



A GLOBAL GOSPEL IN A WORLD OF RELIGIONS

Part 4: Animism

We're asking three primary questions: Who are they? What do they believe? How do we share the gospel with them? How do we build bridges to the gospel so they might know and enjoy the glory of God in Christ for all eternity? I wrestled with what order to go in—smallest to largest, largest to smallest, other possibilities? What I decided was a rough attempt at chronological ordering. Basically, I wanted to start as far back as possible in history and work our way forward from there. The only exception to that would be Atheism, because that would go back to the beginning as well. But the reason I saved atheism for last is to first show a history of the worship of various gods, and then let that lead us to people who worship no god.

Debunking Myths

In light of that we're going to start with Animism. Before we dive into each religion, I'm going to try to debunk a few myths. What might be some myths we have about Animists?

One, Animists can only be found in Africa. People often think of Animism as a tribal religion, and they envision Animists in more tribalistic settings. In part that's true, but at the same time Animists are found in every region of the world, including North America.

The second myth: all Animists are tribal people in villages and jungles who wear weird masks and dance around fires. When we think that, we think of Animism as foreign and way out there and very different from us. As a result, we fail to realize that Animistic thought is often mixed with every religion of the world. Another reason I wanted to start with Animism is because there are many people in many religions—including Christianity—who mix their faith with Animism, often in ways they don't even realize they're doing. So it's not as foreign to us as we might think.

Finally, a third myth: all Animists are primitive people with no education. Which is not true. Your well-educated next door neighbor might be Animistic.

Who Are Animists?

So who are Animists? Animism comes from a Latin word *anima*, which means soul or breath. Animists believe that the physical world is interpenetrated by spiritual forces. Physical objects carry spiritual significance, and earthly events have spiritual causes. Van Rheezen describes Animism this way:

The belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that humans, consequently, must discover what beings and forces are impacting them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.

Or how about this definition from Douglas Hayward?

Animism is a belief in multiple spirit-beings and souls that inhabit the universe, whose existence is found in people or in nature. As most generally conceptualized such spirits are semi-autonomous beings who represent distinct spheres of influence over nature (such as trees, water, animals, weather, etc.); or locations (such as mountains, depressions, forest glens, etc.); or human beings (that is by causing sickness, inducing possession behavior, evil behavior, or by becoming familial, helping entities, etc.)

We're going to unpack that when we get to what they believe, but we need to point out a few unique qualities of Animism.

One, Animism is not a formal religion with an established set of doctrines and practices like we're going to see in other world religions. There's not a specific founder, teacher or teachers, or even a book of teachings like we see in other religions. Instead, Animism is more a folk religion, so it varies from people group to people group. It looks different in different places among different people. Because Animism lacks written teachings, it leans on oral traditions that are passed along from one person or tribe to the next, from one generation to another. Animism can be distinct from other religions—so it can exist in and of itself—or, as I've said, it can co-exist with other religions. It exists right around you and me.

Van Rheezen also says this:

The average person in an Animistic society may wear Western clothes, desire education, listen to the radio, and travel long distances in automobiles, busses, taxis and trams. He might live in a plush suite in a multi-storied building. These material benefits make him appear Western. However, when he is sick or his wife is barren, he consults the medium or diviner. He believes in God, yet fears his ancestors. He appreciates Christianity, but is frightened of witchcraft. He worships Allah, yet places portions of the Qur'an around his house to magically ward off spirits. Only when we realize the diversity of culture and how to perceive distinctive thought patterns can we begin to understand Animistic beliefs and behaviors.

What Do Animists Believe?

Again, this is somewhat of a difficult question to answer, because Animism lacks formal teachings.

Animists Believe in a Supreme Being

Generally, in practice, Animists embrace belief in a supreme, supernatural being who is far removed from creation, almost force-like and too abstract to even be known. It's a higher power, so to speak, over and above all.

Animists Believe in a Spiritual Realm

This is really the foundation of Animism. In Animistic thinking, the material and physical universe are so connected that everything has a spiritual explanation. So nature and weather—they're not just natural. Those are spiritual forces at work in the wind and rain, the sun and the storms. Spiritual forces are at work in current events and circumstances. This or that happens for a reason—a spiritual reason. There are spiritual explanations for fortune and poverty, sickness and pain, disaster and death. All these things that might seem natural are viewed through the lens of the spiritual, the supernatural.

Think about it. If you were to wake up in the middle of the night with a sharp pain in your side, what do you immediately think? You think, "What's happening physically to cause this?" An Animist is more prone to immediately ask, "What's happening spiritually to cause this?"

The story is told of a conversation between a tribal Animist and a Western doctor. The tribesman said, "This man is sick because someone worked sorcery against him." The Western doctor said, "This man is sick because he was bitten by an infected mosquito." To which the tribesman promptly replied, "Well, of course, doctor. But who sent the mosquito?" Spiritual explanations behind natural events.

In Animistic thinking, the whole world consists of personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces. The personal spiritual beings may possess power over natural objects and events: trees, water, animals, storms, disasters. I think about a friend of mine in Nepal who grew up in a town where a tree in the middle of the town was viewed as sacred and inhabited by a spiritual power. So it could be a natural object like that. Or, a spiritual being might be working in human endeavors: business, marriage, community relations or war. It might be causing a war, creating or dissolving a marriage, enabling a business to succeed or fail. These spirits might include human spirits at work in different things. The belief in ancestral spirits is particularly prominent in explicitly animistic people. They believe that once a family member dies, his or her spirit inhabits objects, works in different ways and does different things.

For example, one of the people groups in Sierra Leone believe that the spirit of their ancestors hover close around the earth for 40 days after they die. At the 40-day feast, there is a diviner who throws nuts to the ground, inviting the spirits, while the women prepare food for an ancestor feast. The prepared food is placed on the roof, and it's believed that the ancestors in the form of vultures come and eat the food. If the vultures eat the food, everybody is relieved and happy, because the ancestors are apparently satisfied. If the vultures don't come to the roof, the ancestors must be displeased, and the family seeks the

advice of the shaman—the religious leader—to learn what they need to do to change the situation and please the ancestors.

That seems kind of out there, but then think a little closer to home—even among Christians. After somebody dies, have you ever heard somebody explain this or that happening like this? “Yeah, this person has died, and they’re playing a joke on us.” Or, “Oh, yeah, they’re reminding us of this, or trying to tell us that.” It’s really common language, even among Christians. Sometimes it’s said jokingly, but it does make you wonder where the impulse to even think or say that comes from.

In addition to ancestral spirits, they could believe in unborn spirits, animal spirits, earth spirits. Sun, moon or sky spirits. Universal spirits. Angels, demons or ghosts. These are personal spiritual beings which possess power over natural objects, events or endeavors.

Then they also may believe in impersonal spiritual forces. These are more ambiguous, more “out there” forces that may infuse objects or words or actions or rituals with power. This might include magic—the force of magic at work in this way or that way. “Mana,” a word for a mysterious spiritual energy. Witchcraft. It could also be the “evil eye,” which is a force at work when you look at a certain person in a certain way. Or a taboo—something that is prohibited in the spiritual realm that you want to avoid doing or violating.

In all the spiritual world of personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces, these beings and forces need to be appeased, assuaged and/or avoided. In other words, they need to be considered and reckoned with—and manipulated if possible. This is done through prayer, through ritual, or through other miscellaneous actions.

We might think of these as superstitions. This is another example of how Animistic thinking pervades more common thought. If I wear these socks on this day, it’s going to be a good day at work—as if there’s a spiritual force at work in your socks or the events around you because you got the socks on. That’s Animism in everyday life, and it is totally contrary to gospel truth. Again, people might think, “Well, that’s really no big deal.” But is it? To even think there’s some spiritual influence at work if I do this or that in that way?

Concept of Sin

What would be the closest thing in Animism to the concept of sin? When you think about it, sin would basically be offending spiritual beings and/or forces—doing something in the world around you that they would consider to be wrong. I mentioned my friend who grew up in the town with the sacred tree inhabited by the spiritual being. My friend, who was pretty rebellious as a teenager, went down one night and chopped down the tree. Needless to say, that would be considered sin in his town—extremely offensive.

Animism teaches that such an offense would result in experiencing inevitable consequences. When my friend did that, it was expected of him that all kinds of horrible things would happen to him. I won't go into all the details of that story, but nothing dramatic happened to him at all, which started to shake the faith of at least a few people in the town.

Fear and Power

But the thought is if you don't assuage or appease the spirits and forces—if you ignore or offend them—then there will be consequences. This inevitably leads to a struggle of fear and power. The spirits are powerful and often unpredictable—particularly when you don't have written set, stable and consistent teachings regarding how to appease the spirits. You never know exactly what's needed.

Which leads to perpetual fear, uncertainty and the constant manipulation of different forces and spirits according to what you think might work best. Ultimately, it's a hopeless fatalism that is resigned to the fact that the spiritual forces at work in the world are going to do what they will. You can try to effect change in this way or that way, but ultimately what's going to happen is going to happen regardless of what you do.

Now, that doesn't mean you do nothing. You do what you can do. So Animists may look to shamans, healers, witch doctors or diviners. These are basically leaders among Animistic people who have some kind of connection with—and potentially sway over—spirits and forces. So witch doctors are often some of the most powerful people in a village, because they have answers for every problem the village faces. Whatever they say needs to be done needs to be done.

Or again, let's think about it a little closer to home: the healers. If I go to this person, I can be healed. So much in the world passes for Christianity under that banner. Or it can even be mixed with Hinduism. If I bathe in this river, I can be healed. Or even such simple things as astrology or fortune telling, which assume there are forces at work in the world that determine the future.

Communicating with the Spirits

So we look to the experts, so to speak, who are more in touch with those forces that are at work in the world. They're the people who can communicate with the spirits. This is really what divination is all about. Divination in its essence involves how one has offended a spirit, or deciding how to counter a particular curse, or discerning when to take a particular action. "Should I get married? Should I make this business investment?" So you go to a diviner when you're trying to make a decision or you're considering what your future might hold. Examples might include tarot cards, palm reading, astrology, omens, rituals, contacting the dead, or interpreting dreams and visions.

Communalism

In all of this there is an emphasis on communalism. It's not just individualism here. Animism thrives in cultures that prioritize community. Their respect for family/tribe/people extends even beyond death to the worship of their ancestors. So that interconnection between the spiritual and the physical creates a far great interconnection with the people you're closest to in your family or tribe or people group.

The Afterlife

When it comes to the afterlife, Animists generally believe in some sort of continued existence, and usually in explicitly Animistic people there would be a specific belief in ancestral spirits who would require continual homage. So you would honor, pray to, even worship ancestral spirits. Individually and as a whole, your ancestors who have died would have a continual affect on your life.

Focus on the Immediate over the Ultimate

Then one final characteristic of Animism—particularly in comparison with other religions we're going to talk about—is that there's a much more intentional focus in Animism on the immediate over the ultimate. More formal religions focus more on ultimate issues: who we are, how we got here, and what happens when we die. More folk religions focus more on immediate issues of everyday life. “How do I get a successful crop this season? How do I deal with this cough I've got today? What's going on behind the weather this week?” And on and on and on. Now, it's not that there's not a focus on the ultimate. We just talked about Animistic views of the afterlife. But even there, there's a greater focus on the immediate—what's happening now.

How Do We Share the Gospel With Animists?

In light of that, how do we share the gospel with Animists? Whether it's your superstitious neighbor or coworker, or a tarot card reader, or an Animistic tribe in Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa. How do you build bridges from where they are to the gospel?

Think Supernaturally

First and foremost, I want to encourage you to think supernaturally, which is not always easy for us. I'm not at all saying we need to read spiritual forces into everything going on around us, as Animists do. But belief in the gospel entails belief in the supernatural. And if we're not careful—particularly in our enlightenment way of thinking, our Western way of thinking—we can come up with natural explanations for everything down to the creation of the world, which we'll talk about with Atheism.

We've got to remember Ephesians 6:12:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

There are spiritual forces at work in the heavenly realm—namely demons and angels. There is a spiritual world. “*God is Spirit*,” Jesus says in John 4:24. We need to remind ourselves what the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization—a global movement of evangelical churches working for the spread of the gospel in the world—in a report on sharing the gospel with Animists acknowledged rightly. Particularly in the West, “The influence of the enlightenment in our education, which traces everything to natural causes, has further dulled our consciousness of the powers of darkness.”

C.S. Lewis well said, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight.” So we need to be aware of the magician who distorts supernatural realities. We also need to be aware of the materialist who denies supernatural realities. There is a spiritual world. It's not the spiritual world the Animist envisions. But there are spiritual realities at work in the world around us.

Show Sensitivity

So think supernaturally, and show sensitivity. If we're not careful, we can talk with somebody who embraces Animistic thought or tendencies and just be quickly dismissive. Maybe they share something that we know has a natural reason behind it. It's not wise for us to immediately say, “That's ridiculous. Don't you know why this happened?” We need to listen empathetically to someone who's very sensitive to spiritual reasons behind physical realities.

And we must pray continually, knowing it's completely foolish for you or me or anybody else to go through life just looking at things naturally. In Jeremiah 10:21, the Bible talks about shepherds who were stupid and did not inquire of the Lord. Don't be stupid. Seek the Lord. Inquire of the Lord, the Spirit—God. We'll talk more about that. But in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14, Saul died because he consulted a medium instead of consulting guidance from the Lord.

So we actually don't seek mediums, but we do seek God. And prayer is the means by which we communicate with the supernatural God of the universe, seeking His power and provision in our lives, in our families, in the church.

Demonstrate Christian Community

Which leads to the next exhortation: demonstrate Christian community. We talked about how Animists are more communal than individualistic. So it's important to show the effects of the gospel not just in your life, but in your family and your friendships and most clearly in the church. Ephesians 2:13-22 gives us a glorious picture of how the gospel creates a new community, linking you with people who are totally different from you but who are united together in Christ, so they can see the Spirit of Christ as explained at the end of that passage. Or there's John 13:34-35:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Animists need to see a Spirit-filled, supernaturally united, unique demonstration of the gospel in the church.

Communicate the Gospel Clearly

In that community, we need to communicate the gospel humbly. One of the things I love about 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 is Paul's emphasis on declaring the gospel in such a way that the proclamation of the gospel from his mouth would be a demonstration of the Spirit of God and the power of God, so that people's faith "*might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God*" (1 Corinthians 2:5). We are not trying to assert our own wisdom or our own thoughts. We're asserting His power, which means we need to take time to understand their context as best as we can.

Think about Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:8-18. The people in that day started worshipping Paul and Barnabas as gods, bringing offerings and sacrifices to them. So what did Paul and Barnabas do? They pointed them to Christ. They exalted Christ. This is the key. In an Animistic context, where the spiritual and supernatural are so prevalent in somebody's worldview, what we've got to do is point people to Christ as supreme. No one else; nothing else.

We preach Christ, not ourselves, Paul told the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

We preach Christ, not as a means to an end. In other words, Jesus is not the magic genie who will give you all you want. "You pray to Christ, and you'll get this and that." No, we preach Christ not as a means to an end, but as the end—as the goal. We want Animistic people to see Jesus as the end, as the supreme

Sustainer of all things, Satisfier of our souls—now and forever. We’ve got to be careful not to communicate Christ as a means to an end. If to any extent we try to manipulate God for a quick fix for our own lives in this way or that way, we’re operating from Animistic and not a biblical mindset.

One missionary, working among Animistic people in Africa, wrote:

If Christianity and the person of God simply offered better genie than the demonic powers, this people group would have converted a long time ago. But of course it does no such thing. At the heart of the Christian faith is a personal relationship with God, akin to that of a child to its parent. God does promise to meet our needs. He does promise to guide us. He does promise to give us victory over sin and Satan. But the primary goal of our relationship with God is not to get everything we want, but to make us more like God Himself.

That’s why we preach God as a goal and Christ as the end—not a means to an end.

Start with the Similarities

So how do we exalt God in Christ when talking with Animists? We start with the similarities between Animistic thinking and the gospel. Think about potential commonalities. Ask all sort of questions. Maybe ask them, “What is the supreme God like? Was there ever a time when God was close to humanity? What caused the separation between humanity and God? Why does God seem distant now? How do we offend God—or the gods or the spirits of the ancestors? What are the consequences of such offenses? Is there a way by which to divert those consequences? Does God care about us now? If so, how?”

So, yes, in those questions you’re understanding what they believe, but you’re also creating categories for different truths of the gospel to be communicated—which is huge. As they answer, note areas of agreement, which obviously might include the existence of a supreme Being, which is a category for understanding the existence and nature of God. Here are two passages that speak to this:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty! Your decrees are very trustworthy; holiness befits your house, O LORD, forevermore. (Psalm 93:3-5)

Another area of agreement would be the existence of the supernatural. That’s something both a follower of Christ and an Animist would embrace.

Even consider common emotions we both face, such as fear. The Bible talks a lot about fearing—fear of the greatness of God. There is a healthy sense in which we should have a fear of God. We also share a fear of the consequences of wrongdoing. An Animist might think, “If I do this wrong, this will

happen.” So the Christian—again, in a different but healthy sense—fears the consequences of sin. Mark 9:43-48 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 make that clear. That latter passage says,

... and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ...

So we both share a common fear. We also share a longing for help and guidance in this life’s challenges. Amidst all the evil around us in the world, we long for peace and confidence in this life’s uncertainty. We don’t know all the future holds. Both Christians and Animists long for peace and confidence in a world of anxiety and uncertainty. That’s why it’s so comforting to hear Paul say that when we make our requests known to God with thanksgiving, that “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). So it’s helpful to identify those similarities.

Then Share the Differences

This then sets the stage for you to share the differences in your conversations. You can tell them how you’ve learned that God is actually not distant from us but present with us. Obviously this is most clearly portrayed in the very identity of Jesus as God in the flesh. His name means “God with us.” This is good news. God has come to be with us. He cares about our immediate needs more than anything in all creation, Jesus says in Matthew 6:25-34:

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (See also Matthew 10:29-31.)

Think about a verse like 1 Peter 5:7 in an animistic context: “Casting all your anxieties on [God], because he cares for you.” That’s good news. God, the supreme Being, cares about our immediate needs. And God provides for our ultimate need. Mark 2:1-12 is a great story to tell to an animist—the story of a

paralyzed man being brought to Jesus. He and everyone else around him thought his greatest need was to walk. But before helping him walk, the first thing Jesus does is forgives his sins.

It's a great picture of the fact that our ultimate need, over and above anything else in this world, is to be reconciled to God. That's far more important than any immediate need we have, no matter how serious or severe it may be. Jesus has made a way for us to be reconciled to God, to know and enjoy Him (Romans 5:6-11). The supreme Being over all—we can know Him!

How? This leads to another difference. First, God is not actually far from us, but present with us in Jesus. But also, Jesus has covered the consequences of our sin. This is the grace, which we've talked about tonight—that Jesus has paid the price. He's offered Himself as a sacrifice to the Father. He endured death in our place, and as a result, no other sacrifice is needed. The good news of Hebrews 9:25-26 is that Jesus did not *"offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."* No other sacrifice is needed. Jesus has died for us.

Not only has He died for us, but He's conquered death on our behalf. Talk about power over the supernatural. Not even death can stop Jesus. And as a result, Christians—those who put their faith in Jesus—have nothing to fear in life. In the words of 1 Corinthians 15:58, we're "steadfast" and "immovable" because of the resurrection of Jesus. Christian, I hope you know that nothing can happen to you today or tomorrow or this week or ever in your life to take away the everyday, everlasting security you have in Jesus.

So live like that. Live with that kind of confidence, particularly among Animists. Live like you have nothing to fear. And in this way let your life and your words shout that the path has been paved for a personal relationship with God. Tell animists, "You can be forgiven of all sin's consequences—namely, death itself. You can have power over sin's slavery (John 8:32-36 and Romans 6:22-23). You can be freed from sin's condemnation (Romans 8:1). You can have victory over Satan's power." These are all things that animists long for, that everybody longs for—that I long for.

And they're all found in Jesus alone. *"He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4). Ultimately, this is good news for anybody, and especially for the Animist. You can rest secure in God's love. *"Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39). That's a great verse to share with someone who is an Animist.

Show the Differences in your Life

To put it all together: start with the similarities, ask questions that help you understand what they believe, create categories for gospel sharing, share the differences in your conversation—and as you do, show the differences in your life. Live like God is with you. Live like you have a living, breathing relationship with the God of the universe, the Supreme Being over all. Live like He's with you—because He is!

Which means you're constantly praying for God's provision in your immediate needs. You're looking to Him for provision all the time. So, in a sense, "out-animist" the animist. Pray without ceasing, like you're always dependent on the supernatural provision of God in every single thing you do—because you are. Live like God is with you, confident in God's provision for your ultimate need, really believing that to live is Christ and to die is gain. You have nothing to fear.

Live like God is with you, and live out of the overflow of grace in Christ—not guilt in sin. Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Christian, you've been set free from the guilt of sin, the slavery to sin. So walk in that grace and power. Live with trust in and dependence on God's Spirit amidst life's challenges. Don't try to live like you don't have challenges. Live like you have all sorts of challenges in your life . . . but the Spirit of Christ is the helper who leads and guides and sustains and strengthens you in the middle of those challenges, no matter how hard they are.

As a result, live with joyful peace and humble confidence in God's sovereignty over life's uncertainty. Neither you nor the animist knows what the future holds, but you know the future is not held by some blind, impersonal, fatalistic force, but by a holy, sovereign and loving God who's promised to work all things together for the good of those who love Him.

Reframe the Overall Story

Now, when sharing specific gospel truths—God's character, the offense of sin, the sufficiency of Christ, personal response, eternal urgency, life transformation—how do you bring all that together in conversation with an Animist?

I think it's helpful to reframe the overall story, to start from the beginning and share the story. Begin at creation—the time when the Creator God dwelled in perfect relationship with created men and women. Tell the story when everything was in harmony between the spiritual and the physical—everything. And then tell them about the Fall, how men and women were separated from God when they followed an evil spiritual being instead of Him (Genesis 3). This led to the spread of evil throughout the world, including all of its effects today.

But then share about redemption, how God sent the Mediator to make a way for us to be reconciled to God. From there point them to Jesus. Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:5-6,

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Talk about Jesus, and share how that story leads to restoration, when one day all who trust in Jesus will be reconciled to God in a new creation, free of any curse. So paint a picture of where the world is going (Revelation 22). The gospel isn't just a set of truths here. It's ultimately part of an overarching story that spans and explains all of history.

Tell Individual Stories

Show it—and then within the larger story, tell individual stories, particularly of Jesus. This is where in Animistic settings I've found the book of Mark to be particularly helpful. It contains all kinds of stories that I have shared from Scripture in Animistic contexts with Animistic peoples to point people to the unique power of Jesus. In Mark 4:35-41 there's the story of calming the storm, illustrating Jesus' power over nature. Mark 6:30-44 tells of how He fed thousands of people starting with small amounts of food. In Mark 6:48, He walked on water. He had power over the fig tree in Mark 11:13-14, 20-21. So Jesus had power over nature.

Tell that about Jesus' power over demons. It's all throughout Mark. Tell them about Jesus' power over all kinds of disease. There are all kinds of examples in Mark about His power over disease. Then tell them about Jesus' power over death in Mark 5:41-42. He has the power to say to those who are dead, "Come to life." Tell them He has power over evil itself. Tell them stories of Jesus' power over sin. I mentioned Mark 2:1-12 earlier, demonstrating His power over sin. And then tell them stories of Jesus' power over Satan. So in all these ways, point to the supremacy of Jesus. Exalt Christ over and above all gods, spirits, powers, forces and anything else in creation. Just like we talked about with Paul and Barnabas at Lystra—exalt Christ, exalt Christ, exalt Christ.

Warn against Deceptive Spirits

As you do, warn against deceptive spirits. Use Scripture verses such as John 8:44 and 2 Corinthians 4:4 to point out that there are many deceptive spirits in the world, ultimately controlled by Satan. Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians 4:4: *"In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* We believe that. We know that. Warn them that if we think we can see through deception from Satan and his spirits through our own natural abilities, one of two things will be true.

Either if we can see through their deceptions that we shouldn't follow them, or if we can't see through their deceptions, then we should avoid them. Warn them that *"even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light"* (2 Corinthians 11:14). Or 1 Peter 5:8, *"Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*

Call Animists to a Decision

Warn them to beware of deceptive spirits, to see the supremacy of Christ, and ultimately call Animists to a decision. In the words of Joshua 24:15, 23, *"Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell... Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel."*

Trust God's Power to Save

Call Animists to a decision. Call and invite them. Urge them to trust God's power to save. Ultimately, this is an animist turning from their sin and themselves and trusting in Jesus as being greater than he who is in the world. *"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4).

I've got to tell you a story about an Animistic context that one of our IMB missionaries in Southeast Asia recently told me. This was a believer, but I'll leave it pretty generic—so, an Asian believer from a village of Animistic people who were totally unreached by the gospel. He and a couple other people had gone up to this village to try to share the gospel. They were having Bible studies and telling stories from Scripture, and slowly people started to say, "Maybe this is true."

The people there wore all kinds of necklaces and amulets, plus things around their wrists, and they also had things in their homes to ward off evil spirits. Slowly they started saying, "Maybe we don't need these." They started bringing them to a central place in the village. Their goal was to get rid of them, so they built a bonfire and set them on fire. The Christians were encouraged that interest was progressing.

But then one day they woke up to see all the people going to that central place where they had put those items and began taking them back to their houses or putting them back on their bodies. The men asked them, "Why are you doing this?" They said, "The head of our village just died, and everybody believes it's because we're starting to believe these things you've been teaching."

The believers who had gone up there were obviously discouraged by this. They got together and started praying. "God, we don't understand. Things were progressing and then this happens. Show Your love and power in this village." They finished praying and considered what to do. They decided the least they could do was go to express their condolences to the village leader's family.

The custom there when somebody dies was to keep the person in their house for a period of days, and then go through the burial ceremonies after that. So they went to the house. People were mourning everywhere around it. They went in, and the wife of the village leader was there, so they expressed their condolences to her. Then they went over to the body of the leader, and they quietly began to pray that God would show His glory and love for the people in this village.

The believer told our missionary that as they were praying, all of a sudden the man coughed. Everybody in the house got really still, and he coughed again. The believers came over to him and saw that he had started breathing. They said, “We need to help this man up.” Everybody then looked at the men, so they figured it was a pretty good time to share the gospel. So they began sharing the gospel, which resulted in a massive change in that village. This national believer told our missionary that many people came to Christ and they again burned their amulets and other religious items.

I hear that story, and I’m guessing that there might be some others who also might think, “Really? I mean, was he really dead? I don’t know if I believe that.” I obviously wasn’t there, so I don’t know. I do know that in villages like this they know how to recognize death. This is not an unusual thing. They have a process they go through, so they know how to recognize death. But the missionary and I were talking about it, and his comment was this: “Even if he wasn’t dead, the Lord sure chose an opportune moment for him to cough.” I think that’s a great point.

Here’s the beauty—we serve and worship and have the good news of a God Who has conquered death on our behalf, Who has power to save. The dead come alive. We’ve got that good news, and animists need to hear it. They need to hear it. Those right around as well as those around the world.

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