

The World of Animism

by Patrick Zukeran

World View of Animism

From Genesis to the present, the biblical worldview has clashed with the worldview of animism. Animism or folk religion, is a religion that sees a spirit or spiritual force behind every event and many objects of the physical world carry some spiritual significance.

In most parts of the world, animism blends in with formal religions. Among followers of the major religions lie many animistic beliefs and practices. Animistic beliefs actually dominate the world. Most Taiwanese believe in the Chinese folk religions. Most Hindus and Muslims in Central and Southeast Asia, and most Buddhists in China and Japan combine their religion with various animistic beliefs and practices. In many parts of the world, Christianity has not displaced the local folk religion but coexists beside it in an uneasy tension.

The animistic worldview contains both the observed or physical world and the unseen or spirit world. There is no sharp distinction between the two realities, what happens in one affects the other. The *seen* or the physical world consists of what we can see, feel, and experience. It includes forces of nature and physical beings. In the seen world the earth plays a prominent role because it is viewed as a living entity and is often worshiped as Mother Earth. Nature is believed to be alive. Hills, caves, mountains, and lakes, are often revered as sacred places. Animals may be embodiments of spirits. Many creatures are worshiped as sacred, such as the cow and monkey in India. Plants can also contain spirits and some are worshiped. Forests are seen as places where the spirits dwell. Trees like oaks, cedars, and ash are worshiped in Europe. In many parts of the world, there exist numerous subhuman beings that live in lakes, forests, and caves. For example, in Europe they include mythical beings like trolls, gnomes, and fairies.

The *unseen* world of animism begins with the understanding of “mana,” or the life force that permeates the entire universe. This power is impersonal and not worshiped. This sacred power concentrates more heavily in the deities, sacred people, places, or objects ruling over all creation and is not controlled by the gods or man.

Also part of the unseen world is the Supreme God. Following him are a host of lesser gods who dwell in particular regions. After the gods are the spirits, who often dwell in nature and are confined to a specific area. Next, are the spirits of the ancestors who continue to play a role with the living.

The World of Animism

There also exist unseen forces that include supernatural powers like fate, cosmic moral order, the evil eye, magic, and witchcraft. There are impersonal energy forces that give objects power. These objects are believed to transfer that power so a person can do good or evil.

In the Bible, God transforms the animistic views of Israel into a biblical view. He teaches them that the other gods are not gods at all (Isaiah 43:10). He condemns the use of magic, witchcraft, and divination. He shows that suffering is not the result of the spirits or the gods but His sovereign act of bringing people back to Himself.

Themes in Animism

Do you ever wonder why some people worship their ancestors? The practice derives from the first of several themes within animism. In this community-centered life one's ancestors, their living relatives, and the unborn are the center of existence. Clan life is the most important entity because an individual has meaning only in the context of a community.

The second theme of animism is the role of the spirit world. Humans live surrounded by supernatural beings and forces, most of which are hostile. The worlds of the seen and the unseen are interconnected. For this reason, people spend their time seeking to appease the gods, the spirits, and the ancestors with offerings or bribes. Extreme care is taken to maintain the harmony between the two worlds. Since all created things are connected, a simple act like eating fruit from the wrong tree may bring disaster.

Third is the focus on the present. Primary concern is with the here and now, rather than eternity. People seek to deal with success and failure, the power and knowledge needed to control life here on earth.

Tied to that is the fourth theme, which is the focus on power. Animists view themselves as constantly struggling against spirits, other humans, and supernatural forces. Everything that happens can be explained by powers waging war. Their goal is to attain more power in order to control the forces around them.

Fifth is pragmatism. Animists are not interested in an academic understanding of spiritual and scientific truth but in securing a good, meaningful life and protection from evil. The test of a folk religion is, "does it work?" To achieve their spiritual goals, people will often embrace conflicting ideologies hoping that one will work. Once I spoke with a Chinese woman who was suffering from lung cancer. Although she attended church and prayed to the Lord for healing, she also visited the Chinese Buddhist temple seeking prayers for health from the priests. For those from animistic cultures, times of need cause them to beseech aid from various religions or gods to find any method that works.

The sixth theme is transformation and transportation. Things may not be what they appear to be. Spirits can take the form of animals or plants. Shamans in a trance believe they can travel to distant places and bring harm to an enemy. They also believe they can travel to the spirit world, receive information, or retrieve lost souls.

Seventh, animism takes a holistic view of life. It involves every aspect of life: from what you eat, to where you place furniture, to how you sleep. In al Hambre, Los Angeles, where there is a large population of Chinese, houses with the number "4" in the address do not sell.¹

The World of Animism

Eighth is particularism. People are tied to their land. Each community has its own set of gods and spirits. The gods gave the people their land, and that is where the ancestors reside. In battles, victories and defeats are attributed to the power of the territorial gods.

Finally, fear plays a major role. In a world full of spirits, omens, and spells, life is rarely secure. Many see the world as a hostile and dangerous place filled with spirits and forces antagonistic to people. Seemingly mundane activities such as moving the wrong rock can bring potential disaster. Animists turn to their ancestors, gods, and spirits for protection.

The focus of the Christian life, in contrast, is the relationship believers have with God. God's fellowship with mankind is based on grace and love. Since God is gracious, He does not need to be constantly appeased by believers. His laws are clearly revealed to us in the Bible. When we disobey, we may suffer the consequences of our sin or experience His discipline, which is always motivated by His love and intended to bring us to a right relationship with Him. In times of difficulty, we do not need to fear His wrath but He invites us to draw even closer to Him. 1 John 4:16-18 states, "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like Him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . ." Although believers encounter tragedy and suffering, we do not live in fear but in faith trusting in the character of God.

Gods in Animism

In continuing our study on animism, it may surprise you that most animistic religions teach that there exists one Supreme Being. He is often described as omniscient, eternal, beneficent, omnipotent and righteous. He is the creator, the moral lawgiver, punishes those who do evil, and blesses those who do good.

However, this Being distanced himself from man and cannot be known personally. Legends abound that he was once near but was angered with man and removed himself. He left men to their own devices and used lesser gods and spirits to do his will and serve as his ambassadors. Therefore, most of the worship goes to the lesser gods and spirits who are in direct contact with humans. Anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt studied numerous cultures and concluded that man's first religion was monotheism, which then corrupted into polytheism.² This would concur with Paul's timeline of man's rejection of God that he lays out in Romans 1.

An example comes from the folk religion of China. Long before Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, the Chinese worshiped Shang Ti, the Lord of heaven. He alone was worshiped until the Zhou dynasty, which began in 1000 B.C. From then on, only the emperor was allowed to pay homage to Shang Ti, and the knowledge of Shang Ti among the common people was lost. The worship-starved Chinese eventually embraced the religions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that provided spiritual knowledge and worship.³ Numerous stories like these abound throughout the world. In Korea, the supreme God is called Hananim. The Gedeo people of Ethiopia call Him Magano. Missionaries use this belief of a high God to point people to the God of the Bible.

Following the Supreme God is a host of lesser gods. These beings mediate between man and the Supreme Being, but must first be paid homage. Gods possess specific powers and are localized to a geographical area. The gods inhabit places such as rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, etc. Some gods exercise power over human affairs (business, marriage, death, etc.), other gods exercise powers over nature (storms, rain, etc.). Among Hawaiians, Lono is the god of the oceans and

The World of Animism

controls the clouds and storms. Pele, the fire goddess, dwells in the volcanoes. Many still honor these gods in Hawaii today.

The biblical worldview teaches that a personal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God governs the universe (Colossians 1:16-17). He alone rules creation and there are no other gods besides Him (Isaiah 43:10). The God of the Bible is not distant from humans, but humans have distanced themselves from God. God remains involved in the affairs of this world, constantly pursuing men and women to receive His gift of grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

Spirits and Ancestors

Do you ever wonder if there are spirits in forests or other dark places? Can the dead communicate with the living? Animism holds to a belief that numerous spirits exercise their power over places where they dwell. Spirits have never inhabited human bodies, and since they can be either good or evil they must constantly be appeased. For example, the South Sea islanders ask forgiveness of the trees they cut down for canoes so that the spirits of the trees will not harm them.⁴

Legendary half-divine beings also supposedly exist in animism. Some are humans who became gods. Others are gods who became human. For example, the pharaoh of Egypt and the emperor of Japan were believed to be descendants of the sun god. These beings had supernatural births and did not die, but vanished into the sky. Many are believed to have taught humans valuable skills like making fire, canoes, houses, planting fruits, etc.

Important in animism is the remembrance of the ancestors. Animism teaches that people possess immortal souls. At death the soul is free to wander near the grave, travel the earth, or enter the world of the spirits. The spirits of the ancestors participate in the daily lives of family members. Neglecting to honor them has severe consequences. Souls of the departed who did not live fulfilled lives or died tragic deaths become ghosts. Ghosts search for bodies to inhabit and often to inflict pain.

At death one enters the realm of the ancestors who maintain a relationship with the family. Ancestors remain deeply interested in the family they began. They care for, protect, and punish those who seek to do harm.

Ancestors are revered for the following reasons. First, as the founders of the family, they remain interested in the care of the family. Second, they have answered the question of what follows death, so they can help the living through dreams, necromancers, and visions. Third, some have accomplished great achievements that must be celebrated. Fourth, they protect the family. Fifth, they function as mediators between God and the family.

One's happiness in the afterlife depends on the care given by one's descendants. Anyone banished from a family or tribe, in essence, becomes extinct with no one to remember or care for them.

As Christians, we agree with the animists that there is an immaterial soul that exists beyond the grave. We also place the family as a high priority. One of the Ten Commandments is for children to honor their father and mother. However, no departed souls remain on earth. According to Hebrews 9:27 upon death, one is immediately in heaven or hell. Secondly, the dead do not have contact with the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him. Christians celebrate and honor the memory of our loved ones, but we do not worship them nor seek to appease their

The World of Animism

spirits. We wait with joy and anticipation in knowing we will be united again with believers in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Basic Practices in Animism

In animism there are numerous taboos or prohibitions. Prohibitions are made to preserve the harmony between the spiritual world and physical world. Places or people where the life force is concentrated are protected. Myriads of taboos exist. The violation of them can result in cursing of a community and must be atoned for by sacrifices.

Second, there are sacred places. Sacred places of worship exist to commune with the spiritual world. These are places where sacred power is concentrated.

Third, there are sacred things. A whole host of objects possess power and are potentially dangerous. Stones are often believed to possess sacred power, as are certain plants and insects. Carved images are believed to possess the spirit of divinities.

Fourth, there are sacred actions. Worship includes sacrifices of animals or plants to the deities. The priests or shamans perform the sacred rites. Omens play an essential role. Signs in the heavens and certain reptiles or animals encountered in a day may predict one's future.

Fifth, there are sacred words. There are many oaths, curses, and blessings. Words are charged with sacred power if uttered by a priest. Such words possess the sacred power, mana.

Sixth, there are sacred persons. Witches use their powers for good and evil. They can use their powers to protect communities from enemies. They can use their power to communicate with the gods and spirits. In most societies, witchcraft and sorcery are most feared. Witches are believed to travel great distances in short periods, kill at a distance, and master demons. Witches have supernatural powers to inflict harm or cast spells on others. They can inject foreign bodies into a victim causing illness. Witches have the ability to communicate with dead spirits. Many societies believe these witches can even transform themselves into animals.

Then there is the shaman or the medicine man. He can cure sicknesses. He directs sacrificial rites and escorts souls to the other world. At times he can leave his body and observe events from a distance. He is born into the family or earns the job by passing tests and rituals. There are also sacred kings and even sub-humans such as trolls, water spirits, and little people.

Seventh, animism conducts sacred rituals that must be performed regularly. The head of the family performs some; others require the expertise of the priests.

Eighth, there is the practice of magic and divination. The art of casting spells and communicating with the spirit world are reserved for the priests.

The Christian must be aware when his practices are influenced by animism. Often many feel that saying "amen" or wearing a cross brings protection. Others use sacred stones or believe performing a ritual will bring them fortune. A Christian has direct access to God through Christ and does not need to rely on another person or a sacred office. Also, a Christian has all they need in Christ and does not need powers from the spiritual realm. Christ has given us all we need to overcome.

Overcoming Animism

As our study has revealed, fear is the overriding disposition among those in animistic religions. There are several reasons for this. First, one is never really sure if a taboo has been broken so that the gods, the spirits, or the ancestors have been angered. Should one of these beings become enraged, they may inflict horrific punishments. In Hawaii, there are several frightening stories about the night marchers, the spirits of ancient warriors who march along a sacred path each night. It is believed that some people have been killed because they were in the path of the night marchers.

A second reason is animism includes some of the most feared practices known to man. Sorcery, magic, and voodoo are ancient arts that strike terror in the hearts of people. It can be frightening to know that a priest or witch has placed a curse upon you.

Throughout the Bible and even today, believers continually encounter animistic practices and thinking. In times of crisis, many uninformed Christians will pray to God, but also unfortunately seek help from their animistic religion.

Among mature Christians, animistic beliefs will be displaced only when Christians transform their minds with God's Word and free themselves from the life of fear in animism. Transformation takes place when Christians understand the Bible explains the true nature of the universe. First, in contrast to the many temperamental gods in animism, the Bible teaches that there is only one God. Isaiah 43:10 states, "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me." There is no pantheon of gods; only the one true God; all others are false gods.

Second, in the Bible God forbids the animistic practices of witchcraft, necromancy, magic, and worship of foreign spirits. Deuteronomy 18:10 states "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination, sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who consults the dead." Those who practice these arts are entertaining spirits who are opposed to God and seek the destruction of all people.

Third, Christians do not need to live in fear of hostile spirit beings and spells. Christ, who loves His people, has triumphed over all. Colossians 2:15 states that He, "disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them triumphing over them by the cross."

Christ has brought into submission all authorities under His rule. Not only that, nothing enters into our life until it first filters through His loving hand. God's hand of protection shelters His people. David wrote in the Psalms, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God whom I trust.'" When tragedy strikes, Christians understand God has a purpose not to punish believers, but to teach them new things about God and ourselves refining our character to make us more like Him. Christians can be freed from a life of fear and find joy in a life of faith in Christ.

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The World of Animism

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Notes

- 1 Hiebert, Paul, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou. *Understanding Folk Religion*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1999), 157.
- 2 Anderson, Norman. *The World's Religion*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 38.
- 3 Richardson, Don. *Eternity in Their Hearts*. (Ventura, CA: Regal Press, 1984), 62-70.
- 4 Hiebert, 55-56.

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