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THE IMPLICATIONS OF MIRCEA ELIADE'S APPROACH ON SACRED FOR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Mircea Eliade's ideas developed in the scientific and literary works had considerable influence over the past century, both among historians of religions, imposing the discipline that he promoted in many prestigious universities from America and from around the world, and among other researchers in related fields of the history of religions. The question today is about what is left of Eliade's work after a careful analysis according to the grids of thought of our century. The question that has not yet found a definitive answer is of special interest, because the themes dealt by the Romanian scientist are universal and permanent. Among them, the problem of the timeliness of myth occupies the essential rank closely related with all the concepts developed by Eliade in his works. In this sense, the relationship between the man of archaic societies, often called *homo religious*, and the Christian man is also defined by how the myth is perceived by the two of them. Through its exact understanding human religiosity from forever and everywhere can always be redefined.

Keywords: Eliade, sacred, profane, myth, homo religiosus

INTRODUCTION

Mircea Eliade distinguished himself in the history of world culture as a major figure of the last century, as historian of religion and important novelist. With interdisciplinary interests, Eliade has significance for anthropology, sociology, literature, hermeneutics, philosophy of language, phenomenology, philosophy of religion, philosophical anthropology.

SACRED AND PROFANE IN ELIADE'S THINKING

For Eliade, the myth is a living fact, is the very foundation of religious life, being by definition, truth by excellence. If older research in the mythical domain and the definitions that have been given historically to the myth start from the research of Greek thought, Eliade proposes a detachment from this perspective that led the researchers to "demythisation" and an attempt to present myths of all religious cultures that humanity has known, with special bending over so-called primitive religions.

In Eliade's interpretation, the myth is a true story and can be read and recited only in special conditions and circumstances, as is the case with the initiates and sacred time period. There is a contradiction between myths, on the one hand, and fairy tales

and fables, on the other hand, contradiction defined by the opposition between truth and fake. For the primitive man the myth presents the existential status by excellence, the real way to exist in the universe. For Eliade the myth refers to a sacred history, presenting an event that happened at the beginning, *in illo tempore*. The myth relates the birth of certain facts that we know, being in closely relation with the actions of primordial beings. He relates a “creation”, showing what really happened at the beginnings, in relation with the actions of supernatural beings.

The sacred is irreducible, the definition of myth being in relation with the definition of religion in general. Eliade refers to the concepts that he develops throughout his work: the hierophanies, the time and the sacred space, *coincidentia oppositorum*, deus otiosus, symbolism, homo religious, etc. Hierophany is the manifestation of the sacred. The sacred can manifest itself in different ways, so we can speak about hierophanies or about the sacred being hidden or obscured in the profane. The history of religions is a sum of hierophanies. Because the sacred can manifest everywhere, the entire cosmos can become a hierophany. For ancient humanity, all reality could be sacred. Eliade speaks about the opposition between sacred and profane as an opposition between the real and unreal.

The sacredness of space is better seen in the cosmologic myth: “Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’” [1]. Eliade writes: “In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today” [2]. The symbolism is the language of myth, being irreducible symbolic. Life is recreated by symbolic cosmological acts. Symbolism is present all over the world, because the world has a supernatural dimension in which the sacred is manifested. “The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality - the deepest aspects - which defy any other means of knowledge. Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they respond to a need and fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being” [3]. The cosmological myth refers not just to some moments in humankind’s life, but to all its existence and to all the cosmos, a living organism, which renews itself periodically.

What occurred in the beginning took place in sacred space. For a religious person, space is not homogenous. It has a lot of broken places. Even the sacred can manifest itself everywhere. There are places in space which possess different qualities than others. In connection with sacred space is “the centre of the world.” All the points in space can become “the center of the world.” “Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” [4]. The sacredness of one place can be identified by a specific sign. The people are not allowed to choose the place which will become sacred. The process is different: the sacred manifests itself in a place which will become sacred, and people have to find this place, to discover it with the help of some mysterious signs. The reality, which is sacred, proves that the space is not homogenous. “But we must not suppose that *human* work is in question here, that it is through his own efforts that man can consecrate a space. In reality the ritual by which

he constructs a sacred space is efficacious in the measure in which *it reproduces the work of the gods*" [5]. The space which is not known by people is another world, strange and chaotic. The world is sacred because in this world the sacred can manifest itself, it can produce the sacred break. To consecrate a territory means to cosmocize it. In this way, the cosmology of the beginning is repeated, because it is the creation of the gods. The universe is repeated and imitated by men on their own scale. The temple is an *imago mundi*, because it is an earthly representation of a transcendent model. The entire world is sanctified in connection with the temple, because everything is a repetition of a cosmological model. A construction - a temple - is alive because a sacrifice was offered, and this sacrifice recapitulated a cosmological one.

For Eliade, time and history are essential notions in defining the myth. Sacred space is space consecrated by the repetition of primordial hierophanies, and sacred time is time which influences profane time. Sacred time is circular, reversible and can be recuperated. Time becomes sacred by the periodical repetition of sacred moments performed *in illo tempore*, at the beginning of the world. Because of these festivals, humans become contemporary with the gods and with the primordial events. For *homo religiosus*, time is not homogenous, neither continuous. If profane time is ordinary time, then we live sacred time in sacred festivals. One can speak about breaks in time, which are festivals in which humankind exchanges profane time with sacred time. "One essential difference between these two qualities of time strikes us immediately: *by its very nature sacred time is reversible* in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a *primordial mythical time made present*. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, 'in the beginning.' Religious participation in a festival implies emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration to the mythical time reactualized by the festival itself" [6]. Sacred time is ontological. It is a mythical present which is possible during the celebration of festivals. This time is a present time because of the repetition of cosmological acts. It is a connection between the sanctity of the world and the life of sacred time, because, with each new year the world recovers its original sanctity. The sacred dimension of life is easily discovered during the celebration of festivals. The repetition of these festivals, with different intensity, year after year, is an eternal return *in illo tempore*. "We have no warrant for interpreting periodic return to the sacred time of origin as a rejection of the real world and an escape into dream and imagination. On the contrary, it seems to us that, here again, we can discern the *ontological obsession* to which we have referred and which, moreover, can be considered an essential characteristic of the man of the primitive and archaic societies. For to wish to reintegrate the *time of origin* is also to wish to return to the *presence of the gods*, to recover the strong, fresh, pure world that existed *in illo tempore*. It is one's thirst for the sacred and the nostalgia for *being*" [7].

The myth of origins is related with the *nostalgia* of the Lost Paradise. Eliade starts from the idea that the myth of paradise is found in all traditions of the world having as characteristic element, immortality. These myths depict man before the fall, living in a primordial state characterized by bliss and freedom. It was a time, *in illo tempore*, when the gods came down to earth and people climbed to heaven. The terrestrial paradise myth preserved in the modern cultural creations, where the function

of heavenly territory has remained unchanged, the valorization being changed according to the religious tradition where it can be recognized. On the other hand, there is the cosmogonic myth which narrates a sacred history that took place in primordial times, at the creation of the world, being present both in the myths that speak of plant and animal origin, as well as talking about the man's appearance. The myth is a true story that tells how things came into the world, being an exemplary model for them and also a justification of the human activities. The cosmogonic myth explains the emergence of all life, being present in all religions and all nations of the world.

An important point in the understanding of Eliade's dialectical approach of sacred and profane is the concept of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, myth occupying an essential place in his understanding. The sacred and the profane coexist not in a dualistic, but in a paradoxical relationship. "One must remember the dialectic of the sacred: any object whatever may paradoxically become a hierophany, a receptacle of the sacred, while still participating in its own cosmic environment (a *sacred* stone, e.g., remains nevertheless a *stone* along with other stones)" [8]. Eliade writes that the dialectic of hierophany means that an object becomes *sacred* while remaining just the same as it is. This is the core of sacralization of the world in hierophanies. We can observe this paradoxical existence in the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. The paradox lies in the fact that an ordinary, finite, historical thing, while remaining natural, can at the same time manifest qualities which are more than finite. Something transcendent limits itself by becoming manifest in some relative, historical form. An object can exist and manifest the sacred at the same time. This is the meaning of *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is reflected in symbols, theories, and beliefs. This concept is the explanation of the paradoxical coming together of the sacred and the profane. Eliade argues that the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* is universal.

In many of his books, Eliade speaks about *Deus otiosus*. He says that sometimes people fail to remember the Supreme God and are instead preoccupied by their day-to-day problems. They seek other gods to worship. The primitives have the concept of a Supreme Being, but this Being plays no important role in their lives. Other gods take the role of this Being in their cult. The myths prove that he has withdrawn far from humankind, becoming a *Deus otiosus*. "In some respects it could be said that the *Dues otiosus* is the first example of the death of God that Nietzsche so frenziedly proclaimed. A Creator God who removes himself to a distance and disappears from cult is finally forgotten. Forgetfulness of God, like his own absolute transcendence, is a plastic expression of his religious non-actuality or, what amounts to the same thing, his 'death.' The disappearance of the Supreme Being did not find expression in an impoverishment of religious life. On the contrary, it could be said that the genuine 'religions' appear *after* he has vanished" [9]. *Deus otiosus* means "god at leisure" or "god without work." "Symbolic life, made possible by the withdrawal of primordial being, offers humankind the freedom of the symbolic condition, a dynamic existence that could never have flourished if the creator had continued to crush or overwhelm his creation with his ponderous presence and immediacy. Mediation, intermediaries, and symbolic distance become indispensable and possible when the god retires from scene" [10].

Homo religiosus is the human of the archaic societies. All religious actions, in different cultures, times and spaces, belong to *homo religiosus*. The sacred-profane dichotomy is the central point in this understanding. The sacred has a universal value and it is a notion with an *a priori* signification. It is above all the notions which we can create about it, because it is the Real. The sacred is equivalent with the reality. It is the central understanding in the hermeneutical effort to define *homo religiosus*, who is the sacred human. *Homo religiosus* is always linked with the Supreme Being. The first revelation of the Real for *homo religiosus* is the condition for participation with the Being. This participation is possible in festivals, and the entire year is a succession of festivals. So the calendar represents an eternal return. This idea is not a pessimistic interpretation of life. It is the desire of *homo religiosus* for the sacred, the thirst for salvation, the escape from death. *Homo religiosus* sees nature as full of religious values. In the vision of the Romanian scientist, we can talk about *homo religiosus* only if we stand in his universe. Eliade's method is repeated and fixed in its main points: we can speak of a reality only if we find ourselves within it, if we understand its structure and working. A universe of thought different from ours can be understood only if we are inside it, in its middle, because from here we go in achieving all the important points, for all values involved by this universe. *Homo religiosus* is open to the world, living in its middle, his whole life can be sanctified. In the life of the religious man everything had religious significance, from the most basic actions and feelings, to the most complex human behaviors that seem to lack sacred meanings in the view of the modern man. Physiological sacralization of life is reached by the impregnation of daily acts with religious value. For the religious man, the idea that any action of his, every gesture and every word does not exhaust its significance in this world, but it has its counterpart in the transhuman plan was essential. *Homo religiosus* was concerned with spiritual rebirth, which was based on spiritual death, thus gaining sacred knowledge and wisdom. Being open to the world, the religious man acquires the character of universal. He gets out from the particular state and reaches the universal through transcending.

The life of modern man has not lost the characteristics of *homo religiosus*, but impoverished, the sacred can be known only through an absolute negation of the profane. Thomas J.J. Altizer stated that the myth is of no value for our time, because God is dead. Moreover, neither the manifestation of the sacred, the hierophany, has any value. "As Eliade notes, the very recitation of myth in its true form is a hierofany, a manifestation of the sacred. What meaning can myth have when God is dead?" [11]. Modern religiosity is defined by the radical denial of the transcendent. Altizer said that Eliade's ideas about religion are valid for archaic religions and not for the modern ones. He criticizes Eliade's method as "mystical", "romantic" and cut off from any closeness to what is "rational and scientific". Contrary to these views, Eliade presents the relation between *homo religiosus* and the modern human, who is in many cases areligious or nonreligious. He highlights the relevance of the sacred-profane dialectic: "Modern nonreligious man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god" [12]. Eliade emphasizes the fact that the modern human lacks his or her own structure. He or she is full of negations. Even if he or she wants a break with his or her own past existence, the nonreligious human is compelled by the reality which he or she tried to reject. This reality never disappeared. Many of his or her

acts, gestures, forms of language, structures of behavior simply repeat the acts of homo religious. The watching of a film or reading of a book proves this truth, because these acts are transmitted to this world in finding an imaginary one. One can speak about *homo religiosus* if he or she is situated in his or her world. So we can speak about humanity's values and spiritual creations, about a reality if we are situated into this reality, if we understand its function and composition. *Homo religiosus* is open to the world; he or she lives in the midst of the world. In the life of *homo religiosus*, everything has a religious value, starting with simple acts and feelings, and ending with complex activities which are, for the modern human, without sacred attributes. In this way, physiological life and everyday acts are sacred. For *homo religiosus*, every action, gesture or word has value beyond this world. It has its correspondent in transcendence. The universe is open to sacred realities; humankind is to the world, so its relation with the sacred is alive and it can communicate with the cosmos. Finally, modern myths are superficial and ephemeral creations, because myth is irreducible in religious terms.

The sacred is the principle which can explain religious manifestations. For *homo religiosus*, the first intuition of being is equivalent with the sacred. The sacred manifests itself in hierophanies, and these hierophanies are equivalent with a power from a transcendent world. The history of religion is a series of hierophanies, started with the simple and finishing with the most evolved. The sacred can manifest itself in a multiplicity of forms. For the archaic and pre-modern human, the sacred means power, reality. The sacred and being are equivalent. The opposition between sacred and profane means the opposition between real and unreal. If the archaic human lived in a sacred world, full of signs which waited to be read, our world - the profane one - is a characteristic of modern time, of the new time, a time of destruction of the sacred. The sacred is a universal dimension, and contemporary culture has its roots in experience and religious beliefs. The sacred is still present in our world. "In a desacralized world such as ours, the 'sacred' is present and active chiefly in the imaginary universes. But imaginary experiences are part of the total human being, no less important than his diurnal experiences. This means that the nostalgia for initiatory trials and scenarios, nostalgia deciphered in so many literary and plastic works, reveals modern man's longing for a total and definitive renewal, for a *renovatio* capable of radically changing his existence" [13]. There is a polarity between history and meaning in the understanding of the history of religion. Every religious fact has a history, because it takes place in a historical form. This is the scientific aspect of the work of the historian of religion. But for Eliade, meaning is the central part of the work. It is *meaning* that can transform the sacred into religious actuality.

Eliade presents the relation between the modern man and the Christian man. The "mythical" elements kept in Christianity were Christianized even from the beginning, Christianity being characterized by valuing history. The problem analyzed by Eliade is whether Christianity can continue the sacred horizon of archaic societies, within the desecrated modern societies. Starting from the idea that myth is a way of being in the world, Christianity, being a religion, must preserve a mythical behavior: the liturgical time. Refusing profane time, Christianity periodically recovers the Great Time, *illud tempus* of the beginnings. For any Christian, Jesus Christ is a historical Person, not a mythical Person, not being born as a human in general, but in a special way. The

experience of the Christian is centered on the imitation of Christ, the excellence model, imitation that embodies itself in the liturgical life, centered on His Life, Death and Resurrection. The Christian must be contemporary with Christ, the liturgical time offering this possibility, being no longer a profane time, but eminently sacred time. Christianity extends a “mythical behavior” in the modern world, approaching as structure to the way of being of the archaic human. At the dawn of Christianity, theologians rejected the identification of Jesus with a mythical character as found in the Greco-Roman mythology. Thus, the main concern of theologians was to defend the historicity of Christ against various heresies. In our era, Rudolf Bultmann is the one who questioned the knowledge of the Savior’s life, proposing the demythologization of the *Gospels* and of all sacred texts. In contrast to him, some authors have attempted to reconstruct the “primary myth” that would have given rise to the figure of Christ, and finally, Christianity, thus manifesting the nostalgia of the modern man towards the “primordial mythical”. In Eliade’s view, Christianity cannot be separated from the mythical thinking, starting from the mentality of the archaic and traditional societies.

In the presentation that Eliade makes to the archaic man compared to the modern man, he states that one of the characteristics that distinguishes them is how they perceive myth. “For modern man, novels play a role analogous to myths in archaic societies. As Eliade has defined myth, some of its essential characteristics are found in novels and in all literature that tells a story. The key words in Eliade’s definition of myth (as given in many places) are ‘exemplary story’. Modern novels are not like myths. But what Eliade always stresses about myth are its narrative character and its exemplary function” [14]. What makes man to participate at the truth presented by myth is the separation from the real time, from history, the transposition in the mythical time.

In the novel *The Snake*, Eliade introduces the myth of the androgyny that he analyzes in the scientific work. In the story, the snake symbolizes the dark, earthly, demonic forces, being the symbol of loss of consciousness and its transition to another. Finally, Andronic is not only the Poet, living in the world of myths, but also the primordial Man, who achieves full communion with nature. In the novel *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats* can be seen the logic of myth and the logic of the desecrated modern reality, in other words, the sacred-profane dialectic: the sacred irrupts in the profane and defeats the desecrated world. Eliade sees the Fărămă (Shred) character as an embodiment of the “terror of history”. The idea of salvation through art, the soteriology of creation, appears. The myth of the descent into Hell should not to be overlooked. The novel is based on Eliade’s ideas about *homo religiosus*. In the novel *Forêt Interdite*, the main character, Stefan, asks the important question: in which way we can rediscover the lost time? It is not the time of which Proust speaks. It is the time of myths, a time in which stories are told and the happenings are constituted in hierophanies. “In fact, if history were not what it is, a nightmare, if the tragic did not exist, paradise would lose its significance. Modernity, with its acute awareness of history and historicity, must be assumed before being transcended. If in the past there were other ways to paradise, today this is the only one: passing through history is unavoidable” [15]. In this novel, Eliade emphasizes the important idea of the sacred-profane dialectic. The manifestation of the sacred in the world is always camouflaged. There is no apparent difference between the sacred and the profane, and the fantastic

can be recognized in the middle of the banality. In this novel, myth and destiny occupy an important place, an understanding of the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*.

CONCLUSION

In a world characterized by a tendency of desacralization, where the old religious values no longer seem to find their place, the sacred, as defined over time, is looking for new forms of expression. In this respect, the way that the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade focuses on the religious phenomena is a challenge for the times in which we live. Beyond the influence exercised globally in the era, contemporary researchers are trying to discern what is topical in the vast work of Eliade and what can still have an influence on the religious thought of the 21st century man, and not only.

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