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Mark I. Wallace’s new monograph is nothing if not idiosyncratic. In terms of discipline, it situates itself as a work of eco-theology (p. 10), but in terms of its overall style it blends academic theology, memoir, and personal meditation on the role of religion in a time of climate crisis, as Wallace’s arguments are bookended at the start and end of each chapter with vividly told encounters with birds. While this may feel unusual to some readers, this personal approach to climate scholarship in the humanities is not unprecedented.[1] Furthermore, the inclusion of personal recollections works in the book’s favor, given that one central theme of the book is “re-enchantment,” or the re-introduction of the sacred or sublime into experiences of the world (p. 145), as the heartfelt way they are told conveys a strong sense of the numinous.[2] The book is divided into an introduction and five chapters. The first chapter largely deals with the book’s titular argument: that the Christian God was once envisaged as a bird. The other four chapters revisit this argument, but for the most part focus on Wallace’s other concerns: re-enchantment and animism.

Ecological perspectives on re-enchantment are not in themselves new. Within the United Kingdom and the United States, occultist and anti-capitalist calls for re-enchantment in the face of climate crisis have sought to give the world beyond the human sphere a greater sense of personhood.[3] Wallace himself notes that the Abrahamic religions as a group have been characterized as religions that, through their emphasis on denying the world in favor of the mind and the book, have paved the way to climate crisis (pp. 41–42). To combat this, Wallace articulates what he calls “Christian animism,” a form of Christianity that acknowledges and actively celebrates the presence of God in all things of this world, including abject substances such as dirt and bodily fluids (pp. 2–3, 38–39, 51–80), rather than viewing the world as a passive resource (p. 55). Wallace does not characterize this as the single correct viewpoint (p. 60), but rather a stance he himself finds useful and nourishing—an admission that is evoked as clearly through Wallace’s evident passion as much as through the arguments themselves.

To think through Christian animism, Wallace takes cues from Native American religions as well as the work of Indigenous scholars and Christian theologians (pp. 6–13, 38–39). In some ways, Wallace does this very well. His historiography of animism as a scholarly term in the introduction (pp. 6–13) does a good job of discussing the history of “animism” as a scholarly term, frequently used in a derogatory sense, and animism as active, ongoing belief systems and engagements with the
world, as described by practitioners. Wallace is also aware of the ways that ecological concerns and Christian approaches to an ensouled world have only exacerbated genocidal colonial projects in the Americas: in his chapter on the theologian John Muir, Wallace traces connections between Muir's romanticized yet utterly dehumanizing attitude toward the Indigenous Ahwahneeche peoples of California and the present-day national park system, which he argues uses the ideal of a “de-peopled wilderness” to continue an ultimately genocidal colonial project (pp. 116–117). This approach, arguably, links *When God Was a Bird* to a broader movement in ecological disciplines, as many publications seek to integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge into academic ecology.[4] *When God Was a Bird*, then, forms part of a long-overdue and cross-disciplinary movement that acknowledges the value of Indigenous peoples’ knowledge throughout the world.

This being said, Wallace’s historiography is not always so careful. While he shows care, attention, and respect toward animism and its practitioners in many places, he still has a tendency to place animism at an “early” stage of spirituality, for instance in his characterization of “the first naïvete of primordial animism” and “the second naïvete of biblical animism … a critical but innocent affective disposition toward nature” (p. 48). This feels at odds with the emphatic opposition to the use of animism as a synonym for the primitive elsewhere: a holdover from another period of scholarship. There are also flaws in Wallace’s treatment of other terms that have been appropriated and misused in scholarship. “Shamanism” is deployed multiple times in this book to indicate spiritual journeys, the use of guiding animal spirits, especially serpents and birds (pp. 33–36, 92), and any number of folk medicine practices from Moses to the medieval period (pp. 33–34, 88–90, 105). Wallace draws upon Mircea Eliade’s *Shamanism* (1951, Fr.; 1964, Eng.) here (pp. 34, 177), acknowledging none of the critiques made of Eliade’s decontextualized and universalizing approach to the Tunguz *saman* or of the many popular and academic discourses and mischaracterizations of shamanisms that have arisen since the popularization of the word.[5] At multiple points, Wallace also conflates shamanism with totemism (pp. 34–36, 88–92), a term derived from an Ojibwe word, again without addressing the uses and history of the term.[6]

In addition to these flaws in Wallace’s historiography, there are a number of gaps in his timeline of Christian animism. He speaks not of connecting Christianity and animism as two distinct but potentially harmonious ways of being, but rather of restoring a lost animism that lies at the root of Christianity (pp. 38–43). There are many strengths to Wallace’s argument: for instance, his discussions of the paradoxes of a God enfleshed throughout the world (pp. 15, 24) open interesting ways of considering the potential of Christian animism, in terms of theology and day-to-day practice. Yet Wallace leaps lightly through the history of Christianity and nature, and in doing so doesn’t establish deep roots. The Latin *enigmata* and Old English riddles, which frequently seek to find the divine and the marvelous in the mundane as much as they seek entertainment in wordplay and innuendo, are not mentioned.[7] The Bestiary and *Physiologus* traditions, which again used metaphor and exegesis to find meaning in the natural world, are only mentioned in relation to their influence on St. Hildegard of Bingen (pp. 101–102). Nor is there much discussion of earlier Christian “nature mysticism” and figures such as St. Francis of Assisi.[8] While some of this may seem superfluous given Wallace’s claims that he is recovering an animism that was lost at the very beginnings of Christianity, I do feel that Wallace’s theology could still benefit from finding historical kindred spirits beyond the small selection he presents.

However, the greatest oversights are, unfortunately, in the argument that gives the book its title: the argument that the Christian God was, in the
earliest days of the religion, thought of as a bird. In the preface, Wallace initially highlights many examples of gods that are either birds or have some avian aspects. However, instead of a universalizing bird-god hypothesis, Wallace emphasizes that the avian nature of God was a specifically Abrahamic phenomenon. He takes several scriptural quotes as evidence for this: the description of God as *merahefet*, “hovering,” in Genesis and Deuteronomy (pp. 22–23); the many connections between God, especially the Holy Spirit, and doves in scripture (pp. 25–31), in the Martyrdom of Polycarp, which Wallace reads as an “avian-spirit-possession story” (pp. 43–44); in Jesus’ own calls to consider birds and affinity with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove (pp. 90–94); in St. Augustine’s description of the Holy Spirit as being like a bird over its eggs in the act of creation (pp. 97–99); and in St. Hildegard of Bingen’s description of the Holy Spirit as being in the likeness of a dove (pp. 100–101).

This may seem, at first glance, like a reasonable corpus of evidence. However, there are a number of issues. First of all, Wallace has a tendency to draw connections between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament with very little consideration of any of the intervening time. Wallace argues that Moses had a “shamanistic” religious system and speaks of Jesus continuing this system as if there were a short period of continuity between the two figures (pp. 31–38). This leaves the intervening years between the two figures, and thus a considerable amount of history and practice, feeling like a void, rather than a span of time in which people and birds lived. There is a nagging feeling that surely, if there had been years of belief in an avian god, there would be more than this small number of allusions scattered in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Wallace also has the tendency to overlook the possibility of metaphor and figurative language when it suits his arguments. He is clearly aware of the ways that religion and theology have engaged with animals and the use of animals as metaphors and symbols (pp. 12–13, 36–38). Yet Wallace does not, really, engage with why God might have been repeatedly described as or in terms of a dove: instead, the many potential complex relationships between divinity and avian nature are collapsed into the argument that God must, at one point, have been thought of in terms of an actual, living bird.[9] Then, instead of exploring how and why St. Augustine and St. Hildegard chose the avian language that they did from the vocabulary of scriptures, Wallace instead argues that they “recover” and “adopt” respectively the idea of the avian God (pp. 98–101).

There is also a tendency to treat human-bird relationships in a very ahistorical manner: when it comes to writing about his own human-bird encounters in the present day in the episodes that bookend each chapter, Wallace writes beautifully and eloquently. Yet he does not seem to treat the relationships between humans and birds that may have given rise to the language he has picked up on. He mentions that feral pigeons are edible and mate for life (p. 28), but he does not fully consider the complex interrelations of human and pigeon in western Asia during the Iron Age and classical antiquity, as domesticated pigeons’ droppings were used to fertilize the crops that sustained both these birds and the humans who ate them, or how ritual sacrifice, sustenance, and keeping birds for pleasure co-existed in these relationships.[10] Such aspects of human-bird and specifically human-pigeon relationships could be fertile ground for exploring how humans may have seen the divine in these birds, which are so frequently maligned in present-day cultures, and this oversight feels like a missed opportunity.

Last but not least, there is the issue of replacing one form of amnesia with another. Wallace argues that Christian theology has “forgotten” the original, avian form of God, and as a result has lost its connection with nature. Yet in seeking to re-enchant Christianity through restoration of an
avian god, Wallace potentially runs the risk of obscuring years of theology and practice that deny the world and its divinity, and I do not know if that would be constructive. A truly restorative theology that fosters care regarding humanity’s place on earth and acknowledges the divinity alive in that earth should, surely, also take responsibility for past neglect and abuse of that same earth.

Overall, I do think that *When God Was a Bird* has merit as a slightly experimental work of eco-theology. The elements of this book that tackle animism and Christianity, while flawed, provide food for thought, and Wallace’s reading of the work and letters of John Muir in chapter 5 (pp. 113–140) has a lot to recommend it. Time and again, Wallace’s desire 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” (p. 17) shines bright and clear. But unfortunately, the uneven historiographical approach of this book consistently undermines it. The arguments for a god-bird are ultimately restrictive, based upon a small pool of evidence and the creation of immense, ahistorical arcs between them, especially in comparison to the arguments for a re-enchanted world in the here and now. *When God Was a Bird* is a striking meditation on what it is to be human in a divine world, but not a convincing historical analysis of a lost aspect of Christianity.

Notes


[9]. This reading may have been inspired by Mircea Eliade’s arguments concerning the import-
ance of birds in his universalized shamanism (cited on p. 30).


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