiation of Neoplatonism and his natalist celebration of the maternal, birdy Holy Spirit in the world; and Hildegard of Bingen’s avian pneumatology, in which Earth’s “vital greenness” is valorized for its curative powers in a manner similar to Jesus’ mud-pie healing of the blind man in John 9, noted in Chapter 2. I conclude with a meditation on *nature worship* as acceptable Christian practice in a Quaker meetinghouse in Monteverde, Costa Rica.

Chapter 4 keys on John Muir’s ecstatic wilderness religion as a paradigm of the dialectic between Christianity and animism at the heart of this book, namely, *Christianism*. Muir’s nature evangelism, however, came at the price of rhetorically abetting the forced removal of Native Americans from their homes within the fledgling national parks movement, including Yosemite National Park. Notwithstanding this stain on Muir’s legacy, his thought is notable for rethinking the full arc of Jesus’ life—baptism by John, departure into wilderness, walking on the water, throwing out temple money changers, farewell discourses, and crucifixion—vis-à-vis his own life in terms that are deeply personal as well as being environmentally and biblically sonorous. Glossing Northrop Frye, Muir’s artful use of the Bible is the *great code* that unlocks his euphoric nature mysticism. Some contemporary interpreters of Muir miss this point (Michael P. Cohen, Bron Taylor), but Muir advocates a *two-books theology* in which the Bible and the Earth are equally compelling revelatory “texts.” His *Yosemite spirituality* reaches its apogee in his 1870 “woody gospel letter,” a paean to a homophilic, orgasmic religion of sensual delight: “Come suck Sequoia and be saved.” In Muir’s spirit, I con-

clude today that Christianity is still not Christianity—in spite of its deep incarnational grammar—because of its sometime hostility to embodied, earthly existence.

Using James Lovelock's *Gaia* theory and current biblical exegesis, Chapter 5 maintains that Earth is a *sentient organism* with its own emotional registries, relational capacities, and vulnerability to suffering. This "living Earth" theme is further explored in case studies of two sacred land sites in northern Spain that my wife, Audrey, and I traveled on foot: the Cape of the Crosses national park and the El Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route. I encountered both sites as "thin places"—landscapes where divinity and materiality comfortably intersect—in which errant wandering and purposeful travel were valued equally. But in our current state of social and environmental inequity, such sites are also agonizingly *cruciform*: as Jesus was sacrificed at Calvary, so today we crucify afresh God's winged Spirit in nature through toxic impacts against the very life-support systems that make all beings' planetary existence possible. Massive species depredation—iconically signified by the extinction of the passenger pigeon, which used to soar in great flocks across American and European woodlands—provokes the question of whether God's presence can still be felt when traces of avian divinity are being wiped out, "taking our feelings" with them, in the indictment over the poet W. S. Merwin. The scars of Golgotha mark the whole Earth. The wounds of crucifixion extend on all of creation. The book concludes on a note of broken hope symbolized by the feral pigeon—the dovey cousin of the passenger pigeon and also of Jesus' baptismal bird that Audrey and I witnessed again at the end of our El Camino trek—amid the contemporary loss of embodied deity through *ecocidal*, even *deicidal*, practices.