

Rethinking Animism and Myth: Comparative Models from Tylor to Lévi-Strauss

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Abstract: This study offers a comparative analysis of four influential approaches to animism, myth, and ritual in the study of religion: those of Edward B. Tylor (d.1917), James G. Frazer (d.1941), Mircea Eliade (d.1986), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (d.2009). Using the symbolism of plant and tree animism as a model, the study examines how these four theorists conceptualized the relationship among belief, myth, and ritual. Tylor's theory of animism is presented as a foundational model that explains religion as an early rational response to experiences such as dreams and death. Frazer's myth-ritual theory expands this framework by prioritizing ritual action and fertility symbolism within an evolutionary schema. In contrast, Eliade's phenomenological approach rejects reductionism, interpreting sacred symbols as manifestations of transcendent reality and rituals as reenactments of sacred time. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist perspective further challenges evolutionary interpretations by analyzing myth as a system of symbolic oppositions embedded in human cognition. By comparing these four paradigms, the article highlights both the enduring influence and the methodological limitations of classical theories, arguing that contemporary scholarship benefits from integrating comparative data with phenomenological and structural insights while abandoning unilinear evolutionary models.

Keywords: Animism, Myth-Ritual Theory, Sacred Nature, Symbolism, Comparative Religion

1. Introduction

Animism has occupied a complex and contested position in the history of the academic study of religion. Few concepts have exercised such a sustained influence while simultaneously undergoing such extensive theoretical revision. Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) established animism as a foundational category for explaining the origins and development of religion. In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor (1871) defined religion in relation to the "belief in Spiritual Beings" and interpreted animistic thought as an intellectual response to experiences such as dreams, visions, illness, and death, through which human beings came to distinguish between the material body and an immaterial soul or spirit. His evolutionary works subsequently positioned animism as an early stage in the development of religious thought. James George Frazer (1854-1941), while retaining the comparative and evolutionary assumptions characteristic of Tylor's anthropology, redirected analytical attention from the origins of religious belief toward the operation of magic and ritual. In the twentieth century, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) challenged reductionist interpretations of religion by emphasizing the distinctive character of sacred experience and the symbolic structures through which religious communities apprehend reality. His concepts of the *sacred and profane*, hierophany, sacred space, sacred time, and the reactualization of primordial events placed myth and ritual within a phenomenological framework in which religious symbols are not merely explanatory devices but manifestations of a sacred order. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), in turn, challenged the evolutionary hierarchy underlying much classical anthropology by demonstrating the complexity of so-called *primitive* systems of classification and symbolic thought. In a structuralist perspective, myth is neither simply an intellectual explanation of natural phenomena nor merely a narrative accompanying ritual; rather, it constitutes a system of relations in which fundamental oppositions such as nature and culture, life and death, and human and non-human are organized and mediated. These approaches reveal a significant transformation in the theoretical study of religion from Tylor's concern with the origin of religious belief, through Frazer's emphasis on the function of ritual, to Eliade's investigation of sacred meaning, and finally to Lévi-Strauss's analysis of symbolic structure. The history of animism can therefore be read not simply as a sequence of competing definitions but as a transformation in the questions scholars have asked about religious phenomena.

The central argument of this article is that the development of major classical approaches to animism, myth, and ritual may be analytically understood as a transformation in the principal questions through which religious phenomena have been interpreted. It is possible to express the transformation in the fundamental concepts of animism as *Origin* in Tylor, *Function* in Frazer, *Meaning* in Eliade, and *Structure* in Lévi-Strauss. This formulation does not suggest a simple chronological progression in, nor does it propose a new evolutionary model of the history of the study of religion. Rather, it identifies a significant shift in the dominant analytical orientation through which religion, myth, ritual, and the relationship between human beings and the natural world were conceptualized.

Tylor foregrounds the intellectual problem of how belief in spiritual beings emerges; Frazer emphasizes the operation and efficacy of magical and ritual action; Eliade investigates the symbolic and existential significance of sacred phenomena; and Lévi-Strauss analyzes the structural relations through which myths organize fundamental categories of human experience. These approaches should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Questions concerning the origin of beliefs, the function of rituals, the meaning of symbols, and the structure of mythological systems can all contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of religion. The sequence origin, function, meaning, structure thus serves as a heuristic model for tracing changing scholarly priorities while preserving the theoretical differences and methodological tensions among Tylor, Frazer, Eliade, and Lévi-Strauss. The purpose of this article is not to establish one of these classical theories as definitively correct. Rather, it seeks to reconstruct their conceptual differences and examine what each contributes to the interpretation of animism, myth, and ritual. The resulting comparison suggests that contemporary research benefits from retaining the comparative ambition of classical scholarship while rejecting its assumptions concerning *primitive* religion, universal stages of development, and unilinear progress.

2. Tylor: Animism and the Evolutionary Origin of Religion

Tylor's theory of animism was primarily concerned with the origin of religious belief. He sought to explain how human beings developed the idea of souls, spirits, and other supernatural beings. Experiences such as dreams, death, visions, and altered states of consciousness were interpreted as important sources for the development of animistic conceptions. Religion, consequently, was understood as emerging from human attempts to explain experiences that appeared to demonstrate the existence of a reality extending beyond the physical body. Tylor's central analytical concern was therefore genealogical: he asked how religious ideas originated and how belief in spiritual agency could develop into more complex religious systems.

Tylor defined religion as *the belief in spiritual beings* and sought to explain how such beliefs could have originated through the intellectual activity of early human beings (Tylor, 1920). He accepts religious teachings and practices as elements of theological systems developed by human reason without supernatural aid or revelation as developments of *Natural Religion*. His analysis focused primarily on the doctrines and ceremonies of societies that he classified as “primitive,” while also considering related beliefs and practices among societies he regarded as more advanced. (Tylor, 1920). His approach was evolutionary and he assumed that human cultures could be studied comparatively. Religious beliefs were therefore not isolated cultural phenomena but elements within an evolutionary sequence. Animism occupied an especially important place because Tylor considered belief in souls and spirits to be an elementary form from which more complex religious systems could develop. Dreams, visions, illness, trance, and death were particularly important. A person could experience himself or herself as moving, seeing, or interacting with others while asleep, even though the physical body remained in place. Death presented a related problem: the body remained visible, yet the person was no longer understood to be present. Tylor argued that early humans could interpret these experiences through the concept of an immaterial soul or spiritual entity (Tylor, 1920).

Tylor's explanation was between *primitive* and *civilized* cultures embedded a hierarchical conception of human development. Religious beliefs could be evaluated according to their presumed position within a universal trajectory toward modern rationality. But, Marett (1866-1944), expanded upon Tylor's concept of animism. According to Marett, explaining the earliest form of religion solely through a belief in *souls* or *spirits* is insufficient; this is because a sense of a more diffuse supernatural power; *mana*, may also lie at the foundation of primitive religious experience. The vital concern of religion at any and every stage of its evolution is, to keep its sense of direction, to maintain an awareness of its unchanging end (Marett, 1909). The human assumption that an unseen reality or power exists behind natural phenomena is a foundational process in the emergence of religion. However, Marett, Tylor's explanation of religion as *animism* with the concept of *animatism*, a stage that is both more primitive and broader in scope.

3. Frazer: Magic, Myth, Ritual and Fertility

Frazer accepted that the human mind reacts uniformly everywhere to natural phenomena just like Tylor (Eliade, 1952). Whereas Tylor emphasized the origin of belief, Frazer emphasized ritual action and the human desire to influence the world. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer examined fertility, vegetation, sacrifice, kingship, death, and regeneration, arguing that magical and religious practices reflected systematic attempts to influence or negotiate with the forces of nature. This shift from the intellectual origins of belief toward ritual action and efficacy constitutes an important transformation in the comparative study of religion. The central distinction in Frazer's theory is between magic, religion, and science. The sun, moon, rain, and wind are natural phenomena that need to be controlled in both America and Malaysia (Frazer, 1922). Magic is therefore different from Tylor's animism because its primary analytical significance lies not in the belief in spiritual beings but in the presumed efficacy of action. The magician seeks to produce an outcome through a ritualized manipulation of relationships. Magic is a common method resorted to for protection against harm from others, for inflicting harm on another person, or for protection against natural disasters (Frazer, 1922).

Religion emerges when human beings recognize the limits of magical control and instead appeal to supernatural agents. Prayer, sacrifice, and propitiation become ways of negotiating with powers that cannot simply be manipulated. Science, in Frazer's evolutionary model, ultimately replaces both magic and religion as a more reliable means of explaining natural causality (Frazer, 1922). His treatment of myth is particularly important because he frequently interpreted myths in relation to rituals. Fertility and vegetation rituals were associated with narratives of death, disappearance, return, and regeneration. The recurring cycles of vegetation provided a model through which societies could symbolically represent death and renewal. Trees and vegetation are not simply a natural resource but can become associated with fertility, kingship, seasonal renewal, and cosmic regeneration. The sacred tree can thus be interpreted as part of a ritual system concerned with the reproduction of life (Frazer, 1922).

For Frazer, plants and trees have a somewhat different role from Tylor's theory. Frazer is more interested in how magical and ritual practices involving vegetation operate. In *The Golden Bough*, he treats vegetation as a major field through which humans attempted to understand and control fertility, growth, death, and regeneration. He had shown agricultural societies as particularly concerned with the recurring cycle, seed, growth, harvest, death, regeneration follows each other. Plants therefore become connected with the broader human concern for fertility and reproduction. Rituals intended to promote agricultural abundance may imitate or symbolically stimulate the processes of nature.

Frazer reconstructs a complex system in which the power responsible for the fertility of vegetation may be represented through a plant, tree, animal, human figure, or ritual personage. This is why particular trees and plants can become ritual embodiments of fertility. He gives considerable attention to sacred trees and groves. A tree may represent the life and reproductive power of vegetation. For example, rituals involving: cutting a tree, decorating a tree, carrying branches,

bringing vegetation into a community, burning or burying vegetation, selecting a ritual representative of the vegetation spirit, can be interpreted as attempts to preserve, transfer, or renew the power of vegetation. He explains many plant rituals through sympathetic magic, particularly the principle of *like produces like*. For example: If people perform a ritual symbolizing the growth of vegetation, they believe that the ritual can help produce actual agricultural growth. Thus, a ritual involving a green branch or flourishing plant may be intended to stimulate the fertility of crops. A piece of a sacred plant, branch, or tree can therefore retain the power of the larger vegetation system (Frazer, 1922).

4. Eliade: Myth, Ritual and the Sacred:

Mircea Eliade represents a significant departure from the evolutionary assumptions of Tylor and Frazer. Although he retained their interest in comparative religion, Eliade rejected the reduction of religious phenomena to primitive attempts at scientific explanation. His principal concern was the meaning of religion as experienced by religious human beings. The sacred is not a stage in human consciousness; it is an element within consciousness. Living as a human being at the most archaic level of culture is, at the same time, a religious act. For activities such as nourishment, sexuality, and work possess ritual significance. To be human is to be connected to religion (Eliade, 1969).

The fundamental distinction in his phenomenology of religion is between the sacred and the profane. Certain objects, places, times, and events become sacred because they manifest a dimension of reality that differs from ordinary profane existence (Eliade, 1959). Eliade calls manifestations of the sacred hierophanies. A stone, tree, mountain, spring, or other natural object can become sacred not because it is intrinsically supernatural but because it becomes a manifestation of sacred reality within the ordinary world. This provides a fundamentally different interpretation of animism. A sacred tree need not be understood merely as evidence of an erroneous attribution of a *spirit* to a natural object. Instead, the tree may participate symbolically in a sacred order. Its religious meaning derives from its relationship to a larger structure of sacred space and time.

Eliade's interpretation of myth follows directly from this phenomenological approach. Myth is not simply an imaginary story or primitive explanation. It is a sacred narrative concerning primordial events, particularly the actions of gods, ancestors, or other supernatural beings at the beginning of a particular order of existence (Eliade, 1963). Myth therefore has an ontological function. It explains how a reality came into being and provides a model for contemporary religious existence. A creation myth, for example, does not merely describe an event in the distant past; it establishes a paradigmatic model that can be reactualized through ritual.

5. Lévi-Strauss: Myth and the Structure of Thought:

Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced a further transformation by approaching myth not primarily as an explanation of nature, an expression of sacred experience, or a survival from an earlier stage of human development, but as a system of symbolic relations structured through underlying patterns of human thought. Structuralism investigates the relationships among the elements of myth rather than isolating individual symbols according to their presumed historical origins. Myths acquire meaning through systems of difference and opposition, including such fundamental categories as nature and culture, life and death, raw and cooked, and human and non-human. Lévi-Strauss thus shifted the primary analytical concern toward the structure of symbolic thought and the relational patterns through which human beings classify and organize their world.

Lévi-Strauss represents a further transformation in the comparative study of religion. His structuralism rejected the evolutionary assumption that non-Western societies represented earlier stages of intellectual development. Instead, he argued that human beings everywhere possess capacities for classification, differentiation, association, and symbolic organization. Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that so-called *primitive* systems of classification can be highly complex. The

distinction between modern and non-modern thought should therefore not be reduced to a distinction between rationality and irrationality (Lévi-Strauss, 1977; Strauss, 1955).

Lévi-Strauss raises a much more fundamental objection to Tylor's theory. Tylor views animism as an early intellectual effort by humans to explain natural phenomena. He, however, opposes the characterization of myth and religious thought as merely erroneous explanations by primitive people. According to Lévi-Strauss, the capacity for thought is not exclusive to modern societies; relationships between nature and culture are organized through systematic classifications; animals, plants, humans, and natural phenomena function not merely as objects possessing a soul, but as interrelated symbolic categories (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). For him the question should be: "What meaning does the tree hold within the system of oppositions and relationships such as human, animal, plant, nature, and culture?" In this context, Lévi-Strauss represents a shift from Tylor's question of origins to the question of structure (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

For Lévi-Strauss, myth is especially revealing because it organizes relationships among categories. A myth is not simply a narrative that communicates a religious belief. Its elements acquire meaning through their relationships to one another. Myth can therefore be analyzed structurally (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). According to Lévi-Strauss, binary opposition is an important approach to explaining the structure of myth. Human thought frequently organizes experience through contrasts such as nature/culture, life/death, raw/cooked, animal/human, and male/female. Myths provide symbolic mechanisms for mediating these oppositions. In his works, the famous distinction between the raw and the cooked illustrates this approach. Cooking transforms a natural substance through a cultural process. The opposition therefore becomes a symbolic model of the relationship between nature and culture (Lévi-Strauss, 1969).

Lévi-Strauss's approach to ritual differs from Frazer's. He is less interested in ritual efficacy than in the symbolic organization of relations. Ritual can be understood as part of a broader system in which differences are expressed, transformed, or mediated (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Structuralism, however, has limitations of its own. Its emphasis on synchronic structures can understate historical development, individual experience, social conflict, and political power. Religious systems are not merely abstract structures; they are also lived traditions shaped by institutions and historical circumstances (Bourdieu, 1977).

Since the purpose of a myth is to present a logical model capable of resolving a contradiction, a theoretically infinite number of variants will emerge. Thus, the myth expands in a spiral fashion until the intellectual impulse that gave rise to it is exhausted. While the growth of the myth is a continuous process, its structure remains discontinuous. Given this, we must consider that the nature of the myth within the realm of oral expression largely corresponds to the nature of a crystal in the physical material world (Strauss, 1955).

6. A Comparative Analysis from Origin to Structure

Animism can be interpreted not as a primitive belief system but as part of a system of classification. Animals, plants, ancestors, and human groups can be related through symbolic distinctions that organize social and cosmological relationships. This approach has important consequences for plant and tree symbolism. A tree may represent nature, but it may simultaneously become a cultural symbol. It can distinguish wilderness from cultivation, life from death, earth from sky, or human society from the non-human world. Its significance therefore derives from its position within a system of relationships (Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

The Druid may be understood as a religious specialist who functioned as both guardian and mediator of sacred reality, facilitating the articulation of the sacred through ritual practices, mythic traditions, sacred spaces and times, and symbolically structured relationships between human communities and the natural world (Eliade, 1959). In Eliadean perspective, the Druid can be interpreted as a religious specialist responsible for preserving and mediating sacred reality through the ritual organization of sacred space and time, the transmission and reactualization of mythic

traditions, and the maintenance of symbolically meaningful relationships between human beings, the natural environment, and the transcendent order (Eliade, 1963).

Eliade introduced a substantially different theoretical orientation by challenging the reduction of religious phenomena to evolutionary stages or failed attempts at scientific explanation. His phenomenological approach was primarily concerned with the meaning of religious symbols and the experience of the sacred. Myth, in this framework, is not merely an explanation of natural phenomena or a narrative accompanying ritual; it is a sacred account of primordial events. Ritual, similarly, does not simply perform a practical function but reactualizes sacred time and restores contact with foundational events. Eliade therefore shifts the analytical emphasis from function to meaning (Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 1963).

Table 1. The four theories can be compared according to their central analytical questions.

Factor	Tylor	Frazer	Eliade	Lévi-Strauss
Animism	Early belief in Spirits	Part of evolutionary religious thought	Sacred-natural world relationship	System of symbolic relations
Myth	Explanation	Ritual narrative	Sacred primordial narrative	Structured system of relations
Ritual	Expression of belief	Magical/ religious action	Reactualization of sacred time	Symbolic transformation
Central concept	Soul/ spirit	Magic	Sacred / hierophany	Structure/binary opposition
Analytical movement	Origin	Function	Meaning	Structure

This comparison demonstrates that the four theories are not simply competing definitions of animism. They represent different epistemological orientations. Tylor's primary concern is the origin of religious belief; Frazer's is the function and development of magical and ritual action; Eliade's is the meaning and structure of sacred experience; and Lévi-Strauss's is the relational structure of symbolic systems. The transformation represented by these approaches is therefore not merely chronological or cumulative. Rather, it reflects a fundamental shift in what constitutes an adequate explanation of religion (see Table 1).

For Tylor, explanation primarily entails reconstructing the intellectual processes through which human beings generated beliefs in souls, spirits, and other supernatural beings. For Frazer, it involves identifying recurrent patterns and developmental sequences in magical and ritual practices and situating them within a broader evolutionary account of human thought. Eliade, by contrast, understands explanation as the interpretation of the symbolic, existential, and phenomenological significance of religious experience, particularly as expressed through manifestations of the sacred, myth, and ritual. For Lévi-Strauss, finally, explanation consists in reconstructing the underlying relational structures through which myths organize, mediate, and transform fundamental conceptual oppositions and contradictions (see Table 1).

The movement from Tylor to Lévi-Strauss thus represents not simply a succession of theories but a series of epistemological transformations: from the search for religious origins, to the analysis of ritual patterns, to the interpretation of sacred meaning, and finally to the structural analysis of symbolic relations. Plant and tree symbolism provides an especially productive field for testing these theoretical differences because trees can simultaneously function as natural entities, ritual objects, symbolic representations, and components of systems of classification. A Tylorian interpretation might ask why people attribute spiritual agency to a tree. The answer would be sought in the intellectual development of animistic thought and the extension of the concept of spirit beyond the human person. A Frazerian interpretation would emphasize the relationship between vegetation, fertility, seasonal cycles, ritual, sacrifice, and regeneration. The tree could become part of a ritual complex representing the renewal of life.

An Eliadean interpretation would examine the conditions under which a tree ceases to function merely as a natural object and becomes invested with religious significance as a hierophany, that is, as a manifestation of the sacred within the profane world. The religious meaning of the tree does not derive simply from its physical form or biological properties, but from its capacity to reveal a reality that transcends ordinary experience. Within his comparative analysis of religious symbolism, the tree may consequently function as a symbol of cosmic structure and regeneration. In particular, the image of the cosmic tree may express a connection among different levels of the cosmos and may be associated with the symbolism of the *Center* and the *axis mundi*. Its recurring cycles of growth, death, and renewal can also provide a symbolic model for regeneration and the periodic renewal of life. An Eliadean analysis would therefore focus not primarily on why people attribute agency or spirit to trees, but on how the tree becomes a symbolic medium through which sacred reality, cosmic order, and the possibility of regeneration are disclosed (see Table 1).

A Lévi-Straussian interpretation, by contrast, would shift attention away from the tree as an autonomous object of religious belief or as a manifestation of sacred reality and instead examine its position within a broader system of symbolic relations. The central question would concern the ways in which the tree participates in the organization and mediation of fundamental conceptual oppositions. Within mythic thought, the tree may function as a mediating term between nature and culture, earth and sky, wilderness and settlement, life and death, or human and non-human domains. Its religious and symbolic significance would therefore derive not primarily from an inherent sacred quality but from its relational position within a structured system of differences and transformations. From this perspective, tree symbolism reveals the underlying classificatory logic through which human thought organizes and negotiates apparent contradictions within the natural and social worlds (see Table 1)

This comparison demonstrates the analytical value of theoretical pluralism. No single framework necessarily exhausts the meaning of plant and tree symbolism. The classical theories examined here remain influential, but contemporary scholarship cannot simply reproduce their assumptions. The major problem is unilinear evolutionism. Tylor and Frazer frequently assumed that societies could be placed along a universal trajectory from primitive religion toward modern rationality. Contemporary anthropological work has increasingly emphasized that relationships between humans and non-human beings may involve ontology, kinship, personhood, ethics, ecology, and political relationships rather than simply *belief in spirits* (Harvey, 2006; Descola, 2013).

Eliade's universal phenomenology may overlook historical and cultural specificity. The categories of sacred space, sacred time, and hierophany can illuminate recurring patterns, but they should not automatically be assumed to operate identically across religious traditions (McCutcheon, 1997). Finally, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism understates historical change and lived experience. Although structural analysis reveals the relational patterns through which myths and symbolic classifications organize human thought, symbolic structures do not exist independently of the social worlds in which people inhabit, negotiate, and transform them. Critics of structuralism have therefore argued that its emphasis on underlying structures may insufficiently account for historical contingency, human agency, social practice, and the changing contexts in which symbolic systems are reproduced and reinterpreted (Bourdieu, 1977). These criticisms suggest that the most productive contemporary approach is neither to reject the classical theorists entirely nor to accept their theories uncritically. Instead, their analytical insights can be retained while their universalizing assumptions are revised (Viveiros de Castro, 1998).

7. Conclusions

Animism, in this revised perspective, is not simply a theory about spirits. It is a field of relationships through which worlds are constituted, symbols acquire meaning, and boundaries between human and non-human existence are negotiated. The movement from animism to

structure thus describes not the disappearance of animism but the transformation of the scholarly frameworks through which it has been understood. Tylor's attention to beliefs about non-human agency remains useful when separated from evolutionary hierarchy. Frazer's attention to ritual, fertility, vegetation, and comparative symbolism remains productive when detached from his universal evolutionary sequence. Eliade's emphasis on sacred symbolism can contribute to the interpretation of religious experience when supplemented by historical and cultural contextualization. Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis can reveal symbolic relations when combined with attention to history, power, and lived religious practice.

Eliade's approach moves from analysis to function. His emphasis on symbols carries the risk of universalization and of downplaying the historical differences between traditions. Strauss's and Eliade's work remains important because it challenged the assumption that religion should be interpreted primarily as primitive rationality. Religious symbols became meaningful structures of human existence rather than merely evidence of an earlier intellectual stage.

The theoretical history examined in this article suggests that animism should no longer be treated primarily as a stage in the evolutionary history of religion. Instead, it may be more productively understood as a set of relational, symbolic, and ontological configurations through which human communities understand their relationships with non-human beings and the wider environment. This reconsideration is consistent with later anthropological approaches that have questioned the sharp separation between nature and culture. Contemporary studies of animism increasingly explore how animals, plants, landscapes, ancestors, and other than human beings may participate in social and moral relationships rather than existing simply as objects of human belief.

Comparative analysis remains valuable when it does not erase difference. Symbols can be compared without assuming that they have identical meanings; myths can be structurally related without being reduced to a universal formula; rituals can be compared without presuming a single evolutionary origin. The result is a more flexible conception of animism, one that recognizes both cross-cultural patterns and cultural particularity.

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