

SPIRITS AND SPIRITUALITY

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Do you believe in spirits? Most of us would want to reply: 'It depends on what you mean ...' This is the problem with many words used in religion or theology. They seem to signify something important, but they have no clear edges, no sharp definitions against which we can measure our beliefs and say 'Yes' or 'No' about them.

Pioneer anthropologist Edward Tylor, writing last century, chose as his minimum definition of religion 'the belief in Spiritual Beings'. He offered a theory called Animism, from the Latin *anima* or spirit. According to this theory, religions arise out of beliefs about an invisible world of spirits or powers, non-human or super-human intelligences. At the simplest level, such spirit-beings are insubstantial ghosts, dreams or apparitions – but, amplified through fear and desire to placate or find favour, spirits grow in importance in people's minds until eventually they become divinities: gods if good, demons if evil.

Now Tylor's theory of **Animism** was based on the 'primitive culture' (as he called it) of tribal peoples. Yet the theory seems to fit any faith in which there are invisible agencies or supernatural beings conceived of in personal form, capable of interacting with humans: dead who live on in an after-life, saints who watch over the faithful, devils who tempt, angels who convey messages, a supreme Lord or Saviour who redeems and guides the community of believers, a God or Gods who created the world and continue to transcend time and history. Spirits great and small are not confined to so-called primal or tribal cultures but feature in almost all the world's faiths.

Thus modern-day Jews, Christians and Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is and Rastafarians can all be said to be animistic for they all believe there is a God who is the Supreme Spiritual Being (in the case of Christians a trinity of three distinct persons) along with subordinate supernatural creatures such as angels, satanic and evil powers, as well as holy prophets, apostles, saints and other 'saved' humans who live on after their earthly lives. Hindus, too, are animistic, with countless divinities (male and female) populating their spirit-world. And even Buddhists, though they hold no Divine Spirit to be the creator, attach great significance to beneficent spiritual beings such as Bodhisattvas, and malicious ones like Mara and his demons. Animism or 'belief in spiritual beings' as a definition of religion, then, goes a long way towards covering the major world faiths, even today.

Religion as Animism/Anthropomorphism

In his recent book *Faces in the Clouds* the American anthropologist Stewart E. Guthrie has revived Tylor's classic view of religion as belief in spiritual beings, adding an original angle designed to make the animistic theory more convincing in a modern context. 'Anthropomorphism' – that is, animating the world and attributing human characteristics to

non-human things or events – is ‘familiar, pervasive, and powerful in human thought and action’ (Guthrie 1993: 3).

Guthrie provides a wealth of evidence of anthropomorphism from within our everyday lives. The language we use, for instance, is rich in animistic and humanising metaphors. We regularly address and talk to non-human things: not only to our pet animals but to our diaries, cars, computers. We blame hard objects for the injuries they cause us, swear at appliances that let us down, plead with tools and machines to co-operate with our wishes. We personalise our natural environment endlessly in our art and poetry. Our liking for user-friendly objects, implements and containers is constantly exploited in advertising and marketing. Our very perceptions, as developmental psychology and cognitive science show, are shaped by person-derived categories and governed throughout by human needs and interests.

Rather than apologising for all this anthropomorphising as though it were a childish habit or a survival from less sophisticated times, we should boldly admit the practice and commend ourselves for it. For anthropomorphising makes a lot of sense. It is the key to much of our success in coping with the world. As Guthrie puts it:

... we anthropomorphize because guessing that the world is humanlike is a good bet. It is a bet because the world is uncertain, ambiguous, and in need of interpretation. It is a good bet because the most valuable interpretations usually are those that disclose the presence of whatever is most important to us. That usually is other humans.
(Guthrie 1993:3)

As highly accomplished meaning-makers (the most intelligent beings in the universe, as far as we know), we crave significance in the world around us appropriate to our own level of sophistication. And we inevitably interpret in terms of our personal interests (whether consciously or unconsciously) every experience that comes our way. Using research findings from everyday life, and from psychology, ethnography, the creative arts, philosophy and science, Guthrie shows how natural, universal and fruitful this tendency to anthropomorphise is. Through it, we maximise our ability to grasp the things that matter most to us.

Scanning the world for humans and humanlike things and events, we find apparent instances everywhere. We later judge many of these interpretations mistaken, but those that are correct more than justify the strategy. Because betting on the most significant interpretations is deeply rooted, anthropomorphism is spontaneous, plausible, and even compelling.
(Guthrie 1993: 3)

When it comes to religion, Guthrie recognises that Tylor’s animistic theory is not currently fashionable in scholarly circles. It has been criticised as making religion seem too rational and intellectualist, and is much less popular than two other main kinds of approach.

First, there are irrationalist theories, according to which religion represents wish-fulfilment, fantasy or projection, brought on by human anxiety, alienation or illusions. (Examples of theorists proposing this view are Hume, Feuerbach, Marx, Malinowski and Freud.)

Secondly, there are ‘social functionalist’ theories, which hold that religion is to be understood in terms of its rôle as symbolising and undergirding the social order. Many scholars have included aspects of this view in their thought – above all Emile Durkheim. Guthrie draws attention to various limitations of these more fashionable theories, and sets out to reinstate the animistic approach, augmenting it with his own account of anthropomorphism as a general human cognitive strategy.

It is no news, of course, that religion contains anthropomorphism. This has been pointed out again and again, since the Greek writer Xenophanes (c.390 BCE) observed wryly that animals also, if they could draw, would each depict its gods with its own species' characteristics. So anthropomorphising of the divine by humans, he implies, is just what one would expect, and hardly a reliable guide to the truth of the matter.

For Guthrie, however, anthropomorphism is not merely typical of religion, it actually explains the religious enterprise itself, offering a coherent, rational account of its sources and its workings. In his theory, anthropomorphism is what religion essentially is. (In this respect, his theory resembles more the proposal of another Greek theorist, Euhemerus (c.330-260 BCE): that popular religion arises through the veneration of heroic ancestors who, after their deaths, are raised to the status of gods.)

Theologians and many others find anthropomorphism inevitable in, yet inessential to, religion. They see it as an unfortunate limitation of human thought and peripheral to religious experience. In contrast, I hold that anthropomorphism is the core of religious experience. I claim that anthropomorphism springs from a powerful strategy and pervades human thought and action, and that religion is its most systematic form.

(Guthrie 1993: 7)

What makes religion centrally anthropomorphic is that all religions, in Guthrie's view, have gods or a god, a personalised superhuman being or agent with whom human persons relate in worship and other forms of symbolic interaction. Even Buddhism, often portrayed in the West as atheistic, can be fitted within Guthrie's generalisation, since the Buddha is commonly personalised and given numerous superhuman powers, and is usually accompanied by various lesser divinities (Guthrie 1993: 19-20).

To justify his claim that religion is essentially anthropomorphic, Guthrie has to discount the more mystical and self-transcending elements of many traditions of faith. Some independent-minded or sophisticated thinkers in most faiths have criticised their tradition's anthropomorphism and tried to move beyond it in their own expressions of belief. Those who have had intense visionary or mystical experiences of 'that which is beyond', for instance, have commonly expressed dissatisfaction with words or images drawn from the human, temporal domain, in trying to describe their encounters. Some have even said that God or 'the absolute' should be given no positive attributes at all.

But if such a *via negativa* (saying only what God is not) were all that there was in a religion, there would be no point in human beings following it, Guthrie argues. The *via negativa* and other attempts to get beyond the anthropomorphic, in other words, continue to presuppose a belief in **something** with which humans can as-it-were-humanly interact. That, says Guthrie, inevitably involves anthropomorphism.

Despite the attempts of some religious philosophies and theologies to transcend anthropomorphism, then, it is not something religions can readily shrug off. Any solid notion of gods or other spiritual agencies presupposes it. Sacred scriptures, folklore and popular piety are full of it. And religion itself, to have any living application and personal appeal in practice, cannot get along without humanly-construed relationships, goals, values and ideals. In a word, without an anthropomorphic heart, religion ceases to have human relevance.

Is Anthropomorphism Wrong?

To keep it interesting, the modern study of religion needs lucid and original theories such as Guthrie's. Some criticism, no doubt, could be made of the fact that he leaves little room for important non-personal systems and principles: cosmic law, karma and re-birth, yin/yang dualism, fate and destiny and the like. Astrological charts and zodiacs, systems of number and word-symbolism, laws of alchemy and geomancy, techniques of divination and prophecy based on randomised events (dice, arrows, stones, etc) have a long history of magical and religious usage. Few of these are as personalised or animistic as the examples on which Guthrie relies; indeed, their power commonly lies in the fact that they operate regardless of personal values or intentions. So, even though Guthrie is right to focus on the general humanising tendency in religion, the many non-animistic and non-anthropomorphic sources of religious significance make questionable his attempt to define religion as **essentially** anthropomorphic.

What makes Guthrie's approach most useful for our purposes, however, is not so much the success or otherwise of his claim that anthropomorphism explains religion, but rather his reminder that religion is essentially tied to human interests and concerns. Religion's importance for humans, to put it crudely, lies in what they can get out of it. A religion, whether blatantly anthropomorphic or sublimely mystical, offers itself as humanly worthwhile for its participants. If it did not, there would be no point in following it.

Guthrie's emphasis on anthropomorphism also usefully highlights the fact that one very important way (though not, as he seems to imply, the only way) by which humans recognise things they believe to be valuable to them, and seek to establish fruitful relations with those things, is by personalising them. It is this, I shall argue, that provides the key to understanding the rôle of personally-conceived spirits and gods, the animism and anthropomorphism which, as Guthrie has shown, seems to play a central part in religions of all kinds. Yet anthropomorphism, Guthrie says, like animism, is a mistake – albeit an intelligent and excusable one. The perceptual strategy of 'betting' on human significance pays off so successfully sometimes that its failings at other times do not seriously discredit it. In successful cases, of course, we no longer speak of our personalising as anthropomorphism (or animism) for it is here the real thing. But in others our addiction to anthropomorphising can and does lead us astray. Guthrie writes:

Anthropomorphism (towards animals or anything else) by definition is an overestimate of likeness. It is not simply an assumption of likeness since, in fact, many things are like us in various ways. It is a mistake about likeness. We can label it anthropomorphism only after seeing it as an error.

(Guthrie 1993: 183)

Candidly facing up to the question whether he thinks religion, as essentially anthropomorphic, must thereby be deemed in error, he admits:

The central religious assertion, that the nonhuman world is, in whole or in part, significantly humanlike, seems mistaken.

(Guthrie 1993: 200)

His conviction about the rightness of that conclusion is strengthened, he says, by 'the breadth and depth of anthropomorphism' (i.e. mistaken personalisation) elsewhere in human thought.

Here I think Guthrie has over-extended himself. He has claimed that the reason for anthropomorphising is the ambiguity and uncertainty of much of life. Yet he has decided

himself that 'the non human world' is sufficiently unambiguous for him to reach the conclusion that religion is, after all, in error. How could he have reached such a judgement? Is it a conclusion which others are bound to accept too?

The difficulty lies in Guthrie's assumption that the rôle of anthropomorphism in religion is primarily a cognitive, perceptual one; that we anthropomorphise in order to try to correctly perceive some reality, to try to depict some state of affairs more or less accurately. If that is what we do, then the rightness or wrongness of our perception or depiction would seem to be the main question at issue. But things are not so straightforward.

If we look at religions along the lines of Tylor's and Guthrie's animistic theories, we will tend to think the most important question to be asked about them is: 'Do spirits exist?' If we are persuaded that they do, then religion will be justified; its innate personalism will no longer be animistic or anthropomorphic, but real perception and true depiction. If we decide spirits do not exist, then religion will be shown to be essentially a mistake, its animism unjustified and its anthropomorphism simply wrong.

But an over-emphasis on the cognitive, fact-finding rôle of anthropomorphising in religion fails to take account of everything else that is going on too; the living context, the personal and social setting of practice and usage, within which notions like 'perception' and 'cognitive significance' must themselves be interpreted. Religion, as I have said, is not simply rational, interrogative and cognitive; it is also pragmatic, affective, expressive and instrumental. It aims not just to achieve some superior kind of knowledge by personalising nature, the world, or life itself, but to extract superior values by doing so, and thereby to enrich the knower and serve their higher interests.

Guthrie seems to assume that the rightness or wrongness of anthropomorphism is something that can be assessed from some non-religious non-personalised standpoint. But can we stand outside religion and take a look at things in general – things in themselves, as it were – to decide whether or not religion is getting it right? Where is this external point, this neutral ground, from which such judgements can be made? Here we encounter the problems raised by post-modernist critics, about the generalised, contextless assumptions of modern thought.

Questions like 'Is anthropomorphising wrong?', 'Do spirits exist?' and the like cannot usefully be asked in the abstract. They have no clear meaning until we can find out a great deal more about what religious people do about the spirits they seem to be talking or thinking about. What difference does believing in spirits actually make to people's lives, attitudes, feelings and behaviour? To appreciate these matters, we must look beneath general theories, doctrines and abstract theologies, to particular usage and practice, to religion in the applied rather than in the pure mode. A case study later in this paper will give us an opportunity to do so. To help prepare us to undertake this more practice-centred approach, I shall begin by setting the subject of spirits within the wider area of talk about the supernatural.

Spirits and the Supernatural

Educated people nowadays are mostly reluctant to speak about the supernatural for fear of seeming unscientific, over-religious, or a bit odd. Sociologists and opinion pollsters tell us, however, that by far the majority of people in modern Western societies still admit to beliefs in the supernatural of one kind or another (Gallup & Castelli 1989).

What are these beliefs? Most commonly, they include God, in some fairly unspecific sense (there are still only a small minority of atheists) but much more besides. As bookshop shelves and popular magazines show, interest still flourishes in astrology, clairvoyance and ESP (extra-sensory perception), mediumship and spirit-possession, reincarnation, and healing or other powers resulting from occult knowledge or meditation practices. Likewise witchcraft and magic, hidden forces of good and evil, and alien beings from other galaxies and dimensions, feature prominently in popular fiction and entertainment. (They lend themselves especially well to computerised animation for comic books and video games, and can make visually stunning special effects in film and television.) Though no doubt taken only half-seriously by most educated adults, all this contemporary popular supernaturalism shows how much people in our supposedly scientific, technically advanced society still like to imagine fantastic possibilities and bizarre alternatives to the natural world of everyday life.

Mainstream religious (i.e. Christian) opinion in the Western world reflects a deep-seated ambivalence when faced with the public's continued fascination with the mysterious and out-of-this-world. On the one hand, the Church wants there to be enough openness to the supernatural to keep traditional Christian beliefs afloat, so to speak; but, on the other, it has no desire at all to see modern society awash with what it regards as superstition and occultism.

As well as belief in God, of course, there are many forms of popular supernaturalism to be found in the Christian Bible itself: prophecy and prediction, dreams and visions, signs, portents and miracles abound in the Old Testament stories. And in the New Testament the narratives concerning Jesus, the apostles and the early Church relate event after event of a supernatural kind: dreams, visitations by angels, voices from heaven, exorcisms and miraculous healings, feeding of crowds, stilling of storms and walking on water, turning water into wine, resurrection of the dead. But the Bible has its own clear criterion regarding the occult and the supernatural. That which relates to God and his purposes is approved but all else is of the devil as it attracts the wickedness of idolatry and the folly of false worship. The Bible has no time for any rival religion.

Thus freelance supernaturalism such as astrology, fortune-telling and divination, spiritualism and mediumship, occultism and magic have been sternly opposed by the Church's leaders. Folk magic and supernaturalism within the Christian tradition has been approved of, however, when focused on images of the Virgin Mary, relics and shrines of patron saints and holy martyrs, or shown in such things as the blessing of land and crops and the use of crosses as charms and amulets. Despite the Protestant reformers' dislike for such things, they have characterised most popular Christianity right throughout its history. Thus the Church has had plenty of its own miracles and magic, but has always been suspicious of supernaturalism engaged in by others (Thomas 1971; Brown 1981).

Since the middle of the 20th century the renewed emphasis by Pentecostal or charismatic Christian movements on gifts of the Spirit (speaking in tongues, prophecy, spiritual healing, exorcisms and the like) as part of the Church's own heritage has created wide controversy, with various denominations differing sharply over whether such supernatural experiences and phenomena are to be encouraged or not. More recently still, the deeply engrained Christian attitude of 'those who are not for us are against us' has re-emerged in the strong condemnation (particularly by fundamentalist and evangelical Christians) of the now thriving New Age and neo-pagan supernaturalism. This movement, with its spectacular array of

unorthodox beliefs and alternative spiritual practices, is enthusiastically promoted by a wide range of spokespeople who are often colourful or prominent enough to find a ready audience in the popular broadcast media, and a readership in the flourishing magazine market. It is not surprising that Church authorities should regard such a movement as a serious competitive threat. More than that, it is seen as a momentous spiritual challenge.

Just as popular bookshops stock more and more books and magazines on New Age topics, Christian publishers distribute a growing number of anti-New Age titles. Conservative Christian writers on this subject see New Age thought as an unholy mix of ancient occultism, neo-spiritualism, humanism and Eastern religions. Without a doubt, they believe it represents the work of Satan who, from the very first, has tempted human beings to follow paths other than the way of God. Proving the truth of this view (mostly by reference to the Bible), and warning Christians off the whole business, has become a major preoccupation of some contemporary Christian writers and preachers.

Not being bound to adopt the Christian Church's exclusive stance, the general student of religion is free to take a less prejudiced interest in the things New Agers talk about: ESP, dreams and precognition, spiritual healing, mediumship, yoga and meditation and the like. This is not to say that students of religion will necessarily want to regard such things with great enthusiasm, or believe all they read about them. On the contrary, they will be well aware of the high probability of self-deception, wishful thinking and fraud, in those areas of life in which people are particularly vulnerable: concerns about health and sickness, fantasy and fascination with mystery, insecurity, powerlessness and fear of death.

Some observers have noted that much New Age thought is commercialised and consumer-packaged, and many of its leaders and organisations reflect patriarchal and hierarchical attitudes very much like those which women are coming to find so offensive in Christianity and other religions. New Age spirituality thus seems a very mixed bag, and intelligent people seeking a faith for today might or might not find much of real worth in it.

The student of religion, however, will want to keep an open mind about the more interesting claims made for the supernatural today, particularly such things as meditation, mystical experience and psychical phenomena. The faiths of the world are full of these things, after all. And, like folk medicines and alternative therapies, some may well turn out to be reliable and beneficial, so all are worth considering on their merits. Once again, the subject calls for a pragmatic rather than a merely theoretical or ideological approach. But the general notion of the supernatural itself stands in need of some major clarification before we can proceed further.

'The Supernatural' – Two Main Senses

When an event, experience or state of affairs is spoken of as supernatural, two quite different things can be taking place; it may be being explained; or it may be being evaluated. In many cases, of course, both will be going on together. To **explain** something by referring to a supernatural source, cause or purpose involves going beyond normal explanations drawn from our knowledge of the natural and the ordinary. Here, supernatural things are things 'out of this world'. To believe that they are supernatural is to believe that they are the product of powers, realities or influences over and above those we know through our natural investigative and scientific knowledge. This is the explanatory side of belief in the supernatural.

Evaluative responses to things that happen in our lives may also lead us to speak of the supernatural. Here 'supernatural' keeps company with words like 'amazing', 'awesome', 'extraordinary', 'wonderful' and so on. In particular, referring to something as supernatural shows a certain kind of religiously significant attitude: an inclination to regard that thing as valuable or worthy, and to act towards it in ways we might call worshipful.

Now this dual function (evaluation and explanation) is not at all unusual with words. Consider, for instance, the way we use 'natural' itself. 'Natural' generally carries a positive evaluation. We use it to say that something is normal, proper, to be expected or even to be welcomed as healthy and desirable. Since it is natural (the advertisements say), it must be good for us. Nowadays we feel (mostly) happy about the natural – though occasionally we contrast it with the civilised or the cultivated: 'Left to itself, the garden will quickly revert to its natural state', we might say disapprovingly.

At the same time, natural also has an explanatory use. It means taking place according to known laws of nature; not being unexplained, mysterious or needing any special hidden forces or realities to account for it. Thus when we hear reports of odd events like unidentified flying objects, unusual animal behaviour such as whale strandings, or peculiar circles appearing in fields of corn, our first thought will be to seek natural explanations. To be natural is to be explainable, more or less, by what we already know.

When we turn to the word supernatural we find a quite flexible connection between the explanatory and the evaluative uses. In the Biblical and Christian traditions especially, interest focuses far more on the evaluative than the explanatory aspects of the supernatural. Explanation is taken care of because the religion as a whole rests on belief in a God who creates and upholds the universe. It can be simply assumed that God is the ultimate explanation of everything in general, as well as being part-cause of things that happen in particular. (Even the devil and his fallen angels are ultimately explained by God, who created them and allowed them the freedom to rebel.)

Within the context of most mainstream Christian religious language (particularly the language of the Bible), references to the supernatural in an explanatory sense are hardly ever to be found. For Christianity already takes it for granted that God's being a reality provides all the explanation that is needed, for anything else, whether ordinary or extraordinary. Thus you will not find in Christianity any effort being made to prove that the supernatural exists or is real. The Church, like the Bible, has other matters on its mind. Its main concern is not with explaining amazing or wonderful things, but with cultivating the right and proper responses to them: thanksgiving, love, praise, obedience to God and the like. In other words, all the attention is on right evaluation in practice: showing worship (recognising worth and responding appropriately to it), feeling awe and wonder, drawing power and regeneration from the worshipful relationship, and so on.

Explanatory beliefs about how a particular event or experience has come about (the mechanics of the supernatural, we might say) is not thought of, in the Bible, as nearly as important as evaluative questions such as what to make of it and how to learn from its occurrence (its meaning in practice, for salvation, devotion, faith and the like).

The reason why the Bible, and the Church following it, are so opposed to magic, spiritualism and the occult is that these kinds of supernaturalism seem to offer people the power to achieve some goal which does not involve them in worship or faith in God. The supernatural,

when it is not specifically worshipful in the approved form, is seen as a misguided, go-it-alone activity. Therefore, it is felt, it cannot be conducive to a genuine saving faith and a right relation with God. Instead, it leads people astray.

Now Christianity is not alone in this concern. Other world religions too have found it necessary to rule out too much of the wrong sort of supernaturalism. The Buddha, for instance, while recognising that common folk relied widely on the low arts (magic, mediumship, spiritualism and so on), taught that such things, despite being real forms of supernatural power, are better avoided. For they are not aids to following the path to enlightenment but rather are obstacles, their practice arising from self-interest rather than from the selflessness which leads to true liberation and enlightenment. The main objection by Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism or the other established religions towards freelance do-it-yourself supernaturalism, private occultism or esoteric magic and mysticism is that such things are bad practice. They don't deliver the real goods; they are an unreliable investment and a waste of time. It is not so much that they are mistaken as that they are unhelpful and inferior ways, which lead people astray or put them in bad company.

The dispute between traditional religions and freelance magic and occultism, in other words, is best thought of not as a difference of opinion about supernatural explanations of how the universe works at some metaphysical level (even though disputes may commonly have been portrayed in that form by intellectualising scholars). It is more fundamentally a dispute about values, about what goods are really worthwhile for humans, and about what ways and means in practice are most reliable for obtaining them.

From Spirits to Spirituality

The contrast we need to make clear is between talking about spirits or the supernatural as a special kind of **explanation** (a more-than-ordinarily-scientific, beyond-the-natural-world one), and talking that way in order to help express and put into practice a special kind of **evaluation**. The difference stands out strikingly when we compare (a) arguing over whether or not gods, angels, spirits and the like actually exist, with (b) exploring, with well-informed empathy, the values and practices of a particular spirituality.

An individual's or a people's spirituality refers to the things most precious to them, their inner sources of self-worth and identity, their valued personal goals and ideals, or their shared cultural treasures. The word 'spirituality' nowadays has more appeal for many than 'religion', with its reminders of institutions, dogmas, bigotry, fanaticism and so on. But spirituality in the sense of piety, devotion and commitment has a long-established meaning within living religion itself, bringing out evaluative overtones of worth, benefit and importance in terms of the deepest human needs and interests.

Not only is spirituality an evaluative word but it is also an active, pragmatic, engaged word. When we speak of spirituality we are thinking not merely of theoretical beliefs about invisible entities or states of affairs in some realm beyond time and space or in some life to come. Such ideas of course are not **irrelevant** to spirituality. They may indeed be present in the talk and imagery used to express a certain spirituality, and people may well say they 'believe in' such things. But when it is their spirituality and not simply their beliefs we are seeking, we look primarily at what people hold precious in their lives, what goals they are seeking through religious devotion and piety, what values they are discovering in their experiences of faith and service, and so on. Beliefs, of a theoretical and explanatory kind, lie well in the background.

When we turn in particular to animistic and anthropomorphic ideas such as spirits, people's practice rather than their theories will be our chief source for understanding the significance of their beliefs. We will find this when we look, in the case study later in this paper, at the religious 'cash value' of the idea of spirits of ancestors. There we will find that, so far as actual practice is concerned, theoretical scientific-sounding questions like 'Do ancestor spirits really exist?' or 'Is this particular instance of animistic anthropomorphising justified?' do not have to be settled before the beliefs in question can be acted on or put to work. What matters religiously or spiritually to the practitioner is the spin-off of value, so to speak, the spirituality that goes with the beliefs in question, not their explanatory power. It is the practice, not the theory, which carries most of the weight for a religion in real life.

Now unless we take a pragmatic approach like that to a subject such as spirits or the supernatural, we will be diverted from religion into philosophy, metaphysics, parapsychology or some other kind of would-be science, in the hope that they will be able to decide ultimately mysterious questions for us. But then we will be faced with insoluble disputes from the very start: insoluble because there is nowhere we can turn to find out whether we have finished the task or not. For, unlike the case of simply physical objects which may or may not be present in a room, we have no ready-made decision procedures for settling the existence of non-material entities such as spirits are presumed to be. We do not even know where to begin in finding ways to settle them. Similarly we have no agreed ways of settling questions like 'Is there a supernatural realm?'

Here we might make a comparison between our interests in religion and our concerns about the weather. Few natural phenomena play anything like as important a part in our personal lives as the weather. Temperature and humidity affect our moods; bright skies lift our spirits; heavy clouds threaten or bring the promise of refreshing rain. Storms thrill or frighten us, floods endanger our lives and homes. Winds soothe or chill us, make us playful, or drive us to despair. In its dealings with us the weather lends itself to personalisation in many ways, even today when there are few who speak of gods of storm and thunder, nymphs and goddesses of the seasonal breezes or the sweet-smelling air from hills or sea.

Our personalising of the weather expresses its intimate impact on us as human beings. We are not scientifically explaining the weather when we personalise or anthropomorphise: we are valuing and responding to it. Scientific theorising is quite a different matter. Current meteorological theories and concepts help us to understand the laws governing the weather and, as a result, hopefully to make our predictions more and more reliable. Yet scientific theories change. The terms and concepts used nowadays (isobars, anticyclones, and so on) have only been in use for a century or so, and will no doubt alter in the future as new ways of understanding chaotic or non-linear systems like the earth's atmosphere are developed. Current theories may well be replaced by simpler or more elaborate ones, allowing better explanations and more reliable predictions to be made.

So are our present-day meteorological theories **true** in any ultimate sense? Who knows? Yet we don't have to settle that question before we can carry on the practical everyday business of relating ourselves humanly to the weather, making roughly reliable (for our purposes) readings of its patterns, and responding in words, imagery and actions to its many influences on our moods, our ecology, agriculture and livelihood, our travel arrangements and recreations, our architecture, disaster relief plans and so on.

Like our everyday words and thoughts about the weather, then, our practical spirituality and living religion may work perfectly well within the contexts of day-to-day life, regardless of the fact that would-be scientific, theoretical or metaphysical questions asked outside those

contexts receive conflicting answers from those who claim expertise on such matters, and may even turn out to be permanently unanswerable.

Religion in practice, after all, is about recognising and obtaining value in life and responding to it in our actions and experience. In the West particularly, philosophers, metaphysicians and some theologians have portrayed religion as being primarily an explanatory super-scientific matter, dealing with questions about various transcendent realities and their supposed relationships with the natural world.

They are not entirely wrong to have done so for, if those kinds of question could be definitely settled, it might have a considerable bearing on the continuation of the religious practices involved. But, owing to the nature of the questions themselves ('Do spirits exist?', 'Is there a god?', 'Can humans live again in a future life?' and so on), there is very little likelihood of definitive answers being found at any one time and thereafter locked into all future knowledge. They are eternally elusive questions, always seeming to be able to reappear even when supposedly conclusive answers have been given to them in any particular culture or civilisation

Thus living religion is free to continue in its evaluative, pragmatic rôle in human lives, without the validity of its values and practices being held permanently hostage to the quest for ultimate answers or explanations of a metaphysical kind. By moving the discussion of issues like the existence of such-and-such spirits away from some ideal universal metaphysics or super-science and towards particular questions about the values implicit in such-and-such a spirituality, we escape from a theoretical treadmill and bring ourselves closer to what goes on in practice, where the real core of religion is to be found.

Spirituality as Personalised Value

When it comes to finding significance, personalising maximises our chances. As Guthrie puts it:

... comforting or frightening, a humanlike model yields greater significance than does any other. Because humans habitually look for meaning, interpretations with more meaning (that is, more information) are better than those with less ...
(Guthrie 1993: 77-8)

For Guthrie, personalising is primarily a strategy of perception or cognition (a theory-serving explanatory matter). I have argued in the previous section, however, that in living religion and spirituality, personalising may play only a minor rôle at the theoretical and explanatory level. It is in value-finding, motivating, stimulating experience, imagination and action at the practical level, that it comes into its own. Personal values, after all, are the highest we have, so personalised spiritualities can promise to be the most intensified sources of worth we can know. In evaluative terms, personalness seems to be the highest, most truly supernatural reality in the world.

To say that the personal is the true supernatural is more than just playing with words. The point can be brought out best by attempting a simple action: namely, reaching out one's hand and touching another person. Naturally speaking, we are physical objects, material bodies in time and space which from time to time come into contact with other bodies. Yet it is a very different matter when we consciously (that is, as persons) make contact with the body of another person. We are no longer in the world of the merely physical. Something significantly different is added – even though, because it is natural to us as persons, we usually take it entirely for granted.

What makes personal contact different? Why is something special brought into the picture when we touch somebody else? There is more to this than mere social conventions of acceptable behaviour, though these are revealing in themselves since they hardly apply at all to non-personal objects or bodies. The point is that even to speak of our consciously touching another person is to use terms and concepts for which our existence **as persons** is primary. There is a distinct logical category implied by the statement itself, quite inapplicable to objects other than persons. Person-talk is in a world of its own.

In terms of our modern knowledge, however, many would think persons must be of trivial significance. And, as the immense age and apparently boundless extent of the universe have come to be appreciated, to continue to hold traditional religious ideas of something resembling a human person as ultimately responsible for everything might seem to go from childishness to absurdity bordering on the insane.

But in recent times not only philosophers but physicists and cosmologists too have combined to bring to our notice again just how significant, for the whole universe, is our personal point of view. Thus mathematical physicist and popular writer Paul Davies concludes a recent book with the words:

I cannot believe that our existence in this universe is a mere quirk of fate, an accident of history, an incidental blip in the great cosmic drama. Our involvement is too intimate. The physical species *Homo* may count for nothing, but the existence of mind in some organism on some planet in the universe is surely a fact of fundamental significance. Through conscious beings the universe has generated self-awareness. This can be no trivial detail, no minor byproduct of mindless, purposeless forces. We are truly meant to be here.
(Davies 1992: 232)

Davies reaches his conclusion by traversing the story of cosmic evolution as it can now be told with the help of cosmology, astrophysics and molecular biology. It is the most comprehensive evolutionary story that can ever be imagined, from Big Bang to you and me. The whole universe, it turns out, has gone into the making of every individual person. And it appears to be finely balanced at many crucial points, like a castle made with cards, in just the ways that are needed if the evolution of persons like ourselves is sooner or later to become a real possibility. Of course we would not be here if it were otherwise. But the fact is that we are here.

Now Guthrie's approach to such anthropic [human centred] thinking is to dismiss it as a glaring modern example of our continuing tendency to anthropomorphise. Thus he says:

Anthropists see the universe as designed and humans as central to it. The medley of arguments for anthropism, and the medley of anthropisms, seem impelled by the same unconscious, strategic, perceptual practice we have seen at work elsewhere. At best, anthropism appears an uneasy union of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, elevated to a principle.
(Guthrie 1993: 170)

But to dismiss the current anthropic or personalised cosmological views as unscientific is to think only of their strictly explanatory aspect and to miss the evaluation involved. Popular cosmologists like Davies personalise the universe because they are amazed by it and love it, and want to help their readers to do so too. They do this not just from a romantic urge or fancy. It is because the more they find out about it, the more our own personal values seem to be bound up with it. They are able to show us that we are the universe's children, its highest offspring, in an increasingly remarkable sense.

For it is in human beings – uniquely, so far as we know – that this universe has evolved to the state of becoming not only conscious of itself but sufficiently intelligent to measure, interpret and construct working theories about its own laws and inner workings. It is we above all who extract value from the universe. Thus we are, as persons, both born of nature and also nature-transcending beings. To realise this is to begin to grasp the specialness of our seemingly unique personal status and viewpoint. It makes more intelligible, likewise, the real nature of the supernaturalism of traditional religious cosmologies: that is, the ways in which their values, mythologies, systems of salvation and devotional paths sought to convey and underwrite, by one means or another, the message that personal values are supreme.

The contemporary movement away from impersonal scientific explanation as having the last word, towards more personalised evaluative views – a movement that has been called ‘the new Animism’ (Sheldrake 1990) – is well illustrated in another striking example of modern anthropomorphising, the so-called *Gaia* hypothesis of James Lovelock. This is the hypothesis that the entire earth is an organism and that all earth-based life can be thought of as

... a single living entity, capable of manipulating the earth’s atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts.
(Guthrie 1993: 172)

Guthrie dismisses this as unscientific, as just another example of mistaken anthropomorphism. He comments:

Although Lovelock has few followers among other scientists, his lay audience is broad and his notion is of ancient lineage. Lovelock, his adherents, and even his critics, however, seem hardly aware of the antiquity of his idea.
(Guthrie 1993: 172)

The great appeal of Lovelock’s *Gaia* hypothesis, however, particularly among the lay audience Guthrie refers to, is not that it is scientifically compelling (that depends on currently inconclusive argument among specialists). It is that it revives a traditional but long forgotten feeling about the world: a feeling of love and wonder and responsibility; a feeling so strong that nothing less than personal terms and images can be found to express it. This renewed form of spirituality, a re-awakening to the mystery and wonder of personal existence within a living universe, seems to explain the chief appeal of the *Gaia* hypothesis. There is much more to it than simply misguided, anthropomorphic science.

The same may be said of other instances of resurgent animism: for instance, the passionate commitment displayed in conservation or ecology movements, or the devotion and zealotry present in various movements for saving endangered species and protecting animal rights. All these examples from modern life show a contemporary animistic or anthropomorphic spirituality which is not bad science but which reclaims personalness and begins to extend it beyond humans to embrace animal life, the living systems of nature and the universe itself. The emphasis throughout is on an evaluative response, finding meanings, drawing enrichment, capturing worth and value, as humans participate in and respond to their wider environment in new or re-discovered ways. At the heart of such spirituality is the practice of personalising the things found to be most valuable in life. Recognising this can go a long way towards helping us understand the part played by ideas of gods, spirits and other super-human beings in cultures and religions.

Spirits and Spirituality: Case Study

In this case study we will draw our example of belief in spirits from the Melanesian people of the Solomon Islands in the South-West Pacific. Dr Esau Tuza, a modern-day Solomon Island scholar of religion, reports on his research amongst older members of his own people:

Returning to the realm of the 'old' days, I viewed with interest seven old photographs of traditional shrines decorated with human bones and skulls. I once lived within the areas of these shrines and later visited a number of them, some as recently as 1977. I asked myself the question, 'What actually happened in these places?'
(Tuza 1979: 97)

In response to the question 'What did you do and say when you performed rituals in the "skull houses"?', his informants replied:

We presented puddings, first fruits and pigs to the recent dead in their memory. We recalled their names, their great deeds and how they were recognised when they were still alive. Because of this, we invoke them so that their spirits will keep on protecting the living.
(Tuza 1979: 97)

According to Tylor's and Guthrie's 'intellectualist' theories, belief in spirits comes first (through animism or misplaced anthropomorphism) then, as a consequence of that belief, ritual and worship follow. But, as Tuza illustrates in this case, it makes little sense to talk about the spirits as distinct from the religious worship or spiritual practice. The two are intimately, even logically, connected. For it is within the practice, the spirituality itself, that the spirits are identified as those particular ancestors, and clothed with the religious significance they have for the living. Tuza writes:

With the skull houses (*sope*), the memory is engraved both in symbol and in thanksgiving. Skulls, human bones and certain material representations bring back to life that which people valued during a person's lifetime. Since the deeds of a person's life are worthy of recall to influence the living, puddings are made out of *ngali* nut and *taro*, first-fruits and pigs are given to him in his honour. This is 'worship' to the ancestor.

However, worship as such is a two-way process. On the one hand, man has a need to give praise to what is considered worthy and heroic ... On the other hand, worship or praise is man's constant response to what is constantly helpful and ideal in human situations. Hence, rituals are performed to highlight the continuing influence of good deeds among the living.
(Tuza 1978: 98)

Certain of the dead are honoured, then, by the valuing of their on-going 'impact' (as Tuza calls it) on the lives of the living, who share meals with them as meals are shared with distinguished living relatives. Recalling the status, *mana* or reputation of former family or clan members, and thus feeling the loss of their departure, the living express their anxiety by addressing prayers to them and calling on them for continued help.

The *sope* is often built either on a hill or near a huge tree said to be inhabited by other powers. Such a location gives a sense of height, awe, wonderment, greatness and hence of worship.

Worship involves the 'recalling' of ancestral *mana* to be operative among the living. This is done through sacrifice burnt at the door of the *sope*. When the fire begins to smoke, the recalling of past deeds commences ... recalling begins with the most recent dead and reaches back to distant ancestors, as far as memory can probe. (Tuza 1978: 106)

These memorial rituals, with their accompanying social activities and shared emotions, are clearly rewarding in themselves. Tuza reports the words of one of his informants, telling of the activity of building a particular *sope* or ritual spirit-house:

Let us build a *sope!* we all said in agreement. We went to wash our hands, we ate *sumuku* [protective herbal medicines, often chewed with betel nuts], we put on *papaqala* [traditional

necklaces]. Then the cone shell set aside for wisemen was blown ... After that we begin to work. We sewed leaves together ... made roofs and completed the whole house. We sewed the leaves together for the walls and put them on. After that we collected fish, yams, and *taro* which were set aside for worship purposes, started a fire and burnt them all at the door of the *sope*. When all this was burnt up, cone shell was blown again and we made our way downhill. There at the foot of the hill we washed our hands again, broke our *papaqala* and threw them to the sea. Finally we came home and ate a feast. I felt extremely good inside me.
(Tuza 1987: 105)

No doubt people in the Solomon Islands, as elsewhere, enjoy having an excuse for a feast. (Here it is puddings, first-fruits of the new season's harvest, and pigs, a luxury source of protein, kept for very special occasions.) Such occasions provide an opportunity for the ritual specialists (inevitably groups of adult males) to dress up in ceremonial finery and display their skills and prestige.

The participants share in reminiscing about the dead, recalling what parents, husbands and wives, elder brothers and sisters meant to them when they were alive; how much they would like to have their help and guidance in the present. They act out these feelings in rituals of food-offering, invocation and prayer. Generally, the people find their group relationships strengthened, and gain a sense of renewed identity and well-being from taking part.

Such ancestor worship, then, takes place not simply as a consequence of the people's holding a particular metaphysical or philosophical belief that 'the ancestors live on as spirits'. Instead, the practices can be seen as part of a complex set of activities which people like doing anyway: i.e., practices which have their own rewards and benefits. Many of the practices could quite well go on even if belief in spirits of the dead had never arisen. On the other hand, unless it were carried along by some kind of ritual or practice, a mere belief in spirits might not amount to anything much at all. Without actual practices and conventions of worship, we could hardly speak of those particular spirits as having any distinct identity or value. They would be characterless and irrelevant.

Thus the rituals, values and practices of the living – their spirituality in a word – effectively **defines** the spirits of the dead, personalising them as religiously-important beings. They come alive, so to speak, in the images made to represent them, the stories told in their honour, the food shared with them and the gifts given, along with the expectations placed upon them for their continued influence for the well-being of the living.

Is this all there is, then, to the existence of spirits? Do they only exist insofar as people bring them to mind and perform various actions and practices on their behalf? Indeed, are they simply imagined to exist, in order to add a richer context to the doing of certain things which people are inclined to do anyway – the spirits, as it were, providing a good excuse for having frequent feasts?

It might be felt that we have looked at only half the picture, focusing on the **evaluative**, or value-enhancing, side of supernatural beliefs like the belief in spirits; showing how much this is involved with the living here-and-now practices of a religion or spirituality. But what about the **explanatory** side, the side which seems to offer knowledge of transcendent realities and powers?

After all, aren't ancestor spirits more than just valued icons, symbols of the good (or bad) things in family traditions and culture? Aren't they also believed to be living personalities and agents? Are they not interactive realities and thus in an important sense different from

fictional or imagined realities, even granting that there is a measure of objectivity and power to such things? Can't they answer prayers, arrange good harvests, and organise punishments for breaches of morality? Can they not make their presence felt in dreams and visions, their voices heard through spirit-mediums and their wishes known through oracles and divination?

All these things do indeed appear to be believed of their spirits by the Solomon Islanders. They take it for granted, apparently, that the ancestors, whose veneration and commemoration they find fruitful and rewarding, exist as supernatural beings in an **explanatory** objective sense. Are they right or wrong in doing so? Are their beliefs about the spirits actually true or false? To help answer those questions, we might first consider whether we would be in any position to disagree with them, if we shared at first hand the same practices as they do, experienced the pull of the same spirituality and lived in the same personal and social life-worlds.

'Belief in spirits', as a religious issue, is not a distinct theoretical question to be debated independently of a people's spiritual practices. It is tied up with the continued enjoyment and effectiveness of those practices themselves. So long as people find it viable and rewarding to personalise things valuable to them in terms of ancestor spirits, the question 'But do the dead **really** live on?' will not make much sense to them. Into what other real world than their own are they expected to step, to be able to answer – or even ask – that question?

And it is not at all clear where **we** can be expected to turn to find out what actually exists, independent of some particular living context of beliefs and practices. At best, we can judge such matters according to our own views – but are we at all certain what these are, with regard to subjects like spirits of the dead? And why should our society be particularly expert on the matter, it might be asked. Do we care as much about our ancestors as the Solomon Islanders do? If we did, perhaps our views about spirits would be different. Does it matter, then, for spirituality, whether spirits actually exist or not? After all, spirits might exist in reality yet be so irrelevant to human practice, values and interests that they were of no religious importance at all. It is only when clothed in the spirituality of certain people's actual practice, their worship, offerings, feasts and so on, that the deceased ancestors can have any effect on the living of a valuable, religiously-relevant kind.

Human conceptions of what can and cannot happen, what really is the case and what is not, have changed a great deal down the centuries and will no doubt go on changing. The prevailing opinion of secular academic and scientific opinion in the Western world that spirits do not exist, however confident it may be about its own rightness, is very much a minority view by world standards and is likely to continue to be so. After all, **disproving** the existence of supernatural, invisible agencies in some form or another seems impossible. How do we ever know for certain what doesn't exist?

The idea that there might be a scientific proof or disproof of the existence of spirits or gods that would settle the question of religion for all time is a misguided quest. Whether spirits exist scientifically is as irrelevant to spirituality as the question whether love or music exist scientifically is irrelevant to romance or concert-going.

So, whatever the future of scientific thinking, there will continue to be ample opportunity for large majorities of the world's peoples to rely on humanity's long-standing habit of animism, anthropomorphism and personalisation — not so much as an explanatory theory

of extraordinary things, but as the best way they can find of preserving and enhancing the values they find mean most to them in practice: values like continuity with their ancestors, solidarity with the powers of nature, and imaginative power and inspiration drawn from within their cultural traditions to help them face the future.

What our case study has shown us is that, in a particular living context, the order of reasoning is not that 'personal spirits of the dead exist, therefore it is worthwhile to worship them'. It is closer to 'personalised worship and spirituality focused on the ancestors is worthwhile, therefore spirits of the dead live on'.

Conclusions

Spirits, spirituality, the supernatural ... these are powerful, intoxicating words, rich with flavours and associations, like strong drink or mysterious ancient potions. When used today they can seem stale and unhealthy – or they can carry the promise of intriguing insights and profound new understandings.

In this paper I have explored some of their interconnections, trying to show where they fit into our modern understandings of life and, more particularly, what they can mean for our experiences of religious belief and practice.

The words still have their uses. We may be thinking of ghosts and exorcisms, alien visitors or gremlins in technology. We may have in mind tribal peoples' longing for their ancestral homelands, the presence of the Holy Spirit in inter-faith dialogue, or the passion of nature-lovers concerned for rainforests and animal species. In all these cases and countless more we can still find value in talk about spirit, spirits and spirituality. It can serve us well, so long as we remain informed and flexible in our understanding of it, and conscious that, however antiquated and elusive it may sometimes seem, it is not nonsense as it is rooted in the familiar practices and values of our lives as persons. Animistic and anthropomorphic such talk may be, but that is the way we are. For, after all, it is our language we are talking about.

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Spirits and Spirituality (first published April 1997) was originally written as supplementary reading for extramural students in a course on theories of religion. It is published in the RERC's Occasional Papers series with the author's permission.

RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 9
April 1997
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isbn 0 906165 17 2