

# Animism, Secularism and Theism

## Developing a Tripartite Model for Understanding World Cultures

*What do African Animists, Japanese Shintoists and American Secularists have in common? How do they differ from one another? Here is a preliminary discussion draft suggesting that theirs and the world views of others can be classified by summing their animistic, secularistic and theistic components.*

By Gailyn Van Rheenen

In my book *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* I contrast animism and secularism and evaluate both on the basis of Christian theism (1991: 95–102). After studying these concepts in my course on Animism, a creative group of graduate students suggested that all world cultures could be categorized by the extent to which they are secular, animistic, and theistic. They worked with me to construct what we called a tripartite model for categorizing worldviews. This model, first suggested by Yukikazu Obata of Japan, will be diagrammed in this presentation. Before the model is presented, however, I will describe and contrast the secular, animistic, and theistic worldviews.

### Secularism

Secularists believe that God is either non-existent or irrelevant to affairs of this world. They divide the world into two large slices, the natural and the supernatural. Only natural powers, which can be empirically analyzed, are thought to operate in the natural world. The secularists' world is a "closed universe" because natural powers are thought to operate with no interference from any spiritual realm. Secularists, consequently, tend to live for the here and now; are absorbed by material, this-worldly concerns; are extremely busy with earthly distractions; and are career consumed. Even Christians within secular societies reflect this thinking. They often seek medicine and therapy for illness without relying on the Great Physician. In other words, prayer and healing are divorced as if God has little to do with life as a whole. Many study the sciences without reflecting on the Creator who created and sustains the universe. Science and religion are thus disconnected. This can

lead to the belief that humanity, with its scientific understanding, is self-sufficient, able to handle all obstacles in life, without any need of God. But Jeremiah's words call the secular person to dependence on the Creator God: "I know, Oh Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23).

Four presuppositions of this secular thinking are described by Diogenes Allen in *Christian Belief in a Post-modern World*: (1) The world is studied without any reference to God; (2) Morality and ethics are rooted in reason rather than in a compassionate, holy God; (3) Progress is inevitable and would free humanity "from social bondage and vulnerability to nature"; and (4) Knowledge is considered to be inherently good. But in what Allen calls the postmodern age each of these secular assumptions is being called into question (Allen 1989:3).

### Animism

Animism is "the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that humans, consequently, must discover what beings and forces are impacting them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power" (Van Rheenen, 1991:20). This definition assumes that an interaction exists between the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, the holy and the secular. Personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces are thought to be everywhere shaping what happens in the world. Humans with this worldview employ divination to determine what powers are impacting their lives and manipulate this power for their own benefit. The essence of

Animism is power—power of the ancestor to control those of his lineage, power of an evil eye to kill a newborn or ruin a harvest, power of planets to affect earthly destiny, power of the demonic to possess a spiritist, power of magic to control human events, power of impersonal forces to heal a child or make a person wealthy.

Animists perceive that they are living in an interconnected world. They are intimately connected to their families, some of whom are living and some of whom have already passed on to a spiritual realm. They are also connected to the spiritual world; the ambivalent yearning of gods, spirits, ancestors, and ghosts impact the living. Animists feel a connectedness with nature. The stars, planets, and moon are thought to affect earthly events. The natural realm is so related to the human realm that practitioners divine current and future events by analyzing what animals are doing or by sacrificing animals and analyzing their livers, entrails, or stomachs. Animists also believe that they are connected with other human beings. They access the thoughts of other human beings through ESP or other types of thought transfer. Thus the animist believes that no person can live as an individual separate and apart from his extended family, spiritual powers, nature, or thoughts of other human beings. While secular assumptions are increasingly being called into question in this post-modern age, various forms of animism have become viable options.

In many ways animism is the total opposite of secularism. Animists perceive that all of life is controlled by spiritual powers; secularists

believe either that there are no spiritual powers or that these powers seldom intervene in the natural realm. Animists live in fear of spiritual powers whose activities must be divined and frequently manipulated; secularists believe they can chart their own courses by human inventiveness, and resourcefulness and through reason. Animists seek to live in harmony with their world believing that the forces and powers of the world are interconnected; secularists manipulate their world by means of science and technology.

Amazingly, however, many similarities exist between animism and secularism. Both are philosophies rooted in power. While animists believe in spiritual powers, secularists believe in human power. This emphasis on power leads both worldviews to be essentially manipulative. Animists seek to manipulate spiritual powers by means of magic; secularists manipulate their environments by means of technology. Both animism and secularism are amoral systems. Animists erect taboos to control power or believe that some force, such as *karma*, will make one pay later for the sins of today. Secularists seek, by reason, to erect logical fences of morality, but all such fences eventually fall before the strong winds of cultural forces. Both animism and secularism are extremely adaptable to the ebbs and flows of cultural tides. Neither believe that there is such a thing as ultimate truth. Animism is continually changing form: one generation worships polytheistic gods, the next seeks answers to life's problems by following the patterns of the stars, the third believes that the stars and planets which their fathers followed are really personifications of the personal gods of their grandfathers. Secularism is equally adapted and relativistic. One paradigm of truth takes the place of another paradigm which is displaced by still a third.

### Christian Theism

Christian theism stands in stark contrast to both animism and secularism. Theism presupposes the God who created the heavens and the earth has always been a personal loving active God. God has raised up judges to deliver the Israelites (Judges. 2:10–19), instituted priests to intercede for the people of Israel (Exod. 28–29; Lev. 8–9), sent

prophets to proclaim his message to kings and the people (Jer. 1:5–6; 15:19; Amos 7:16; Ezek. 3:17), and gave his son Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to die for humankind (John 3:16). He elected Israel to be his priest to the nations (Exod. 19:5) and now works through the Church as his chosen people to call the nations out of darkness and into his wonderful light (1 Pet. 2:9).

Contrary to the secular and animistic worldviews, a theistic worldview acknowledges that God “is always at his work to this very day” (John 5:17). While not denying the reality of spiritual powers, Christian theism acknowledges God as the incomparable one, the God of gods and the Lord of lords. Moses’ confession of incomparability describes how God’s nature is distinct from that of other gods: “Who among the gods is like you, Oh Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exod. 15:11). Even though God is perfect, just, faithful, and upright (Deut. 32:4), Israel followed various gods, who were demons in disguise (Deut. 32:17). These powers variously are called gods in the Old Testament, demons in the Gospels, or principalities and powers in Pauline literature. My contention is that, although these powers take different forms and manifest themselves in different cultural ways, their essence is the same in all ages. The names of powers who oppose God vary in different biblical contexts, but their origin and essence are one (Van Rheezen 1991: 99–124).

The predominant attributes of God, his love and holiness, demonstrate the central qualities of Christian theism. God is characterized by “steadfast love” (*hesed*). He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6–7). This attribute is demonstrated continually by God’s saving actions throughout the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Psa. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). In the New Testament this attribute is attested in the sending of his divine Son to become flesh and die for sinful humankind (Rom. 5:8). God’s eternal nature is love (1 John 4:7–8). God, who is love, is also holy.

A theistic worldview poses a moral God in charge of His universe. Isaiah called him “the Holy One of Israel (43:8). God speaks through Isaiah to say, “I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel’s Creator, your King” (Isa. 43:15). The heavenly host reflect this quality of holiness by proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). The sacrificial system described in Leviticus is based on a holy God desiring to unite sinful people with Himself. Therefore, God identifies Himself as “the Lord, who makes you holy” (Lev. 20:8). These two qualities—love and holiness—make God distinct from all other spiritual beings.

God, although reigning as sovereign Lord over his universe, allows people the freedom to choose their allegiance in life. This is a main tenant of the theistic view. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve could choose the way of life or the way of death—the way of the tree of life or the way of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Human freewill is a testimony of God’s love. He desires that people follow him because they love and adore him.

### A Radical Difference

As the above discussion illustrates, the essence of Christian theism is radically different from either secularism or animism. First, Christian theists acclaim a personal loving, holy God. Secularists either deny God or believe that he is not actively involved in the world. Animists understand God to be (1) a distant, unapproachable Creator, (2) the Supreme Being whose nature is refracted in lower spiritual beings to whom prayers and sacrifices are made, or (3) the impersonal power that permeates all of nature (Van Rheezen 1991: 243–246, 298).

Each of these perspectives is a contrast to the true nature of the Creator God. Second, theists hold to objective reality as defined by God who stands above changing earthly cultures. Secular and animistic perspectives change rapidly as old paradigms are replaced by new paradigms of reality. Third, theistic morality is rooted in the eternal nature of God, who rules over human cultures and societies. Although moral issues change, God’s attributes of love and holiness provide eternal

principles for Christian morality. Secular morality, on the other hand, is drawn from human philosophies, and animistic morality is based upon human taboos and fear of spiritual retribution.

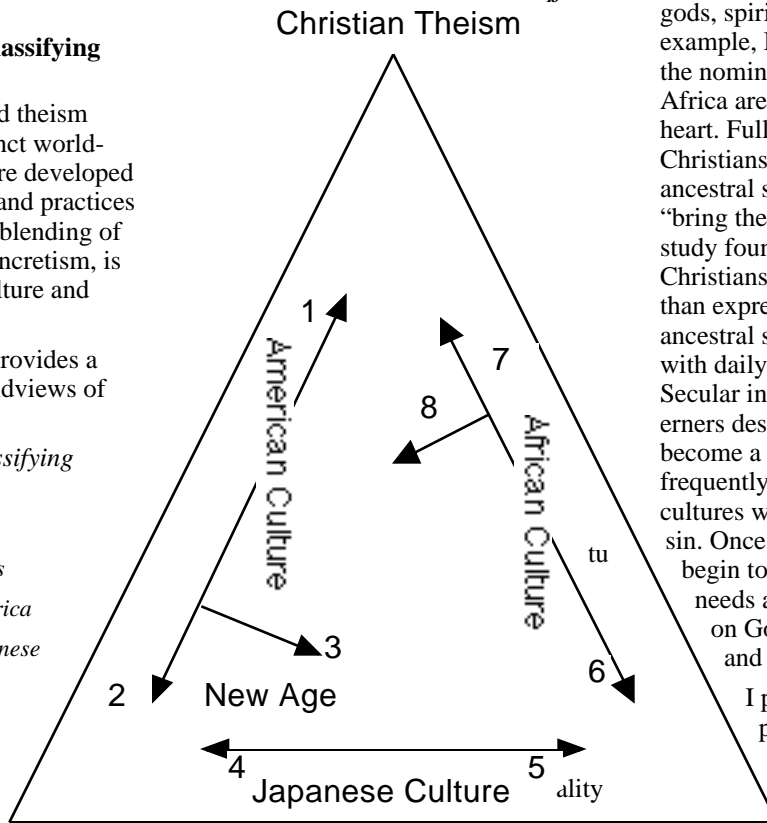
**A Tripartite Model for Classifying World Cultures**

Secularism, animism, and theism seldom stand alone as distinct worldviews. These worldviews are developed by mixing together beliefs and practices from various sources. This blending of cultural elements, called syncretism, is common to every world culture and religion.

The triangular diagram provides a model for charting the worldviews of various cultures:

*A Tripartite Model for Classifying World Cultures:*

- 1— American Christians
- 2— American Non-Christians
- 3— New Agers in North America
- 4— Western-Influenced Japanese
- 5— Shintoists
- 6— African Traditional Religionists
- 7— African Christians
- 8— Secular influences radiating out of Christianity



of conversation and is increasingly less isolated from life. People, however, are cynical about traditional religion which has empty forms but little spirituality. This desire for spiri-

honor and praise.

Even in the lives of these Christians, however, the acceptance of God and other beliefs of the Christian faith has not necessarily displaced beliefs in gods, spirits, and ancestors. For example, Dal Congdon has found that the nominally Christian Zulu of South Africa are still largely animistic at heart. Fully 69.6% of all professing Christians continue to believe that ancestral spirits “protect” them and “bring them good fortune.” Congdon’s study found that “fewer professing Christians affirmed the deity of Christ than expressed dependence upon the ancestral spirits for problems connected with daily living” (Congdon 1985:297). Secular influences introduced by Westerners desiring to help Africa have also become a reality in Africa. All too frequently Christianity revitalizes cultures which have been broken by sin. Once revitalized, however, many begin to seek to satisfy their own felt needs and no longer are dependent on God or have time for worship and prayer to Him.

I pray that this model, although preliminary, might stimulate significant discussion and become useful in the theology of missions and missiological training and strategy.

**References**

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yet rejection of the forms of traditional religion, has opened the doors to New Age perspectives, frequently introduced as true Christian spirituality.

Japanese have difficulty perceiving God as personal, loving, and involved in human life. This inability to comprehend the personal Creator God partially explains the resistance of the Japanese people to the Gospel. Their worldview runs along the secular—animistic line. Shintoists are highly animistic while those influenced by the West have turned to secularism.

African worldviews on the other hand follow the animistic—theistic line. Thousands of Africans South of the Sahara have become Christians. They accepted the Christian message that God is not distant or unapproachable, as they had supposed, but is the great I AM, the ever-present Creator who is dependable and faithful, the Incomparable One deserving of all