

Toward a Psychology of Religious Ritual

By

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Ritual has been an important part of humanity's existence from before Neolithic times. From the cave paintings dating back more than 30,000 years to the most elaborate of religious or civil rites, ritual has been with humans everywhere. Ritualistic behaviors also seem to be present in human relationships as well. (2) Hence, ritual would seem to be part of the gregarious nature of human beings everywhere.

For the most part, when dealing with human ritual, researchers have concentrated much of their attention on the exoteric aspects of ritual and ignored and often neglected the esoteric. This would seem, as it were, due to several reasons: 1) There may be observer bias involved in the interpretation of the rite itself and, consequently, a subjective point of view would be expressed; 2) Many researchers are unfamiliar with the esoteric aspects of ritual; and 3) In many cases, rites, especially of the religious nature, have been associated with the practice of magic and to explain a rite in the esoteric sense would appear to foster a belief in superstition of some sort and, again, we'd be bothered with the problem of bias.

One problem encountered when focusing on the exoteric aspects of ritual is that of tending to miss observing some portion of the rite due to the lack of familiarity with what is being done and why. Observation is quite important but in that observation more than surface appearances must be considered. All rites are designed in a specific way, with specific tools, and with specific intents. Being mindful of this will enhance the observation, the interpretation and the understanding of the nature of the rite.

The main purpose of ritual can simply be described as unification. Whether the rite is performed for a civil ceremony, a magical or religious observance unification is the desired result. In the case of the civil rite it is a union of all persons from a simple marriage ceremony to the union of individuals of a particular city, state, nation or particular political ideology. For the religious rite or for the magical act, it is a union with a specific deity (5, 8, 11, 12) or metaphysical entity. What the rite is attempting to do is to bring all who observe into a like mind and into a single unifying consciousness.

In the case of a religious or magical ceremony, we are dealing with what can be termed prayer. As previously implied, *all* religious ceremony *is* magical ceremony and both are prayer in its highest form. The main reason that religious and magical rites can be considered the highest form of prayer is their intent. First of all, they're designed to facilitate union with a deity of some sort. Second, they tend to involve more of the physical senses. Third, they tend to be more participatory than the civil ceremonies, which are observational or traditional prayer which only involves a small part of the individual. Fourth, their main intent is to cause change of some sort. Whether this change be within the minds and lives of the participants or for some material purpose, change is desired and magic has been described as the art of causing change in conformity to will.

(8)

What is it that seems to inspire an individual during a rite? Is it the pomp and splendor of the proceedings or are other things involved?

Quite obviously the pomp and splendor of a rite does have some effect on the participants. This is the first thing which meets the eye. The color and pageantry will cause one to pay closer attention than ordinarily. Beyond the surface appearances something more is happening for there are those individuals in which change will actually occur. What is it that may be causing this change?

Ritual is a manipulation of archetypes and metaphors and change is triggered by their manipulation. In the Analytic theory of Carl Jung, the contents of the Collective Unconscious are the archetypes. These symbolic forms have external representations and hence there is a commonality between cultures in their choice of implements and in aspects of their rituals. (See *The Golden Bough* by James G. Frazer and *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell).

Archetypes are independent of individual consciousness (28, 6) but their use and manipulation still can cause an effect. Archetypes can be employed to alter an individual's or group's consciousness and in turn change individual and group awareness. One of the most ancient forms of meditation is that which requires one to meditate upon an archetype. This could be a single symbol of some sort which would be visualized (e.g. the crucified sun-god, the celestial mother, the lotus, etc.) or a series of symbols which would be gazed upon (e.g. a mandala, a Tarot card, etc.). The use of this type of contemplation would be that of inducing change via the associations which the archetype brings with it from the Collective Unconscious.

In the rite, these archetypes would be displayed, manipulated, and ministered to in order to facilitate the intended effect. One extremely good example of the manipulation of archetypes in a ritual setting is that of the Catholic or Episcopal Mass. The archetypes not only are within the service itself but also surrounding the participants. These would then affect the individual both directly and indirectly.

When we think of archetypes in a rite we generally consider only those physical objects which we observe and of which we're aware of either directly or indirectly. We do not consider that archetypes can be of other forms. We never consider that *everything* used within the rite is an archetype of some sort.

Let us consider some of these other archetypes.

According to Jung, these archetypes are fraught with emotional imagery. (6, 13) and hence would tend to release an emotional discharge upon their contemplation. Within the rite other archetypes being used are, first of all, sonics. That is, particular sounds and words.

The importance of sonics (11) within a rite cannot be understated. Sonics tend to involve an individual to a greater degree (12) into the rite. Consequently, we'll have both our visual and auditory senses manipulated. Sounds are extremely important. All one need do to gain a greater understanding of this concept is to look at the number and purposes of mantras or constructed prayers.

In the Eastern meditation systems there are literally hundreds of mantras all designed with specific objectives in mind. From the most widely known, "Om Mani Padme Hum" and "Om Naman Shiviah" to the lesser known, "Om Shanti" and "Svah" and on to the Chinese "Ghen Shang," mantras are word symbols which bring to mind, through the voice, a particular concept --- if one knows the meanings of the words.

Otherwise, the sounds, if appropriately performed, will only induce particular physiological responses.

Even in the Western world there are mantras which are used to do similar things. In the Jewish Mystical tradition there is what is known as the Shem ha-Mephorash, or the Name of Seventy-Two (Letters). This is a series of letter triplets which, when recited properly, for none of the triplets are Hebrew words, is said to induce altered states of consciousness and a state of true prophecy. (See *Meditation and the Bible* and *Meditation and the Kabbalah* by Aryeh Kaplan) The two Biblical mantras that many people gloss over when reading The Bible are “selah” and “amen.”

In the Christian tradition there is the mantra of the repetition of the names of the Holy Family or the Latin, “Deus in adjutorium meum intende” (Oh God, come to my aid) (15) or “My Jesus Mercy.” All are archetypes of both sound and imagery.

In *The Nag Hammadi Library* (Ed. James M. Robinson) and *The Other Bible* (Ed. Willis Barnstone) are early Gnostic Christian texts that were excluded from the Canon. Contained within these two texts are Gnostic Christian prayers and mantras.

Within the properly constructed rite the sonics which are used will work as mantras that will help inundate the senses. This, in turn, will assist in the altering of consciousness.

Properly placed in the ritual, the sonics can be an excellent asset to altering the state of consciousness to a particular point. In many instances, the way words and sentences are spaced and pronounced will be important in achieving the appropriate state of awareness.

We must also consider that any “divine names” or the names of any deities used in a ritual are also archetypes. Their correct pronunciation is designed to bring out from those present a particular response. Each deity is associated with a certain inner response and the assumption of a particular physical position and the pronunciation of certain “words of power” along with the names of the deity is supposed to put the participants into alignment with that god and, hence, the power which it represents. Accordingly, any mispronunciation or bastardization¹ of the name interferes with the union and alignment.

Another archetype which is usually not considered is that of the use of color. The effect which color has on individual consciousness is well-documented. This is usually part of the pageantry of the ceremony. Whenever a lot of color is used it generally represents happiness and joy. When the darker colors are used (blacks, grays, purples, dark blues) it usually represents a more somber influence. Often, along with the mantra in meditation a color is prescribed for visualization in order to assist in consciousness change.

The next archetype to consider is that of body positions. This was already briefly mentioned. Under this can be included, what are termed, “mudras” or hand positions. According to the East Indian concept of the mudra, the hand positions circulate and manipulate the body’s natural energies (termed prana in India, chi in China, qi in Japan, and ruach in mystical Judaism). The positions made by the hands are the external representations of the mental archetypes.

Another aspect of this archetypal concept is that of body position and gestures which a server or priest will assume. Each position will inspire within the server, and

¹ An example is the use of the name Jehovah for the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (יהוה). This is an incorrect pronunciation of the name.

those participating, the concept embodied in the physical form assumed by the server. When the position is assumed at a particular time in the rite it is supposed to inspire the internal feelings associated with the archetype which it represents. We can get an understanding of the importance of body position in ritual working when we look at the positions assumed by the ancient Egyptian gods. These positions were used by the servers in order to unite with that particular deity and its representational energy. From that position, the priests could then assume the power which was associated with that god. (11)

To this point, discussion has concerned itself with specific archetypes. First were the external symbols themselves. Most of these are recognizable one way or another. Second were the sonics. This referred to the use of words, whether “words of power” or those used as a mantra. Third was the association with color and its effect on the mind. Finally was the use of the mudra (hand positions) and body postures and gestures.

Now, it is necessary to understand the types of rites that exist, their basic construction, and the psychological effects either received or desired.

There are essentially three types of ritual procedures: 1) banishing; 2) special procedures; and 3) spontaneous procedures. (11) We’ll begin with the banishing procedures.

Banishings include any type of cleansings or exorcisms (literally, purifications). The objective here is to remove any unwanted influences which presumably may interfere with the rite. In this procedure, as with any other, there are particular archetypes or implements used. Often tools such as salt, water, fire, a knife or sword a movement of air and earth or dirt are employed. (11) These things will be manipulated in particular ways which will bring about a desired feeling within those involved.

Second are the special procedures. They involve particular kinds of special rites. These would include weddings, funerals, blessings, commemorations, and the summoning of “spirits.” (11) Each of these procedures will have its own particular tools and actions. For example, the rings used in the wedding ceremonies represent the ropes which were bound around the wrists of those who desired to be “hand-fastened” or married in early human groups. The rope was generally tied in a figure-8 or infinity symbol which represents the constant progression of life.

Finally are the spontaneous procedures. These are rites which are done on impulse. They follow a general pattern or outline, but within that pattern the participants will act and say things spontaneously within the context of the rite and usually without rehearsal. The implements which will be used are those associated with the intent of the participants.

There are three general types of rites: 1) hermetic; 2) mystic; and 3) orphic. (11) The hermetic and orphic rites usually involve a lot more pomp and accoutrements than the mystic rite. The mystic rites are more contemplative. The hermetic rites usually call for specific conditions (environments of one sort or another), and exacting rituals. These rites are usually very sophisticated. The orphic rites usually involve a lot of emotional attunement than the hermetic or the mystic rites. There is usually a lot of music and dancing and free-expression of the individual participants, hence, there tends to be more spontaneity in orphic rites.

Six specific types of rites have been described: 1) initiatory; 2) instructional; 3) sacrificial; 4) seasonal; 5) devotional; and 6) consecratory. (11) The most elaborate of

these rites are the initiatory rites. The initiatory rites are usually structured in this way: A candidate is chosen. He/She will be led away to first be questioned for suitability. If found to be worthy, the candidate will then be given a series of lectures designed to put the individual into a particular frame of mind. After this, the candidate will be put through a series of tests and experiences designed to call out the necessary initiative in the person. (11, 12) Afterward, the candidate then accepts the position and begins to study for the next grade or level. (See *The Mysteries of Eleusis* by Goblet D'Alviella and *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* by Thomas Taylor for discussion of initiation rites.)

The rites with the widest range are the instructional rites. They can go all the way from rites used for divination to that of gaining experience in doing different types of rituals or workings. The symbols used are those associated only with the specific information sought or point being made. These rites are made up generally of a brief instruction, a prayer aimed at the point being made, a meditational period usually using archetypes which are involved in the specific point and an acknowledgement. (11)

The rites which are the most misused and misunderstood are the sacrificial rites. These do *not* involve a bribe or ulterior motives and most specifically do *not* involve the ending of a life. The term sacrifice means nothing more than an exchange of energy (12) not the taking of a life. For countless eons whenever animal sacrifice was performed it was done with an animal which was associated with the particular deity which it represented. This type of rite was performed usually only once a year and only on the feast of that deity, not whenever anyone decided to do it. The animal was treated as a god and it was believed that the killing of the animal would release the "etheric" form (5) or spirit of the deity and due to that the deity would bless the people. (10)

It is true that human sacrifice had been used at times. We see remnants of this in the Bible (Gen. 22:1-2; Ex. 22:29; Jud. 11:39) and in the Catholic Mass which is called the "unbloody sacrifice."

The earliest known use of human sacrifice apparently stretches back to when humans first became sedentary. It was believed that the "spirit" of the grain would attach itself upon the final cut to the person cutting the last bundle, to the first passing stranger or to a particular animal. Hence, it would need to be released in order to return for the next season. Later, an individual would volunteer for the sacrifice, be treated as a deity for a period of no less than six months and then be "raised up" or put on the altar and sacrificed to the particular deity. (10)

There are three factors involved in the choice of a sacrifice: 1) the sacrifice must be done of one's free will. If one is unwilling to make the exchange of energy or effort, it becomes useless; 2) the sacrifice must be within the ability of the donor to give. It's quite obvious that one can't give what one doesn't have or has not the ability to give; and 3) Whatever is given must be irrevocable. (11) An excellent example of a sacrifice is that of one's time in the job market in order to complete an education or training of some sort in order to make better gains after graduation.

Sacrificial rites involve a certain structure. First of all, an approach with the intent is outlined. Second, an invocation is directed toward the consciousness which is desired. Third, the oblation is consecrated to the deity and the objective. Fourth, the sacrifice is presented to the deity. Finally, the rite is closed with a resumption of normal consciousness. (11)

The next type of rite is the seasonal rite. It doesn't matter of what religion one is speaking, the rites invariably tend to be based on particular cycles in nature. These cycles are the solar, lunar, and seasonal changes most generally. We also have carry-overs from ancient celebrations such as All Hallows' Eve, which is a harvest festival.

The fifth type of rite is the devotional rite. Most rites are devotional rites of one sort or another. Essentially, the devotional rites are designed to link one with a particular deity or state of consciousness. These rites usually haven't a particular pattern but can be quite spontaneous. (11, 12)

The last of the rites are the consecratory rites. The word, consecrate literally means "to make holy together." (11) Accordingly, it is a focus of one's consciousness and will attune to that of a deity all aimed toward a particular object. This may be a talisman, amulet, power object, or a person.

All rites are designed in a particular way. In the complete rite several things must occur. First, and the most obvious, is the entrance. Everyone involved in the rite is brought into the ritual area in order to begin to tune into the appropriate state of consciousness. Second are the opening prayers. These are directed toward the necessary entities (for consciousness) for their assistance. Third is the cleansing of the area and/or specific instruments which will be used in the rite. In many instances this is done with prayers to specific entities who are associated with protection and/or strength and power. Other times certain motions are performed in the ether; specific signs may be drawn in the ether or on some material such as parchment, cloth, metal, or stone; specific sonics may be employed; specific implements may be used in order to perform this part of the rite. Fourth is the commemoration. This is the link with those who have done the same or similar performances in the past. It may be said in the form of a litany or naming of specific individuals and/or groups or even a simple statement (i.e. "Do this in memory of me" from the Catholic and Episcopal Mass). This links the server and participants to the collective consciousness of the whole group. Fifth is generally an invocation. (11)

It would be appropriate to explain the difference between an invocation, evocation and conjuration.

An invocation is performed to attract the attention of a higher spirit form. These are usually referred to as gods. The word, invoke literally means to "in-speak." In other words, we speak to our self in order to draw something out. Hence, we're actually attempting to draw out of our own self the archetypal principal associated with that certain deity and to unite with it. In Freud's theories, these would be related to parts of the superego.

To evoke literally means to "out-speak." An evocation is performed to attune to, what are now termed, "angelic" forces or lesser order beings. These beings could be related to aspects of the unconscious, the psyche or aspects of the ego.

To conjure means to summon. Usually the summoning is done of entities associated with the "lower" spirit realm. These would include demons (daemons or diemons), genii, deva, and so forth. These would be related to Jung's concept of the shadow or to Freud's id.

To understand the differences in the use of invocation, evocation, and conjuration it is necessary to understand that: Invocations are prayers specifically to attract the attention of a deity. In other words, invocations are performed respectfully. Consequently, we have the commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy

God in vain.”² The implication is that once the name of the deity is spoken and the power is brought out the individual must then be prepared with the appropriate workings in order to please that entity.

Essentially, we’re dealing with a higher level of consciousness. All of the people of all of the races of humanity believed in gods of some sort. They represented nothing more than higher consciousness, the higher thought processes of that which humans cannot understand about his self and the universe. These deities did nothing more than give the group a “hook,” so to speak, that he could use to gain some sort of comprehension of nature and all of its processes.

Evocations are performed using an intermediary and the name of a particular deity. This is done when a specific job is necessary to accomplish. The name of the deity presumably empowers the intermediary. Hence, the deity used is one which is associated with the particular working. In fact, the intermediary will be selected due to its inherent potential.

The conjuration is usually done with some nefarious purpose in mind. But those presumed entities which can be conjured are able to perform both positive and negative duties. (See *The Lesser Key of Solomon: The Goetia*.) In the conjuration a name of a deity is used as a threat. Supposedly the threat will “force” the entity into the performance of a certain job knowing that the deity mentioned will “punish” it if it doesn’t do what it’s told to do. According to the belief, these spirit forms will extract some sort of payment for getting the job done. What the payment could be is unknown but it usually ends up being the loss of a physical object of some sort --- which really doesn’t make much sense that a non-material entity would want something which is material.

If we equate the concepts of invocation, evocation, and conjuration to different parts of the mind what we see is that there is a higher, middle, and lower mind. The higher mind, when a concrete union is made, is direct and to the point. One must take care in what is thought while in this state of awareness and union. For at this point things tend to reflect rather precisely from one dimension to another. The use of the name of the deity is nothing but a mantra to contact this part of the mind through the attunement to a particular part of the brain. Possibly this attunement could be to the right frontal cortex which tends to be a more synthetic part of the brain.

The middle portion of the mind is a bit slower and needs some encouragement in order to be reached. This is why the name of the deity is used. You will notice that what apparently is being done is the attunement to two particular portions of the brain. In other words, a higher portion empowers a lower portion. It may be that the inner portions of the brain, possibly the limbic system, will become vibrated with the name of power and this in turn will vibrate an outer portion of the brain, possibly the left frontal cortex.

The lower area of the mind is very sluggish and must be forced into operation. Consequently there is the use of external archetypes and methods of external control and/or manipulation. There may be a connection with the lower brain centers (referred to as the “reptilian brain”) here and consequently the necessity of using the name of the deity along with mention of the names of those powers whom the deity presumably controls. This would then be a mantra system which would bring out the more primal responses which could go in either direction; positive or negative.

² Taking the name of the god in vain meant several things: 1) Never invoke a god’s name without a positive reason; 2) Never misuse the name of the god; and 3) Never mispronounce the name.

Finally, after the invocation there may be a brief meditation or prayer. Then there is the dismissal of all the energies and participants. At the end of the Latin Mass was the statement, “Eta missa est,” “Go, the mass is over.” No proper rite is ever complete without thanking the deity who was invoked for all that it represents and all that it is presumed to do.

What a ritual, when properly performed, will do is induce an altered state of consciousness in all present. In other words, rituals can be considered a form of hypnosis which will entice certain areas of the brain into operation through the manipulation of archetypes and other sensory systems.

It is an interesting chain of events which can produce an altered state of consciousness through the ritual. The most obvious is that of the pageantry. This is mainly used to occupy the conscious functioning of the brain and mind, or in essence, to keep the left-hemisphere occupied. For when the left-hemisphere is busy it tends not to block the right hemispheric processes. (9) The right hemisphere, it will be remembered, works on a totally different system and uses a completely different language. It is the right-hemisphere where metaphors and archetypes can cause change.

As the rite continues other devices are brought in which will aid in the altering of consciousness. This is the use of sonics, as previously discussed. A process known as the “voice roll” which is a forty-five to seventy-two³ beat per minute repetition can be employed. This constant droning beat produces a hypnotic trance state which affects one’s state of mind. This may come in the form of the server repeating a litany for several minutes or music. A Gregorian Chant can be quite effective in this area. Now we have Gospel music, much of which contains this beat. Add to this the use of a vibrato in the voice and an altered state of consciousness can be enhanced. (24) Once this process has begun and continues the archetypes, either physical or verbal, are presented and manipulated.

The server of the rite, if well-trained, will be able to produce mood effects and, hence, psi experiences in many of those attending. (12) It has been found that several things are occurring when psi phenomena are produced: 1) the temporal lobe of the brain appears to be most active during psi (19, 20); 2) psi phenomena appear to be relatively right-hemispherical brain phenomena (9); 3) psi phenomena appear to be facilitated by decreases sympathetic nervous system activity (4) and arousal of the autonomic nervous system activity level (3); and 4) experimenter expectancy (1) and greater contact can increase the chance of psi (7) in an altered state of consciousness. Magic arises in the structure of emotional experiences and other cognitive structures. (7) The ritual, if properly designed, will produce, among other things, an emotional experience which will aid in by-passing the conscious left-brain control of an individual’s experience. This will in turn produce a greater chance of a heightened altered state of consciousness.

There are essentially three reasons necessitating the production of an altered state of consciousness during the rite: 1) the archetypes of the rite have no meaning to the left-hemisphere consciousness. In order for them to have an effect they must be understood. As previously mentioned, the right-hemisphere understands the archetypes and the metaphors contained in the rite. The symbolic language of the archetype is linked to ideas in the psyche within the unconscious. The archetypes themselves probably represent part

³ These two numbers are interesting because in the Jewish Mystical tradition there are the forty-five and seventy-two names of God.

of four psychic survival system (16) and their manipulation can produce rather specific events within the individual which could be related to that survival system and, hence, the survival of the individual.

2) The altered state of consciousness enhances the possibility of a psi experience. This psi experience tends to be one of causality and synchronicity. Hence, there is the potential of specific occurrences of events either within the framework of the rite or outside of it and this will in turn be related to the rite or the person conducting it.

Many researchers are now finding that the mind and body are inseparable and indivisible units. It has been further found that not only the brain but also every neuron in the brain seems to have a consciousness of its own. In this area, there has been a bit of controversy concerning the effect that mental and physical field configurations have on the individual and on the production of psi phenomena. The current theory places the individual in the creation of his own personal experience. This indicates that the mind and matter are *not* the same but *complementary*. (22) The mind acts non-locally. (17) In other words, whatever happens in one area of the universe *does* affect what happens in another. The manipulation of archetypes within a rite is a means of producing a particular effect within the mind which has the potential to cause the appropriate change in the participant's personal experience. The reason that a psi experience or paranormal effect can occur during or associated with a particular rite is due to the interaction between mental and physical fields occupying the same region of space and time. (18)

Once the consciousness of the neurons begins to change the chemical composition of parts of the brain begins to likewise change. We can, then, see a rite as a means of changing the chemical structure in the brain of an individual. What is occurring is the shifting of consciousness at the synapse and as the chemical structure changes so goes the neuron, the brain, and the individual.

3) The possibility that there are effects brought about via the use of ritual cannot be discounted. There is potential for both benevolence and malevolence (21) in this manner. We can see that one part of life affects another just through the observation of nature and that events which occur in our life seem to be connected to our experience. During the rite what has been described as a state specific and a paranormal causality (25) may both exist. The state specific causality would make the correlations between the events and the archetypes of the rite comprehensible and causal within the altered state. The paranormal causality will occur when the psi abilities are released during the rite and a correlation between the events occurs due to the release of these abilities. This in turn will produce being-specific synchronistic causality or a series of events which are genuinely causal but which the left-hemisphere cannot comprehend due to its linear functioning.

Whenever we apply any kind of force to anything a change is produced. The same goes for ritual workings. Whether the change be an individual and personal one or a more universal one, change is produced. It has been said by the mystics of old, "When I move a blade of grass, I disturb the farthest star." This statement deals with an understanding of not only the non-locality of events but also that of causality. An individual *can* cause events to occur. The method of doing this is by uniting with the event. Whether the event occurs symbolically during a rite or physically by assuming and performing it or mentally by imaging it, the effect can be much the same. The force applied comes from the mental energy expended to bring the desired change about.

The purpose of religious ritual is to bring about the appropriate physical and mental conditions which will allow an individual a union with a heightened state of consciousness. The union with the deity is nothing more than a union with, what may be termed, the Higher Self or the Real Self. It is designed to assist the individual to find his place in the universe and to understand and accept his part in the scheme of things. As long as a person feels separate from life there will be a feeling of opposition to all existence. A well-constructed rite will dissolve this separateness and opposition, hence, the possibility of an emotional experience which can precede psi phenomena.

An individual who is in total harmony with all aspects of the self will find unlimited potential and mental power. It is unfortunate that the individuals or groups which practice ritual the most do it for personal gain. It is for the advancement of the group and not the individual to which the rite is aimed. An appropriately conceived and executed rite will bring about personal and individual change which can potentially cause a quantum shift in consciousness and living experiences.

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