

Biblical Responses to Animism in Asia

Animistic practices run rampant throughout Asia, despite the fact that most people are also at least nominal adherents of the four major world religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, Christianity or of some of the smaller, regional religions such as Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism. For example, Phil Parshall estimates that at least 70% of Muslims practice folk Islam.¹ Others place the percentage even higher.² The situation with the other religions is similar.

Gailyn Van Rheenen 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.”³ He then goes on to raise the question as to how Christians should deal with these things when ministering in animistic contexts.⁴ This volume is one small attempt to answer that question. Much, much more can and must be done to address this critical issue.

The first two articles call for understanding animism through the paradigm of the charismata. In the opening article, Vietnamese scholar Bee Huyen Nguyen notes that while the major religions and belief systems such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Catholicism have been in Vietnam for centuries, animism continues to be prevalent.

She goes on to say that Pentecostalism shares some of the same beliefs as animistic cultures, namely, the spirit world. Both believe in the existence of spiritual beings and their activities, which influence human beings. She notes that “these worldview parallels have become factors contributing to the impressive growth of Pentecostalism in animistic contexts in the last decades.”⁵ Vietnam is no exception.”

¹Phil Parshall, *Bridges to Islam*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 16.

²Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 22.

³Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1991), 20.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 24.

In her paper, she specifically focuses on the concept of personal prophecy, which has strong parallels to the type of divination known as chresmology, fortunetelling by prophets and seers. Rooting this in the historical context of Vietnam, Nguyen notes that during the period of persecution, prophecy was often used to protect the church, but “soon veered toward abuse and misuse.” Digging deep into the culture and the Bible, she explores the issue and offers some help towards discipling believers on this vital issue.

In the second article, I take a look at how the concept of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit needs to be explained in the Filipino context, given the Filipino’s understanding of the spirit world and knowing that any teaching on the subject will be filtered through their worldview. The concept of supernatural power is nothing new in the Philippines. But the source and purpose of that power differs radically from the biblical portrayal of the power of the Holy Spirit. I discuss these differences in order to bring Filipinos into the truth about who the Holy Spirit is and that power that he can be in the lives of every believer.

Finally, in a two-part article, Chinese theologian Stephen Yao raises the question of using the Chinese concept of heaven, *Tian*, as an appropriate name for God when referring to divine revelation, giving special attention to Paul’s message on Mars Hill in Acts 17:23-31. In Part I, he reviews three traditional views on the subject, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each view. In Part II, he engages in the controversy surrounding the use of *Tian*, noting the controversy can be good as it may lead us closer to the truth.

But if *Tian* is to be used as a name for the God of the Bible or to refer to him in any way, then the animistic concepts associated with *Tian* cannot be ignored. Yao deals with this issue squarely, offering biblical reflections on how the Chinese understanding of these issues can be changed to give the Chinese a clear understanding of who God is within their own cultural context.

Whether one agrees with our authors or not, we pray that this edition will spur further reflection on animism in Asia and the opportunities it offers for biblical contextualization, while also recognizing the danger of syncretism that animism poses to the cause of Christ.

With this edition, the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* crosses a new threshold. For the first time in our 21-year history, one of our articles here is offered in a language other than English, in this case, Mandarin. Granted, it is only a translation of Yao’s article; nevertheless, it represents a small effort on our part to expand the reading audience of the Journal as part of our goal to provide theological reflection that will serve the Asian Church. Please join us in prayer that at least one article in an Asian language will become a regular part of our journal.

We are also pleased to announce our new website, www.aptspress.org. You are welcome to share your own thoughts and reflections on animism with me by contacting me through the website. I'd enjoy hearing from you.

Yours in Christ,

Dave Johnson, DMiss
Managing Editor