



Weaving the Rainbow: Astrology as a Sacred Art

Exploring astrology's relationship to
belief and spirituality

Carole Taylor

My purpose in writing this article is to contemplate some of the ways in which astrology resonates to the notion of spirituality and to explore its capacity to contain and express the sacred. This is certainly not a scientific study of what astrologers believe and I confess here to the biases of my own perspective and to the preoccupations of my own chart – consistent with Saturn in the 9th house, I have spent much of my life searching for a belief system which feels authentic to me; it has been a long road and I am certainly not at the end of it yet.

Saturn aside, my own spiritual history is typically Geminian and Mercurial – I started off as an agnostic, engaging briefly with Christianity before scepticism reared its head and I fell into agnosticism again. Buddhism followed, and mindful meditation, then Taoism as I learnt the practice of Tai Chi – then years later, as a result of studying astrology, I delved into the Western mysteries and became interested in alchemy and magic.

Although the specifics may be different, I don't think I am alone amongst astrologers in having such a varied experience – I don't think this is 'spiritual tourism', but a genuine attempt to explore the bigger questions of life. Perhaps astrologers are particularly prone to this – my observation is that we are curious and questioning by nature, interested in probing below the surface to discover the deeper mechanisms that may be at work.

Spirituality - a human need



The need for belief

There have been a number of theories put forward as to why religion first arose – for instance, that it began with an animistic belief in the idea of spiritual presence within nature or with the mythological exploration of natural events. But ever since the earliest appearance of evidence for religious ideas (thought by some scholars to date to the Palaeolithic period), there seems to have been continuity of spiritual expression in some form or other.¹ Even in our current secular time, the results of the 2011 UK national census showed that 60% of the UK population associate themselves with a religious faith of some kind (55% Christianity, 5% other faiths).² Whilst statistics often require thoughtful analysis (in the previous 2001 UK census, for instance, almost 0.8 % of the population claimed to be of the 'Jedi' faith, named for the quasi-religious order of Jedi Knights in the film *Star Wars*), it seems that the majority of us still align ourselves with some form of religious or spiritual expression. Despite the best efforts of well-known atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, the sheer number of religious faiths, belief systems and spiritual traditions, historic and current, suggest

that belief of one kind or another is an important strand of human experience – as Jung observed, there seems to be a human instinct towards religion.

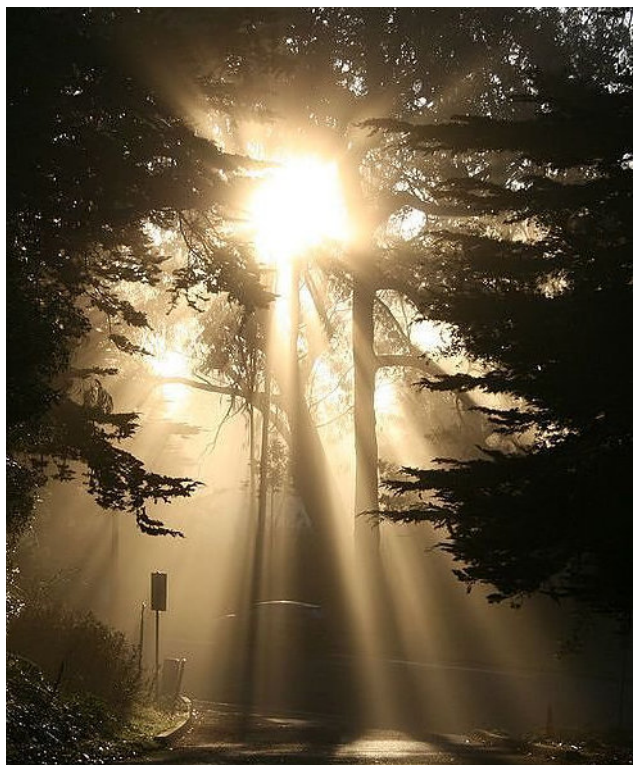
In June 2012, the Dalai Lama toured the UK, attracting large audiences and news coverage, suggesting that his appeal, as a universal symbol of spiritual wisdom, stretches far beyond those who would describe themselves as practising Buddhists in the Tibetan tradition. Many years ago I had the privilege of seeing him speak at the Royal Albert Hall, and he easily packed this 5,000-seat auditorium over two nights – long queues of people, hopeful of getting returned tickets at the box office, snaked around the building. On the television the following day, I watched him being interviewed by two hard-bitten journalists who spent the first two minutes enquiring about the political situation in Tibet and the remaining 28 effectively asking him to reveal to them the meaning of life. When the Dalai Lama, with his usual knowing smile, indicated that he did not have access to this information and gently suggested that they look within themselves for the answer, they merely reformed the question and asked it again. And again.



Astrology is multifaceted

Astrology, belief and imagination

Depending on one's definition of religion, astrology may or may not fall into this category. We might say that, overall, it has no specific creed or dogma which must be adhered to in order that one might call oneself an astrologer, beyond the employment of some kind of astronomical phenomena such as use of the stars, planets or zodiac signs. It has no 'holy scripture' (unless one counts Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* or Lilly's *Christian Astrology*, or perhaps the ephemeris) and no intrinsic moral or social code beyond that which a practising astrologer might voluntarily apply to themselves. A number of faiths rest on codes of practice which are enshrined as religious 'law'³, and we use the word 'order' to designate a bonded religious community, such as a monastic house, governed by a 'rule'. Being arguably Promethean and multifaceted in nature, with Mercury as its ancient ruler and Uranus as one of its suggested modern rulers, the notion of astrology as a whole coming under one creed or set of rules seems out of place. Most forms of astrology are governed by their own conventions of course, and it is not unheard of for some astrologers to display a certain fundamentalism, but the nature of astrology itself seems to me to encourage multiplicity and experimentation with a wide range of perspectives and practices, rather than the tendency to crystallise into a single enduring orthodoxy. This is no doubt true of some religions too – it could possibly be argued of Christianity – but it seems particularly true of astrology.



The imaginative world of symbols

But many astrologers I have come into contact with (I have never engaged in any statistical testing of this, but my limited experience seems to point to it) are inclined towards what might be termed a spiritual perspective – or at least they identify themselves as being on some kind of spiritual path, whatever that might be. I have yet to meet a Jedi, but I have known astrologers who are practising Christians (Catholics, Anglicans, non-conformists), as well as Gnostics, Spiritualists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Theosophists, pagans, magicians, witches and Wiccans. Some have been atheists, for whom the planets are strictly archetypes in the collective human unconscious – and on the occasions when I have voiced the idea that deity could be thought of as more than just human projection, I have not always received a favourable reaction. Perhaps our Western scientific upbringing is really very strong, or the historical shadow of religion-as-social-control is still too strong in the collective mind for some astrologers to feel comfortable framing their conception of the planets in this way.

Many astrologers I have met seem to come from an agnostic point of view – they do not profess any particular religious beliefs (at least not to me), although they profess a kind of ‘secular spirituality’ which emphasises humanistic ideals of compassion, tolerance, mindfulness and self-awareness, as well as the desire for some kind of connection to a world beyond the limits of the physical senses. And for many, myself included, an engagement with astrological symbols is, in itself, one route to this, because we access them through the imagination. They exist in the imaginal realm – the Otherworld of the Celts, the spirit world of the shamans, Jung’s collective unconscious, the mundus imaginalis described by Henry Corbin. As Corbin himself said of it: *‘We are not dealing here with irreality. The mundus imaginalis is a world of autonomous forms and images...It is a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state.’*⁴ Or in the words of the 11th century Sufi mystic, Al-Ghazali: *‘The visible world was made to correspond to the world invisible and there is nothing in this world but is a symbol of something in that other world.’*⁵

I have heard many astrologers say that they do not feel the need to ‘believe’ in astrology – that astrology is a ‘tool’ (like a spanner or a socket wrench?) which proves its validity through practical use. However, I would say that astrology does indeed require a leap of faith – or at least a leap of imagination. It is a system which, despite the statistical findings of researchers such as Gauquelin and Eysenck, defies rationality and cannot be easily explained in anything other than poetic and imaginative terms. For example, logic cannot tell us why the Ascendant

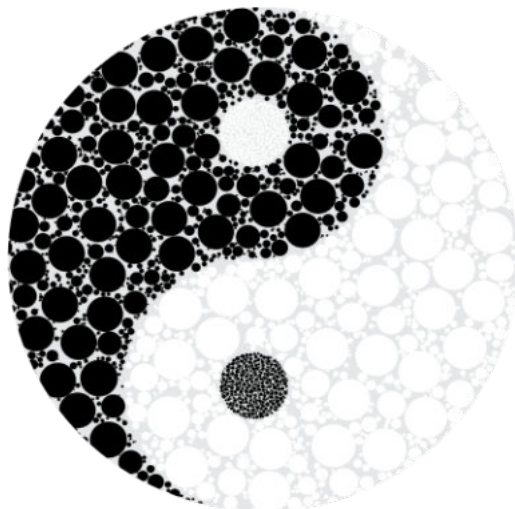
and Descendant should be accorded influence – they represent the intersection of the horizon with the ecliptic from the viewpoint of the observer in one specific time and place, and so do not exist in any objective sense. And we are all familiar with the idea of the zodiac as an invented mathematical and symbolic device, and that the actual positions of the planets against the background constellations are no longer aligned with the corresponding tropical zodiac positions due to precession of the equinoxes.

As Thomas Aquinas observed though, knowledge has more than one source – Aquinas judged these sources to be reason and revelation. We might also call them the rational and the imaginal, and astrology seems to demand a mixture of both from its practitioners. It requires rigorous measurement of time and space alongside an ability to interpret the heavens in an entirely symbolic way. Astrologers make precise use of astronomical data, yet we work within a pre-Copernican astronomical framework which privileges the observer's viewpoint. In this sense, astrology asks us to move beyond left-brained intellect and respond to what we see on a poetic and symbolic level – as Norman Davidson writes in *Astronomy and the Imagination*, 'The heavens are part of the totality of our experience of life – our geocentric position has more reality in an immediate sense than the heliocentricity we know to be intellectually true.'⁶

Astrology as spiritual expression

It therefore seems to me that astrology is inherently spiritual in nature, recognising that not only do we exist within a wider cosmic structure, this structure has meaning. Astrology connects us to the image of the heavens in a way which defies scientific causation and takes us into the heart of a deep mystery which strict logic cannot describe or contain. It is a system of thought which makes no clear distinction between inner and outer, celestial and terrestrial, psyche and soma, that which is above and that which is below. At a conference talk, I heard the author and architect Keith Critchlow once comment that 'ultimately, the most basic mystic truth is that of inseparability'. The Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus said something of the same nature – 'everything breathes together'.

Astrology offers us the potential for spiritual expression at a time in human history when traditional forms of religion are in flux and cannot always satisfy this need. It speaks of an intelligent and intelligible cosmos, alive with meaning for anyone who makes the effort to read the signs. It also offers a framework which potentially encompasses all things, from the



Everything breathes together



The universal imagery of myth

most profound mystical encounter to the most mundane event. One of the most powerful moments for me when learning astrology was appreciating that the idea of correspondences means the planets in a chart relate to the ordinary level of the physical world as much as they do to psychological drives and dynamics, and that both are brought together in the image of an ancient deity. Mercury represents the urge to connect and he manifests in the form of a pen or a book or a bridge as much as through the human function of speech and language – he is to be found both in the email I write and in the hallowed words of a religious text. Astrology allows us to see the sacred embedded in the mundane – with astrology as the framework, every experience, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, contains the potential for sacred connection.

There is also an inherently spiritual aspect to the idea of the chart as mythic narrative, astrology's use of the universal imagery of myth as a primary language of the soul. Whether we see this imagery in terms of deity or as the archetypal contents of the collective unconscious, the expression of individual experience in terms of universal stories creates a powerful transpersonal element. Myths are repositories of shared human experience representing, in the words of the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, something of the cumulative wisdom which a society can pass from one generation to another. 'If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives'⁷ – and myths are one of the ways in which we derive a sense of meaning, by connecting to their universal dimension and framing our experience within the context of a shared story.

For example, if I am undergoing a Pluto transit, I know that I am not the first person to have experienced the descent into the underworld which forms this planet's core archetypal pattern – others have gone before and charted the territory, in poems, songs, art and mythic narrative. It is a universal experience, as evidenced by the fact that most, if not all, cultures include some kind of 'descent' story in their mythology. So although my experience is unique to me on many levels, I have clues to the terrain and how to navigate my passage through it – how to recognise each stage of the descent and, most importantly, how I might effect my return to the 'upper world' when the time is right. The stories also remind me that this process of descent is concerned ultimately with renewal and regeneration and is therefore purposeful.

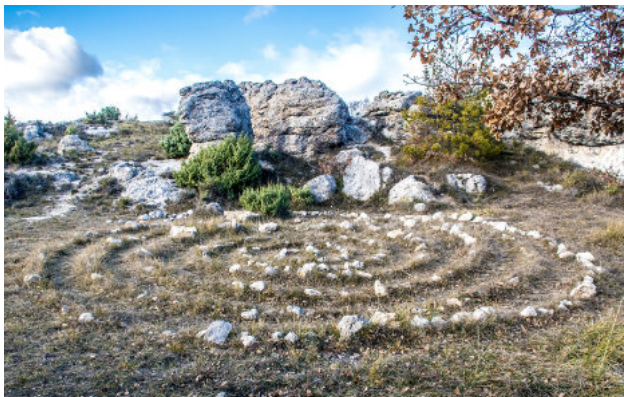
Through the framework of astrological timing, myth offers us a sense of our place within the natural order of things. Particular transits such as the Saturn return or the Uranus opposition accompany important life passages – their symbolism, embedded in mythic stories and explored through the imagination, not only reflects with unerring accuracy the true nature of what we feel inside at these times, imbuing these experiences with meaning and purpose, it offers the possibility of a context for life's key rites of passage. In a world where many of the major turning points, such as the passage from childhood (around the time of the first Saturn opposition) or the menopause (around the time of the Chiron return), are often not marked in any significant way by communal rituals of initiation, we can look to astrological cycles as a way of framing and understanding the deeper levels of our experience. Even the simple act of following the monthly cycle of the Moon or the yearly cycle of the Sun through the seasons has the power to put us back in touch with the ebb and flow of the natural world – it is the simplest form of spiritual observance, but it still holds great power, particularly when we connect to the image of those cycles as metaphors for an aspect of human experience. The ancient Greeks had two words for time, *chronos* and *kairos*, the former referring to chronological or sequential time and the latter to the notion of an opportune moment, the right time for a particular action. Astrology works with *chronos* time in the physical cycles of the planets, in order to give us knowledge of *kairos* – the right time for something, indicated in the larger cosmic picture to which the inner self resonates, so that we can live in accordance with the cosmos and with our true nature.

Noting that humans have always been mythmakers, Karen Armstrong, author of many books on comparative religion, has this to say about myth:

*'Mythology is usually inseparable from ritual. Many myths make no sense outside a liturgical drama that brings them to life, and are incomprehensible in a profane setting....Myth is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words...(it) speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it.'*⁸

Astrology offers us a framework for such ritual, based on the cycles of the planets over time and the use of planetary archetypes which resonate to the stories which we find in myths.

Rituals of initiation



Participation

Astrology can be used in an entirely mechanical way, like moving pieces strategically around a chess board – it is only the perspective and intention of the astrologer which makes it otherwise. The chart does not in itself offer meaning, only the possibility of this – meaning arises when we begin to engage with it, through the process of connecting to the symbols when we read the chart. The deeper our connection to them, the richer our interpretation is likely to be.

As part of the Foundation course at the Faculty of Astrological Studies where I trained and where I have taught for many years, students are required to learn how to calculate and hand-draw a natal chart. This is not a pointless exercise in doing by hand what most astrologers now achieve in 10 seconds using astrological software, but a way of connecting to the idea of astrology as a craft and to the chart as a form of sacred space within which a human life unfolds, bounded by the perfect circle of the heavens and divided by the cross of matter (in the form of the Ascendant-Descendant and MC-IC, representing East-West and South-North) which orientates us within the heavenly picture – it is an exercise which seems quite ordinary on one level, but on another level might be viewed as a form of invocation or inviting of the gods, or the ‘divine’ archetypes, into the ritual circle, so that we may begin to create our dialogue with them.

Time: the moving image of eternity



Time as the moving image of eternity

In *Timaeus*, Plato writes:

*[The creator] sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time.*⁹

In other words, the moving cosmos, manifesting itself as time, is an expression, through the mathematics of planetary motion, of an underlying eternal, perfect unity. In the motion of the planets through time, the totality becomes an expression of the One. We might translate this into an astrological context and say that one birth chart, representing a moment in time, is

linked to all other birth charts, and the totality of all birth charts is the woven thread of time, an expression in time of underlying unity.

In this respect, perhaps just being ourselves and living our chart, our slice of time, as authentically as we are able to do at any given moment, with imagination and a sense of connection to the symbols, is one of the most powerful forms of spiritual expression, connecting the temporal and the eternal through the device of the horoscope.



Science or imagination

Weaving the rainbow

On 31st December 1995, the Independent on Sunday newspaper published an article by the biologist Richard Dawkins, vehemently attacking astrology. As you would expect, he went for the jugular, describing astrology as 'an aesthetic affront' which 'demeans astronomy, shrivelling and cheapening the universe with its pre-Copernican dabbings'. Later, in 1998, he expressed a similar view in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, a book which sought to counter the criticisms he had received following publication of *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*, that he had stripped the world of any meaning, in the same way that John Keats had suggested, in a poem about Newton, that Newton had destroyed the poetry of the rainbow by describing it as the prismatic effects of moist air.

It wasn't the first attack on astrology by a scientist in modern times and, as we know, it certainly wasn't destined to be the last. But when scientists dismiss astrology because they can find no causal mechanism for it nor satisfactorily test it under laboratory conditions, they are missing the point – that astrology is itself like poetry, the meaning of which only fully arises from the inter-relationship between poem and reader and which offers a different meaning to each person. We can analyse a poem and say that it is written in iambic pentameter or in sonnet or quatrain format, and that will tell us something true about the poem – but it cannot tell us anything about the emotions it will engage in is, for which we need an entirely different mode of perception. Hildegard of Bingen¹⁰, Christian mystic and visionary of 12th century Germany, and composer of some of the most beautiful music ever written, is thought to have been a migraine sufferer – the source of her 'visions', as re-interpreted by modern commentators. So was she inspired by visions of God, by the mystic's 'fire in the head', or did she simply suffer from appalling headaches? The rainbow is indeed brought about by the prismatic effects of moist air – it is a fact which no one wishes to deny.



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She gained a Diploma from the Faculty of Astrological Studies in 2000 and has held a variety of roles at the Faculty since then, including Summer School Organiser, Head of Classes and Director of Studies. She pioneered the Faculty's online seminars and online classes programme, shaped its syllabus and has contributed extensively to its course material over the years. She was Vice-President of the Faculty for nine years and President for three years, being awarded a Fellowship in 2012 for her unique contribution to the life of the school. She continues to teach on the Faculty's Foundation and Diploma training programmes.

She holds an honours degree in Geography from the University of Cambridge and an MA with distinction in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred from Canterbury Christ Church University. She is a tutor on the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David teaching on the Sky & Psyche and the Researching Contemporary Cosmologies modules.

But seen with the eye of the imagination, it is also the path made between earth and heaven by the Greek goddess Iris, it is the bow of Indra, Hindu god of the lightning, it is the belt of Tir, the Armenian Sun god, and the jewelled necklace of Babylonian Ishtar. It is all of these things – and it is the magic of astrology which allows us to hold within us these two very different forms of truth.

Footnotes:

1 There is some debate amongst scholars as to when religious practice first appeared, depending on how archaeological finds are interpreted – there seems to be evidence of it emerging in the Upper Palaeolithic, although some scholars date it to the earlier Middle Palaeolithic.

See: Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: a Search for the Origins of Art, Religion, and Science*, Thames and Hudson 1996; D. Bruce Dickson, *The Dawn of Belief: Religion in the Upper Paleolithic of Southwestern Europe*, University of Arizona Press 1990; and Philip Lieberman, *Uniquely Human*, Harvard University Press 1991

2 www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/yougovcambridge-on-religion/ Accessed 24th June 2012

3 For instance, in Judaism the *Halakha* refers to the collected body of religious law, Islam has Sharia law and Christianity has Canon law.

4 Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, Swedenborg Foundation 1995

5 Abu Hamed Mohammad ibn Mohammad al-Ghazzali (1058–1111), known as Al-Ghazali or Algazel, was a noted Persian Muslim theologian, jurist, philosopher and mystic

6 Norman Davidson, *Astronomy and the Imagination: A new approach to man's experience of the stars*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1985

7 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Penguin Books 1991

8 Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, Canongate Books 2006

9 Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d (transl. Benjamin Jowett)

10 Hildegard, Abbess of Bingen (1098 – 17 September 1179), was a writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, visionary and polymath, known also as 'The Sybil of the Rhine'. She wrote theological, botanical and medicinal texts, as well as letters, liturgical songs and poems, often using her own invented alphabet. Her visions began at the age of 3, when she described seeing 'the Shade of the Living Light', and continued until her death.

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