

## What is Animism?

When I served as a missionary in Okinawa, there was a man that I will never forget who actively attended one of our churches. He was not mentally ill, as far as I could tell. He was a nice fellow and could engage a person in conversation as well as anyone. But there was one very strange thing about him. As he walked around, he would sometimes swat the air as if he were shooing away a fly or mosquito.

Because it was such a strange thing, I asked the church's pastor what he was doing. What I heard rather surprised me. I was told that he was swatting away what he thought were evil spirits which were in his path. It seems that even though he had become a Christian, there were elements of his previous animistic religious beliefs that he had not yet been able to shake.

While Okinawa is now a part of Japan, which is a very modern country, it also has its own distinct culture and religion. Before it was taken over by the Japanese, it was an independent kingdom. The native religion is a form of Animism and is still widely practiced on the island.

At this point, you may be a bit surprised that such a modern country, which has been so strongly influenced by Western civilization, would still see such strong residual Animistic ways in practice. You also may be wondering how this relates to anything that is going on in the United States or other modern countries. Well the fact is, Animism is not a huge player in Western societies, but it does have a solid core of adherents who express this worldview in a wide variety of religious practices. Let's examine this worldview and see where the tentacles of its influence reach.

### Basic Premise

Before we explore more deeply about the various forms of Animism, let's take a moment to define what it is and the basic beliefs that it puts forth. Animism tends to be centered more in primitive societies and is closely associated with pagan religions. It is essentially based on an experiential approach to life where people without a formal religious doctrine have tried to explain what they perceived as a transcendent presence.

In its essence, Animism believes that there are many spirit beings who exist in the universe. These spirits live in a spiritual part of reality, but are also actively engaged in interacting with the material world. Some are seen to inhabit material objects (like trees and rocks), some are heavenly objects (sky, sun, moon and stars), some are animals, and others are believed to be the spirits of people who have died. The spirit world is understood to exist parallel to the material world (like a different dimension) and the two worlds exist in a symbiotic relationship with one another.

Human interaction with various spiritual beings is vital, and prayers and offerings are given to win their good will. It is up to living humans to perform rituals and give offerings in order to manipulate and placate these gods. If the right actions are not performed toward the spirits, they will cause bad things to happen to the individuals. The spirits depend on the actions of human beings for their own well-being and will reward humans who act rightly toward them.

Animism assumes that any kind of unexplained event happens because spirit beings, or supernatural forces, are at work in the natural world. Certainly natural forces are recognized as operating in situations where a natural cause can be readily seen. But in cases where a natural cause cannot be seen, it is automatically assumed to be caused by some supernatural power.

### History

Historically, Animism is difficult to pin down. It is commonly understood by secular anthropologists to be the most primitive of all forms of religion. Many think that Animism was humanity's first attempt to explain the nature of the world we live in. As Christians, we certainly don't acknowledge it to be the first, but it certainly is the least sophisticated in terms of theological and philosophical doctrine.

Animism has emerged in some form in virtually every part of the world. It is most common in primitive tribal and nomadic communities, and is typically associated with the era before writing systems developed. Since Animistic cultures have non-literate backgrounds, there is not an actual recorded history of the development of this worldview. Because of this, archaeological research depends heavily on the artifacts found in burial mounds and archeological excavations for their research into the history of Animistic cultures. They also depend upon an examination of the rituals and folk beliefs of cultural groups which still practice these beliefs in our present day.

Typically, Animistic cultures which have had significant interaction with societies based on other worldviews, have ended up being more influenced by the more sophisticated usurper, and tend to quickly adopt many of the more "modern" practices. That being said, old practices die hard and it is not at all unusual to find a great deal of syncretism between the old and new beliefs.

### **Belief Systems Which Come from Animism**

There are a number of different religious traditions which have Animism as their core worldview. These include:

- 👍 Shinto
- 👍 Witchcraft
- 👍 Astrology
- 👍 Fortunetelling
- 👍 Spiritism
- 👍 Voodoo

### **How Animism Answers the 7 Worldview Questions?**

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality? & 2. What is the nature of material reality?  
The universe contains both material and immaterial parts. Spirits exist in a separate place from physical beings, but they interact with each other in a symbiotic relationship.
3. What is a human being?  
Humans are material creatures who inhabit the physical world and have a spiritual core.
4. What happens to a person at death?  
At death, an individual's spirit enters the spiritual dimension.
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?  
Knowledge is simply assumed to exist and is acquired by observation.
6. How do we know right and wrong?  
Morality is based on experience.
7. What is the meaning of human history?  
History is a linear progression of events without special meaning.

### **Practical Implications of Animism**

The impact on culture, from Animism, is that there is no built-in inner drive to strive toward

higher levels of achievement – either individually or as a society. When something bad happens to an individual or to the group, it is believed to be because some spirit has been offended. As a result, there is no focus on advancing society, the focus is almost entirely on making sure the spirits are constantly appeased. Rather than develop new implements and systems to advance society, they concentrate on finding which spirits caused things to be bad and offering prayers and offerings to fix them.

The Animistic understanding of the operation of the world, and life in general, is that it is not moving toward a higher destination. Rather it basically just sits in static time. The focus is almost entirely on the present. The tendency is simply to live life one day at a time and accept things the way they are.

Certainly there are places where Animistic religions are still practiced but which have had advancement in the various realms of the society. However, the places where these exceptions have occurred tend to be places where there has been significant influence from the outside by some other worldview.

### **How Animism Deal with Specific Culture War Issues?**

***Life Issues*** - Abortion, Euthanasia, Suicide, Genocide, Murder, “Right to die,” Terrorism, War

Animism considers most of these issues to be wrong as they relate to ones own group. Each one of these tends to disrupt the connection between family and clan – both those who are living in this world and the ones on the other side of death. It may be another matter, though, as it relates to other groups. The primary goal is to make sure that one’s own gods are protected and taken care of. The group that fails to do that will be punished by their gods.

***Sexual Issues*** - Adultery, Bigamy, Polygamy, Exhibitionism, Fornication, Homosexuality, Pedophilia, Pornography, Bestiality, Prostitution, Rape

In Animistic societies, most of these activities are considered wrong as they relate to one’s own group (though each group might have its own ideas about any particular act). Anything that tends to disrupt the connection between family and clan, both living and on the other side of death, is typically considered to be bad. Acts such as rape and prostitution, when done to someone not related to the group or the group’s gods, may not be seen as particularly troublesome, unless the act ends up having a bad effect on one’s own group.

***Personal Integrity Issues*** - Cheating, Fraud, Greed, Lying, Profanity, Revenge, Theft

Within the sphere of influence of the local gods, Animistic thought would probably consider each of these issues to be bad, since they are disruptive to the unity of the group. Outside of the group, however, where the influence of the clan or family gods is not an issue, there is no essential problem.

***Physical Health Issues*** - Alcohol abuse, Drug abuse, Gluttony, Obesity, Smoking, Overwork, Lack of exercise

Animism doesn’t necessarily see any of these issues to be particularly problematic unless they result in behavior that harms the group. In any case, it is not the individual activities that are bad, but the actions that result from them. As long as a person can keep from bringing difficulty on the group, and not disrupt the gods, there would be no problem with these.

***Industriousness Issues*** - Gambling, Hedonism, Laziness, Begging, Mooching

Industriousness issues tend to focus on happenings that relate to self-satisfaction. Animists have a high concern with the welfare of the group. Thus the idea of becoming totally self-absorbed could cause damage to the group which would not be considered a good thing.

***Relationship Issues*** - Bigotry, Child Exploitation, Domestic Violence, Hatred, Divorce, Prejudice, Slavery, Torture

In Animistic belief systems, most of these issues would be considered wrong as they relate to ones own group. Each would disrupt the connection between family and clan – both those living and those on the other side of death. It may be another matter, though, as it relates to other groups. The primary goal is to make sure that one's own gods are protected and taken care of. The group that fails to do that will be punished by their gods. There is no particular problem, though, if this is done to those outside of ones group as long as their gods are not able to cause problems to your group.

***Church-State Issues*** - Posting of Ten Commandments, Religious symbols on public property, Praying in school, Praying at public institutions, Government money to religious schools, Government money to religious charities, Religious organizations meeting on public property, Religious symbols included in public symbols, Religious words in the pledge of allegiance

In principle, Animists would not have a problem in this area. They already recognize physical and spiritual reality as completely intertwined.

## **Summary**

Some time back I wrote a letter to the editor stating my opinion about an issue that related to expressing faith in the public square. When the letter was printed in the paper, they also included my personal e-mail address. I expected to get some personal responses from this, especially from the atheist crowd.

What surprised me, though, was that I got just as many responses from Wiccans. They were actually not trying to engage me in a theological discussion, they just didn't want their faith to be left out of the mix. Because this religious form tends to group themselves in very small circles, we don't often hear much from them. But there is a very distinct presence of this and many other adherents of Animistic belief systems who are living all around us.

I believe that most of us shy away from discussions with people who hold beliefs that are unfamiliar. But these people need the Lord, too. Understanding Animistic beliefs at the worldview level, and having the ability to contrast it with the truth of the gospel, will give us the knowledge and confidence to share our faith with anyone, no matter how esoteric their beliefs.

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