

## Mythology and Religion in the Context of Transition from Mythological Thinking to Religious Thinking

Mitolojik Düşünceden Dinsel Düşünceye Geçiş Bağlamında Mitoloji ve Din

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### Abstract

The human species, which was completely dependent on nature in its early periods, experienced both physiological and intellectual changes in various periods. Human thought systems and styles have also undergone many significant changes over time. We can examine the development of thought systems, which are extremely important in the emergence of modern society and culture, in a sociological context in a particular order. In this study, the relationship between mythology and religion is discussed in the context of mythological thinking and religious thinking forms. The subject of belief has key features in thought systems and changes. These processes of change in people can be seen in the form of various elements in their narratives, philosophies, beliefs, and traditions. Myths, which are an important part of human culture, can reflect the change of thought of people from an only source in terms of their common handling of narratives, philosophies, beliefs, and traditions. The subject of religion and belief in myths and mythologies is also particularly important and comprehensive. One of the reasons for this is the relationship between mythological and religious thinking forms. In this study, first, the thought systems of human society and the change in these systems are discussed. In this section, mythological thinking and religious thinking styles are tried to be explained in social and cultural contexts. Then, various information about the myth genre is given and explanations are made about the relationship between mythology and religion in the context of mythological thinking and religious thinking forms. After the information given and the explanations made, it is tried to conclude. In this context, it is seen that the relations of "belief, imagination, fiction, and ritual" are common in religions and myths in the transition from religious thought to mythological thought.

**Keywords:** Myth, mythology, religion, belief, mythological thinking, religious thinking.

### Öz

İlk dönemlerinde tamamen doğaya bağlı olan insan türü çeşitli zamanlarda hem fizyolojik hem de düşünsel değişimler yaşamıştır. İnsanın düşünce sistemleri ve tarzları da zaman

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içerisinde pek çok önemli deęişim geçirmiştir. Modern toplumun ve kültürün ortaya çıkmasında son derece önemli olan düşünce sistemlerinin gelişimini sosyolojik bağlamda belirli bir sıra içerisinde inceleyebilmekteyiz. Yapılan bu çalışmada mitolojik düşünce ve dinsel düşünce biçimleri bağlamında mitoloji ve din ilişkisi konu edinilmiştir. Düşünce sistemlerinde ve deęişimlerde inanç konusu önemli özellikler taşımaktadır. İnsanların bu deęişim süreçleri anlatılarında, felsefelerinde, inançlarında ve adetlerinde olmak üzere çeşitli unsurlar şeklinde görülebilmektedir. İnsan kültürünün önemli bir parçası olan mitler anlatıları, felsefeleri, inançları ve adetleri ortak bir şekilde ele alması bakımından insanın düşünce deęişimini tek elden yansıtabilmektedir. Din ve inanç konusu da mitlerde ve mitolojilerden çok önemli ve geniş bir şekilde yer almaktadır. Bunun sebeplerinden biri de mitolojik ve dinsel düşünce biçimleri arasındaki ilgidir. Ortaya konan bu çalışmada ilk olarak insan toplumunun düşünce sistemleri ve bu sistemlerin deęişimi ele alınmıştır. Bu bölüm içerisinde mitolojik düşünce ve dinsel düşünce biçimleri toplumsal ve kültürel bağlamda açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Ardından da mit türü hakkında çeşitli bilgiler verilip mitolojik düşünce ve dinsel düşünce biçimleri bağlamında mitoloji ve din ilişkisi hakkında açıklamalar yapılmıştır. Verilen bilgilerin ve yapılan açıklamaların ardından da bir sonuca ulaşılmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu bağlamda dinsel düşünceden mitolojik düşünceye geçişte dinlerde ve mitlerde “inanma, hayal, kurgu ve ritüel” ilişkilerinin ortak olduğu görülmüştür.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Mit, mitoloji, din, inanç, mitolojik düşünce, dinsel düşünce.

## Introduction

The human species, which sees itself as the ruler of the modern world, nature, and all living things, has taken its first steps in nature like all other living species. Human’s first sight and the first spark of thought took place in nature. Human thought starts from the simple to the complex and that is why humanity first thought about objects and actions of vital importance. Human societies have formed thought systems that take place in their minds and develop them based on the objects, animals, plants, and people necessary for their own lives. These thought systems have suffered changes over time with human development. The thought systems of the human species can be called “biological, magical, mythological, religious, philosophical and scientific” thinking in general (Kahveci, 2021: 29-85). Niyazi Kahveci examined and explained these thought systems in detail in his book titled “Çağımız ve Türkiye; Düşün ve Bilim Alanları” (Kahveci, 2021: 29-85).

### 1. The transition from mythological thinking to religious thinking and the relationship between mythology and religion in this context

The ability to think and speak makes today’s modern human “homo sapiens”

different from other species and has led to the rapid development of this species. Therefore, the term homo sapiens means “thinking human.” This nature and life-centered thinking ability of primitive people is called “biological thinking”. Biological thinking is a feature that exists with differences in all living species, including plants. Over time, thoughts have turned into an intellectual activity that develops in the form of “asking questions, questioning”, first at the individual and then at the social level. The human species, which already can think biologically, has reached a different cognitive level with the actions of asking questions and questioning. It is this feature that distinguishes humans from other living things for the first time. The act of asking questions is a feature that a person creates and develops to understand the environment and living conditions. With this feature, people started to ask questions about the objects, living things, and events around them. Humans trying to understand nature and the elements in nature have tried to find a meaning for herself/himself.

Human, whose cognitive level is not sufficient to understand nature and its elements, has adopted the idea of describing everything in an “extraordinary” way. The state of mind that can ask questions but not understand the reasons and answers can be defined as “magical thinking”. According to the first people who were in the stage of magical thinking, nature and everything in nature were magical. Their perception of life and death was not fully developed and therefore nature and everything in nature were considered “alive” according to them. Early humans were cognitively attached to things they did not understand and did not know, with the ability to believe. In this way, they experienced both cognitive and emotional relief.

The origins of belief were formed in this period of human perception, which we call magical thinking. From this point, believing in beings and perceptions that cannot be seen, heard, felt, or understood is an archetypal legacy for today’s people. At this stage of development, human societies began to develop belief systems based on spirits/iyes such as the cult of ancestors, Totemism, Animism, and Fetishism. Spirits/iyes believed to exist will later turn into extraordinary beings such as God, goddess, devil, angel, jinn, and fairy. Concepts such as magic, spell, and prophecy began to emerge during this period. In addition, the “multifunctional” clan ruler, defined as a shaman or kam, also emerged during this period.

At this stage, human beliefs had a nature and land-centered structure. By combining the perception of “birth and upbringing” with the elements of nature and earth, the sacred faith had a feminine significance. The feminine characteristics of the first believed spirits and the “goddess” belief bear the traces of this period. From this point, many elements that the first people gave significant importance such as birth, fertility, and protection have always been feminine. Sacred beings and goddesses such as “Mother Nature”, “Mother Goddess”, “Goddess of Fertility Cybele”, “Ak Ana/Ene” and “Umay” are the spirits of birth, life, protection, and fertility shaped by the magical thinking system.

Human beliefs are shaped in the “mother” center, just as a baby grows. After this baby grows up, she/he will separate from her/his mother and raise her/his head and look at the sky/skys that she/he sees as “father”.

As time passes, nature, living things, objects, and events take place increasingly in both individual and collective memory systems with the five sense organs. Later, the human mind thought more about nature, living things, objects, and events, and tried to answer the questions that it could not answer during the magical thinking period about these elements with the act of “imagining”. Fundamental questions such as the formation, existence, and outcome of nature, living things, objects, events, and people have been tried to be explained with both individual and social imagination. These explanations, on the other hand, have turned into the “myth” type, which is the origin narratives and beliefs over time. For this reason, the cognitive stage of obtaining answers through the act of imagining is called “mythological thinking”.

With the mythological thinking, people imagined and believed the origin of many things they saw, heard, and experienced, and in this way, myths emerged. It has the characteristics of literature and belief since it consists of myth, imagination, and belief actions that answer the questions of origin and formation. Myth, which answers the questions of origin and formation, has the characteristics of literature and belief because it is formed by acts of imagination and belief.

At the origin of the myth type formed in this period, there are the first belief systems such as the cult of ancestors, Totemism, Animism, Shamanism, Pantheism, Naturalism, and Fetishism. Myths began to form with the systems that adopted this spirit/eye belief. After this formation,

myths supported divine religions.

Human societies have reached the perception and result of a “supreme being” because of the questions they received at the mythological stage. The spirits formed during the period of magical thinking began to become Gods together in this stage. Humans are very weak in nature and life, and therefore in their beliefs, it was essential to have a stronger being than humans. Because nature was dominated by the relationship between “strong and weak”. That is why they saw many elements of nature, which they saw as stronger than themselves, as the creators of life, objects, and living things in their dreams and thoughts. Terrible elements began to become gods at the mythological stage. For this reason, many elements such as dangerous animals, plants, and mountains in human societies have been shaped as gods or totems. Thus, “religious thinking” began to emerge.

Over time, human beings began to understand and defeat these elements that they feared and deified. They even destroyed these elements sometimes. However, there was an enemy that primitive humans could not defeat. This enemy has left people sometimes in the cold and sometimes in the scorching heat. This element of nature, which is the source of endless rains, storms, and hurricanes from time to time, was something that people could not understand and overcome. The reason for all this is the sky.

The sky can be beautiful, but it can also be deadly for people living in nature. The sky is inaccessible, far from people. As snow falls from the sky, unexpected fireballs can also fall. For this reason, the sky was perceived as much mightier than humans. The sky has been seen as the source of most things in the human mind because it is too powerful to fight. That is why the sky is associated with the “father” metaphor because the sky has a punitive feature, in a way, like a “father”. Also, the sky and its elements are holy. Thunder is the weapon of the sky god in all mythologies and the place it hits with lightning gains holiness (Eliade, 2003: 74). The creative perception, which was previously defined as feminine with the metaphor of earth, nature, and mother, has passed into masculinity with the sky, which is seen as the father. However, in some cases, the same creator is referred to as both feminine and masculine at various times. From this point, belief in God also has hermaphrodite features.

Human societies that have reached the belief in God have passed the stage of “religious thinking”. With this stage, people’s separation from

nature accelerated and people started to create their own nature through farming and animal husbandry. For this reason, many of the gods believed in most societies are related to farming and animal husbandry.

Religious thinking is a continuation of mythological thinking. Although the order is seen in mythological thinking systems, there is also chaos. This chaos comes into order with religious thinking. Also, religious thinking includes both magical thinking and mythological thinking. Because religious thinking was influenced by magical thinking and mythological thinking. Some elements of religious thinking are related to magical thinking and mythological thinking. The “belief element” is particularly important in all three systems of thinking. Human culture began with belief. Against real nature, the human species has created culture. Culture is the opposite of true nature. Culture is fiction and belief. So, nature is “real”. Culture is “belief”. The first common point between mythological thinking and religious thinking is belief.

Human has developed various biological features to adapt to nature and life and has various intellectual and cultural features to adapt to nature, life, and society. These intellectual and cultural elements have caused the human species to survive and dominate planet earth.

The intellectual and cultural evolution of humans can be revealed through religions and myths. The intertwined myths and religions contain and at times explain the early thoughts, discourses, and cultures of human societies. Therefore, to understand the roots of human culture and mentality, it is necessary to look at myths and religions. As an example, Karen Armstrong says that Hercules in ancient Greek mythology reflects the Stone Age man (Armstrong, 2006: 30). In addition, the social changes of the Turkish nation can be seen in the Oguz Kagan Epic.

After human societies started to think about the objects, living things, events, and other people they constantly saw and recorded in their minds in their natural environment, they questioned where these objects, living things, events, and other people came from and how they were. They tried to answer these questions by combining their own meaning and comprehension skills with their imagination. These answers are myths that have the characteristics of narrative and belief to a substantial extent. Thanks to myths, the human species passed into the mythological thinking stage.

In the most general definition, myths are narratives that deal with the issue of the origin and are shaped by full belief. Myths, which deal with creation and origin as content and subject and contain the characteristics of the period and social structure in which they were produced, contain a real object, concept, or event. Myths are narratives that contain the characteristics of folk literature and folk belief about how objects, living things, places, features, and behaviors, in short, everything in nature and human life came to be.

Myths are the first accepted system units that human societies created and believed in understanding life and nature. Myths have similar features to today's science in a few points, as they have the function of explaining and understanding an origin. In addition, the foundations of mythological thinking and philosophical thinking, and scientific thinking were laid.

Elements of life and nature are reflected in myths as symbols, images, and metaphors. From this point, the basis of myths is the perception of nature and life in human consciousness. Although the heroes of the myths have features such as God, devil, spirit/iye, there is a perception of reality based on them. Because in the formation periods of myths, God, devil, spirit/iye etc. beings are concepts that are believed to be as real as mountain, sea, sky, and fire for people. Beliefs such as God, devil, spirit/iye were formed by symbolizing the elements of nature in many ways.

Human has concluded the questions of origin and creation, which he could not physically connect to a reason and could not answer, with the acts of thinking, believing, and saying through myth. For this reason, people have experienced emotional, mental, and existential relief from myths.

The myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'. In other words, the myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates to how something was produced and began to be (Eliade, 1963: 5-6).

Myths are narratives that are sacred and require full faith, which people create based on real-life to understand, interpret, adapt to, and root

in the environment in which they live. Myths are the basis of the known world, and these myths often contain content that supports monotheistic (monotheism) and polytheistic (polytheism) religions. But we must say that the origin of myths is the first belief systems and primitive religions such as the cult of ancestors, Totemism, Animism, Shamanism, Pantheism, Naturalism, and Fetishism. Myths began to form with these systems, which adopted the belief of spirit/ıye and nature.

Myths and mythological narratives are inherently related to a creator god or gods (Uysal and Genceli, 2021: 209). There is a close relationship between mythology and religion, since most, if not all, mythological narratives are about a god or demigod and are woven with motifs such as “creation”, “belief” and “holiness”. Mircea Eliade states that because of these features, the myth is also defined as “sacred stories” (Eliade, 2001: 16). On the subject, Fuzuli Bayat makes the following statements:

When the subject is considered from this point of view, it is seen that especially cult character myths have religious content. In fact, the religions and mythologies of some ancient civilizations are so intertwined that it is very difficult to distinguish the boundaries between myth and religion. However, according to experts in the history of religions, the understanding of religion has been inherent in human nature. Myth, then, is in religious thinking, or at least in tribal religions known as primitive before monotheistic religions. In addition, the fact that the concept of belief is at the core of mythological thinking reveals the assumption that there was a close relationship between mythology and religion in the periods before monotheistic religions. The content of myths creates a series of similarities between religion and myth in terms of religious events and religious subjects, and the sanctity of myths (Bayat, 2019: 83).

Bronislaw Malinowski also says that religion is based on mythological tradition (Malinowski, 1990: 76) because mythology deals with the beginning of religion, such as the universe, the world, and humans.

Myths are common products of human thought. These thoughts have become the common consciousness of people over time. From this point, myths are the thoughts and consciousness of human culture and communities. Today, myths contain many archetypal features of the individual and society. Myths are generally reflections of human perception, social life, and religious beliefs/rituals.

Niyazi Kahveci states that societies in the period of mythological thinking tried to perceive existence and explain it with legends and myths, based on the superhuman powers that they envision as concrete human beings, that is, in human form (Kahveci 2021: 39). During this period, people passively believed that these beings governed their destiny (Kahveci; 2021: 39). From this point, we can say that God did not create humans in his own image; humans created God in her/his own image.

Myths are narratives that contain complete belief. For societies, their own myths were sacred and sometimes described as a ritual. Since myths are about beings of extraordinary power, both those who created the myths and those who later adopted them believed and worshiped these beings as titans, gods, and creators.

Myths are narratives based on belief, and therefore their belief-based textures are transferred to epics, legends, and folk beliefs (Önal, 2007: 2). Myths have been shaped by the first belief systems such as the cult of ancestors, Totemism, Animism, Shamanism, Pantheism, Naturalism, and Fetishism, which were formed in the period of human magic thinking. For this reason, many sacred beings and elements of such beliefs have been transferred to mythology. These beings were shaped over time as divine and cosmic beings such as gods, devils, and angels. Many elements in the spirit/iye systems have also turned into divine attributes and some ritual behaviours in mythologies. There is a commonality of religion and mythology in rituals such as worship, prayer, sacrifice, sacred dances, holy holidays, and marriage ceremonies. With the myths and mythological thinking, the feminine earth and nature worship in the magical period turned into the sky worship, which was conceived as masculine. Monotheistic or polytheistic (monotheism-polytheism) belief systems and religions are the results of the mythological period. Beliefs defined as “true”, “heavenly” or “one” religion also contain various mythological narratives and sources.

Beliefs and religion are indispensable features of human thought. Human has always felt the need to believe in things such as God, the devil, angel, nothingness, and the cosmos. This belief can be a religion or an object. The important thing here is not what is believed, but the act of believing.

Myths reflect the idea of humans and society. The act of believing, which is a part of human and social thought, is important both in the

formation of myths and in terms of being among the subjects. Beliefs in myths lead people to psychological, social, and functional relaxation and to take part in an orderly manner.

“Mythology and religion develop in accordance with the social structure of their time. Myths and religions are tools in the process of understanding and making sense of life. In this framework, human has produced the cultural values of life” (Kaynak, 2012: 681). Myths, which deal with the chaos-cosmos dichotomy in the context of the absence-existence relationship, have transferred this duality and causality to societies with belief systems. Human societies have started to move away from nature with mythical and philosophical thinking. At the stage of mythological thinking, people formed beliefs and religions within themselves by looking at the sky and the stars. Philosophical thinking has begun to display an attitude that dominates the world by looking at both nature and the sky. In both stages, nature is outside of humans and is considered an element to be conquered. The nature and human dichotomy began in these stages.

Myths created by systems based on spirit/iye such as Animism, Totemism, Fetishism, and Shamanism have revealed religions. Philosophy emerged from myths and religions. Science emerged with the transition of philosophy from abstract to concrete. These constructs are systematically linked, at least retrospectively.

Human societies were in a nature-centered life and thinking in the stage of magical thinking. Life thoughts, beliefs, and activities were completely nature-centered. Mythological thinking and nature-centered belief and thought have turned into a sky-centered structure.

The commonalities that exist in the context of the transition from mythological thinking to religious thinking are more easily identified in folk literature products because religion and myth are highly effective in folk literature products of societies.

## **Conclusion**

The human species has experienced physical and cognitive changes and developments at various times and in various geographies. Mythological and religious thinking that emerged from biological and magical thinking forms have a key place in the formation of human culture. In this study, the relationship between myth and religion is discussed in the context of the

transition from mythological to magical thinking. In the context of oral and written culture, it has been seen that the stages of thought that we examined in the study are frequently included in folk literature products. The myth genre, which is the product of the mythological thinking stage, is a remarkable genre in terms of both the development axis of human thought and its inclusion in folk literature. Myths can address and reflect anything related to human beings. One of these elements is the subject of belief.

Religions and folk beliefs, in terms of their formation, came after mythological thinking. From this perspective, religions and beliefs contain many elements with mythical value. In this study, explanations were made about the place of myth and mythological thinking in religion and religious thinking. When the explanations and the information given are examined, it is seen that the relations of “belief, imagination, fiction, and ritual” are common in both mythology and religion. In this context, the relationship between myth and religion has been tried to be explained.

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