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Animism: Respecting The Living World



Synopsis

How have human cultures engaged with and thought about animals, plants, rocks, clouds, and other elements in their natural surroundings? Do animals and other natural objects have a spirit or soul? What is their relationship to humans? In this new study, Graham Harvey explores current and past animistic beliefs and practices of Native Americans, Maori, Aboriginal Australians, and eco-pagans. He considers the varieties of animism found in these cultures as well as their shared desire to live respectfully within larger natural communities. Drawing on his extensive casework, Harvey also considers the linguistic, performative, ecological, and activist implications of these different animisms.

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Customer Reviews

No recent author has emphasized it or dealt with its implications as thoroughly as Harvey. Choice (Choice) The strengths of this book are its fluid and engaging...writing; its openly committed stand on the central question, i.e., whether or not animals, plants, rivers, etc. are people, and its use of major ethnographic sources as evidence, together with conversations with indigenous peoples. (Stewart Guthrie, Fordham University)

Graham Harvey explores current and past animistic beliefs and practices of Native Americans, Maori, Aboriginal Australians, and eco-pagans. He considers the varieties of animism found in these cultures as well as their shared desire to live respectfully within larger natural communities. Drawing

on his extensive casework, Harvey also considers the linguistic, performative, ecological, and activist implications of these different animisms.

It was wonderful to find a book on the topic of Animism that didn't try to simply appropriate another culture's view on spirituality. Harvey's view of Animism strips out the mystical aspect of the practice, and simply lays the subject out on the table to examine plainly. Far too many people get caught up within the details of what Tribe X or Tribe Y believes in, and miss the point entirely: Animism is about forming healthy relationships with the world around you. Animism is not "a belief in spirits" -- though it is often accompanied by it -- but rather it is relating to the world around you, and the realization that you are only one person on the face of this planet that is filled with persons, both human and 'other-than-human'. Harvey spells this out plainly, and backs up his claims with decades and centuries of philosophy and science. This book is quite dense, however, and at times it can be difficult to slog through quotations from other works. All-in-all though, it has been a remarkable read.

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This book can guide one through some of the solutions and cures for the ills in our present destructive culture.

In this book Harvey does exactly what he sets out to do: discuss animism in the modern world. He starts off by giving a brief overview of the history of the word, describing the "old" animism of Tylor and then explaining how it has changed and how the term is used in modern academia. The second section then includes four case studies, in which he looks at the animistic tendencies among certain cultures. Included here are the Ojibwe and their language, Maori Arts, Aboriginal Law and Land, and Eco-Pagan activism. In each section, Harvey does a thorough job of explaining what they believe, and gives plenty of sources for the reader to pursue. He also achieves what is perhaps the main point of the section: showing that animism isn't necessarily the same for everyone. The third section focuses on issues facing animist, and is divided into seven chapters. In these, Harvey discusses the history of the subject, as well as how it fits into an animist worldview both in modern times and in the past. The fourth and final section is on challenges that animists face. Here Harvey has provides three big challenges, and also provides some answers to them. At the end is a bibliography of all the work which Harvey references during text, making it easy for the reader to find an article or book on a particular topic of interest. While this is a great book and highly recommended for anyone to

read, it must be noted that the book is very academic and might not be the best pick for someone more casually interested in the philosophy behind animism.

I am a professional anthropologist, with a specialization in anthropology of religion and the author of a forthcoming text on anthropology of religion from Routledge. Like the previous review, I was skeptical when I saw that Harvey included discussions of wiccans, feminists, and eco-spiritualists. However, the concern was ill-founded. Harvey has actually given us a very intelligent book on the latest research into "animism" or more properly the agent-centered view of nature and supernature. Truly, early commentators like Tylor considered animism to be an inferior type of religion, one based on false notions of intelligence or will in non-human beings (of course one could criticize all religions for false notions about non-human intelligence). However, as Harvey shows, not only is animism not inferior at all, but it is actually the essence of ALL religion--that there are non-human agents in the world, and that we humans interact socially with them. The contemporary sources that Harvey cites are a valuable library on their own. There are some shortcomings of the book. It does not include some of the best new work on agency in religion, like Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, and Paul Bloom. The discussion of Hallowell and the Ojibwe is valuable, but the chapter on Australian Aboriginals is very deficient, relying on two main sources, one worthwhile (Deborah Bird Rose) and one not worthwhile (Michael Jackson). There is much literature he could and should have referenced, as I know, having done my fieldwork among the Warlpiri of Central Australia. Even the discussion of eco-spiritualism and such shows that these religions are as authentic as any "traditional" belief system, and in fact all belief systems are of course invented and constructed, and all are as affected by modernity as these new ones. Harvey's conclusion, that animism has been a concept invented by moderns to achieve modern intellectual goals is a good one, and he rightly points out that not all cultures share our Western dualistic approach to mind and body or to humans and "nature." It is a book very worth reading.

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