

Animism

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of animism, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Animism

1. ANIMISM

Animism is one of the earliest forms of religious belief, which holds that the natural world and the elements within it, like plants, animals, rocks, wind, storms, etc., have a consciousness that affects the happenings of humanity and human society.

Religion is a cultural universal, meaning that all cultures have religious institutions, yet they are all different. All cultures try to answer the universal questions such as:

- Why are we here?
- What does life mean?
- What happens after we die?

It is the human propensity to question these things, yet each culture has its own responses. Sociologists, therefore, are interested in the relationship of these responses to the society as a whole. Sociologists, in studying religion, acknowledge that the form that religion takes in each society is directly related to the society itself.

Animism represents one of the earliest attempts of a culture to answer its universal questions. Animism is typically found in hunter-gatherer societies--primitive societies where the men do the hunting, and the women and children do the gathering of produce from the environment.



THINK ABOUT IT

Suppose you are living in one of these hunter-gatherer societies. You survive by tracking deer--the primary game that you eat--when suddenly, one year, there's simply no deer. Or, perhaps a huge storm decimates the forest. What happened, and why? You're likely going to try to impute consciousness to everything around you because you don't necessarily understand the forces of the world in a scientific fashion, and the way that they affect you. In this manner, you might think that the deer are gone because they're worried about something, or that the wind destroyed the forest because you did something bad or wrong.

In societies which are very tethered to nature, like hunter-gatherer societies and traditional Native American societies--which are still very close to nature--you will see evidence of animism, because it's a reflection of their engagement with the natural world and their inability to control the natural world. Being subject to the natural world's vicissitudes makes them view objects in the natural world as having a consciousness that affects human society.



BIG IDEA

Animism is one way that humans have answered their religious questions. It's sociologically interesting because the beliefs flow from the nature of the society itself and the environmental constraints that the society faces.



TERM TO KNOW

Animism

A religious belief that holds that the natural world, and elements within it like plants, animals, rocks, and clouds, have consciousness and affect the happenings of humanity.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about an early religious belief called **animism**. Animism is typically found in hunter-gatherer societies--primitive societies and is one of the first of a culture to attempt to answer universal questions.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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