

Animism and Related Beliefs

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WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson talks about animism and related beliefs. You'll look at the presence of animism in several of the religious and spiritual traditions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Animism
2. Eastern Religions
3. Paganism and Pantheism

1. Animism

The word “animism” comes from the Latin term **anima**, which means “soul” or **life force**.

Animism is the belief that all living things are endowed with a **spiritual essence**. Plants and microscopic life are included sometimes. Even inanimate objects are sometimes filled with the animating force of life, according to some animistic beliefs. One distinctive feature of animism is that there is no separation, no distinction between the realms of matter and the realms of spirit.



TERMS TO KNOW

Anima

In animism, that which enlivens and gives character to plants, animals and (sometimes) physical objects.

Life Force

That which imparts life, spirit, and/or soul.

Spiritual Essence

That which expresses the true nature of a person, place, or thing.

2. Eastern Religions

Animism is present in many of the religions of the world. In certain Hindu traditions, there's a practice of sacrificing the spirit of the rooster through offering its blood in sacrifice to particular gods.

The traditional Japanese religion called Shinto has many animistic features also. Many Shinto shrines incorporate natural structures, such as mountains or trees, with kami that are honored and revered.



DID YOU KNOW

The Japanese word “kami” refers to divinity, animal spirits, all natural forces, and also to the general category of essence.

There are elements of animism also in the religion of Jainism. Practitioners practice extreme nonviolence and self control as a principle means of spiritual freedom and spiritual liberation. All forms of life—animal, plant, down to the microscopic level—possess souls, according to the cosmology of Jainism.

3. Paganism and Pantheism

Many ancient and contemporary traditions are categorized as pagan religions or paganism. Animism is a central feature here as well. All of nature is believed to be inseparable from the spirit realm. Deity infuses nature, and therefore there's no distinction.



DID YOU KNOW

Within contemporary paganism, there are at least two different perspectives on animism. In one case, it's believed that a spiritual energy resides in every aspect of the universe. In other cases, some pagans believe that there are very specific spirits that dwell in particular places, such as natural structures, which can be engaged and communicated with through things such as rituals, prayers, and ceremonies.

Pantheism is the idea that a divine spiritual force or god is omnipresent in the created world of matter and therefore resides in every aspect of life in the universe. Pantheism is a way of thinking about the sacred that, like animism, can also often be applied to paganism.

One difference between pantheism and animism is that, usually, pantheists believe in an all-present and immanent divine, whereas animism doesn't necessarily have specific notions regarding the nature of divinity per se. The foundational structure of animism has more to do with primal spirits differentiated by the form of life that they inhabit.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you looked at **animism** in three **Eastern religions**: Hinduism, Shinto, and Jainism. Animism, **paganism** and **pantheism** are religious worldviews in which nature is generally thought to be inseparable from the divine. Then you distinguished between pantheism and animism in terms of how deity is understood.



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