ANIMIST PAGANISM

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Increasing numbers of Pagans are identifying themselves as animists or naming their worldview animism. Some Pagans use the term animism to refer to one strand within their Paganism, while others identify it as the most appropriate label for everything they do. This chapter explores some typical expressions of Pagan animism, and argues that various tensions and trajectories within Paganism are helpfully illuminated by paying attention to the different phenomena that may be identified as animism. For example, clarity about the diverse ways in which Pagan animism resonates with ideas about “nature” may contribute to a better understanding not only of elements of Paganism (in which nature is often said to be central) but also of other contemporary religious, social and environmental movements.

Before introducing and discussing specific details about Pagan animism, it is important to note the fluid, non-systematic nature of Pagan thought and practice. Paganism has never been dogmatic about beliefs, nor have Pagans insisted on one way of being Pagan. Paganism is almost by definition eclectic and pragmatic. When Pagans present their religion to a wider audience, they often draw on the religious (primarily Christian) language of their dominant culture. Similarly, scholarly terms from a wide range of academic disciplines frequently occur in Pagan discourse and practice having been mediated through the eclectic reading habits of Pagan authors. For example, despite the marginality of belief and believing with Paganism, and despite the multiplicity of Pagan theories about the nature of deity, many publications insist that Pagans worship immanent deities, or that they are pantheists, polytheists and animists all at the same time. Like all lived religions, Paganism is messy, and terms that might refer to discrete phenomena in systematic thinking are commonly entangled or braided in reality. Pagans often speak about single deities, especially “the Goddess”, in contexts that show them to be polytheists. Their insistence that “the Earth” or “Nature” is somehow divine can sound like pantheism or at least stress an immanentalist ontology until it shades either into a version of transcendentalism or animism. Certainly not all Pagans are systematic
thinkers, or interested in propounding a theological system, some might well be confused about the terms they use. However, Paganism, like all lived religions, has its own styles and flavours that are not well represented in other people’s languages. Pagan uses of the term “animism” resonate with two distinct approaches to the term, identified below as “the old animism” and “the new animism”, and blend with other theoretical terms to suggest issues of importance to particular Pagan groups and individuals. Perhaps the continuing evolution of Paganism will generate or revive more appropriate terms for specifically Pagan worldviews and practices, until then it will be necessary to carefully attend to the fluid and messy uses of adopted terms.

Old and New Animisms

A brief orientation to the two major uses of “animism” in academic debates will establish the context in which an examination of specific features of animist Pagan discourses and practices will be of more than descriptive value. It will become clear later that this section, which presents material drawn from my larger discussion of animism (Harvey 2006), is not only contextual but anticipates the argument of this chapter about animism within Paganism.

Animism derives from Latin anima, usually translated “soul” although this term too bears a wide range of meanings in different cultures and religions. Until recently, animism has been defined as a belief in the existence of a component that distinguishes living beings from inanimate matter. Most academic theorists have postulated metaphysical rather than physical factors, but in 1708 Georg Stahl (a German physician and chemist) proposed that a physical element, anima, vitalizes living bodies just as another element, phlogiston, enables some materials to burn or rust. His theory was soon rejected, but exemplifies a widespread interest in these issues. In 1871 Edward Tylor (often considered the founder of anthropology) adopted Stahl’s term “animism” to label what he saw as the central concerns and character of religion. For Tylor, animism identified a “primitive” but ubiquitous religious mistake, namely “the belief in souls or spirits” (Tylor 1913). He argued that all religions express the beliefs that living beings are animated by souls and that non-physical beings, “spirits” of various kinds, can be communicated with. Religious believers theorize the existence of something that enables self-consciousness, survives the experience of death and, therefore,