

Paganism, Polytheism and Animism

Polytheism is a belief in, or worship of, multiple and equal gods or divinities. The word comes from the Greek words *poly+theoi*, meaning 'many gods.'

Most ancient religions were polytheistic, and often the Gods and Goddesses of a particular people or region were viewed as if they were a defined group of deities that shared some form of relationship with one another. Known as pantheons, these codified or systemic bodies of Deities consisted of traditional Gods and Goddesses, often first worshipped as the patrons of cities or places, came to be collected together as empires extended over larger territories and were often accumulated over centuries of cultural interchange and experience.

Examples of cultures that had pantheons and were polytheistic would be the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, Celts, Romans, Slovaks, Vikings, Mesopotamians and Saxons.

Prior to this long period of clearly defined and codified pantheons, man's relationship with spiritual forces was both more personal and universal.

The roots of the words we use to describe the world around us provide clues about early man's relationship to the world around him.

The word *Animal* describes that which is living and has its Latin roots in *Anima, Soul*: to be animated by *Spirit*. This word brings with it the concept that all living creatures on Earth are each the physical embodiment of the creative force of the universe which some call *God*.

Currently we tend to view things with differentiation: people, are seen as being separate from, or different to, animals and nature. The word 'nature' has Indo-European roots and can be thought of as meaning the essential properties of something. If we are also essential properties of the cosmos then would it not be true to say that we too are definitely a part of nature?

Ancient man saw everything around him as a manifestation of universal spirit, captured by its creation or origin into a unique moment of time. To embody something means to give physical expression, and that which is born into the realm of time and space was viewed as a living embodiment of spirit: the word *Life* derives from the Latin *Spiritus*, or *Breath*.

From this perspective it could be said, 'Deity is everywhere': in the surrounding world and cosmos and within one's own body, mind and feelings. Deity is in the trees, the rocks, the rivers, the hills and mountains. Special places were revered and held sacred for countless generations; holy wells and springs from which the source of life would flow were seen to be the dwelling places of favourable spirits, or Gods or Goddesses. Unclean or stagnant water was the product of foul tempered beings or impish creatures.

From Mother Earth to the stars, the spirit of creation flows towards you and out from you. Man is not separate from the nature around him. For ancient man there was neither inner-life, nor outer-life, no higher-self or lower-self. Just the Self, relating with the forces of creation via the sentient world of experiences.

If a bond was formed with an animal it was more than mere convenient husbandry or even friendship. A kinship would be developed and the animal's temperament and nature would blend with one's own. It would become altogether familiar. This concept remains evident, for example, in certain martial arts, and is the basis behind popular film titles such as 'Crouching tiger, hidden dragon'.

In certain parts of the world, different deities were held in higher favour than others for both geographical and life enhancing reasons. For people living near the equator the Sun might be viewed as something that scorches and burns, turning life into dust. The spirit that brings rain would be held with great joy in this region.

A different group who lived in northern climes would hold alternative view. For them, the problems that come with crops being flooded by frequent rain would mean that the Sun would be revered as the harbinger of warmth, life and joy.

These two sets of people would evolve very different perceptions of life and the nature of reality. Their customs, rituals and most highly valued deities would differ. The cultural and language differences would be markedly distinct, as would their idea of Truth.

There are though, a surprising number of similarities between peoples, cultures and civilisations that once lived thousands of miles, and even thousands of years, apart. For example, in Ancient Greece the God of war was called Ares. The Romans called their God of war Mars, the Norse men called theirs Tewis, and it is from Tewis that we get the name of the day of the week that we now call Tuesday. Tewis-day. In esoteric doctrines the days of the week are held in reverence and each attributed to a God or Goddess in the pantheon.

Sunday: Day of works of the *Sun*. A day for enjoying one's Self and being creative: a day for re-creation and fun.

Monday: Day of works of the *Moon*. A day for being sensitive to one's emotions and caring for others. A day for meditating or participating in natural magik.

Tuesday: Day of works of *Tewis*. A day for self expression, for asserting the self, defeating challenges, resolving conflicts or heroically crushing an enemy. A day for competition and athletic prowess.

Wednesday: Day of works of *Woden* (synonymous with the Greek God Hermes and the Roman God Mercury). A day for learning, reading, communicating and writing.

Thursday: Day of works of *Thor* (synonymous with the Greek God Zeus and the Roman God Jupiter). A day for travel, for higher learning, for teaching and ritual or religious observations. A day of luck, protection and for expanding one's horizons with hope and optimism.

Friday: Day of works of *Freyer* (Synonymous with the Greek Goddess Aphrodite and the Roman Goddess Venus). A day for acts of love and romance and affairs of the heart.

Saturday: Day of works of *Saturn* (synonymous with the Greek God Cronus). A day for acts of business, trade, officialdom and authority. A day for dealing with issues of karma and working steadily though long-term goals, hurdles and obstacles.

We can see then that the essence of some deities had their counterparts in other cultures. Jung was later to term these principles that are common to all people as *Archetype*.

The root of the word Pagan means *country dweller*, and the customs of indigenous populations often prevail through the changes of history, even in the aftermath of invasion. In many Christian and Islamic countries the old folk customs and cunning practices of herbalism, divination, healing and spell crafting are easily found just under the surface of religiously correct daily life in cities and towns as well as in the countryside.

It is common to find the education of the day is coloured by the religion, philosophy and moment of history it finds itself in. For example, I was taught in school that people thought the Earth was flat and Christopher Columbus was the first person to discover that it is round. I wasn't taught the fact that the Earth is round was evident to most people of Columbus' time, especially other sailors and navigators. Nor was I informed that [Eratosthenes](#) (276-194 BCE) had accurately calculated the circumference of the Earth seventeen hundred years earlier.