CRISTINA SCARLAT
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MIRCEA ELIADE
ONCE AGAIN

Lumen

A Controversy: Eliade and Altizer

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Abstract:

In these discussions between Mircea Eliade and Thomas Altizer we can recognise two important things: there are some points of contact between these two thinkers and some differences. The problem lies in determining whether or not these points of contact are simply two different ways of understanding the same concepts.

On the one hand, "Death of God" theology was in vogue in the United States in the 1960s, but today has few adherents. However, a new evaluation of this theological movement is necessary because we need to understand its possible impact on the renewal of Christianity. On the other hand, Eliade was considered an important scholar in the field of history of religions. In our time, many critics contest his influence in this field and criticize him for the fact that he relativizes Christianity. This new interpretation of both scholars was an opportunity to link the research in the theology with that in the history of religions, an important motive for our time. In ecumenical discussions, the link between research in both these fields is so important. The concept of coincidentia oppositorum, the understanding of the sacrality of our time, in different religions, and the new language for discussing with people of different faiths are the main preoccupations of the ecumenical movement.

Keywords:

Eliade, Altizer, Death-of-God theology, sacred, profane, hierophany, homo religiosus

Introduction

Objective

In this paper I will attempt to explore if Mircea Eliade's understanding of religion influenced the "death of God" theology of Thomas J.J. Altizer. I will focus on these two religious thinkers for different reasons.

Mircea Eliade was considered one of the twentieth century's most important scholars in the field of history of religion. His influence in many scholarly circles is noted by several people. In recent times, many scholars criticize Eliade's understanding of what religion means.

The "death of God" was a theological development which appeared in twentieth century and influenced many theologians. It is considered to be a response to the Incarnate Word, and so was a Christian movement. The American Thomas J.J Altizer is considered the most important theologian of this movement.[1] He said that no intelligent person today can be anything other than an atheist, although one might choose between Christian and non-Christian forms of atheism.

Background

Mircea Elaide was born on 13 March 1907 in Bucharest, Romania, and died on 22 April 1986 in Chicago, USA. He studied in Bucharest, where he received a degree in philosophy in 1928 with a paper about the philosophy of the Renaissance, and in Calcutta, India, 1928-1931. He earned a doctorate in philosophy in Bucharest in 1933, his dissertation focusing on yoga. Between 1933 and 1938 he published and served as a professor in the faculty of letters and philosophy in Bucharest. He served as a diplomat for the Romanian government in London (1940-1941) and Lisbon (1941-1945). After 1945 he emigrated to Paris, where he was professor at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, and at the Sorbonne. In 1956 he was invited as visiting professor for the Haskell Lectures at the University of Chicago. The following year he joined the university's

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[1]*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Editor in Chief Mircea Eliade, vol. VI, (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York. Collier Macmillan Publishers, London, 1987. Complete and unabridged edition, 1993), 24.

faculty as a professor of history of religions. The university named its chair in history of religions after Eliade in 1985.

Eliade's writings on philosophy and religion were prolific: The Sacred and the Profane, Traité d'histoire des religions, Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism, The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion, Mythes, rêves et mystères, Mephistopheles and the Androgyne: Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol, Fragments d'un journal, Forêt Interdite, among them. He was also editor in chief of the 16-volumes Encyclopedia of Religion, which was published posthumously.

Thomas J.J. Altizer was born in Charleston, West Virginia, on 28 September, 1928. He attended St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, and later the University of Chicago where he earned undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees. His master thesis examined the concepts of nature and grace in St. Augustine. His doctoral dissertation of 1955 examined Carl Gustav Jung's understanding of religion. He subsequently took up a post at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana, from 1954 to 1956, where he taught religion. He then became professor of English at Atlanta's Emory University where he taught from 1956 to 1968. He authored many books about "death of God" theology: *Contemporary Jesus*, *Descent into Hell*, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, *New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*, *The Self-Embodiment of God, Total Presence: The Language of Jesus and the Language of Today*, among others.

Method

This paper will be an analytical and comparative study of the relation between Mircea Eliade's understanding of different aspects in the field of history of religion and Thomas Altizer's ideas about death of God theology. For different reasons, I will use some of Eliade's books in French and some in English. For example, the French preface of *The Sacred and the Profane* was not translated in the English version which I will use, so I will present the ideas of this preface in the paper and the original text itself in the footnote. I will do the same with *Traité d'histoire des religions* and several other books which were not accessible in English translation. Again, I will paraphrase Eliade's ideas in the body of the text, but in the footnotes will quote the full original text so as to offer a better

understanding of Eliade. I will use the first volume of Eliade's journal in French, *Fragments d'un journal*, but for the second volume I will draw from the Romanian version, *Jurnal,* because neither an English nor French version of this publication was accessible.

Because of the limited scope of this paper, I will attempt to present in footnotes portions of books and articles connected to my topic, and at the same time will quote what is important for a better understanding.

These remarks will not obscure the text, because the paper will be in English, and the footnotes will contain the full texts which I consulted in their original language. In this way, I hope to offer a text which is both fluid and academic.

Mircea Eliade: Some Opening Remarks

In 1956, Mircea Eliade wrote the book *Das Heilige und das Profane: Vom Wesen des Religiosen* (*The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*). In the first page of the preface of the French edition, he wrote that he attempted to present the importance of the concepts about world for archaic peoples.[2] In the opposition between sacred and profane, Eliade perceives that our secular world is spiritually impoverished. It is a world which wants to live without God, a world in which the sacred is camouflaged in the profane. Rediscovering the sacred dimension of the world can lead us to a new type of humanity and religiosity.

For Eliade, 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

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[2]Mircea Eliade, "Avant-Propos à l'Édition Française," in Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le Profane*, (Gallimard, Paris, 1965), 9: "Il ne s'agissait pas de montrer simplement qu'un Australien ou un Africain n'étaient pas les pauvres animaux à demi sauvages (incapables de compter jusqu'à 5, etc.) dont nous entretenait le folklore anthropologique d'il y a moins d'un siècle. Nous visions à montrer quelque chose de plus: la logique et la grandeur de leurs conceptions du Monde, c'est-à-dire de leurs comportements, de leurs symbolismes et de leurs systèmes religieux." All subsequent quotations will be drawn from the English version of this book: Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, translated from the French by Willard R. Trask, (A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., San Diego, New York, London, 1987).

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 reader will very soon realize that *sacred* and *profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history."[3]

A hierophany has three different elements: the object, which continues to be understood in a natural way; the invisible reality; and the mediator, which is the object consecrated. In *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Eliade presents the dialectic between the sacred and the profane and the manifestation of the sacred in hierophanies. The sacred is different from the profane, but it can manifest itself in the profane world, in hierophanies. This is true for all the religions of the world, not just for primitive forms of religion. Everywhere we can find inferior and superior forms of hierophanies; these hierophanies are organized in a system.[4] In the history of humanity, there does not exist a single object which has not been transfigured as a hierophany.

The sacredness of space is better seen in the cosmologic myth. This myth is addressed by Eliade many times.[5] 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 (Genesis 28, 12-19)."[6] The sacredness of

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[3] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, 14.

[4] Mircea Eliade, Traité d'histoire des religions, préface de Georges Dumézil, (Petite bibliothèque Payot, Paris, 1975), 38-39.

[5] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, (Translated from the French by Willard R. Trask, Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York and Evanston, 1963), 5: "Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'."; 6: "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."

[6] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 26. See also Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, (Translated by Philip Mairet, Harvill Press, London, 1961), Chapter I, Symbolism of the "Centre," 27-56: "All this seems to show that man *can live only in a sacred space*, in the 'Centre' […]. It calls attention to something in the human

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*."[7] 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. "But the work of the gods, the universe, is repeated and imitated by men on their own scale."[8]

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.[9]

Sacred space is space consecrated by the repetition of primordial hierophanies, and sacred time is time which influences profane time.[10] In Eliade's understanding, 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

condition that we may call the *nostalgia for Paradise*. By this we mean the desire to *find oneself always and without effort* in the Centre of the World, at the heart of reality" (55). See also a critique to this understanding of the sacred space and center in Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987), Chapter 1: In Search of Place, 1-23.

[7] ibid., 29.

[8] ibid., 35.

[9] See a critique of this opinion in Jonathan Z. Smith, Op. cit., 16: "If there is no evidence in ancient Near Eastern materials for a central cosmic mountain that served as an *axis mundi*, there can be no assimilation of such a mountain to the temple, as Eliade's pattern requires. This calls into question the notion of the temple as the 'Centre' of the cosmos."

[10] Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, 329: "Dans la religion comme dans la magie, la périodicité signifie avant tout l'utilisation indéfinie d'un temps mythique *rendu présent*. Tous les rituels ont la propriété de se passer *maintenant*, dans *cet instant-là*."

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."[11] 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: "For religious men of all the archaic cultures, *the world is renewed annually*; in other words, *with each new year it recovers* its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the Creator's hands."[12]

Life is recreated by symbolic cosmological acts. Eliade studied the symbols in which the world becomes transparent. Symbolism is present all over the world, because the world has a supernatural dimension in which the sacred is manifested.[13] Because all human life can be made sacred, the cosmological myth refers not just to some moments in humankind's life, but to all its existence and to all the cosmos. "But one thing seems clear beyond doubt: that the cosmos is a living organism, which renews itself periodically. The mystery of the inexhaustible appearance of life is bound up with the rhythmical renewal of the cosmos."[14]

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

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[11] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, 68-69.
[12] ibid., 75.
[13] See Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism,* especially the forward, 9-25: "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", (12).
[14] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 148.

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*"[15].

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*. For Eliade, *homo religiosus* 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 of eternal return 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. The manifestation of the sacred is the hierophany, or the ontophany.

Eliade presents the relation between *homo religiosus* and the modern human, who is in many cases areligious or nonreligious. At the conclusion of *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade 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."[16] 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

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[15] Ibid., 94.
[16] Ibid., 203.

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 behaviour 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. "Openness to the world enables religious man to know himself in knowing the world—and this knowledge is precious to him because it is religious, because it pertains to being."[17] 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.

Eliade understands the sacred as 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 ethimology of the word hierophany demonstrates the manifestation of the sacred. In *Mythes, Rêves et Mystères*, Mircea Eliade defined "the history of religion" as a series of hierophanies, started with the simple and finishing with the most evolved. The sacred can manifest itself in a multiplicity of forms.[18] For the archaic and pre-modern human, the sacred means power, reality. The sacred and being are equivalent. The

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[17]Ibid., 167.

[18] Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, (Gallimard, Paris, 1957), p. 167: "A partir de la plus élémentaire hiérophanie—par exemple la manifestation du sacré dans un objet quelconque, une pierre ou un arbre—et jusqu'à la hiérophanie suprême, l'incarnation de Dieu dans Jésus-Christ, il n'existe pas de solution de continuité. Sur le plan de la structure, nous nous trouvons devant le même acte mystérieux: la manifestation de quelque chose de 'tout autre'- d'une réalité qui n'appartient pas à notre monde— dans des objets qui font partie intégrante de notre monde 'naturel,' 'profane' ".

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.

In *The Quest,* Eliade notes that the sacred is a universal dimension, and contemporary culture has its roots in experience and religious beliefs.[19] 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."[20] 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.

An important point in the understanding of Eliade's dialectical approach of sacred and profane is the concept of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.[21] In Eliade's interpretation, the sacred and the profane coexist

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[19] Mircea Eliade, *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion*, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1969), 9.

[20] Ibid., 126. On initiation see Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, translated by Willard Trask, (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York, 1958).

[21] On the *coincidentia oppositorum* see Shafique Keshavjee, Mircea Eliade et la Coïncidence des opposés, (Peter Lang, Berne. Berlin. Francfort-s. Main. New York. Paris. Vienne, 1993). See also Mircea Eliade, L'Épreuve du labyrinthe: Entretiens avec Claude-Henri Rocquet, (Pierre Belfond, Paris, 1978), 10: "On voit bien pourquoi chez Eliade le thème de la *coïncidentia oppositorum* résonne si souvent et si fort." In his Autobiography. Volume I: 1907-1937. Journey East, Journey West, (Translated from Romanian by Mac Liscott Ricketts, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1981), Eliade noted: "*Coincidentia oppositorum* is just as integral to folk religiosity in Eastern Europe as to the religious experience of an Oriental or archaic type. I should go even further and say that the paradox of the coincidence of opposites is found at the base of every religious experience. Indeed, any hierophany, any manifestation of the sacred in the world illustrates a *coincidentia oppositorum*: an object, a creature, a gesture becomes sacred – that is, transcends *this* world – yet continues to remain what it was before: an object, a creature, a gesture: it participates in the world and at the same time transcends it." (257).

not in a dualistic, but in a paradoxical relationship.[22] 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. For Eliade, 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. The concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* is the explanation of the paradoxical coming together of the sacred and the profane. Citing Maister Eckhardt and Nicholas of Cusa, Eliade argues that the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* is universal.[23]

In many of his books, Eliade speaks about *Deus otiosus*. In *Traité*, after he studies some myths in different cultures and among various populations, Eliade 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.[24] In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade develops the same idea about *Deus otiosus*. The primitives have the concept of a Supreme Being, but this Being plays no important role in their lives. Others 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

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[22] Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 84: "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)"; 178: "One need only recall the dialectic of hierophany: an object becomes *sacred* while remaining just the same as it is." See also Traité d'histoire des religions, 24-26.

[23] See Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*: Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol, (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1965), 78-124.

[24] Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, 55: "Les hommes ne se souviennent du Ciel et de la divinité suprême que lorsqu'un danger venant des régions ouraniennes les menace directement; le reste du temps, leur religiosité est sollicitée par les besoins journaliers, et leur pratiques ou leur dévotion se tournent vers les forces qui contrôlent ces mêmes besoins."

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."[25] In *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, the chapter about *Deus otiosus* was written by Mircea Eliade and Lawrence E. Sullivan. Here, the explanation begins with the etymological sense: *Deus otiosus* means, literally, "god at leisure" or "god without work." The subchapters deal with celestial associations, absence of myth and cult, and withdrawal of God. "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."[26] This idea of *Deus otiosus* has different understanding in concordance with different cultures and peoples. At the same time, the influence of the myths is different. But, "since every reality appearing in the mythic beginning of the world is a total and absolute statement of its kind of being, the change and dynamism that undergird human history provoke a total eclipse or disintegration of primordial form. The death, transformation, or withdrawal of supernatural beings into the heights or into the extremes of the cosmos exemplifies the fate of primordial existence as a whole."[27]

Eliade wrote many novels and short stories in which he tried to present, in a literary way, the ideas developed in his scientific works. But it would be a mistake to examine his literature only to see if religious phenomena are present. It is important to appreciate the originality of Eliade's creations. His double preoccupations were interpreted as "*le diurne et l'onirique univers spirituels.*"[28]

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.

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[25] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 95.
[26] *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Editor in Chief Mircea Eliade, vol. IV, (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York. Collier Macmillan Publishers, London, 1987. Complete and unabridged edition 1993), 317.
[27] Iibid., 318.
[28] Mircea Eliade, *L'Épreuve du labyrinthe: Entretiens avec Claude-Henri Rocquet*, 196-204.

"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."[29] 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.* "He gives in *Forêt Interdite* a living, true form to the myths, inserting them perfectly into the destiny of his characters, vivifying them with situations and places, to create a fantastic word as permanent watchman over reality. This time it is very possible that Eliade has reached the ideal of his activity on the most varied levels: the stylistic interpretation of the sacred and the profane, the dissolution of the fantastic."[30]

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[29] Matei Călinescu, "The Disguises of Miracle: Notes on Mircea Eliade's Fiction," in Mircea Eliade: *A Critical Reader*, ed. Bryan Rennie, (Equinox, London, Oakville, 2006), 388. This article was first published in World Literature Today 52/4 (Autumn 1978), 558-64. On Eliade and Proust, see Virgil Ierunca, "The Literary Work of Mircea Eliade", in *Myths and Symbols. Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa and Charles H. Long, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1969), 349-350: "*Forêt Interdite* remains *par excellence* the novel of Time. […] For it is not, as with Proust, a matter of searching for the lost time, but of blotting out Time as psychological, personal, and social memory. The 'memory' for which Stephan struggles is a memory of the *illud temps* and not a personal, historical recollection (as is for Proust), for History is in fact destructive of memory. It is a metaphysical effort and in this sense nearer to Dostoevsky and Faulkner than Proust."

[30] George Uscătescu, "Time and Destiny in the Novels of Mircea Eliade," in *Myths and Symbols. Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, 402. See also Mircea Eliade, Autobiography, 322: "Unconsciously and unintentionally, I succeeded in 'showing' in *Şarpele* something I was to develop later in my works of philosophy and history of religions: namely, that the 'sacred' apparently is not different from the 'profane', that the 'fantastic' is camouflaged in the 'real', that the world is what it shows itself to be, and is at the same time a cipher. The same dialectic – of course, in the context of an epic fresco of grand proportions – also sustains *The Forbidden Forest*, begun twelve years later in 1949, with the difference that at this time no longer was it a question of the profound meaning of the Cosmos, but of the 'cipher' of historical events. The theme of the 'fantastic' camouflaged in everyday occurrences is found again in several of my novellas written still more recently, for example: *La Ţigănci* (With the Gypsy Girls, written in 1959) and *Podul* (The Bridge,

Thomas J.J. Altizer and "Death of God" Theology

"Death of God" theology was the name for a theological movement based in United States during the 1960s.[31] As the theologians of this movement themselves said, death of God theology was a new Christian movement inside the old church. This theology's concepts lead to the conclusion that this theology is atheistic, non-theistic, and radical. All the theologians involved in this movement created separate understandings of what "death of God" means, and this imprecision created many difficulties and misunderstandings. Being considered an atheistic theology, this movement is related to a modern understanding of what Christianity means for the people of our time. "Although there were echoes of the death of God theme in the writings of Jewish theologians, especially Richard L. Rubenstein, and Catholic thinkers were influenced by it, the death of God movement remained a primarily Protestant one."[32]

The majority of articles which were written about this movement tried to find its roots in the past, in theology or philosophy. The main attempt at a theological connection was with Martin Luther's phrase**,**

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written in 1964). In a certain sense, one could say that this theme constitutes the key to all the writings of my maturity."

[31] This theology was not developed in others part of the world as it was in USA, for different reasons. Alan Richardson said: "The news of the death of God has been taken quietly in Britain […]. Altizer has remarked that 'God is dead' are words that may only truly be spoken by the Christian who speaks in response to an Incarnate Word. If this is true, it is hardly surprising that the death-of-God theology does not arouse much interest in secular Britain. It is clearly irrelevant to those who believe that God has never exist at all and therefore cannot have died or be dead. Something which has never lived cannot logically be said to be dead."; "we may agree with Altizer that the death-of-God theology is a Christian phenomenon. In his sense it would be impossible for Jews and Mohammedans to accept it, because it has to do with an Incarnate Word in which they do not believe." (Alan Richardson, "The Death-of-God Theology", Religion in Life, volume XXXVI, Spring 1967, No. 1, 70-71).

[32] *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, (Thomson. Gale, Detroit, New York, San Diego, San Francisco, Cleveland, New Haven, Conn. Waterville, Maine, London, Munich, in association with The Catholic University of America. Washington, D.C., 2003), 583. About Rubenstein see: The Encyclopedia of Christianity, vol. 2, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milič Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, Lukas Vischer (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grads Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, U.K./ Leiden7 Boston/ Koln, 2001), 442: "Richard Rubenstein in *After Auschwitz* (1966) defended an essential pessimism that construes the Holocaust as the paradigmatic event requiring a thoroughly tragic vision of human life without God."

"God is dead," "with reference to the death of Christ, an extreme example of *comunicatio idiomatum*," and with the ideas of many philosophers.[33] So "death of God" theology is a theme influenced by many scholars in different fields, with different perspectives and different understandings of Christianity.[34]

Theologically, this movement finds its roots in the debate between Karl Barth and liberal Protestant theologians, in Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing approach to exegesis, and in a radical interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, of which Mircea Eliade was editor in chief, John B. Cobb Jr. wrote an article about death of God theology in which he argues that this theology is related with the discussion about Barth's theological approach, Ludwig Feuerbach's belief that God is an oppressor, and Friedrich Nietzsche's call to kill God. All debate about death of God theology "contributed further to weakening Barth's influence."[35]

The most important advocates of this theology were: Gabriel Vahanian (*The Death of God*, 1957), John A.T. Robinson (*Honest to God*, 1963), Paul van Buren (*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, 1963), William Hamilton (*Radical Theology and the Death of God*, 1966), Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*, 1965), and Thomas J.J. Altizer (especially with *Gospel of*

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[33] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F.L. Cross, Third Edition edited by E.A. Livingston (Oxford University Press, 1997), 459: "G.W.F. Hegel quoted the words, but gave them a new sense, namely the Absolute Spirit has given up its transcendence in order to enter the finite reality of history. Other German writers (e.g. H. Heine and Jean Paul) spoke of the death of God in a cultural sense, meaning that man had now entered on a stage of civilization to which the concept of God had no relevance. This atheistic meaning was taken up by F.W. Nietzsche who proclaimed the death of God as a human act: to achieve the full stature as autonomous beings."

[34] *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, 441: "David Hume's formulation and defense of empiricist nontheism in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779)* initiated the modern effort to write God's death certificate. The 'God problem' looms large in antitheological literary artistry of such writers as Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Edward Gibbon, and George Eliot; in eminent and persuasive philosophical luminaries such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, and Friedrich Nietzsche; and in political and psychological movements initiated by Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Thomas Huxley."

[35] *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Editor in Chief Mircea Eliade, vol. VI, 24. See in the same article: "Barth's reassertion of God as free and sovereign will did little to respond to these challenges, and the work of Thomas Altizer renewed this challenge in the mid-sixties."

Christian Atheism, 1966).[36]   Altizer's is considered the most popular representation of death of God theology.

In his preface to *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, Altizer defines his theology and his mentors: "My own route to theology has been through the discipline of the history of religions. My teacher was Joachim Wach, and the incredible breadth of his understanding of religion beautifully exemplifies the methodological contribution that the history of religions can make to theology. More recently, Mircea Eliade is beginning to make an impact upon theology, as Rudolf Otto did before him, and I cannot refrain from once again pointing out the debt that I continue to owe to Eliade. Moreover, I am persuaded that one of the most important sources of a new direction of theology will be a new and more critical understanding of the uniqueness of Christianity. All theological talk about a 'religionless Christianity' will remain largely meaningless so long as the theologian remains ignorant of the historical phenomenon of religion."[37]

Compared with other advocates of death of God theology, Altizer uses a metaphysical and theological interpretation of Christianity. For

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[36] Vahanian, Robinson, and Cox were not really the theologians of the death of God movement. See The Encyclopedia of Christianity, 441-442: "These efforts of Vahanian and Robinson to reconstruct a critical nontheism for modernity and its cultured despisers endeavored to go beyond the dense doctrines of closed theological systems in favor of the clarity of the ordinary language of analytic philosophy," "Cox's view was not atheistic or nontheistic; it was an effort at describing the secular model as an alternative to theological and metaphysical idolatries."

[37] Thomas J.J. Altizer, The Gospel of Christian aAtheism, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1963), 11. Charles E. Winquist finds the same mentors of Altizer: "The originality of Altizer's work is in part the originality of his work as a reader. In particular, his reading of literary and philosophical precursors—Blake, Hegel, and Nietzsche—who are themselves transgressors of the Western tradition, and the transgressive reading of his more immediate teachers—Wach, Eliade, and Tillich." (Charles E. Winquist, Reviewer, "Thomas J.J. Altizer: In Retrospect," in Religious Studies Review, (vol. 8, 4, October, 1982, 337.) The relation between Altizer and Tillich is described by Eliade in his Fragments d'un Journal, Traduit du roumain par Luc Badesco, (Gallimard, Paris, 1973), on 12 October 1965: "Longue conversation avec Tom Altizer-et Tom qui lui répétait sans cesse qu'il était le plus grand théologien de son temps, et que eux, ceux de '*God-is-dead-theology*,' sont ses disciples." See about the understanding of history of religion at Chicago school, where Wach and Eliade were professors: Charles H. Long, "A Look at the Chicago Tradition in the History of Religions: Retrospect and Future", in The History of Religions. Retrospect and Prospect, (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, Collier Macmillan Publishers, London, 1985), 87-104. About the relation between Wach and Eliade see: Gregory D. Alles, "Wach, Eliade, and the Critique from Totality",,Numen, XXXV, 1, (July, 1988), 108-138.

Altizer, one of the most important ideas is that God's revelation is not complete in Jesus Christ. This is because in Altizer's understanding, God is identified with the world. Consequently he considers that three other thinkers of our time present a significant interest for theology, because in their works we can find a new revelation: G.W.F. Hegel, William Blake, and Nietzsche. Altizer's theology was interpreted as "quasi-Hegelian," one in which God had entirely dispersed himself among finite beings.[38] From Blake, Altizer took the idea of a new apocalyptical time expressed in poetic language. In contrast with the vision of Christianity as an absolute religion, "by coming to know the total presence of God in the incarnation, Blake and every radical Christian is eliberated from the God who is Wholly Other than man."[39] From Nietzsche, Altizer borrowed the notion of the death of God, an old idea proclaimed by a new prophet, who came down from the mountain declaring that God is dead. This is the death of God through the crucifixion of the incarnate Christ. "The death of God is the great trope that reveals the seamy side of theology in all of Altizer's books. The death of God is a profound No saying to the name of God and this No saying permeates Altizer's work as it issues forth in an eschatological and apocalyptic Yes."[40]

According to this new revelation, we have to think differently about what Christianity means for our time and what means the sacred-profane dialectic. For Altizer, the true meaning of Christianity is the identification of God with his creation, so "the Christian's fidelity to the Incarnation does not mean that the Christian must define his faith in the traditional way by looking back upon the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ as past events that have left the transcendent God fundamentally unchanged. On the contrary, fidelity to the Incarnation means that the Christian must identify himself with the God who has united Himself through His Incarnate Word, with the evolutionary process of creation

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[38] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 459. In many books Altizer uses the works of Hegel, Blake, and Nietzsche: Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1963), (specially Chapter 8; *The Sacred and the Profane*, 176-201); The Gospel of Christian Atheism, (see *Bibliographical Note*, 29); The Contemporary Jesus, (SCM Press Ltd., New York, 1997), (especially Chapters 7 and 8: *The Protestant Jesus: Milton and Blake*, and *The Nihilistic Jesus: Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche*, 115-160).

[39] Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake,* (Aurora, Davies Group, 2002), 106.

[40]Charles E. Winquist, Op. cit., 339.

and human society."[41] The death of God is a consequence of God's kenosis, because God is empty after his Incarnation in Christ. This process is not theoretical, it is ontological. Many times Altizer points out that "we must recognize that the death of God is a historical event: God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence."[42] The Incarnation is the actualization of a presence that destroys the real meaning of consciousness, and of humanity. Jesus did not come with a message of a new life; he came with the message of death, and this is the aim of the Incarnation. In *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness*, Altizer writes that Jesus is "the man of Hell," so he is the man of eternal death, the death of eternal life.[43] We can recognize real transcendence only if we understand real immanence, so only in human life. The kenotic understanding of Christ is, for Altizer, the understanding of radical immanence, and this is the message for the Christians in our time.

The language of our time is totally different than the language of the past. "Altizer's theology is still a theology of radical negation because it is only by way of a negative assault on all established forms of identity through the language of Jesus or the language of today that a total and final presence manifests itself."[44]

In two books, *The Self-Embodiment of God* and *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus Christ and the Language of Today*, Altizer emphasizes his ideas about death of God theology. All the statements presented in his other books are presumed to prove that God is dead in our time. Altizer demonstrates that the understanding of theology is, in fact, the

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[41] *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, 585. See also The Encyclopedia of Christianity, 441: "According with Altizer's theory (as in classical Buddhism), what is ultimate is what is discovered only in the fullness and passion of human life. In that passion, the very act of denying God actualizes the liberation of human beings."

[42] Thomas J.J. Altizer*, Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, 19. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, 102. This statement is for Altizer the essence of Christianity, because God emptied himself into Jesus Chirist and the Incarnation, and died when Jesus died on the cross. Alan Richardson considers that it is not a new statement. The same affirmation we can find in *modalism* or *monarchianism*, at *Praxeas*, and at *patripassians*. Alan Richardson, Op. cit., 75: "Hence also the name 'patripassians' which was given to the theologians of this school, the first proponents of the death-of-God theology."; 76: "there is a close parallel between Praxeas and Altizer."

[43] Thomas J.J. Altizer, The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970), 127.

[44] Charles E. Winquist, Op. cit., 342.

understanding that we have to use a new language, different from the language of the past. Language is the mark of contemporaneousness. "Theology today is most fundamentally in quest of a language and mode whereby it can speak."[45]

The core of Altizer's theological approach is the emphasis on the distinction between the message of the incarnate Christ and the development of Christianity in history. "We must ask why it is that the theologian in our time is forced to dissociate faith and religion. Surely an answer lies in the gradual evaporation of the religious life of the historic church."[46] Altizer distinguishes the eschatological Christ from the Christ of Christendom. The theology of today is a process of de-eschatologizing the original faith of Christianity.[47]

It is still difficult to understand the role of Altizer in the development of theology in last century. The opinions are different and, sometimes, contradictory. In this way, Alan Richardson considers that Altizer's thinking is mythological, and that death of God theology can be compared with a myth. "The death-of-God myth has arisen in a particular social environment to take the place of a Big-Brother-is-watching-you type of mythology which seems somehow to have grown up in the absence of sound theological teaching in an age of cloying religiosity."[48] Charles E. Winquist, who in generally appreciates Altizer, compared him with "landscape painter, who has enriched the presence and the meaning of God and our common humanity by portraying their apparent absence."[49] Others consider that Altizer did not explain in his books everything that he promoted. "Although Altizer's writings contained the germ of a powerful philosophical theology, he never worked out the

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[45] Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Total Presence: The Language of Jesus Christ and the Language of Today*, 102. The same idea is in Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred, 65: "Finally, all Eliade's theological difficulties derive from an inadequate theological language." Richardson considers this interpretation interested for the psychology of religion and not for the theology perspective: Richardson, Op. cit. 77.

[46] Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, 14.

[47]Iibid., 68: "Suffice it to note the discrepancy between the primitive eschatological conception of Jesus as the Messiah-Son of Man whose decisive redemptive role lay in the future and the mystical-sacramental conception of Jesus as the cosmic Logos whose incarnation has mediated salvation to the present, the one deriving from the categories of Jewish eschatological religion, and the other from the categories of Hellenistic mystical religion."

[48] Alan Richardson, Op. cit., 77.

[49] Charles E. Winquist, Op. cit., 342.

implications of his major metaphysical assertions. Consequently the many ambiguities of his system, e.g., the immanence or transcendence of God, the relation of creation to the incarnation, the relation of grace to nature, the precise significance of the Word God, remained unresolved."[50] Altizer's explications of the death of God are provocative suggestions. "It never became a coherent theological synthesis capable of exerting a lasting influence."[51]

"Notes for a Dialogue"

In 1963, Thomas Altizer published his book *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*. In the introduction, Altizer discusses what he calls the Christian crisis of our time and the death of God. This death is the consequence of the lost contact between theology and the sacred. But, according to Altizer, "today, in Mircea Eliade, Christian theology is confronted by a great religious scholar and thinker whose vision of the sacred is incompatible with the established forms and traditions of Christianity."[52] Altizer sees in Eliade a scholar who can realize a contemporary theology, because his interest is to establish a dialogue between West and East: "Theology can learn from Eliade that paradoxically the very choice of a profane language can be an authentic path to the sacred in our time."[53] Altizer tries to present Eliade's understanding of the dialectic between sacred and profane. But the final impression is that Altizer's book is really divided into two unconnected parts: one about Eliade, the second about other modern thinkers.

According to Altizer's interpretation, Eliade understands in the dialectic sacred-profane an abolition of the profane. "For Eliade, the language of the sacred can have only a dialectical relation to the language

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[50] New Catholic Encyclopedia, 585.
[51] Ibid.
  "Notes for a Dialogue" is the title of a response Eliade issued to Altizer. Mircea Eliade, "Notes for a Dialogue", in The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr., (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1970), 234-238.
[52] Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, 15.
[53] Ibid., 17. See also Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion. Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions,* (Mouton Publishers, The Hague, Paris, New York, 1978), 129: "Altizer and Hamilton do not take Eliade seriously enough on his own grounds. They are theologians and criticize Eliade's theological position on a "fall". But Eliade at least purports to be a historian of religions."

of the profane: the sacred can become manifest only through a negation of the language of the profane."[54] Altizer considers that, for Eliade, the sacred negates the present time and the experience of profane existence. In Altizer's view, Eliade is guilty because he is inconsistent, failing to make clear the final distinction between sacred and profane. The death of God created a radical distinction between sacred and profane. "Finally, all Eliade's theological difficulties derive from an inadequate theological language. He is forced to speak in a language of traditional theological conceptions although his own thought has taken him far beyond the province of the theological tradition."[55] The sacred can be known only in an absolute negation of the profane. Altizer thinks that myth has no value for our time, because God is dead. The manifestation of the sacred has no value, either. "As Eliade notes, the very recitation of myth in its true form is a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. What meaning can myth have when God is dead?"[56] For Altizer, modern religiosity is defined by its very denial of transcendence. He considers that Eliade's concept of religion does justice to archaic, but not to modern, religion. Altizer considers Eliade's method "mystical" and "romantic," and divorced from any approach which is "rational and scientific."[57]

In the chapter, "The Coincidence of the Opposites," Altizer presents his understanding of the paradoxical dialectic of sacred and profane. In all philosophical thought, dialectic thinking is present in a pure way. "Christianity must assume a fully dialectical form, both if it is to be a full expression of the sacred and if it is to relate itself to the modern expressions of the profane."[58] For Altizer, Eliade emphasizes that the

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[54] Ibid., 34. Allen criticizes this interpretation of Eliade's ideas about sacred and profane. See Douglas Allen, Op. cit., 126: "Unfortunately, this interpretation destroys the dialectical complexity of the religious mode of manifestation and leads to an oversimplification and distortion of Eliade's phenomenological method."; 133: "in terms of our rejection of Altizer's analysis of the dialectic of the sacred, it is clear that the profane has value: one could not realize the sacred without the profane through which it is revealed."

[55] Ibid., 65-66.

[56] Ibid., 36.

[57] Ibid., 30, 84. See a criticism of Altizer's understanding of Eliade's method in Allen Douglas, Op. cit., 198-199.

[58] Ibid., 82. This is the understanding of Altizer. But when he speaks of Eliade's understanding, he gives the impression that he did not understand very well this dialectic of sacred and profane: "Thus Eliade's phenomenological method has genuinely mystical

purer expression of the sacred reveals a paradoxical mode of being. It is a nostalgia for a lost paradise, a nostalgia for a state in which all contraries coexist. But Altizer criticizes this understanding of *coincidentia oppositorum*: "Eliade is ever in danger of identifying man's religious goal with his pristine and archaic state; but to do so is to dissolve the religious ground of the 'Fall' (which Tillich so clearly perceives), and to abandon a dialectical mode of understanding the sacred that is absolutely essential if the higher expressions of religion and the Incarnation itself are to become fully meaningful in their own terms."[59]

In 1964, Eliade published an article in *Criterion*, entitled, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist." In it he speaks about the relation between religion and arts, an idea he further develops in other writings. At the beginning of the article, Eliade states that "ever since 1880, when Nietzsche first proclaimed it, people have been talking a great deal about the 'death of God.' Martin Buber asked recently if this is a question of a genuine 'death,' or simply of the eclipse of God—the fact that God is no longer in evidence, that he is no longer responding to the prayers and invocations of man. Nevertheless, it does not seem that his rather optimistic interpretation of Nietzsche's verdict is able to assuage all doubts. Certain contemporary theologians have recognized that it is necessary to accept (and even to assume) the 'death of God' and are trying to think and to build on the basis of this fact."[60] The connection between the theme of this article and death of God theology was to prove that the modern artist has the same problem in the present as in the past, a sign that this theology has its roots in history. Eliade created a link between what the philosophers did in the past and what the new theologians do in the present. Death of God theology makes it impossible to express new religious ideas and experiences in traditional language. "From a certain point of view, the 'death of God' would rather seem to be the destruction of an idol. To acknowledge the death of God would thus be equivalent to

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roots: the *via negativa* of classical mythical theology, a dialectical way that can know the sacred only by engaging in an absolute negation of the profane." (30)

[59] Ibid., 91-92. In the same chapter Altizer says: "Can Eliade remain content with the idea that the goal of man's choice of the sacred is simply to arrive at a precosmic state? If so, he will be forced to abandon both his dialectical method and his Christian ground." (104).

[60] Mircea Eliade, "*The Sacred and the Modern Artist*," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Crossroad, New York, 1984), 179. This article was published in *Criterion*, (Spring, 1964), 22-24.

admitting that one had been taken in, that he had been worshiping just a god and not the living God of Judeo-Christianity."[61] After this affirmation, Eliade starts to analyze the relation between religion and arts, but his observation proves that he understood the core of death of God theology and the link with the past concepts. The problem of language, through which the experience of Christians is expressed, is the main preoccupation of Altizer's theology. All of Eliade's observations are about the sacred and profane in our time, in which the sacred has not vanished, but is simply unrecognizable. Even if it seems that Eliade uses the language of this new theological movement, the understanding of his ideas is centered on a different interpretation of the dialectic of sacred and profane.

On February 11, 1966, *Time* magazine wrote an article on Eliade's new book, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*. The article observed that, "Eliade has had a profound influence on a number of younger theologians—notably Emory's Thomas J. J. Altizer, one of the leading death of God thinkers,"[62] a reference to Altizer's book, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*. One of the first review articles of Altizer's book was written by Mac Linscott Ricketts, and published in *Christian Advocate*. In his review, Ricketts suggested that Altizer's readers would be disappointed to see that the author did not accomplish "a through-going reading of the works of this historian of religions."[63] Ricketts' claim is that Altizer simply used Eliade to support his project which had at its center the death of God theology. All the authors cited by Altizer advocated the notion death of God: Kierkegaard, Teilhard, Dostoievsky, Proust, Kafka, Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, Marcus and Norman Brown. Ricketts criticized Altizer for failing to understand the issue of the dialectic of sacred and profane in Eliades's books. These misunderstandings appear to support Altizer's ideas. Because Altizer said that the person of today can be religious only if he or she affirms the body and death as the realities of our time, it is a fundamental dialectic between sacred and profane and Eliade is the one who says this truth. "Altizer talks about the resurrection

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[61] Ibid.
[62]http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,842489,00.html>access29-05-2008.
[63] Mac Linscott Ricketts (Reviewer), "Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred, by Thomas J.J. Altizer, Westminster", Christian Advocate, (December 3, 1964), 18.

of the body in a way which will seen as blasphemous of Christian doctrine to many, while for others it will be an age for which God is dead."[64]

Ricketts continued to write about the distinction between Eliade and Altizer in two other articles published in 1967, in *Religion in Life* and *Christian Advocate*. In the first article he suggested that the theologians of death of God movement are atheologians or necrotheologians, and that Eliade's name cannot be linked with the promoters of this movement, and especially not with Altizer, who argues that God's death is an event in our time and history and consequently no intelligent person can be anything other than an atheist. Altizer's philosophy is connected with existentialism. But "Eliade defines religion in exactly the same terms as do existentialists such as Sartre; only instead of choosing historicism, Eliade chooses the transhistorical or religious mode of being as the more truly human."[65] For Eliade, religion is defined in opposition with existentialism philosophy, and the relation between sacred and profane is more paradoxical than dialectical. According to Ricketts' critique, Altizer did not understand the sacred-profane relationship and the meaning of hierophany, which is the manifestation of the sacred. "The former [Eliade] sees the sacred as a manifestation of the transcendent, whereas the latter [Altizer] accepts no transcendence or nonhistorical essences."[66] In another article, Ricketts argues that Eliade and Altizer have fundamentally different understanding of the meaning of religion. For Altizer, God is dead in our time. He was alive at some time in the past, but for twentieth-century humankind God is dead, because the only reality of our time is the historical one. Only humanity makes history. Eliade did not attribute the ultimate value to history that Altizer did. Speaking about

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[64]Ibid.

[65] Mac Linscott Ricketts, "Mircea Eliade and the Death of God", Religion in Life (volume XXXVI, Spring, 1967, No. 1), 42-43.

[66]Ibid., 52. Allen Douglas and John Valk agree with Ricketts' critics that Altizer did not understand the dialectic of sacred and profane and the role of hierophany. See Allen Douglas, Op. cit., 126: "After completing this section, I came across a very similar criticism of Altizer's interpretation of Eliade's sacred-profane relationship in Ricketts' 'Mircea Eliade and the Death of God.'" And John Valk, "The Concept of the *Coincidentia Oppositorum* in the Thought of Mircea Eliade", Religious Studies, 28 (1992), 34: "Thomas Altizer understands Eliade as emphasizing only one side of the paradox, that the sacred negates the profane. Ricketts point out however, that such a negative dialectic misses Eliade's point […]. To understand Eliade more fully it is necessary to retain both sides of the paradox. Here the concept of the *coincidentia oppositorum* comes into play."

archaic religion, Eliade promoted a different understanding of reality. "What is true of primitives is true likewise for *all* religious man of every age (including Christians): to live in conformity to sacred tradition is to participate in the Real; the Real and the sacred are equivalent."[67]

In 1970, John B. Cobb Jr. published a book of critiques and responses to the theology of Altizer. The volume included an article by Eliade entitled, "Notes for a Dialogue." Eliade's response began by stating his appreciation for the originality and importance of Altizer's theology. After this, he analyzed the book *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, focussing on six points. "A preliminary remark is that the book is personally important for Altizer, because it uncovers the direction of his own thinking."[68] Altizer criticized Eliade's understanding of religion and *homo religiosus*. After the appearance of this book, Altizer became the champion of death of God theology. Eliade wrote, "I have the impression that the reader must finish the volume feeling rather disappointed with Altizer's declaration that my work utilizes the dialectic of the sacred in a 'revolutionary' way."[69] Altizer considered that the interpretation of sacred and profane in Eliade's books is an important step for a new understanding of Christianity for our time. Eliade was compared with important thinkers of humanity who, to Altizer's understanding, promoted the same ideas about history, Christianity, and the sacred. Eliade reproached Altizer for basing his critique only on Eliade's scholarly works and not his creative ones, especially those published in Romania, most notably his novel *Forêt Interdite*, "which could have helped him grasp more actually my personal ideas on time, history, destiny, etc."[70] Eliade proved that Altizer committed an error when he compared his scientific works with the creative works of Dostoevsky, Proust, Kierkegaard, Camus, and Sartre.

In fact, Altizer's most serious error is his misunderstanding of the sacred and profane and Eliade's method in study of religions: the hermeneutical method. Eliade wished to present in his books the importance of non-Christian religions for the present time. This is

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[67] Mac Linscott Ricketts, "Eliade and Altizer. Very Different Outlooks", Christian Advocate, (October 5, 1967), 12.
[68] Mircea Eliade, "Notes for a Dialogue", in *The Theology of Altizer: Critique and Response*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr., (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1970), 234.
[69] Ibid., 235.
[70]Ibid., 236.

important for contemporary culture. "This is not because it proposes 'models' for a modern man, Christian or agnostic; for I never suggested that we must go back to the archaic or Oriental models of existence in order to recapture the sacred."[71] The sympathy for some cultures and religions does not mean nostalgia for an archaic time. Eliade's understanding of history is against post-Hegelian historicism. But Altizer did not understand the dialectic of the sacred as a hierophany. For Altizer, the manifestation of the sacred, hierophany, abolishes the profane: "But I have repeatedly pointed out that, for example, a *sacred* stone does not cease to be a *stone* […]. In fact, hierophanies could not abolish the profane world, for *it is the very manifestation of the sacred that establishes the world*, i.e., transforms a formless, unintelligible, and terrifying chaos into a cosmos."[72] For Eliade, the hierophany is an onthophany. *Homo religiosus* imitates the models, but he uses and conquers the material world, too. This is the real significance of myths.

In his *Journal*, Eliade speaks 11 times about Thomas Altizer.[73] On 3 January 1963, Eliade explained to Altizer that the modern thinkers to which Altizer made reference—Nietzsche, Freud, Max—are all from the West and study modern spirituality. Eliade does not speak in a provincial way, because he opens the possibility to dialogue with other worlds. This dialogue is not with Freud or Joyce; it is with people from Paleolithic, with yogi and shaman. On 3 August 1964, Altizer asked Eliade to write a book about Proust, because he was preoccupied with the problem of time and history, and only Proust could see the real solution. On 10 October 1964, Eliade noted that he was invited to make a presentation on death of God theology. It is a text by Gilkey, about Hamilton, Van Buren and Tomas Altizer. Eliade notes that the death of God is not a new phenomenon in history. In all history of religion, we can find this example, in the "black out of God" in images and secular symbols. But Eliade complains that even he can understand Giordano Bruno (*Dio, come assoluto, non a niente da fare con noi...*), or Nietzsche, but he cannot

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[71] Ibid., 237.

[72] Ibid., 238.

[73] Mircea Eliade, *Fragments d'un journal* : 413 (3 janvier 1963), 432 (27 juillet 1963), 462 (3 août 1964), 471 (10 octobre 1964), 507-508 (12 octobre 1965), 509-510 (5 février 1966), 522 (13 mai 1966), 539 (4 avril 1967). Mircea Eliade, J*urnal*, vol. II, 1970-1985, (Ediţie ingrijită şi indice de Mircea Handoca, Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1993), 109 (1 iunie 1973), 135 (10 noiembrie 1973).

understand the theology which is created by Hamilton, Van Buren and Altizer. On 5 February 1966, Eliade reflects that Altizer looks like a prophet and all young students are interested about death of God theology. Altizer says that young Americans are interested in Christianity, but they cannot use the old dogmas or the old language. God the Father is dead because he was incarnate in Jesus Christ. He became immanent, so he is in history in all the time. Jesus did not resurrect and he did not ascend into heaven. If it was so, it was not important to the incarnation, because God remained transcendent. So, the solution for a Christian is to live in history, because history became Jesus Christ. Eliade notes that these ideas are new interpretations of Marxism, Bonhoeffer, and existentialism. He notes that Altizer is the most prominent proponent of this new theology because he wished to be a prophet of this fashionable theology. On 13 May 1966, Eliade spoke about Altizer's book, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. He disliked the book because Altizer's intention was to provoke and to conquer, using just a few ideas to create an entire tome. The new Christianity, or Altizer, is not a religion because it has no past; it does not look to the past. Here Eliade makes a connection with Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer. Because God does not resurrect, and God lives here, all history is sacred. The death of God is, for Altizer, radical Christianity. Only a real Christian can see this truth. On 4 April 1967, Eliade recorded a quotation from *Holzwege*: "*Hier stirbt der Absolute. Gott ist tot. Das sagt aller andere, nur nichts: es gibt keinem Gott*," ("Here dies the Absolute. God is dead. Let everyone announce it, nothing but nothingness: there is no God.") and he writes that it is for Altizer on which to meditate. The last reference to Altizer in Eliade's journal is on 31 October 1975, and discusses theologian and Rabbi Richard Rubenstein and his ideas.[74]

In an interview with Claude-Henri Rocquet, published in 1978 in *L'Épreuve du labyrinthe*, Mircea Eliade was asked to speak about death of God theology, and was asked if this theology is the limit of the history of religion. Eliade responded that this theme is not a new one. It is known in the history of religion as the concept of *deus otiosus*, a god who, after he created the world, withdrew himself in transcendence. The theology of the death of God is interesting because in the understanding of history of

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[74] Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal*, vol. II, 211-212. On R. Rubenstein as a promoter of the death of God theology, see footnote 31 in this paper.

religions, it is the only creation of the modern world. This is the supreme desacralization of our world; it is the identification between sacred and profane.[75] Eliade considered that the impact of this theology for our time is difficult to appreciate. But the question is a significant one: in what way can the profane can become sacred, and in which manner can a life without God can be a new kind of religion? Eliade identifies three types of answer to this question: the death of God theologians think that they can find a link between the desacrealization of the world and a new type of religiosity, in *coincidentia oppositorum*. The death of the religion is not, for these theologians, the death of faith.[76] The second answer is that the disparities of the religions are not disparities of religiosity. The last answer starts with the affirmation that the opposition between sacred and profane is important for the religions, but Christianity is not a religion. So, the Christian is not obliged to live in the cosmos, because he rather lives in history. But the question is now: what is history, and what kind of world is saved by history?

Conclusions

In these discussions between Mircea Eliade and Thomas Altizer we can recognise two important things: there are some points of contact between these two thinkers and some differences. The problem lies in determining whether or not these points of contact are simply two different ways of understanding the same concepts.

First, both Altizer and Eliade use a new language in their writings. It is a new language, not because they use new words, but because they attribute new meanings to existing words. The theology of Altizer was interpreted as another way to speak about Christianity for our time. It was a question of finding new language to witness to the Christian faith in the twentieth century. Altizer understood that the old language cannot speak for the present time. The same can be said for Eliade. He uses the same words which we can find in others scholarly books, but with new

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[75] Mircea Eliade, *L'Épreuve du labyrinthe: Entretiens avec Claude-Henri Rocquet*, 173: "Pour l'historien des religions, son intérêt est considérable puisque cette étape ultime illustre le parfait camouflage du 'sacré', ou, pour mieux dire, son identification avec le 'profane'."
[76] Ibid.: "La mort de la 'religion' n'étant pas pour eux, et bien au contraire, la mort de la 'foi'."

meanings. See for example the terms: sacred, profane, hierophany, hermeneutic, and history of religion.

It was not my task here to present the connections between Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto, Emil Durkheim, Roger Cailoise, or to establish the connection between Altizer and other theologians of the death of God movement or of other confessions. But it will be a useful contribution if someone could explore in which way the same language is used by the scholars in the same field, but with different meaning. So, at this level these two scholars have the same task: to present the understanding of their ideas in a new language for the people of our time. It was their task to offer contemporary society a new interpretation of meaning of theology or history of religions.

Both Eliade and Altizer speak about the sacred-profane dialectic. Even if this dialectic is not formulated by them for the first time in history, at the core of their thinking is this dialectical approach. The sacred and the profane are two different modes of living in this word. In connection with this dialectical approach is the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Both scholars use this term as one of the most important exemplifications of the structure of religiosity. The various dichotomies of this world, no matter what they are, have this capacity to stay together in the same equation. In theology or in the field of the history of religion, everyone can find the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Both of these men are interested in the understanding what religion means. Because the people of our time cannot live in the past, religion has to be interpreted in different ways. Both of Eliade and Altizer try to present definitions of religion using the language of different scholars, to prove their affirmations or to disprove them: theologians, historians of religion, artists, psychologists and the like. But Eliade and Altizer come up with new interpretations of what religion means, interpretations which are different from those of the past. The methods which are employed by them are different, one being theologian and the other a historian of religion.

An important preoccupation for both is history. Because history occupies a large place in their works, we can say that for both history is the most important theme which needs to be understood. History is not just the history of our time, separated by the history of the past. To understand our history means to understand history in general, the role of history for humankind.

These are some points of contact between Eliade and Altizer. If we remember that they were actually friends, we can understand that these ideas, and maybe others, were discussed between the two on various occasions (see for example the Eliade's *Journal* references to Altizer). But the question is if these common points are really common. Do these two scholars think in the same way when they speak about the same things? My impression is that they do not.

The first argument is the understanding of the *sacred-profane dichotomy*. For Altizer, it is a radical dichotomy between sacred and profane, an understanding Altizer said Eliade himself should have adopted. For Eliade, the sacred and the profane live in a paradoxical relationship more than in a radical dichotomy. The sacred manifests itself in hieropahy, in different times, places, and objects. But the objects remain what they normally are. It is the camouflage of the sacred in the profane which is the idea presented in all of Eliade's books. The *coincidentia oppositorum* means exactly this: the sacred and the profane coexist at the same time, in the same object.

For Eliade, history is a sum of *hierophanies*, the manifestation of the scared in the world. The religious human being, *homo religious*, lives in *history*, but this history is a sacred one. It is not history as understood in our profane way. Elaide was considered to be anti-historic or transhistoric. For him, present-day history has no value, because it is desacralized. At the same time, human beings live in this word, in this time, and because the sacred and the profane coexist together, this desacralized life can be understood as a camouflage of the sacred in the daily activities of modern people. The sacred is present even if we do not recognize it.

For Altizer, history occupies the primary place in his interpretation of Christianity. In this respect, he was considered to be influenced by Hegel. History is the place were God died, and so now history is sanctified by the death of God. In fact, history *is* God and, at the same time, history is the place where we live, and so is the arena where our lives unfold. And God died in our time, in our history. For this reason, history is important for the people of our time.

The concept of *Deus otiosus* is used by Eliade to understand the fact that, in history, some important cultic divinities were not worshiped as they had once been. Other gods take the role of this Being in the cult. In mythology we can find these *Deus otiosus* who obscure themselves after

the creation of the world. According to this interpretation, Eliade can say that death of God theology is not a new theology. The same concept can be found in all mythology and in many philosophies. The obscuring of God was interpreted as the death of the God.

After having considered about these similarities and differences between Eliade and Altizer, I must return to the question with which I began this paper: Did Mircea Eliade's understanding of religion influenced the "death of God" theology of Thomas J.J. Altizer? My view is that he did not. Even if there are many links between them, I observe that Altizer, in his book about Eliade and in other books, did not clearly understand the meaning of Eliade's concepts. All his new theology is based on the same concepts of the sacred-profane dichotomy, *coincidentia oppositorum*, the understanding of relation between Christianity and other religions, or between faith and religion. But Eliade understands all these concepts in a different way. To present Eliade's ideas and Altizer's ideas on common themes has provided an opportunity to understand them. In these conclusions, I have presented some points of connection, but in my opinion these points only appear to be the same; the essence of their understanding is markedly different.

I focused on this theme because I considered to be of particular interest to our time. On the one hand, death of God theology was in vogue in the United States in the 1960s, but today has few adherents. However, a new evaluation of this theological movement is necessary because we need to understand its possible impact on the renewal of Christianity. On the other hand, Eliade was considered an important scholar in the field of history of religion. In our time, many critics contest his influence in this field and criticize him for the fact that he relativizes Christianity. This new interpretation of both scholars was an opportunity to link the research in the theology with there in the history of religion, an important motive for our time. In ecumenical discussions, the link between research in both these fields is so important. The concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the understanding of the *sacrality* of our time, in different religions, and the new *language* for discussing with people of different faiths are the main preoccupations of the ecumenical movement.

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