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Rituals and Ceremonies: Their Purpose



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Rituals and Ceremonies: Their Purpose

While there are a few items that all religions have in common, we are going to focus on the most obvious and least discussed. Rituals are a key component of the religious practice and are probably the least understood. Spiritualism is the only practice I'm presently aware of that may not have any associated ceremonies. Typically, we pick one and modify it, which is fine, but we still don't know the purpose of the ritual.

Rituals and ceremonies are designed for one purpose, to evoke an emotion. Emotions are powerful. They move us to do things normally avoided. They move us to act.¹ Political ad campaigns are just one example of the power of emotions. They are often designed to evoke specific emotions related to fear, anger, and distrust. Some religious events are geared towards stirring and nourishing our emotions, sometimes moving us towards a religious experience.

The essential pieces of the ritual are the words, the items, and the mythology supporting them. Ceremonies are symbols in motion, which make them experiential. The items used in a ritual are symbolic. The oldest ritual still in practice is the baptism or dedication, of which there are several versions. Water, a key component of the baptism, symbolizes purification and cleansing.² Perhaps this is why the body is washed prior to the burial ceremony. Water also represents the yonic condition of reception because of water's unique qualities. Water has neither taste nor form. It receives its form from the container; It receives its taste or odor from what is added.

Some baptism rituals use flowers, these represent renewal.³ Many of the rites of the ancient mysteries were centered around the renewal of life through the cleansing of one's

¹ (Weisfeld & Goetz, 2013)

² (Graves, 1875)

³ (Taylor, 1891)

character or personality.⁴ With babies or young children, a rose is dipped in holy water and then used to anoint the child. The rose, along with the lotus, is representative of the creative powers of nature.⁵

The cross, another active symbol in rituals, represents the four aspects of life; birth, growth, maturation, and decay or death as represented through astrology.⁶ The words or prayers used, depending upon one's belief system or interpretation, could easily be charms because we pray for healing, wealth, love, protection, etc., the same application as a charm. It is the intention that determines how a prayer is formed.

The mythology is the story motivating the activity. For instance, the communion used during the Easter service is often attributed to Jesus the Christ. Wine is used in this ritual, but not just any wine, it must be a red wine. The juices of grapes are often a deep red, representing blood,⁷ which has long been associated with vitality or life. The bread of Passover represents the exodus from Egypt.⁸ Bread is also a substitute for meat and is considered the meat that does not perish.⁹ The ritual symbolizes becoming like Jesus the Christ.

Our Pagan predecessors looked to nature as a guide. The second Declaration of Principles, 'We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual are the expression of Infinite Intelligence,' directs us towards Nature for guidance. Our third Declaration of Principles, 'We affirm that the correct understanding of such and living in accordance therewith constitutes true religion,' supports the practice. Andrew Jackson Davis, one of our prominent framers of Spiritualism who introduced our philosophy as being based upon nature tells us, 'Duty demands serious analysis and investigation of all

⁴ (Willoughby, 1929)

⁵ (Hall, 1928)

⁶ (Bailey, 1951)

⁷ (The Refutation of All Heresies, 1886)

⁸ (Rabbis, 1923)

⁹ (Hinds, 1927)

conspicuous subjects. Trust may be found in the following revelation: If so, Nature must be the standard by which all men may judge whether the truths therein contained are pure, practical, and elevating.¹⁰

In the early religions are celebrations, rituals, and practices centered around four specific times of the year, spring, summer, fall, and winter or birth, growth, decay and death. Some of you may know them as the cardinal points in astrology. They also form the four aspects of the cross, or nature, or life, etc. being seasons, elements, conditions, and more. In the spring, many of us celebrate Easter, which is birth and growth. In the fall there is the harvest or Halloween, which is maturation. In the winter, we celebrate Christmas and New Year, otherwise known as decay and death. The only one we really don't have an overt celebration for occurs in June, which is the summer solstice.

As we are nearing the Summer Solstice, we will begin here. Easter is not yet too distant in memory and happens to coincide with the Spring Equinox. Looking to Nature as our guide, spring is about renewal and birth. The grass becomes greener with the rains, which cause flowers to bloom. These sights of beauty and encouragement are a release from the dreariness of winter and are symbolic of renewal in Pagan terms.¹¹ As we move towards summer, we experience growth. The Summer Solstice marks the beginning of maturation. Again, looking towards Nature, asparagus, strawberries, and similar vegetables and fruit signal the beginning of harvests. This can only take place at maturity.

The Fall Equinox marks the culmination of maturity by the final harvests. After the harvest, all of Nature begins to decay. Leaves turn from various greens to shades of orange, burgundy, and finally browns. Much of the vegetation begins to decay as do the length of days. The process continues until finally, death.

¹⁰ (Davis, 1847)

¹¹ (Taylor, 1891)

The winter solstice is a time of decay. All but the sturdiest of plants have taken on the appearance of death, as have many of the animals taken to a deep sleep. No longer are the days warm. They have become cold and bitter as death. There is nothing left of the past year. We are left with looking towards a time of renewal. We are left looking towards the spring, when the land is renewed.

Nature is the test of all truth. No truth is lessened by disbelief and no error is true because it was taught as truth. The best gift given us by the Divine is reason.¹² The purpose of philosophy is to aid us in discovering our ultimate purpose,¹³ or the ultimate good. Good is what is beneficial to an individual.¹⁴ What might these four points within Astrology demonstrate about us?

We live our lives in a similar fashion as witnessed in nature, whether it is our daily life, our yearly life, or our entire lifespan. Every aspect is governed by growth, maturation, decay, and finally death and birth, because when something ends something else begins.

Again, as we are near the Summer Solstice, we shall begin with maturation. Yet, birth, renewal, and growth have not yet become lost in memory. We have laid plans and have begun to move in a direction. Once we begin moving in a desired direction our goal becomes clearer and success is encouraging. When we have achieved our goal and have celebrated, what do we do next? Our excitement begins to wither, we become listless, our drive begins to decay until it is no longer there. We have come to a halt, mentally and emotionally. Death of a sort has overtaken us, until a plan begins to formulate. We have experienced the four seasons of Nature.

¹² (Davis, 1847)

¹³ (Bahm, 1964)

¹⁴ (Plato, 1998)

Rituals and ceremonies play a major role in our lives. We celebrate birth and death. These celebrations, rituals, or ceremonies fulfill many of the needs we strive for. They evoke emotions, many of which the typical person is afraid to display. They evoke joy and sadness, often at the same time. They give reason for us to come together and set aside past grievances. The most important aspect of experiencing these sacred moments is they allow us to bond, to resonate, if only for a moment. They are the life of civilization.

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