

Animism

By James C. Ventress

Origins: Historic evidence and contemporary animism are found wherever there are traditional hunter gatherer, agricultural or pastoral societies. Nearly every modern country on every continent has a legacy of animism.¹

Date: Animism has been practiced since prehistoric times, before written culture or historical records. The modern use of the term was first used by Sir E. B. Taylor in his 1871 anthropological book, *Primitive Culture*, to describe an evolutionary step in his theory of the development of religion.²

Unique Terms or Concepts: Each culture uses its own language for names and definitions of animistic concepts but anthropologists use certain terms universally, including but not limited to: Taboo, Totem, Shaman, World Tree (also Cosmic or Celestial Tree), World Pillar, Cosmic Mountain, Sky House and Cosmic Zones.³ Mystical numbers (especially 3, 7 and 9)⁴, colors, ancestor worship and various spiritual beings such as little people or big people are also common.

Organizational Structure: Animism has no global organized structure.⁵ It is unique in each culture where it is practiced, often with local variations between different communities of a culture. Individuals may have their own unique system of belief and/or make use of the guidance and skills of a shaman.

HISTORY

No one knows when animistic systems first emerged. No written records of its origins exist, only religious artifacts recovered from sites of ancient civilizations. Some anthropologists do not consider animism to be a distinct religion,⁶ because it can and has been a component of many established world religions, such as Hinduism, Shinto, Taoism and the highly developed paganism of Egypt, India, Greece and Rome.⁷

Sir E. B. Taylor wrote *Primitive Culture* in the aftermath of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The academic culture of the time sought to use evolutionary models to explain the origins of other structures as well. Anthropologists and sociologists used it to explain human cultural constructs such as society, the family and, in the case of Taylor, religion.⁸

Taylor saw a hierarchy of religious sophistication and he felt that this reflected an evolutionary process. Because most animistic groups are stereotypically small, rural and use an oral method of doctrinal transmission (leading to a more basic set of beliefs), Taylor felt they must have been the first religions. In this system, he ordered these primal and folk religions as being the most basic, followed by the pagan polytheistic and pantheistic creeds. Last of all in his order were the great monotheistic religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Animistic belief systems go back to antiquity and there is much blending with more developed religious systems. The ziggurat and pyramid building cultures of Mesopotamia were animistic in nature (these structures being examples of a world pillar or cosmic mountain used to link the terrestrial physical world with the celestial spiritual world),⁹ so the biblical account of the builders of Babel describes animism. Yet, Taylor has received much criticism for his system.

In his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Don Richardson reveals flaws in Taylor's theory and gives examples of simple and even Stone Age cultures that had elements of monotheism prior to missionary contact.¹⁰ Richardson's Biblical defence demonstrates man's beginning was in the Garden of Eden, in a monotheistic relationship with God, and that only after events like the great flood and the Tower of Babel did animism become something common and widespread.

THE BEST RESOURCE COLLECTION ON CULTS AND RELIGIONS



The *Watchman Fellowship Profile Notebook* provides you with an extensive personal library of information about cults, new and alternative religions, world religions, and religious leaders. You will have at your fingertips over twenty years of research to answer your questions, strengthen your faith, and improve your witness to others.

- Over 100 Profiles
- Over 400 pages of information
- The history and primary teachings of each group
- A Christian response to deepen your faith and enhance your outreach



[CLICK HERE TO ORDER YOUR COPY OF THE WATCHMAN FELLOWSHIP PROFILE NOTEBOOK](#)



Be sure to also order your [free subscription to the Watchman Fellowship Profile](#). Several times each year you will receive a new, four-page Profile that you can add to your Profile Notebook, as well as the latest news from Watchman Fellowship. [Click here to order your free subscription!](#)



A resurgence of western interest in animistic practices is occurring. Besides established movements like Wicca, there are increasing instances in popular cultural that show an animistic influence our worldview. Television shows, movies, comic books and cartoons are rife with examples of characters that control spirits or creatures which give power to those with special knowledge and ability. Many of these shows are aimed at children or teens, such as *Charmed* (television show), *Pokémon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, and *Wolf's Rain* (all Japanese anime type shows). Animism ideas may be enticing to people, whether ancient or modern, because they give a sense of power to those who have none, provide a release from the ordinary visible world, and give a sense of status in society. Ultimately, they answer basic human questions about the nature of the universe, man, his role in creation and life after death.

BELIEFS

Because of the idiosyncratic nature of culture, animism does not have one set foundation of belief or practice. However, many animistic beliefs are common to all systems.

Spirit Beings: Animism is first and foremost concerned with awareness and communion with spiritual beings and the spirit world.¹¹ Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines it simply as, "the belief that natural objects, natural phenomena, and the universe itself possess souls." It is not simply the worship of animals, as some mistakenly believe (although animal worship may be involved); the etymology of the word comes from the Latin word *anima*, for soul or life.¹²

Animistic groups believe that a complex system of supernatural beings or spirits inhabit and control everything. The common thinking behind this is that if humans have an animating soul or life force, then other living things must have one as well. This concept is also extended to plants, trees and even inanimate objects as well. Rocks, streams, lakes and entire mountains have these spirits too. In the most extreme versions, the whole earth, the sky and maybe the entire universe all have spirits.

These spirits are not always present in the physical things they are associated with. They also may exist before its creation or after its death. The plane they inhabit when disembodied is the spirit world, which is usually but not always invisible. In some cultures this spirit world is right on top of and parallel to our own. At other times it is far removed, usually located in the sky, another dimension or a cosmic zone. Reincarnation may be a component of these spirits existence and purpose,¹³ or they may go to a permanent residence, i.e. the "Happy Hunting Ground" of American popular thought about the native cultures of North America.

This invisible spirit world is important to cultures that practice animism. Usually some aspect of the physical well being of the culture is tied to these spirits. In hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies, the health and abundance of game animals, domestic herds and crops is dependent on the state of well being of the spirits of those animals and plants. A spirit may become angry or dissatisfied and either withhold blessings or do harmful things. There are often elements of fear or consequence in animistic systems. Humans must remain on good terms with these spirits and there is a tenuous balance to be maintained.

Some of the spirits encountered by animistic societies seem benevolent or neutral, but many are malevolent or vengeful. Numerous North American indigenous cultures have a type of trickster character. Time has muted the modern image of these spirits, but many oral traditions show them as thieves, kidnappers of children, or as an incubus or succubus (seducing demon or spirit). Were-beings or animals (like the classical werewolf) are another global phenomena in animistic cultures. Sometimes a shaman or witch has the ability of manifesting themselves as a were-being (half animal and half human), or even as a complete animal. Westerners rarely witness such phenomena as this, but it is not unheard of.

Hippos, walruses, crocodiles, bears, and deer are some examples of animals that have been witnessed in transformation. The Choctaw of the southeastern United States still tell stories of a deer woman (lower half deer and upper half woman) who entices men into the woods and tramples them to death. The Konakusha, a race of little people lead children into dangerous situations.¹⁴ The Inuit and Cree¹⁵ people give accounts of little people and giant people spirits who chase and torment their victims across the tundra. People go missing or are found dead after encounters with these spirits.

Many of these phenomena seem foreign to the modern European worldview. It must be remembered however, that Europe has an animistic history that was just as real and just as dangerous. The leprechauns, brownies, fairies, gnomes and elves so fondly remembered by European cultures were once dangerous beings that were taken very seriously. They were not stories but actual spiritual forces that had free reign to prey on pagan, pre-Christian societies.

There was a time in Ireland, Britain, France, Scandinavia and Germany when the swamps, streams and the great oaks were holy and had to be treated as such. It's no surprise that there is evidence of costly sacrifices of goods, animals and even humans being made to these entities. The Iron Age bog bodies found buried in Danish peat are a likely testament to this practice and a good reminder of the lengths men must go to please their spiritual masters.¹⁶

Taboos: Taboos are important practices that are the responsibility of everyone within the society.¹⁷ There are specific taboos for specific people; some may apply only to pregnant or menstruating women, others to men before battle. Taboos may be specific to certain times of the year or activities such as right before planting or harvest. There are positive and negative taboos, prescribing behavior that must or must not be done. They may concern foods that cannot be eaten, words that cannot be said, or places that the uninitiated may not visit. Taboos can be temporary or permanent. By keeping taboos, participants take individual responsibility for their community and lifestyle. The main source of taboos is the shaman.¹⁸

Shamans: The shaman is a man or woman who has been initiated into a line of succession of people who have special or esoteric knowledge of the spirit world. They know what must be done to please the spirits and they guide their people in this pursuit. The shaman communicates with the spirits in many ways, but they generally fall into two categories, spiritual possession or spiritual journey.¹⁹

Shamans have many culturally specific ways of becoming possessed or entranced. Possession may involve the use of incantations, familiars, special clothing or paraphernalia (amulets, medicine bags, etc.), special songs or words, fasts, self flagellation, ingesting alcoholic drinks or hallucinogenic drugs, or the application of extreme heat or cold (sweat lodges or chills from immersion).²⁰ Possession is often public so the society is familiar with the intercession of the shaman on their behalf. Shamans may have differing levels of self-awareness and self-control. It is during possession the shaman communicates with spirits, they may also offer sacrifices to idols that represent the spirits, learn of offenses or new taboos, and gain more spiritual power for themselves.

Spiritual journeys require the shaman to leave the group or village and go to the spirit world. This may start with an actual journey to a secluded place, often a special mountain or high place. In societies where the spirit world is distant, the journey usually involves some type of ladder, cosmic pillar or world tree around which the world revolves. This passage is used to reach the sky or upper levels of the world.

Western views of shamans (or witch doctors as they are often disparagingly called) have been critical of this constant search for more power and see it only as the self-serving act of a charlatan. The society however, sees their complete welfare as being dependent on the success of their shaman who may be very altruistic in his/her motives. A shaman who is not careful can become injured, ill or even suffer death. His/her desire for more power may cause considerable risk in attempting to appease or gain control of real spiritual forces. Shamans often distinguish themselves from other members of the culture who may have bad intentions, usually referred to as sorcerers or witches. They seek similar powers but will have different purpose for using them. A shaman would consider his magic to be "good" or "white magic" and the powers of a witch to be "bad" or "black magic," a distinction familiarized by European forms of animism and evidenced in the modern Wicca movement.

Cosmic levels: Though Animistic cosmology is diverse, one common concept is the idea of cosmic levels. Often there are levels below ground, above ground and the sky level. The "world tree" concept is an ancient and widespread idea (which has found new popularity with neo-pagans and New Age groups) because trees have roots that are in the underworld, a base and trunk in our world and a canopy of branches and leaves in the sky world.²¹ A shaman's sacred

tree may simply be the tallest tree in the forest or it may be an invisible or far distant tree of colossal proportions. Whether a world tree, pillar or mountain, the shaman uses it as a trail to ascend or descend to different levels of his cosmology. When he arrives at his destination, the shaman will commune with the spirits there, gain more power and perform necessary duties and rituals.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

It is clear that the religious worldview of Animism is contrary to Biblical teaching. God commanded us to worship and serve Him and only Him, making no other gods or idols of any living or created thing. Even if no physical idol is made, giving service to these other spirits violates God's law and is sin (Ex. 20:3, 4). In Animism, man has traded a perfect relationship with a creator God for the worship of created things (Rom. 1:19-23).

The shaman or practicing animist may think they have some control over spiritual forces but they do not. The spirits working behind these exchanges of power give just enough to ensure belief and devotion so that they may lead men astray forever. They put on a show of signs and wonders that provide temporary assurance of a higher power that meet basic human needs.

Paternalistic views of animistic societies will often dismiss the idea of spirit interaction as superstition or folklore. This may arise from an increasingly modern and scientific anti-supernaturalistic worldview, although there may be fanciful depictions of details after lengthy periods of oral transmission.

Missionaries and Christian workers wishing to minister to people practicing an animistic lifestyle should give a serious hearing to how these people understand the world around them. The Biblical theistic worldview is aware of the spiritual forces at work in this world even though they are not always observable in our technology based, mostly urban society. Condescending attitudes toward a belief in spirits will only alienate people who are absolutely certain they are real and may cause public activities to be done in private, away from outsiders who can learn much or influence change.²²

Notes

¹ "Animism," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animism> (accessed November 27, 2006).

² Ibid.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press, 1964), 269.

⁴ Ibid, 274.

⁵ "Animism," Wikipedia.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press, 1964), 264.

⁸ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1984), 133.

⁹ *Shamanism*, 267.

¹⁰ *Eternity in Their Hearts*, 33.

¹¹ "Animism," Wikipedia.

¹² *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House Inc., 2001), 82.

¹³ *Shamanism*, 246.

¹⁴ Personal contact with the author and various members of the Choctaw Nation; Ringold, OK. 2005.

¹⁵ Personal contact with the author and various members of the Inupiat Inuit; Barrow AK 1998 and Wynter DuCharme, Cree; Calgary, AB. 2006.

¹⁶ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 138.

¹⁷ Ibid, 289.

¹⁸ A. Scott Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 928.

¹⁹ *Shamanism*, 6, 8.

²⁰ Personal contact with Donny Varnell and Gloria Churchill, Haida Nation; Ketchikan, AK. 2001.

²¹ *Shamanism*, 269.

²² *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 870.



Profile is a regular publication of Watchman Fellowship, Inc. Readers are encouraged to begin their own religious research notebooks using these articles. Profiles are published by Watchman Fellowship approximately 6 times per year, covering subjects such as new religious movements, counterfeit Christianity, the occult, New Age Spirituality, and related doctrines and practices. Complete Profile Notebooks containing all Profiles published to date are available. Please contact Watchman Fellowship for current pricing and availability. All rights reserved © 2007.