



Myth and ritual



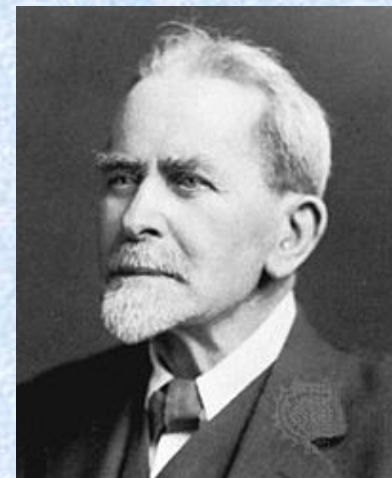
Dr. Liz Greene
University of Wales, Trinity St David
MA CAA
4 March 2013

Various scholarly interpretations of myth

Myth as 'bad science'

- Late 19th-century historico-anthropological understandings of myth assume that myths are narratives developed to provide explanations for biological and natural phenomena and experiences that are inexplicable to a pre-modern mentality. Myth was viewed as 'bad science' by James Frazer (1854-1941) in his seminal work, *The Golden Bough*: myths are 'primitive' explanations of natural phenomena which can now be correctly understood through scientific knowledge (e.g. the Greek myth of Persephone and Hades as an 'explanation' of the cycle of the seasons).
- Jonathan Z. Smith (*Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990, 128) points out that the notion of myth as 'bad science' still lingers in the academy even in the post-modern era, resulting in confusion between a 'correlation' and an 'identity'.

Left, 5th-century red-figured Attic kylix portraying Persephone in the underworld with Hades



Frazer's evolutionist legacy

- Hans Jonas suggests that Gnostic myths, which he believes portray dramatic cosmic processes in the form of literally understood stories ('bad science'), were gradually interiorised in early Christian mysticism. The 2nd century CE Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus likewise understood Gnostic myth-making as primitive and inferior to the abstract, interiorised soul journey he himself describes in the *Enneads*. [Hans Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought', *Journal of Religion* 49:4 (1969), 315-29; Plotinus, *Ennead* II.9]
- Many researchers assume that Gnostic myths were understood literally and describe cosmological phenomena in naive ways ('bad science'). The Gnostic soul journey is described by Kurt Rudolph as a mythic event that only occurs after the death of the Gnostic initiate. [Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (HarperCollins 1977)]
- John J. Collins describes the Gnostic myth-making propensity as 'narratives in the mythological mode', and contrasts it with the superior conceptual mode of science and philosophy developed by Greek thinkers in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. Collins proposes that figures such as the personified Sophia (Wisdom), which appear in both Gnostic and early Jewish texts, are an 'intermediate' stage between myth and logic. Gnostic myths are thus seen as a regression to pre-Platonic thought. [John J. Collins, 'Cosmos and Salvation: Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Hellenistic Age', *History of Religions* 17:2 (1977), 129]

‘Pre-modern’ and ‘post-modern’ understandings of myth

- Plato distinguished between two modes of understanding and describing inner and outer realities: *mythos* – relying on intuition and imagination – and *logos* – relying on logic and reason. [Plato, *Republic*, Book X. See also Albert A. Anderson, ‘Mythos, Logos, and Telos: How to Regain the Love of Wisdom’, in Albert A. Anderson, Steven V. Hicks, and Lech Witkowski, *Mythos and Logos: How to Regain the Love of Wisdom* (Rodopi, 2004), 61-74]
- This perception of dual modes of perception and expression, entirely ignored by the Frazerian evolutionist current in anthropology and history of religions, is reflected in Stanley J. Tambiah’s distinction between participatory and causal thinking. Causal thinking is defined by Tambiah as the ‘rules and methodology of positive science and discursive mathematico-logical reason’. Participatory thinking is lateral rather than linear and relies on intuitive association rather than causal progression. Myth is thus a way of understanding which works by analogies and sympathies rather than by a preconceived notion of objective ‘truth’. [Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)].
- Ingvild Gilhus suggests that mythic narratives are themselves rituals, and that the recitation of Gnostic cosmological and cosmogonic myths in the first centuries CE were intended to invoke and sustain a process of change and transformation in the listener: a process that occurs ‘on the psychological level’. Myth is thus neither an explanation for ritual, nor a form of ‘bad science’, but is itself a ritual intended to induce an ‘altered state of consciousness’. [Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, ‘Gnosticism: A Study in Liminal Symbolism’, *Numen* 31:1 (1984), 110]

Myth as a narrative explanation of ritual

- The so-called 'Cambridge Ritualists' of the early 20th century – Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928), Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), and F. M. Cornford (1874-1943) – assumed ritual to precede myth, which provided a narrative to explain and sanctify ritual actions rooted in earlier, more primitive responses to basic human experiences such as birth, puberty, sexual union, and death.
- Harrison was strongly influenced by Frazer and Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), but was also receptive to Theosophical ideas circulating at the time, and postulated a kind of 'ur-religion' or primal form of religion practised in pre-history. She viewed the rituals of the ancient Greek world as 'primitive' ways of negotiating with fear of spirits, of death, and of the gods. Harrison believed that, beneath the surface themes of early Greek poets such as Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides lay the basis for the earliest forms of ritual, whose original purpose or intent had been forgotten.
- Ritual is '...a stratum of religious conceptions, ideas of evil, of purification, of atonement, ignored or suppressed by Homer...It is this substratum of religious conceptions, at once more primitive and more permanent, that I am concerned to investigate.' In other words, myth follows ritual and provides it with a sophisticated theology, but ritual is essential, primitive, and concerned with the most basic mysteries of human life. [Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge U Press, 1903), vii-viii]



'The first preliminary to any scientific understanding of Greek religion is a minute examination of its ritual.' (Harrison, *Prolegomena*, vii)

Myth and astrology

- Cosmological and cosmogonic myths usually involve anthropomorphised narratives about the heavenly bodies and the fixed stars, e.g. the thirty-six decan demons of Egyptian astrology and early Jewish magic, or the seven planetary archons of Gnostic cosmologies. These myths usually also include anthropogony: the emergence, creation, and fate of humans in relation to the heavens and heavenly bodies, e.g. the myth in the early Jewish apocalyptic work, *3 Enoch*, of the stellar angels who mate with mortal women and teach them heavenly secrets, or Plato's idea of the stellar origin of the human soul.
- Despite the claims of some contemporary astrologers, myths have been associated with the planets since very ancient times. Although from Ptolemy onward the myths disappear from astrological texts, Ptolemy's references in the *Tetrabiblos* to 'the star of Zeus' or 'the star of Aphrodite' imply a knowledge of the myths on the part of his readers.
- Analytical and archetypal psychologies involved with astrology often use myths as a technique of 'amplification', i.e. myths provide a meaningful narrative through which a planetary symbol can be understood on an intuitive, non-rational level as a dynamic rather than a static factor.



Myth and mythic image

- Myths are not identical with mythic images. The bare bones of a myth are clothed with diverse fabrics according to cultural context and individual predisposition.
- For example, Saturn in Gnostic cosmology is represented as a lion-headed serpent, Ialdabaoth. Astrological portrayals of Saturn vary across the centuries. The myth of Saturn eating his children can be visually portrayed in many ways and used in many contexts, including Goya's savage vision of Saturn as the best possible representation of the inner meaning and dynamic of the Spanish civil war.
- The individual artist or writer resonates with particular aspects of a myth and perceives the myth enacted in the outer world or within the human psyche.
- 'Myth is characterized by its suitability for telling and retelling...Its themes are often surprisingly constant, in spite of the many fantastic and paradoxical motifs that shape its unmistakable identity; even though slightly distorted, they return again and again.' [Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 31-32]



The origins of theatre as a poetic enactment of myth

- 'Tragedy is in origin a Ritual Dance, a *Sacer Ludus* [sacred game], representing normally the Aition, or supposed historical Cause, of some current ritual practice...The Dance in question is originally or centrally that of Dionysus, performed at his feast, in his theatre, under the presidency of his Priest, and by performers who were called Διονυσίου τεχνίται [artists of Dionysus]...Comedy and Tragedy represent different stages in the life of this Year Spirit; Comedy leads to his Marriage Feast, his κωμος and γαμος, Tragedy to his death and θρηνος [lamentation].' – Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1912), 341
- Harrison's sequence of mythic stages, which she believed formed the basis of both ritual and Greek tragedy, include: 1) an *agon* (Contest), the year-god or solar divinity against his enemy, light against darkness, summer against winter); 2) a *pathos* or sacrificial death; 3) a Messenger (whose arrival announces the death of the year-god to the shocked community); 4) a *threnos* (lamentation), which invokes paradoxical emotions among the community, since they know that the death will lead to a rebirth; 5) a theophany, discovery, or recognition; and 6) a resurrection or apotheosis of the year-god.
- These stages were reformulated and elaborated by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1949) as the 'monomyth' of separation, initiation, and return: the archetypal stages of the solar cycle lying behind every mythic narrative of the hero's journey. Campbell relied on Jung's idea of archetypes rather than Frazer's idea of myth as 'bad science', but like Harrison, he adopted a morphological (structural) approach.

Ritual dress

- In ancient Greek theatre, no actor showed his naked face; all the roles were enacted in stylized masks and costumes.
- 'Masks, the most ancient means of surrendering one's own identity and assuming a new extraordinary identity, come to the Greeks through various traditions...The mask effects a transposition into a new and unknown world.'

– Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion, Archaic and Classical* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 103-4



Greek tragic mask,
1st century BCE



Photos of Peter Hall's production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, given at the National Theatre, 1981, and acted entirely in masks based on ancient Greek prototypes. The group on the left represent the Erinyes or Furies who avenge Orestes' murder of his mother; on the right, the Chorus.



21st-century Druids at Stonehenge



Ritual objects

- Ritual objects serve as reminders or paradigms of the essential elements of the mythic narrative, but they may also be understood as *sunthemata*: symbols which through their function as intermediaries connect the participants with transpersonal or celestial potencies. For this idea in late antiquity, see Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

- Christian 'mystery' or 'miracle' plays (10th to 15th centuries) are the earliest formally developed theatre in medieval Europe. They first emerged as dramatic embellishments of liturgical texts (i.e. Christian myths), and were enacted in churches as tableaux accompanied by antiphonal singing and utilising traditional Christian ritual objects and dress.



The revival of the Christian mystery play: the York Mystery Plays, 2012, at the Museum Gardens, York. The original Middle English text for the York cycle of forty-eight plays is available at <http://www.hti.umich.edu/c/cme/>

Ritual structures

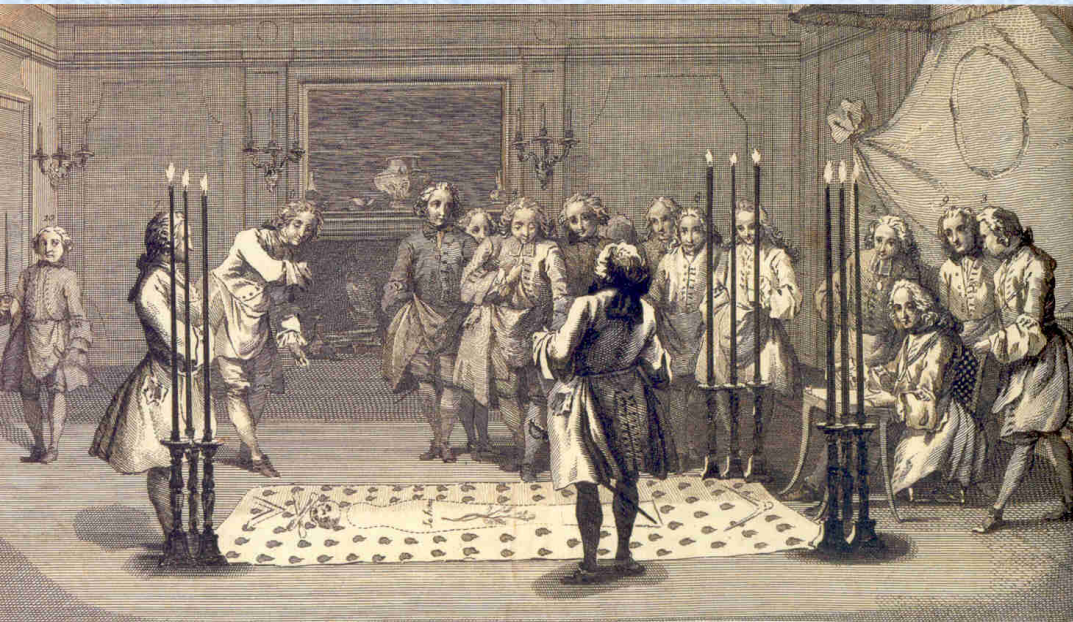
- The Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry, in *De antro nympharum* (‘The Cave of the Nymphs’), describes the Mithraea – the buildings constructed by initiates of the mystery cult of the god Mithras – as ‘symbols’. Mithraea were built to replicate the dome of the heavens, and were designed to facilitate the mythic journey of the soul through the planetary spheres undertaken in the rituals of this religious cult. Mithraic rituals enacted the myth of Mithras slaying the cosmic bull (known as the tauroctony). The architecture as well as the specific iconography of the Mithraea combine with ritual action and language to generate an initiatory experience. The building, like the cruciform shape of many Christian churches, is an essential part of the ritual and also distills the mythic narrative in architectural form.
- On Mithraic ritual, see Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Roger Beck, *Beck on Mithras: Collected Works with New Essays* (Ashgate, 2004).



Far left, Roman bas-relief from the altar of a Mithraeum, 2nd century CE. The god is portrayed slaying the cosmic bull to fertilise the earth. Near left, a domed Mithraeum at San Clemente, Rome, 3rd century CE.

Ritual actions

- Ritual actions, which are formulaic, repetitive, and theatrical, may include words, music, chanting, dance, and recitation of '*nomina barbara*' or incomprehensible names or strings of letters, but can also be performed without them.
- In the Masonic ritual shown in the 18th-century engravings below, the death of Hiram Abiff is being enacted. Hiram, according to the Masonic 'foundation myth', was the Master Mason of Solomon's Temple. Refusing to reveal his secrets, Hiram was murdered by three fellow masons, buried, discovered, and then resurrected after fifteen days by King Solomon, who used the grip of the Master Mason and whispered the 'Lost Word' in Hiram's ear.
- 'It was the single object of all the ancient rites and mysteries practiced in the very bosom of pagan darkness...to teach the immortality of the soul. This is still the great design of the third degree of Masonry. This is the scope and aim of its ritual... By its legend and all its ritual, it is implied that we have been redeemed from the death of sin and the sepulchre of pollution...The important design of the degree is to symbolize the great doctrines of the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul.' – Grand Lodge of South Carolina, *Ahiman Rezon or Book of Constitutions* (1965), 141-2



Psychological perspectives on myth and ritual

- In 1907 Freud wrote a paper called 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices' [*Zeitschrift für Religionpsychologie* 1:4-12, reprinted in English in Vol. 9 of the *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959)]. In this work, the first in which he discussed the idea of 'unconscious guilt', he discussed ritual in the pathological stereotypical behaviour of some 'neurotics', 'derived from the most intimate, and for the most part from the sexual, experiences of the patient'. Obsessive ritual actions, arising from unconscious guilt, are 'a compromise between warring forces of the mind' (p. 120-26). Freud believed that religious rituals, while not necessarily compulsive, arise from the same root: they are a sublimation of forbidden unconscious wishes.
- Freud's understanding of ritual as psychopathology or, at best, as sublimation, has influenced subsequent clinical approaches to ritual.
- Ritualistic behaviour in clinical frameworks is understood as *protective*: a mode of defence, a *strategy* resulting in '*fear behaviour*' and intended to cope with hostile forces in the environment or within the individual or society.
- Clinical syndromes involving ritualistic behaviour include phobias, various forms of autism, and obsessive-compulsive disorders
- 'Appeasement is a normal feature of much human behaviour. We give gifts to prevent anger or to placate people who are already cross. Religious sacrifice and prayer are on one level efforts to avert the wrath of God that descends in the shape of misfortune. Superstitious taboos are thought to fend off disaster and obsessive-compulsives often say that their ruminations and rituals stave off harm to themselves or other people'. [Isaac M. Marks, *Fears, Phobias, and Rituals: Panic, Anxiety, and Their Disorders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 81]



Autistic child with toys lined up in ritualistic fashion



Obsessive-compulsive disorder



Phobic responses as 'fear behaviour'



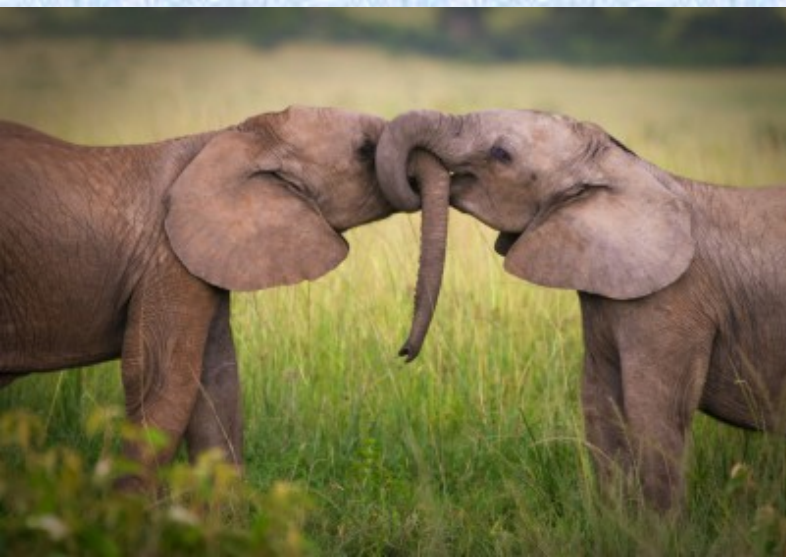
Psychologists' myths: myth as a mode of perception

- Freud understood the Oedipal triangle as the 'foundation myth' of the human psyche. In order to make the myth fit his psychological theory, he selected particular portions of Sophocles' dramatic trilogy and ignored others.
- Jung understood 'individuation' to be the 'foundation myth' of the human psyche, best symbolised by the alchemical process of transforming base matter into gold, or the celestial ascent of the soul through the planetary spheres.
- Alfred Adler understood the 'will to power' as the 'foundation myth' of the human psyche.
- James Hillman has suggested that psychologists themselves, like all humans, have an individual myth or mode of perceiving and relating to life, best exemplified by the individual *daimon*. There is no single 'foundation myth' applicable to every individual or every culture.

Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864)

Anthropological approaches to ritual

- Ritual denotes ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances’. [Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24]
- Rappaport notes the overlap between clinical and anthropological definitions, and the synonymous use of the term ‘ceremony’. In sociology and anthropology, ‘ritual’ and ‘ceremony’ can refer to a large range of social events, not all of which are religious – although an argument can be made for a religious component in all agreed formalised social rituals such as puberty rites.
- Ethologists equate ‘ritual’ with ‘display’ to designate repetitive behaviour in animals, fish, birds, and insects as well as humans.
- Ritual is thus linked with instinct, and instinct with fundamental biological necessities such as reproduction and the need for food, territory, and safety.



'The concept of *ritual* has long been used to describe the rules of religious behaviour. Biology's recent usurpation of the term appears, however, to confuse the concept, mixing the transcendent with the infra-human. But perhaps these two do indeed meet within the fundamental orders that constitute life...Biology has defined *ritual* as a behavioural pattern that has lost its primary function – present in its unritualized model – but which persists in a new function, that of communication...This communicating function reveals the two basic characteristics of ritual behaviour, namely, repetition and theatrical exaggeration...Above all, then, ritual creates and affirms social interaction.'

– Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1983), pp. 22



Initiation ritual of boys in Malawi

Ritual and language

- ‘Ritual, as a form of communication, is a kind of language. It is natural, then, that verbalized language, man’s most effective system of communication, should be associated with ritual...Ritual and language have gone hand in hand since language began’.

[Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 29-30]



Celebration of
the Catholic
Mass

- ‘Ritual...is a complex of words and actions...it is not the case that words are one thing and the rite another. The uttering of the words itself is a ritual’ .

[Edmund Leach, ‘Ritualization in man in relation to conceptual and social development’ , *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*:251 (1966), 247-526]

- ‘Rituals exploit a number of verbal forms which we loosely refer to as prayers, songs, spells, addresses, blessings’ .

[S. J. Tambiah, ‘The Magical Power of Words’ , *Man* 3:2 (1968), 175-208, on p. 176]

- ‘All ritual, whatever the idiom, is addressed to the human participants and uses a technique which attempts to re-structure and integrate the minds and emotions of the actors’ .

- [Tambiah, ‘Magical Power of Words’ , 202]

- ‘Neither the ideas and insights that can be extracted as a partial clarification by interpreting the ritual, nor the emotions and explanations expressed by participants in the cult, are the basis and origin of ritual; they simply accompany it. Thanks to its theatrical, mimetic character and the deep impression that its sacred solemnity can import, ritual is self-perpetuating.’

- [Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 23]



Astrologers performing the ritual of planetary calculation and interpretation (17th-century engraving)



Remembrance Day ceremonies



Graduation ceremony, University of East London

‘Rituals are ways of acting that are generated only within assembled groups and are meant to *stimulate and sustain or recreate certain mental states* in these groups’ .

[Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford University Press, 2001), 11]

Ritual, archetypes, and the unconscious

- ‘It is the internal spiritual attitude and receptivity to inner transformation – and the constellation of archetypal patterns within the individual – which provide the purpose and effectiveness of ritual acts.’

[Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 2]

- ‘By the “transcendence of life” I mean those...experiences of the initiate who takes part in a sacred rite which reveals to him the perpetual continuation of life through transformation and renewal...What really matters is that an objective substance or form of life is ritually transformed through some process going on independently, while the initiate is influenced, impressed, “consecrated”, or granted “divine grace” on the mere ground of his presence or participation’.

[C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, CW9i, ¶208]

- Ritual from the archetypal perspective involves a contained and structured experience of an archetype or archetypal pattern, linking the microcosmic individual with the macrocosm and offering an experience of meaning which also provides a sense of continuity and even of immortality.

Jung on myth and ritual

Writing about the Eleusinian mystery rituals enacting the myth of Demeter and Kore Persephone), Jung states:

‘We can hardly suppose that myth and mystery were invented for any conscious purpose...We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling give rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*...The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations – the first step towards the immediate experience and conviction of being outside time, which brings with it a feeling of *immortality*...This leads to a restoration or *apocatastasis* of the lives of her ancestors...An experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations...At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness.’ [Jung, CW9i, ¶316]

Ritually enacted myth, in Jung’s perspective, creates an intuitive link with an archetypal pattern, shifting the individual from the earthbound limits of a specific time, place, and identity, and generating an experience of timelessness, continuity, meaning, and immortality.

The ‘time’ at which the mythic event occurs – whether historical, pseudo-historical, or ‘once upon a time’ in an inconceivable distant past – serves the purpose of allowing the ‘event’ to be ritually repeated as a specific action or happening. But it is both specific and universal/archetypal. Paradoxically, the mythic event, through its ritual repetition, invokes a timeless, eternally happening ‘now’ through the participation of the initiate, whether it is the resurrection of Christ or Hiram Abiff, the reuniting of Demeter and Persephone, or the Mithraic bull-slaying.

Ritual and altered states

- The use of language in ritual is usually directed at altering the consciousness of the participant. This usage is ‘usually connected with the conscious construction of paradoxes whose necessary violation of the laws of logic are intended to shock, even shatter, the standard epistemic security of “disciples”, thereby allowing them to move to new and higher forms of insight/knowledge’.

[Steven T. Katz, ‘Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning’, in S. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-41, on p. 7]

- Actions, images, language, narrative, song, dance, sexual encounters, hallucinogenic substances, and symbolic objects – as well as ‘sacred spaces’ and ‘sacred architecture’ – can all be ritually focused to generate an altered state (RASC = ‘religiously altered state of consciousness’ or RISC = ‘religiously interpreted state of consciousness’). Although the specific features of ritual vary according to cultural context, there is a persistent transcultural idea that such techniques affect both body and psyche and allow ‘supernatural’ or ‘transpersonal’ experiences to occur.

- Cognitive approaches postulate ‘emotional firepower’ as the chief factor in inducing RASCs. These are understood to arise from alterations in brain activity, often induced by ritual.

[Robert N. McCauley, ‘Ritual, memory, and emotion’, in Jensine Andresen (ed.), *Religion in Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 115-140]

- Jung also postulated ritualised emotional engagement with archetypal images (‘active imagination’) as a trigger for transformational experience, but did not localise the ontological source of the experience solely in the brain.

[See Jung, CW6, ¶722 and n. 45; Jung, CW8, ¶166-175; Jung, CW9i, ¶621; Jung, CW14, ¶752-755]

Myth and academic paradigms

- Just as science, according to Thomas Kuhn, lurches 'from paradigm to paradigm' (or from myth to myth), so too does the Academy. Views of human history change according to the prevailing cultural myth. The study of this process is known as historiography.
- For example, Weber's theory of 'disenchantment' is a popular contemporary myth, describing a kind of primal Fall from a Garden of Eden in which, once upon a time, humans once participated in nature and experienced 'enchantment' and were then corrupted and disenchanted. The twin serpents of Cartesian rationalism and Protestant-fuelled capitalism spoiled the party and in consequence we all suffer from 'post-Enlightenment secularized disenchantment'. This is a mythic paradigm of social and religious history which has recently been appropriated by many post-modern scholarly currents.
- In the late nineteenth century, Johann Jacob Bachofen presented a view of history in which, once upon a time, the world was ruled by peaceful, agricultural matriarchies, which were then overthrown and replaced by aggressive, warlike, nomadic patriarchies. This is another mythic paradigm of social and religious history, belonging to the cultural current known as the Romantic Movement.
- The Marxist view of history may also be viewed as another mythic paradigm, which belongs to the modernist current.
- Our understanding of myth, like our understanding of astrology, reflects the particular myths prevailing in our culture as well as in our individual psychology. But myths are not a means through which we consciously decide to order reality. We do not seem to be able to deliberately construct myths that have real potency. Myths seem to have their own agency, and appear to order our reality with or without our conscious consent.

‘Reductionism’ and ritual

- ‘Reductionism’ is the practice of ‘reducing’ a human expression to the smallest possible entity: It is *nothing but* A or B. Ontological reductionism explains everything according to a particular metaphysical explanation: It is *nothing but* the will of God, karma, or a punishment for sin. Scientific reductionism explains everything according to a particular material (social or biological) basis: It is *nothing but* a particular chemical discharge in the brain, or a reflection of the fight-flight mechanism in animals.
- Frazer is a 19th-century example of scientific reductionism: Myth is *nothing but* bad science. Freud’s psychoanalysis is also reductive: human religious aspirations are *nothing but* sublimated sexual urges of an oedipal kind. Émile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), presents a reductionist explanation of religious expression: It is *nothing but* a social construct. Marxism is a reductive political philosophy: religion is ‘the sigh of the oppressed’ and societies are driven by *nothing but* desire for power and property. Some psychological and psychiatric explanations of ritual are also reductionist: Ritual is practiced *only* for reasons of anxiety and protection against unknown forces, present or future.
- The more recent attribution of all human expressions, including those that might be understood as ‘religious’, to *nothing but* a cultural product (albeit without value judgement) are likewise reductionist. An example: ‘All religious phenomena are *entirely* dependent on social and historical context’. [Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), xiv-xv]
- While functional explanations usually have considerable validity, the underlying assumption is that there is no other explanation: It is not possible for a human expression to be based on *both* A and B. In fact there is and ever has been any proof that any reductionist explanation, scientific or ontological, is true in any absolute sense.
- It has been said that all human endeavours are fuelled by either fear or love, or, more frequently, a combination of the two. If ritual is *nothing but* an effort to assuage anxiety, then its sole *raison d’être* is fear. But ritual might also be fuelled by love: love of the beauty of the heavens and the movements of the heavenly bodies, the beauty of nature and its seasons, the beauty of the world, the beauty of the human body and its stages of development. In this case, while fear may also be part of the equation, love and the desire to emulate, relate to, or become one with an experience of larger unity and connectedness may be equally part of the equation.

Some final speculations and questions

- Both myth and ritual appear to facilitate a process of 'connection', whether they are viewed from sociological, anthropological, religious, or psychological perspectives. But connection to what? It is possible to hypothesise the entire spectrum of ritual – from biological through obsessive to religious and magical – as a mode of connection with larger patterns or potencies in life, which provide an experience of meaning, continuity, safety, control, and/or attunement or alignment with a perceived intelligent, teleological, or even immortal and omnipotent life-potency. Both fear and love may contribute to the development of ritual, instinctive or deliberate.
- A state of 'enchantment' appears to be the goal of many, if not all, rituals, as well as the goal of ritualised recitations of myths. This altered state seems to be difficult or impossible for ordinary waking consciousness. The 'enchantment' is also a recollection: ritual and myth might both be concerned with recreating a particular imagined or real past 'event' in cosmology, cosmogony, eschatology, or individual experience which, if perpetually renewed, confers a sense of timelessness, meaning, and redemption.
- The compulsive aspects of ritual appear to offer a form of connection to something that will provide safety or protection from hostile or dangerous forces or powers. The consciously constructed aspects of ritual may also do this, but they may rest on other reasons, such as a perception of beauty and magnificence in life and in the universe.
- Myth and ritual might be viewed as necessary for psycho-physical well-being on many levels and for many reasons.
- Have we lost our myths and rituals in a purportedly secularised, disenchanted society, or have the older forms simply been replaced by new ones shaped by current cultural dominants? Do myths and rituals 'work' even if we are unaware of them?
- In what ways might the study and practice of astrology in both older and contemporary cultures provide a vehicle for myth, ritual, and enchantment?



Conclusion: Happy Spring Equinox (depending on your cultural context)