Among the many issues faced by Psychology of Religion today, the serious problem of cultural bias in the majority of research findings presented in the textbooks existing in the field stands out. The majority of findings represent the results of research conducted in religiously and culturally homogeneous samples. These findings are then formulated as if applicable to almost all forms of human religiosity in almost all cultural settings.

There is an urgent need to change the situation and to introduce an approach which will be, at least, sensitive towards its own limitation and at the same time open to application in more than one culture. The concept of “ritual” seems to be a suitable subject for such an exercise because it exists in various forms in all cultures and religious traditions. However, it has presented a notable difficulty for Psychology of Religion.

This paper will present some of the ways “ritual” has functioned up to this time in Psychology of Religion and what we feel are the limitations of those interpretations. Later in the paper we will introduce some of the views of a newer field of study, Ritual Studies. We will try to suggest how the application of this broader conception of “ritual” from Ritual Studies might help Psychology of Religion to cope better with the cultural challenge.

One of the most interesting characteristics of ritual is that it is “multivalent”; it operates on more than one level at once. One should not imagine these levels as distinct ingredients that combine to make a whole. Rather, they are ways of looking at the whole so that different elements come into focus. Any number of levels could be said to exist depending on the viewer’s proclivity for categorization and sub-categorization. For the purposes of this paper we will find it useful to speak of at least three levels: form, meaning, and purpose.

Most authors find it necessary to use one level or another as a starting point for their explorations of ritual. To demonstrate the range of interpretation that results from different “points of entrance,” we offer the definitions of ritual given by Richard Pilgrim and Frits Staal. Pilgrim begins with meaning when he suggests that ritual is “a specific and usually repeated complex language of paradigmatic word and gesture” [Pilgrim, 1985, p. 62-63]. Staal, starting from form, has almost the opposite view: Ritual is “[…] pure [ideal] activity, without meaning or goal” [Staal, 1979, p. 9, 14]. “Rites and mantras suck up meanings that come their way like black holes suck up matter” [Staal, 1991, p. 233].
Freud and his immediate followers chose to examine ritual on only one of its levels: the meaningless *form* of ritual. This level is always prominently present in healthy ritual (as Staal has pointed out). However, what caught Freud's attention was the relationship between the level of "meaningless form" in religious ritual (where it is one of many) and "meaningless form" in the compulsive ceremonials of neurotics (where it is "flat" and devoid of other levels).

When Freud turned his attention from Viennese neurotics to the realm of religion, he kept his focus on the level of *form*. He knew that there existed differences between these two kinds of ritual. However, on the level of *form*, the *similarities* are more striking.

David Wulff [1991] has paraphrased Freud's definition of religious ritual:

> religious ritual[s are] [...] carried out with scrupulous attention to every detail; they are conducted in isolation from all other activities and brook no interruption; and their neglect is followed by anxiety or guilt [...] [They are] meaningful in every detail [...] [and] based on the suppression [...] of certain instinctual [sexual, egoistic, socially harmful] impulses [...] [Religion may be viewed as a universal obsessional neurosis [David Wulff, 1991, p. 275].

... and of neurotic ritual:

> neurotic ceremonials [are] [...] carried out with scrupulous attention to every detail; and their neglect is followed by anxiety or guilt [...] [They seem utterly senseless [...] [and] originate in the repression of a sexual impulse [...] [They are] a compromise so that they yield to some degree to the pleasure they are designed to forestall [...] [Neurotic ceremonials are] a distorted private religion [ibid, p. 275].

"Senseless" compulsive rituals are contrasted with "meaningful in every detail" religious rituals. The level of *meaning* in compulsive rituals is thin and purely private. Their *purpose* is an unhealthy repression. Religious rituals have a thick and rich level of *meaning* and their *purpose* is to facilitate healthy social interaction. Note, however, that on the level of *form* Freud does not (cannot?) distinguish between them.

[routines are the ceremonials of compulsion neurotics [...] derivatives of warded-off impulses [...] [which have an [...] exaggerated character [...] [a] disproportion of the accompanying emotions or [...] rigidity with which they are adhered to. [They are] [...] called rituals because of the similarity to religious rites. However, there are also basic differences between a compulsion and a religious rite, the discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this book [...] [however] There is hardly a single compulsion neurosis without religious features [...] [Otto Fenichel, 1945, p. 269-302].

Again in Freudian thought we find that although religious ritual and obsessive ritual are expressly *not* identical, they are closely intertwined and difficult to separate. Fenichel's definition has been cobbled together from passing comments in a longish article on neurotic obsession. It is interesting that