

## The Persistence of Pagan Myth in Christian Thinking

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August 23, 2022



**A**t this point, it is difficult to imagine a more tedious and oversaturated topic than the significance of Jordan Peterson. His takes on politics, psychobiology, the Bible, *The Lion King*, and general well-being have been endlessly analyzed. His lectures, books, and interviews have provided great heaps of grist for the dark Satanic mills of online opinion-having.

Is he a reactionary neo-Darwinian in the guise of a gentle Canadian shaman? Is he a truth-teller sensitive to the needs of our spiritually starved adolescents? Is he a natural entry point for Catholic apologists to bring spiritual seekers to the faith? Or is he nothing more than a grifter who continues to sell the same self-help pseudo-sermon under different book titles? The flow of columns, podcasts, and YouTube essay analysis continues unabated.

Luckily for you and me both, I have no intention of saying anything at all about Jordan Peterson. Instead, I am wondering why all of this fervid speculation over theological engagement with Jungian psychology feels eerily familiar. Why is no one pointing out, Catholics in particular, that we have done all of this before?

The first predecessor to Jordan Peterson that comes to mind is, of course, Joseph Campbell. The pop-cultural influence of his works as well as his series of interviews with Bill Moyers on PBS are common cultural knowledge. The literature professor from Sarah Lawrence exercised his influence on everything from the gritty bunnies of *Watership Down* to the epic space fantasy *Star Wars* and even the frenzied self-referentiality of the sitcom *Community*. I myself read some of his writings and watched the Moyers interviews on my lethargic internet connection in high school.

Admittedly, I was, and am, more impressed by his encyclopedic knowledge of comparative folklore than by the organizing theories he proposed around them. I cannot remember at what point I became more actively disillusioned, whether it was his tendentious and treacherous description of the funeral of JFK as constituting a modern myth, or reading his caustically racist assessment of the subcontinent of India compared to Japan in his travel journal *Sake and Satori*. Somewhere along the way it all became a bit much.

Instead, I became much more enamored with the figures who were direct contemporaries of C.G. Jung and who formulated a school of religious phenomenology: Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto. They provided more historically varied and philosophically sophisticated analyses of cult, myth, symbol, ritual, and sacraments. Above all, I was attracted by their fascination with the sacred in all its forms. Exhausted by their spiritually desiccated and war-torn age, Eliade and Otto began a kind of intellectual salon that also functioned as an international academic conference.

This gathering, *Eranos*, was born out of a desire to renew the religious depths of human experience. It included not only Jung, Eliade, and Otto, but Gersom Scholem, Jean Daniélou, Henri Corbin, Gilles Quispel, and Erich Neumann. *Eranos* at its outset was a veritable utopia of interreligious and interdisciplinary dialogue. Though Campbell edited the papers from the *Eranos* yearbooks, the tone and substance of this early research was far removed from the latecomer's mantra: "Follow your bliss." It was to this astonishingly erudite and spiritually variegated audience that Hugo Rahner S.J., brother of famed systematic theologian Karl Rahner, addressed the essays in the recently reprinted volume [Greek Myths and Christian Mystery](https://clunymedia.com/products/greek-myths-and-christian-mystery/).

It was not simply love for learned company that led this Jesuit to these gatherings. In the words of another towering figure of the early members of *Eranos*, Karl Kerényi, this was a search for a new humanism. The correspondence between Kerényi and Thomas Mann (published under the title *Mythology and Humanism*) makes it very clear that a return to religion and mythology was a shared impulse among a large but informally connected group of postwar intellectuals (Kerényi was also close with Jung and Martin Buber). *Eranos*, which began as meetings between friends in a Swiss villa, was simply the most explicit culmination of this general atmosphere. The ease with which German academia capitulated to Nazi instrumentalization haunted Kerényi. His hope that a renewed attention on man as *mysterium* would save the intellectual life from a stifling positivism as well as a dangerous subservience to political forces.

Many Catholics were intrigued by this milieu and attempted to bring theology to bear on comparative religion and psychoanalysis (the "White Raven" Victor White, O.P., longtime correspondent with Jung and author of [God and the Unconscious](https://clunymedia.com/collections/shop-all/products/god-and-the-unconscious/)), is another prominent example). Rahner shared the intimation that the revival of humanism would require the slow and laborious work of spiritual regeneration. With his fellow travelers, he shared a disgust for the eighteenth-century imposition of Enlightenment rationalism on the ancient Greek world. By divorcing the search for illumination from the yearning for redemption, such scholars refashioned antiquity in their own image.

The mythic poems of Hesiod and Homer, as well as the inquirers at the Pythian oracle or the practitioners of the mysteries of Eleusis, were not alien irrational elements. Nor were the myths and *daimon* of Socrates mere metaphors. Rahner stresses that the desires lurking in Greek myth and mystery religions are evidence that the average Hellene farmer knew more about spiritual powers, both divine and chthonic, than many of us. In his admiration for the Greeks and the *Eranos* project, however, he did not surrender the distinctiveness of Christian theology.

In case any readers are wary that Rahner preached a cheap irenicism, the first essay in the volume should allay those fears. He unequivocally rejects the approach of scholars like Richard Reitzenstein and Alfred Loisy who argued that Christian dogma and ritual were directly and derivatively dependent on Greek mystery cults. Instead, he argues that the terminology and imagery of the Hellenic mysteries were only appropriated by Christian apologists for purposes of persuasion, and even then, only at a relatively late date.

If Rahner is to be charged with any excess, it would be this overcorrection in favor of strict heterogeneity. While it is good to restrain those scholars who postulated a yet undiscovered Mithraic *taurobolium* in Tarsus as the true origin of Pauline theology, Rahner's zeal for identifying differences is itself somewhat myopic. He, not unlike Jean Daniélou in his similar work [Myth and Mystery](https://books.google.com/books/about/Myth_and_Mystery.html?id=UPICAAAAIAAJ), makes the New Testament and the first three centuries of Christian language and practice almost exclusively dependent on prior Hebrew usage.

Yet, as we are [increasingly realizing](https://wipfandstock.com/9781498278737/socrates-and-other-saints/), a pure Hebraism and pure Hellenism simply did not exist in late antiquity. By the time of Christ, the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek for at least two hundred years and the dissemination of the Septuagint reached far beyond Alexandrian Egypt. As Jan Bremmer, specialist in the historiography of ancient religion, points out in his [Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World](https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110299557/html?lang=en) (2014) both the writings of Philo and the intertestamental *Book of Wisdom* reveal that a reception of Greek mystery terminology was taking place among Jewish authors.

This portrait of Mediterranean culture and religion as a variegated but highly interactive culture allows for a subtler and far more interesting approach. We can then speak of a gentle convergence or at least mutual exchange between Jewish apocalyptic, philosophical school, and mystery-cults. That Pauline theology is engaged in a creative rereading partially in light of these interactions is the thesis of Markus Bockmuehl's [Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity](https://www.mohrsiebeck.com/en/book/revelation-and-mystery-in-ancient-judaism-and-pauline-christianity-9783161453397?no_cache=1) (1990). Contra Rahner, it is not necessary, theologically or historically, to dismiss all correspondences between Hellenic and Christian *mysteria* that appear before Clement of Alexandria.

It is when he loses this overly defensive posture and begins to positively explicate the Christian use of mythic and mystery-related symbolism that Rahner contributes something truly wonderful. His chapters on the sun and the moon are, like all these essays, compendiums of exquisite liturgical poetry and patristic passages on the cosmic scope

of the mystery of salvation. His erudition allows easy movement from the most well-known of Greek and Latin fathers to Syriac liturgies and Carolingian medieval exegetes.

Rahner does not exclude artistic or architectural representations from his surveys. The sheer number and variety of these images and poems startle and subvert any easy claims about strict separations between the symbolism of the ancient and medieval world, or even the medieval and the Renaissance imaginations. One arresting example is common identification of Christ as the true Orpheus in early Christianity and well through the medieval period, including depictions of the cross in an Orphic-Bacchic mode and anonymous twelfth-century Easter sequences like this one which melds Old Testament narrative and Greek symbolism:

*Brazen serpent on a pole—  
Serpent once did make men whole,  
Cured the poisoned sting.  
Orpheus of the latter day  
Dauntlessly his bride away  
Out of Hell did bring.*

Learning about these usages makes later Florentine Christians like Marsilio Ficino and look far less idiosyncratic than even current scholars often claim. For us, it is a good reminder that liturgy and religious consciousness in general never develops in a vacuum. We are always indebted to our inner history as well as external expressions of the sacred.

In the final section of the volume, entitled “Holy Homer,” Rahner once again displays his familiarity with the Christian reception of the *poeta sovranus*. Primarily using scenes from *The Odyssey*, but branching out into the farthest reaches of ancient herbal magic, Rahner focuses on the sacred willow tree and the mysterious mandrake and moly plants. In Homer, the willow tree appears at a significant moment in Odysseus’s journey to the underworld. As Circe reveals the location of the dark doors of Hades, she mentions a grove: “Where there are tall poplars and fruit-destroying willows.”

Rahner takes this single line and traces its significance in the Hellenistic culture at large. According to folklore, the willow shed its flowers before it could bear fruit. Because of this, it was seen as destroying its own fruit *in utero*. At the same time, it acquired a paradoxical significance in Greek religious festivals, like the *Thesmophoria*, for fertility, as young women would lay on the ground in a bed of willow leaves. Just like Artemis, the divine force of chastity was also seen as the guardian of fertility. As Rahner puts it “they lay close to the womb of Mother Earth, thus sanctifying their own fruitfulness, the fruitfulness which in giving life also gave birth to death” (223). This ambiguous status of the willow, in Homer literally planted between the world of the living and the world of the dead, was retained in Hellenistic and Christian treatments.

The Septuagint translation of the Book of Job subtly emphasizes that the Behemoth lies in a watery grove of lotus trees and is “covered by the shoots of the *agnos* [willow] tree.” God and Job are wrestling with the chthonic mystery of death, not, as Bertrand Russell sniped, with a hippopotamus. More explicitly, Origen, Methodius, and Hesychius are all aware of the symbolic valence of the willow and apply it tropologically throughout their exegesis. The deathly willow can be transfigured. In his commentary on Ezekiel, Origen freely combines the use of willow branches in the feast of the tabernacles, with the willows which the exiles hung up their lyres, with the faithful who will spring up like willows in Isaiah 4. In the heavenly Jerusalem, nothing will be barren.

The scene in Book X of *The Odyssey* where Hermes gives Odysseus the moly plant as an apotropaic against Circe’s magic also caught the attention of pagan and Christian sages. Rahner stresses how this plant, like all ancient botany, functions in a kind of spiritual and therapeutic discourse. The literal moly plant is supposed to have certain potencies and virtues related to the soul; on top of this, the symbolic valence of the herb, in itself and narratively, provides material for psychological and moral reflection. In itself, the black roots surging forth into a white blossom evoke the animal-angelic existence of each human being with its attendant tensions.

In the Homeric narrative, Hermes grants Odysseus the magical means to resist becoming an animal. The holy *pharmakon* of Hermes resists the dehumanizing *pharmakon* of Circe. Rahner takes this opportunity to point out the ancient identification of Hermes and the Logos, going all the way back to Hippolytus and Justin Martyr. “In this we are at one with you, in that we both regard the Logos, whom you call Hermes, as the messenger of God” (*Apology* 1.22). In all of this, Rahner sought to open up a dialogue on psychagogy with Jung, Kerényi, and others which would allow him to display the riches of monastic ascetic spirituality.

The symbolic *imaginaire* of the Greco-Roman world was not immediately dissolved with the emergence of Christianity and Rahner was eager both to refresh that mode for the faithful and use it as a means for discussing the soul with non-Christians. The significance of this mode remains an open question. [Hildegard von Bingen](#) [[link:/articles/hildegard-of-bingens-lament-for-the-environmental-crisis-caused-by-human-sin/](#)] was recently (and rightfully) made a doctor of the

Church. The Sybil of the Rhine was able to make such beautiful and creative contributions to the theology of nature in part because her vision of plants, minerals, animals, and elements was born of this symbolic world. Her treatment of mandrake plants in the *Physica* does not go unremarked in Rahner's relevant section.

Hugo Rahner died in 1968 and the world looks somewhat different than the heyday of *Eranos*. Rahner possessed an essentially conservative Eurocentric disposition: his account of Hellenism conveys an exaggerated sense of distance from ancient near eastern cultural context (for more balanced accounts see Walter Burkert's [Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis](https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674023994) [link:https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674023994] and Stephen R.L. Clark's [Ancient Mediterranean Philosophy](https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/ancient-mediterranean-philosophy-9781444123596/) [link:https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/ancient-mediterranean-philosophy-9781444123596/]). The dangers latent in these assumptions are even more pronounced in cruder contemporary forms of this discourse. Chase Padusniak, in his essay "[Jungianism and the Proliferation of Meaning-Seeking Esotericism](https://www.oxfordjournals.org/doi/10.1093/monist/100.1.1)" [link:/articles/jungianism-and-the-proliferation-of-meaning-seeking-esotericism/], incisively points out these shortcomings. An uncritical embrace of "meaning" and "order" is not only another form of meaninglessness, it plays right into the consumption models of late capitalism and a reactionary authoritarianism. Psychoanalytic figures like Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek are necessary voices to retain a healthy sense of the negative and possibility.

But perhaps we can hold out hope that myth does not have to be a reactionary discourse simply glossing the status quo as a sacred order. If the mythic concern with primordial origins can converge with the Jewish and Christian horizon of eschatology, of the *future*, then the mythopoetic can be harnessed to a vision of collective liberation, instead of individual betterment or some varietal of social fascism. There really is no alternative, as modern literary artistry from Joyce to Eliot to [Calasso](https://www.oxfordjournals.org/doi/10.1093/monist/100.1.1) [link:/articles/the-book-of-all-books-and-the-inevitable-return-of-substitutionary-atonement/] prove. The mythic will never disappear for believer and non-believer alike. Such forces are too volatile and fascinating for Catholics to ignore. Least of all should we allow the complex Christian reception of myth, esotericism, and hermeticism to be devalued and disseminated by the latest self-help gurus. Hugo Rahner's engagement with the Jungians of his day allows us to evaluate contemporary discourse with a larger perspective. With some luck, we might be able to avoid repeating our mistakes and instead make genuine interreligious progress.

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*Featured Image: Detail from Botticelli's Primavera, 1482; Source: Wikimedia Commons, PD-Old-100.*

Posted in [Theology](https://www.oxfordjournals.org/doi/10.1093/monist/100.1.1) [link:/articles/category/theology/]

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