

The Holy Spirit Is a Bird in Flight: Reimagining the Sacred with Mark Wallace and Tanya Luhrmann

Sarah Werner

Volume 38, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095388ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095388ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

0832-6193 (imprimé)

1705-9429 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Werner, S. (2022). The Holy Spirit Is a Bird in Flight: Reimagining the Sacred with Mark Wallace and Tanya Luhrmann. *The Trumpeter*, 38(1), 85–93.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1095388ar>

Copyright © Sarah Werner, 2022



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

The Holy Spirit Is a Bird in Flight: Reimagining the Sacred with Mark Wallace and Tanya Luhrmann

Sarah Werner

In the last several years the seemingly paradoxical term *Christian animism* has arisen in religious studies to describe the re-enchantment of the earth in Christianity or, put another way, to reclaim the biblical vision of a sentient and sacred cosmos. In a similar manner some scholars in the field of anthropology have focused on the lived religious experiences of their subjects, rather than only on doctrine and beliefs. Attempting to understand the animist context in which the Bible was written is a method for doing this work in a historical way: looking back to help us understand our own current situation with new awareness and to breathe new life into preconceived notions of Christian religion as unchanging through time. These academic interests have resonated with me on a deeper, more personal level, helping me make sense of my own innate holy experiences, slotting them like puzzle pieces into the whole that is my life bound up in a community of others, both human and non-human, throughout time and place. And it begins and ends with birds.

My first experience of avian divinity was at the age of sixteen. I was hiking alone at a Texas state park in late fall. Many of the leaves had fallen from the deciduous trees but the cedars and live oaks were still a dark green canopy just above my head. I scrambled up a steep section of the limestone gravel path, looking down at my feet the whole time, trying not to fall. As I crested the top, I looked up and right into the eyes of a red-shouldered hawk. He was perched on the low branch of a cedar tree not six feet from me. We watched each other for a full sixty seconds before he took flight. The thing is, he had watched me the entire time I climbed the hill. I stood where he had been perched and saw the path laid out below me. He didn't fly away until I saw him. I felt immensely blessed by this encounter and began to notice red-shouldered hawks everywhere I went: on fence posts along the road, soaring over the lake where I kayaked, even perched high on a neighborhood tree. I felt intuitively that I had been visited by the sacred, but I didn't have a framework for making sense of it, so I kept it to myself.

Another powerful bird encounter was with the long, elegant great blue heron. I was living in Maryland, working as a research technician in a microbial ecology lab, my first job after graduating from college. I loved observing nature in miniature through the lens of a microscope. I learned more about the intricate beauty of the world there than I ever did in biology class, and I found myself awestruck on an almost daily basis by the infinite and intimate complexity of an ecosystem, and equally anguished at how skilled humans are at taking a wrecking ball to these intricate systems. I had been there for a few years, and I was starting to wonder about my next move. I could go back to school and continue my education in biology, a requirement for moving up in my job, or I could go in an entirely different direction.

As I was pondering these things, I started to see great blue herons everywhere I went. They would watch me from across the water as I sampled mud from the marsh, or fly over as I ran through the forest in the evenings, their prehistoric call reverberating in my chest. I was always moved by these encounters, seen, pierced by their gaze. And I paid attention. The heron sits in stillness for hours, watching the water underneath her feet, until just the right moment when she lunges down and stabs a fish. These herons taught me the value of standing still, watching, waiting until just the right moment, and then making a swift move. I decided that year to make a move in the opposite direction of science and attend seminary. I felt deeply in my soul-gut that this was the right thing to do, but I couldn't articulate why to my puzzled science friends, to my family, or to my new religious friends in seminary. I just knew, and I saw great blue herons throughout the summer of my big move: in Texas, flying over my head, in the high country of Colorado, and waiting for me in my new home in Georgia. They were watching, reminding me to be still and listen until taking action at just the right time.

These and many more holy encounters with birds have deeply shaped my spiritual life, but I was hesitant to share them with anyone because I couldn't fit the sacred gift of their presence into the language of my faith tradition. For the longest time I didn't think Christianity had anything to say to this embodied, holy vital mystery I felt all around me. But I am starting to understand that the idea that the Bible has nothing to say about this innate animist sensibility of mine is incorrect. My new awakening to the spiritual presence of birds in the Bible is the result of reading Mark Wallace's book, *When God was a Bird*. Wallace argues, among other things, that bird imagery permeates the Bible from Genesis all the way to Revelation, including the avian embodiment of the Holy Spirit throughout the Gospels. He structures the book around his own personal encounters with the sacred in nature as he traces Christian animism from its roots in the Bible through Christian history, from St. Augustine and Hildegard von Bingen to John Muir.

The key to discerning this rich imagery is in understanding that animism, far from being banished by an imagined pure monotheism of Abrahamic religion, was the dominant worldview of the Jews at the time of Jesus and early Christianity. This earthy foundation was pummeled out of these religions in their attempt to become religions of the Book, or religions of history, to be defined in opposition to the nature religion of the uncivilized people around them (Wallace 2018, 6). The primary hinge of his argument is that the Holy Spirit is portrayed throughout the New Testament as a dove, the animal third person of the Trinity along with God and Jesus, the human one. Wallace argues that, "[h]idden in the bedrock of Christian theology is a grounding *animist* sensibility that construes all things—including the sentient and relational biomass that makes all life possible—as living enfleshments of divinity in the world" (Wallace 2018, 3). Moreover, the earth isn't a place of fallenness and sin, it is the natural home of God, the true dwelling place of God. He explains:

the religion of Jesus both sprang and continues to receive its vitality from its dynamic origins in and interactions with the animist center of its founding vision. Animism is not peripheral to Christian identity but is its nurturing home ground, its *axis mundi* (Wallace 2018, 10).

The prevailing theme of many texts on ecotheology is to describe how certain biblical texts relate to caring for creation and make an argument for why Christians should care about preserving and restoring the natural world. The works of Norman Wirzba, Sallie McFague, and the *Christianity and Ecology* anthology by Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether are all good examples of this. They all make excellent arguments but do so primarily from a modern Western point of view and for a Western audience. Additionally, almost all of work in ecotheology is a reaction in one way or another to the famous argument of Lynn White that Christianity has been the root cause of environmental destruction since the Medieval Period. Ecotheologians have either agreed with White, disagreed with White, or tried to demonstrate how the theological tenets of Christianity are not antithetical to ecology. These are important conversations without doubt, but they tend to be more academic than based on a felt connection to the earth.

What appeals to me most about Wallace's argument is that it feels more embodied than the many intellectual arguments I have read. Wallace is writing to convince us to change how we see the world and how we conceive of God. In asserting God's animal nature, Wallace is opening our eyes to a world in which God is present in an embodied way in all of life. It is a reclaiming of the animist heart of Christianity that is completely lost on us modern, urban humans, who are for the most part disconnected from the pulsing rhythms of the natural world. In our focus on the accumulation of wealth and status in our capitalist society, we see the natural world only as a resource to be exploited, instead of a blessing to be savored, something that is fully alive and valuable in its own right.

I remember leading a church group on a hike at Sweetwater Creek State Park near Atlanta, Georgia when I was in seminary. It was early spring and the whole landscape felt vibrantly alive and sacred, but I struggled with how to relate this sense of the presence of the Holy to the biblical faith I had inherited. I had all of these books about animals in a variety of Indigenous religions and New Age spirituality, but I didn't think there was much in the Bible that spoke to my love of nature and the holy portents I saw in the presence of the great blue heron and the red-shouldered hawk. Even in the burgeoning field of ecotheology, there wasn't anyone I had read that talked about this very personal sacred connection to the landscape, specifically particular animals and plants in it.

Wallace argues that this very vibrant immanence is indeed present in the Bible if we know where to look. His main argument is that "while the Christian religion largely evolved into a sky-God tradition forgetful of its animist origins, its carnal identity is paradigmatically set forth in canonical stories about the human embodiment of the historical Jesus, on the one hand, and, provocatively, the animal embodiment of the avian Spirit, on the other" (Wallace 2018, 10). Wallace lays out extensive evidence for this argument, beginning in the Genesis creation accounts, where God is a brooding bird, hovering

over the waters, and then as a being who walks in the garden of Eden with the humans. God wrestles in bodily form with Jacob in Genesis 32. God speaks through the burning bush in Exodus 3. Wallace also discusses the prophetic literature where the wellbeing of the land is linked to the right actions of humans. The land is desecrated by human sin, seen most strongly in the murder of Abel in Genesis 4 and the undoing of creation in Jeremiah 4. In the book of Hosea, the land suffers because the people have turned away from God. Wallace notes that the whirlwind speeches in Job 38-42 are some of the oldest texts in the Bible and reflect a vision of creation as holy in its own right with little need of humans.

Wallace's strongest evidence, though, is in the story of Jesus's baptism. His translation from Luke 3:22 is, "[t]he Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in bodily form [*somatiko eidei*], as a dove/pigeon [*hos preisteran*]" (Wallace 2018, 30). The text is clear that it isn't allegory or symbolism; the Holy Spirit is embodied as a dove. Wallace notes that the word used here refers to the earthy Palestinian pigeon, a mottled brown and green creature closely related to the modern rock dove, which is endemic to city parks and streets the world over. This observation speaks deeply to me because pigeons are birds we all encounter; even the most urban of city-dwellers knows about the presence of pigeons in their life. The Holy Spirit isn't a rare snow-white dove; it is the common bird we see all around us.

He also writes beautifully of Jesus as a traveling teacher throughout his ministry, moving constantly from one place to the next, the holy landscape all around him, "[t]aking comfort and finding God in these thin places was the living ground tone of Jesus'[s] labors" (Wallace 2018, 91). For Wallace "Jesus'[s] mission emerged, therefore, from his deep communion with landed places integral to his daily peregrinations. His identity with spiritually saturated thin places entailed as well his sense of belonging with trees and flowers, wind-blown seas, and the starry atmosphere above" (Wallace: 91). Far from being a heady religion of the book, Christianity is, at its heart, rooted in the earth, and the message of God throughout the Bible reflects this relationship. Rather than focusing only on heaven and the afterlife, we as Christians should be invested in the wellbeing and sacredness of the natural world here and now because it is the dwelling place of God.

Wallace also draws from the writings of theologians throughout Christian history, including St. Augustine and Hildegard von Bingen. They are examples of people whose theology is guided by the metaphor of fecundity, a term coined by Paul Santmire in *The Travail of Nature* (1985). Hildegard wrote a book called *Scivias* which was a theological field guide to the natural world, including, in Wallace's words her "theological aviary" (Wallace 2018, 101). Wallace writes that Hildegard's theology is based on a model of creation as vibrantly alive:

In creation, the Spirit revels itself in ever-flowing streams and teeming oceans; luxuriant landscapes of wild forests and cultivated fields; the sweet-smelling air that enables and sustains the breath of all life; and, overall, in the green mantle that shrouds and protects the well-being of all creatures within the bountiful garden of the natural world (Wallace 2018, 102).

His point is that this creation-centered interpretation of the Bible is a current throughout history, and that we do not need to create a theology whole-cloth. We only need to recover what has been part of our own Christian story all along.

Wallace's argument that what we need is a recovery of the animist roots of Christianity is closely related to Tanya Luhrmann's exploration of the human connection to supernatural others in her latest book, *How God Becomes Real*. Her main argument is that belief in gods and spirits cannot be taken as given; it must be kindled through prayer and other religious practices. It's usually understood that people worship because they believe, but Luhrmann suggests that it might be more accurate to say that people believe because they worship. Worship leads to belief because it makes God real. It's more important that gods and spirits "feel" real than it is to say we believe in them. One is an emotion, the other is a statement. Her related assertion is that prayer changes people, and that the act of praying creates an experience. Luhrmann argues that "prayer and ritual and worship help people to shift from knowing in the abstract that the invisible other is real to feeling that gods and spirits are present in the moment, aware and willing to respond" (Luhrmann 2020, x). Her argument hinges on what she calls microprocesses of attention, which are methods of using the mind to discern the presence of the invisible other. She explains:

The microprocesses of attending—socially shaped, locally specific—kindle divine presence for a person of faith by using the mind to shift attention from the world as it is to the world as it should be, as understood within that faith. I will argue that the kindling processes through which invisible others come to feel real changes people and that the change becomes a powerful motivation for their faith (Luhrmann 2020, xi).

Luhrmann's primary assertion is that "the puzzle of religion is not the problem of false belief, but the question of how gods and spirits become and remain real to people and what this real-making does for humans" (Luhrmann 2020, x). She makes her arguments using examples from a wide variety of religious traditions including British magic, Indian Zoroastrianism, American Santería, Orthodox Judaism, and evangelical Christianity. Her main hypotheses are: (1) people don't (easily) have faith in gods and spirits; (2) detailed stories help to make gods and spirits feel real; (3) talent and training matter for how well someone is able to kindle faith; (4) the way people think about their minds also matters; (5) the sense of response is "kindled"; (6) prayer practice changes the way people attend to their thoughts; and (7) people create relationships with gods and spirits (Luhrmann 2020, xii-xiii).

I was particularly moved by the chapter "Why Prayer Works" because I've had a hard time in the past understanding prayer and the efficacy of prayer. Luhrmann's argument is that anthropologists have misunderstood prayer and ritual because they think it is founded on a mistake, which is "that people pray because they think that gods deliver the outcomes for which they pray, and that they are wrong" (Luhrmann 2020, 138). Religion isn't a primitive attempt at science. Religion is the purview of all in the

natural world that cannot be “controlled, mastered, and managed” and that “when you find what humans cannot control, you find intense feeling” (Luhrmann 2020, 138). This is the true essence of prayer that I had missed for so long because I had taken on the mindset of a Calvinist—it will be what it will be and God will do what God chooses to do and I can’t do anything to change the outcome. Luhrmann hits at the heart of what prayer should be when she says, “[t]he central act of praying is paying attention to inner experience—to thoughts, images, and the awareness of one’s body—and treating those sensations as important in themselves rather than as distractions from the real business of living” (Luhrmann 2020,139). Prayer isn’t about trying to bring about a particular outcome and then being disappointed when it doesn’t come to pass. Prayer is a way of reorienting the soul, focusing on inner experiences as well as feeling the presence of an unseen God.

I had been feeling lately that something was wrong with me because I don’t really think about God that much, or pray, or feel God’s presence in my life. But in reading this book I have begun to realize that I used to be much more attuned to the inbreaking of the sacred in my life and that this is both a gift and a cultivated skill. So I’ve been trying to re-learn how to connect with the sacred. When I think about God as the divine being of Christianity, what first comes to mind is an old man in the sky on a throne, which is what I absorbed of God in church as a child. But when I think about holy moments of connection in my own life, the sacred feels much more tangible, like a life force that permeates the whole universe. There is something holy that passes between all living things and natural elements. When we pray, we move this invisible life force in a tangible way. The book suggests that the more you pay attention to the sacred, the more attuned you become to connection.

These books relate to one another in that they are both attempts to move our everyday experience of the sacred beyond a focus on the intellectual convictions of theology to a more embodied conception of religious faith. Wallace does this by bringing to light the animist strain of Christianity throughout history, inviting us into a world that is suffused with holiness. Luhrmann does this by focusing on how people from a variety of religious traditions are able to kindle a sense of real, felt presence with God or gods through prayer and other practices. They are both trying to move beyond a focus on stated belief into an emphasis on practice, connecting with the sacred in birds for Wallace and kindling a real connection with invisible others for Luhrmann. Additionally, using prayer and other practices to kindle a sense of felt presence are embodied ways to reconnect us with an animate world as well. Their work represents a needed shift from the theoretical to the practical, emphasizing how to live as embodied beings in a fragile more-than-human world. The earth now more than ever needs humans who recognize the value of the natural world apart from our society’s desire for power and control over it.

What ties these books together for me is my desire to feel the heartbeat of the sacred in my own life. I realized in my ordinary church life that I don’t have immediate experiences of God like some of my fellow congregants seem to have on a regular basis, and that made me feel like something was wrong with me, with my faith. I am very involved in the life of my religious community, but it isn’t because I

feel particularly close to a loving God; it's because I am woven deeply into the warp and weft of relationships that make up this community.

In contrast to this perceived lack of holy experience of God, I have almost daily encounters with wildlife that fill me with small bursts of joy—the merlin that lives in my neighborhood, the giant deer hopping the fence from the forest beyond my backyard, the thrilling call of the wood thrush in spring, and the more ordinary but no less beautiful call of the mourning doves from the telephone line. I mark the year with the outdoor soundscape of my home: the cold, still silence of a winter blanket of snow yields to the first murmur of spring with the arrival of the peepers and green tree frogs, then cicadas in the heat of mid-summer, who give way to the crickets all the way through fall until the first bite of frost lays the land silent once more, all of this interspersed at regular intervals with the reassuring patter of rain.

This deep impulse I have now to feel the presence of the sacred in my daily life, to connect to the lifeforce of the universe, is also born from a desire not to feel alone, to feel bound up in a web of community both human and non-human. Theology and church tradition is all well and good, but the Bible is the most direct link to the ancient roots of our spiritual tradition. Maybe that's just the Protestant in me, but I have always wanted to see the world how Jesus saw it two thousand years ago, and how the Israelites saw it for a much longer period. I want to become a more whole person by connecting with this lost aspect of my faith. I want to walk on the land and feel the earth rising up under my feet, vibrantly alive with meaning. And this is what appeals to me so much about Tanya Luhrmann's book about how we tangibly experience the unseen other in our bodies and how that other changes us. Her work provides a practical analysis of how that process of kindling faith actually works and why behaviors matter more than stated beliefs when it comes to religion.

The paradigm of human connection to the natural world presented most fully in the Bible is that of the community of creation. We are part of a web of organisms, all created from the same clay, and we are deeply dependent on the rest of this community. What ties all of this together in my mind is that God isn't just in a dialectical relationship with humans: God is suffused throughout the whole of creation. It's not just me alone in the woods by the river, trying to conjure a closeness to God. The Holy is a pulsing landscape all around me, and Jesus understood it in this way too. He walked through a world alive with the sacred, present in the plants and animals who were his constant companions in his itinerant life. It's not homelessness if the whole landscape is home.

I have been looking for a religion that involves more than the mental cultivation of a close relationship to God. I have wanted to be surrounded by God in a sacred landscape, which is what has so appealed to me for all these years about certain Indigenous religious traditions such as those of the Navajo and Australian Aboriginal peoples and how they are intimately linked to particular sacred landscapes. A holy mountain where God dwells not in a foreign country, but just outside your front door, a place seen in daily life like Shiprock in Arizona (McPherson 2012) or Uluru in the case of the Anangu people of Northern Australia (Griffin 2002). And what I was missing the whole time is that the Bible is full of this imagery that has been lost in my Western culture's obsession with dominion, subjugation, and power. I

didn't grow up with the grammar of honoring the holy in the everyday, in the land around me, urban or rural, and am only now recovering the language of the ordinary holiness of life. I have felt alone, high on a pedestal, the pinnacle of creation, when the truth is that I am embedded in a web of community, both human and more-than-human, all shot through with holiness.

Nothing reminds me of this community more than my frequent interactions with a resident merlin that lives in my neighborhood. Merlins are small raptors in the falcon family that are usually only in Ohio during migration. For whatever reason, this merlin has chosen my street as her home. It's a good habitat as far as urban wilderness goes. There is a plentiful supply of songbirds to eat in addition to mice and voles, and there is a whole forest of trees in which to take shelter. It feels like a particular blessing to have her here, watching me, her small feathered frame observing my comings and goings as she waits for the right moment to pounce on a house sparrow at a bird feeder or for a chipmunk to come sprinting across the grass. We sometimes sit and watch each other for minutes at a time, me stock still in the middle of the street and her on a low telephone line, eyeing me warily but not flying away. I know that crows have strong memories and can remember individual humans. I wonder if Merlin, as I have taken to calling her, remembers my face, the strange human who stops to watch her. Above all it feels like a blessing to be seen by another animal, to be reminded that not all persons are human, and to wonder how this small raptor experiences being alive. My recognition of her presence is possible because I have begun to cultivate the proper awareness of the sacred, a kind of lived prayer as I walk every day, helping me to be aware of this landscape of blessing. She reminds me of my sacred connection to the cosmos, just as the mourning doves cooing from the power line remind me of the embodied Holy Spirit. I observe the world, but the world is also watching me, alive and aware of more than I can imagine. We are never just ourselves alone. I wonder if this is how Jesus saw the world around him as he traveled throughout the desert landscape of first-century Palestine, alive and full of meaning.

Works Cited

- Griffin, Graham. 2002. "Welcome to Aboriginal Land: Anangu Ownership and Management of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park." In *Conservation and Mobile Indigenous Peoples: Displacement, Forced Settlement and Sustainable Development*, edited by D. Chatty and M. Colchester, 362-376. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Hessel, Dieter T., and Rosemary Radford Ruether. 2000. *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McFague, Sallie. 1993. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- McPherson, Robert. 2012. *Dinéjį Na`nitin: Navajo Traditional Teachings and History*. Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado..
- Luhmann, Tanya. 2020. *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Santmire, Paul. 1985. *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Wallace, Mark. 2018. *When God was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-enchantment of the World*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Wirzba, Norman. 2003. *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- White, Lynn. 1967. "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155 (3767): 1203-1207.