

A Commentary on Mark Wallace's *When God was a Bird*

Andrew J. Cutler¹

Landing gently on the field of environmental posthumanist philosophy, Mark Wallace's (2019) *When God was a Bird* is a refreshing text on environmental stewardship and a call for the re-enchantment of nature. It is a highly nuanced and intriguing book, offering a rather unique interpretation of the bond between nature and spirituality, or more precisely between ecology and Christianity. Yet Wallace's approach is of interest for all lovers of nature—religious or not. Since Wallace finds a spiritual connection with nature through the phenomenological lens and in the connection between human and non-human consciousness. In this sense, Wallace is advocating a form of posthuman eco-theology. The text is partly a response to the criticism that traditional religious thought has led to the environmental crisis. Wallace as an environmentalist, and as an academic philosopher and professor of theology is adequately qualified to speak to such a criticism and to offer a highly innovative response. A response informed by a deep reading of philosophical and theological texts, in the tradition of his mentor Paul Ricœur... While natural theology and rational philosophy may offer their own responses to the environmental crisis, Wallace's phenomenological approach offers something unique for the reader. It is a phenomenological approach to finding God in nature through the expression of nature itself. Conceptually falling into the religious-philosophical side of the posthumanist literature...

Wallace's openness to the religious dimension of nature can be considered an extraordinary answer to the crucial question found in Elaine Graham's (2021) article "Cyborg or Goddess": "is there space for a religious dimension to visions of the posthuman?" Wallace's text is an answer to this question in the affirmative. Aligning itself with (but not limited to) the more spiritually inclined posthumanist reader, the religious dimension of the text is linked to the green theology tradition.² The text communicates to us that a noble ethical-spiritual position in life will appreciate all life and treat the environment as sacred. It offers a posthumanist perspective on the relation of nature and spirit which is not limited to human language and arguments. Not even to the human experience itself, since even without human beings, nature would be no less sacred for Wallace.

¹ Director, General Studies, Yorkville University, Canada. E-mail: acutler@yorkvilleu.ca

² In this case specifically Christian. *Green theology* itself might be interpreted as posthuman since it takes nature (and not single beings) as its starting point.



The philosophical dimension of the text is multi-faceted but essentially yet implicitly tied to the deep ecology tradition.³ It will be appealing for those philosophical minded⁴ and spiritually open readers interested in posthumanism's relation to nature and to modern and indigenous forms of spirituality. The text is also an important addition to the philosophical-religious dimension of the posthumanist literature since it offers a unique foundation of its thought specifically in phenomenology and hermeneutics. Wallace's text is important in this regard since it is by no means a traditional argument for religious life or theory. Wallace does not bow to orthodoxy, nor does he rely on the onto-theological philosophical tradition to make a posthumanist argument. In fact, he is avoiding this method of formulating an argument almost altogether. This helps Wallace's overarching idea act as a bridge for the much-needed dialogue between modern religious and indigenous forms of spirituality and animism.

While the text itself is philosophical, it is not deeply argumentative. Wallace mentions many great thinkers but mainly as supporting examples of how animals have been important to them, as for example with Derrida's dog or Buber's cat. Wallace offers a more continental philosophical approach to the religious dimension of the posthuman, rich with personal experiences and subsequent streams of thought. He is also not relying on western humanist foundations for his ideas. While some of the posthuman scholarship to date has foundations in humanism and transhumanism, Wallace's text offers an alternative. This seems to be welcome since recent posthumanist literature has questioned its own foundations. Anna Markopoulou's (2021) commentary, "Transhumanism, Nietzsche, and Politics" is critical of the theoretical, supposed, Nietzschean and existential foundations of transhumanism. What is different here about Wallace, is that his philosophical roots in hermeneutics also have traces of existential philosophy, but more specifically in phenomenology. It is specifically this phenomenology which Wallace uses as his foundation for a religious post humanist approach.

The text is therefore interdisciplinary, explicitly referencing posthumanism as ally, with a firm foundation in continental philosophy and hermeneutics. As Wallace writes, "I make reference to [...] posthumanism (the anti-speciest disavowal of human chauvinism) [...] sotto voce dialogue sources in my return to animism" (5). Mark Wallace's perspective is a combination of tempered philosophical reason, faith, and a profound passion for nature. His text whisks the reader away on a series of metaphorical 'spiritual hikes' based on both Wallace's personal experiences and historical philosophical reflections on what he calls throughout the text 'Christian animism'. Wallace rejects the antiquated anthropological and rather colonialist definition of animism as simply spiritualized nature in less 'advanced' cultures. Wallace develops a rich philosophical definition of animism throughout the text. At one point he quotes Gregory Cajete who is invoking the phenomenological tradition as he writes, "if, as the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau Ponty contends, perception at its most elemental expression in the human body is based on participation with our surroundings then it can be said that 'animism' is a basic human trait, common to both Indigenous and modern sensibilities. Indeed, all humans are animists" (12). This new model for animism, "is presented as a turn to the indigenous sensibility vis-à-vis the world, and potentially a corrective model

³ *Deep ecology* is an eco-centric philosophy founded by Arne Ness and post human in the most literal sense. Since questions about environmental harm need not be considered from a human perspective for deep ecologists. For many deep ecologists, humans are a problem for the well-being of nature.

⁴ One might be inclined to simply ask: is this not pantheism? Or panentheism or some variation of these ideas? The answer is, not technically since many philosophers have used the term in various ways from Spinoza to Hegel to Whitehead to Tillich. Wallace's vision as stated is much more phenomenological.



for the West to follow” (12). Wallace’s ‘Christian animism’ advances a posthumanist theological vision, as a rejection of purely human-centered theological arguments. He offers both a wander through an enchanted forest and an examination of the specific trees and their inhabitants. In this case they are the subjective experiences of Wallace as he communes with God in nature, with stories of the Holy Spirit’s incarnations in animal and environmental forms, in biblical natural metaphors, and in continental philosophical thought.

The preface of the book immediately clarifies the title and Wallace’s literal intent as he writes, “At one time, God was a bird. In ancient Egypt, Thoth was the long-billed, ibis-headed God of magic and wisdom. Winged divinities populated the Pantheon of Greek antiquity” (ix). Wallace wants to show the reader the textual evidence for such claims but more importantly he wants to remind us just how animalistic, and nature oriented the history of human religions have been. He explicitly states that for him, true Christianity should be interpreted as animotheistic—the belief that all beings are imbued with divine presence.

In Chapter One, ‘Song of the Wood Thrush,’ we find the foundation for Wallace’s specific interpretations and his reading of the Bible. Wallace supports his hermeneutic analysis with such passages as, “In biblical times, doves, in addition to divinized flora and fauna [...] figured prominently as symbols of Gods’ compassion” (25). Wallace describes how in biblical translation the sacred dove could also be translated as a simple pigeon (pigeons being a form of dove) and asks if when we see a pigeon, do we see God? Wallace further explains that the four elements of wind, water, earth, and fire are in fact the fundamentals of the Holy Spirit. Here we find the Greek *pneuma*/air/wind/breath of life. The water of Earth which makes life possible is another foundation. Third, the dual power of comfort and destruction one finds in fire and finally the Holy Spirit as the Earth itself. For Wallace, this incarnating of God as the Holy Spirit in nature is equivalent to the Incarnation of Jesus as the Son of God as a human being. In fact, Wallace thinks the incarnation is meant to refer to all of nature both in matter and spirit. In this sense, destruction of nature is in fact the destruction of God. Wallace writes, “My point is simple: if God is, among other things avian, vegetal and reptilian (if God is winged creator, baptismal pigeon, burning bush and bronze serpent) and if all things God made, (birds, shrubs snakes, and all other beings) are God-in-the Flesh, then it behooves each of us to care for the natural world insofar as this world is God, in bones, feathers, skin, soil, air, water, leaves, flowers, eggs and scales” (45). Not an orthodox interpretation of Christianity, yet one Wallace sees as crucial for a profounder understanding of creation. Nonetheless, this chapter may also come off as overly theological for the posthumanist reader wary of religious language.

Chapter Two, ‘The Delaware River Basin,’ is the foundation of much of the continental philosophy of the text, and specifically on the ideas of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The modern issue of fracking opens the chapter since it perfectly exemplifies the human destruction of nature for limited utilitarian ends. Perhaps the main philosophical point of the chapter’s circles around the problem of nature interpreted as ‘standing reserve.’ Wallace describes Heidegger’s Greek-German notion of *poiesis* as the everyday poetry of nature—how the rhythm of nature is continually full of creative events such as the blossoming of a cherry flower or the Monarch butterfly’s metamorphosis. The world can be changed naturally, like the *poiesis* of the flower blossom or via human interaction, which is *techne* and the linguistic root of the term technology. While not all technology and human interactions need to have negative effects, the human interventions into natural processes have now obviously reached

a point of crisis. The chapter also interestingly gets into some biblical hermeneutics around the idea that Jesus was a healing shaman in touch with nature. Wallace writes, “Jesus is an animist shaman who expectorates in the good soil of creation to make a plaster and to teach that all life...is charged with divine power and wonder” (67). This is for sure a radical departure from orthodox Biblical readings. It could therefore act as a welcome bridge to dialogue with shamans in other cultures, but more conservative readers might take serious issues.

Chapter Three, ‘Worshipping the Green God’ - This is where Wallace’s original interest in a Christian Paganism comes forth, which was a term he used to describe his philosophy prior to calling it Christian Animism. Wallace deliberates on the difference between religious theory and religious practice as his university class participates in a pagan ritual which cumulates in the class being ‘visited’ by an actual Great Blue Heron. And later, this chapter links together various theological ideas of sacred nature as found in Saint Augustine and Hildegard—a medieval ‘green’ monastic theologian and healer. This chapter is a good example of Wallace’s history and profession coming through in the text—shedding light onto his interest in not only pagan theory but practice. It is also perhaps a specific example of what Wallace means by God in nature. He does not mean some abstract concept but rather the material manifestations of the spirit that can be felt/seen alone or in groups. As he writes, “In worshipping God and nature together, in worshipping God-As-Nature, I felt the rapturous Truth of the ancient teaching that the Word has now become Flesh and is dwelling among us. Through silence and many voices (human, avian and vegetal voices alike), I touched and was touched by the lush Green God- the God of Jesus, Augustine, Hildegard, and the Quakers- of historical Christian witness” (112).

Chapter Four, ‘Come Suck Sequoia and Be Saved’ - The historical exploration of Christian animism, in a sense, culminates in the fourth chapter of *When God was a Bird*, where Wallace turns to the American naturalist and co-founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir, to present a modern exemplar of a salutary Christian attitude towards nature. For Wallace, Muir is a figure who embodies the capacity to rhetorically deploy scriptural language to animate the natural world. In Muir’s vision, the Spirit seeps down into the very roots of the natural world. Indeed, Muir sees the Spirit as present even in the lowest echelons of vegetal nature. As Muir writes, “Now we observe that, in cold mountain altitudes, Spirit is but thinly and plainly clothed...” (1979, 138). This idea is captured by Wallace in reference to the New Testament concept of ‘thin spaces’ as connecting heaven and earth—for example in the pillar of fire, the holy mountain, or the sacred temple. The idea of ‘thin spaces’ challenges the false dichotomy of the transcendent and the imminent. Much like the false dichotomy between experiencing God and experiencing God’s creation in nature for Wallace. This chapter is perhaps the richest in its celebration of nature itself. Wallace writes, “In the modern period, I turn to Muir as a model for a thoughtful and nuanced celebration of the full enfleshment of God’s Spirit within all things: songbirds and waterfalls, mountain streams and alpine meadows, Sequoia trees and Douglas squirrels. Many contemporary scholars of Muir (and, in Muir’s time, his own father) have failed to understand the scriptural-animist coherence of his project, what we might call Christianism. It is the integral unity of Muir’s divinized and verdant vision of the world that stands out in a reading of his voluminous works” (113). This chapter will appeal to nature lovers of all stripes with its poetic reverence for all of nature’s beauty. Philosophically the idea of the thin spaces is a fascinating one since it challenges the traditional immanent and transcendent distinction so much orthodox theology depends on.



Chapter Five, 'On the Wings of a Dove' - Human development issues are the focus of the final chapter. Wallace opens it with childhood memories of wild sagebrush outside his home and its fragrance wafting through his home windows, but returning there now, no wild sage is left since once disturbed it does not come back easily. Never ending urban and rural development has led to great devastation in a few decades. The Gaia hypothesis is brought into the text with the notion that the Earth is now suffering. Wallace writes, "My aim throughout this project has been to counter the instrumental model of nature by *re-enchancing* Earth as an animate being, a living soul, a spiritual life force that feels a type of joy and suffers a certain kind of sorrow and loss in a manner analogous to what we also feel" (145). This is where Wallace's Philosophy of religion seems to touch up and/or draw a line with new age religion. But luckily, Wallace with his emphasis on experience over theory avoids falling backwards into the random speculations and maintains a philosophically sound expression of his ideas. Yet a major part of his Christian animism is that as nature dies, as does God, and so for him this environmental destruction takes on an even higher level of meaning.

In conclusion, one may ask if Wallace sufficiently answers the question: is there space for a religious dimension to visions of the posthuman? The answer is clearly yes. Without invoking orthodox Christianity nor the onto-theological philosophical tradition, Wallace takes a continental bridge-path over the theological waters towards a posthuman eco-theology. While avoiding a charge of postmodernism, Wallace challenges traditional hierarchies and manages to share his personal visions and his environmental anxieties in an open and accessible way for a posthuman audience. It is no means a mainstream religious approach and might not please many on that front. Since many traditional Christians and/or animists might take issue with Wallace's idiosyncratic vision of reality. The blending of animism and the Trinity might be too unique for some. What one finds over the five chapters is a gradual unfolding of Wallace's overarching vision of Green Christian Animism or animo-theism⁵ supported by biblical hermeneutics, continental philosophy, medieval theology, and considerations of paganism. These theoretical ideas support his personal experiences and reflections on the majesty and transcendence to be found in the imminent world of incarnated nature. The type of beauty one finds in the majesty of the Great Blue Heron or the Pileated woodpecker. The connection between the good, the beautiful and the true is clear. The overall tone is a refreshing mix of genuineness, melancholy, and hope as it recognizes the profound environmental problems of the planet while offering new ways to think about—and feel about—why we might care. An important contribution to a philosophical-eco-theological, posthumanist interpretation of reality.

References

- Eliade, M., (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy* (W.R. Trask, Trans.). Bollingen Series LXXXVI. Random House. (Original work published 1951)
- Graham, E. (2021). Cyborg or goddess? Religion and posthumanism from secular to postsecular. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 1(1), 23-31, <https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i1.1444>
- Heidegger, M. (1969). The Onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics. In *Identity and difference* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). Harper and Row. (Original work published 1957)
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *The question concerning technology, and other essays*. Garland Pub.

⁵ Mark Wallace took the term 'animotheism' from Mircea Eliade's text *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* in describing Christian Trinitarianism.

- Markopoulou, A. (2021). Transhumanism, Nietzsche, and politics: A commentary on their relationship. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 1(2), 229–234, <https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i2.1714>
- Muir, J. (1979). *John of the mountains: The unpublished journals of John Muir*. University of Wisconsin Press. (Original work published in 1938)
- Ricœur, P. (1986). *The symbolism of evil* (E. Buchanan, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original work published 1960)
- Wallace, M. (1990). *The second naiveté: Barth, Ricœur, and the New Yale Theology*. Mercer University Press.
- Wallace, M. (1996). *Fragments of the spirit: Nature, violence, and the renewal of creation*. Continuum Publishing Company.
- Wallace, M. (2019). *When God was a bird: Christianity, Animism, and the re-enchantment of the world*. Fordham University Press.

