



## Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

Mircea Eliade was born on March 9, 1907 in Bucharest, Romania and died on April 22, 1986 in Chicago, Illinois. He was a historian, morphologist, and phenomenologist of religions but also authored novels, novellas and short stories. He has been described in the popular press and by some scholars as the most influential historian of religion. He studied philosophy and oriental studies at the *University of Bucharest* where he received his M.A in 1928 for his thesis on Italian Renaissance philosophy from Ficino to Bruno. He then studied in Calcutta under Sanskrit scholar Surendranath Dasgupta from 1928-30 followed by 6 months practicing Yoga at Rishikesh with Swami Shivananda. After this, he returned to Bucharest and received a Ph.D. in philosophy for his thesis on the history of comparative techniques of Yoga. He believed that what he learned in India helped him to understand peasant cultures in Romania. Eliade joined the faculty of philosophy at the *University of Bucharest* as an assistant to his most admired scholar, the controversial Romanian philosopher, logician, and mathematician, Naë Lonescu, and taught courses in philosophy, religion, Hinduism and Buddhism. During World War II he was appointed *Cultural Attaché* with the *Royal Legation of Romania* in London (1940) and in Lisbon (1941-45). It was while living in Paris after the war that his international reputation grew. He then joined the *History of Religions* department at the *University of Chicago* in 1956-57 where he later became a full professor and chairman of department. He remained at Chicago until his retirement in 1983. Eliade published numerous scholarly works, including *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949), *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), also translated as *Cosmos and History*, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951), *Yoga, immortality and Freedom* (1954), and his three volume *A History of Religious Ideas* (1978-1985). He also published several popular works, including *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), and several collections of articles, including *Myth and Reality* (1963) and *The Quest* (1969). He also authored several literary works, including his highly successful novel, *Bengal Nights* (1933). His most ambitious novel, which he saw as his literary masterpiece, *Forêt Interdite* or *The Forbidden Forest* (1955), is about the historical tragedy and destiny of the Romanian people. Many of Eliade's key mythical and symbolic concepts are reflected in this work because he believes that these are present beneath the surface in Western experience. Finally, Eliade published many autobiographical collections of essays concerning his own life, but also concerning scholarly, religious, social, psychological, philosophical and political issues in Romania and the world.

### **The Sacred and the Profane**

Religion is concerned with the sacred and the sacred is utterly other than the ordinary, the secular, the usual, the mundane. However, anything selected as sacred—an animal, a tree, a stone, coition, etc., remains a natural object but also reveals a transcendent character. The sacred has this *paradoxical* dual nature. Eliade sought a *morphology* of the sacred, the general structures and typical patterns underlying the various specific sacred phenomena. The historian of religion is not primarily a historian, a philologist (e.g., a Sinologist), but rather a comparativist, a phenomenologist, and a *hermeneutic* practitioner seeking to get beyond the surface facts to decipher the hidden universal structures.

### **Symbolic Religious Language**

Human beings are essentially religious (*homo religiosus*) and use language to express their views on this primordial paradoxical relation. Religious language is *symbolic*, not literal. Human beings are also, therefore, essentially symbolic beings (*homo symbolicus*). It is, therefore, a mistake to dismiss religious views as naïve superstitions. A religious statement is not about the facts in the world and cannot be refuted by citing facts. Rather, it is *via* symbolic religious language that human beings are able to express and unify their deepest experiences by reference to coherent structural worlds of meaning.

### **Myths**

The concepts of *archetypes* and *repetition* play a central role in Eliade's account of these structures. A myth (for example, that the world was created by God out of chaos), is not a factual assertion. It is a *symbolic sacred narrative* employing archetypes of what takes place in *primordial mythic time* that enables people to make sense of and deal with their existential crises, including their confrontation with their temporal limitations, senselessness suffering, arbitrary death, alienation, and the lack of deep meaning in life. This means that the myth of death as a rebirth into a transcendent world is an archetype repeated throughout very different religions around the globe. Eliade's notion of archetypes is somewhat similar to Carl Jung's, but Eliade is concerned with concrete historical happenings rather than the human psyche.

### **Primordial mythic time**

According to Eliade, cosmogonic myths (creation myths), as well as other myths about origins describe the sacred origins that *symbolize* the full primordial sacredness of being that explain the meaning of human existence. Thus, he saw his *The Myth of the Eternal Return* as a study of "archaic ontology".<sup>1</sup>

### **Rituals**

Rituals and other sacred activities, which may seem meaningless to science, are *re-enactments of myths*. A ritual is not merely someone in a costume playacting turning wine into the blood of the redeemer. Rather, by participating in rituals and other sacred activities, human beings are able to overcome their sins and achieve *spiritual renewal* by participating in the full *primordial sacredness of being*.

## The Dialectic of the Sacred

Since religion is concerned with the paradoxical relation between the transcendent and the profane, it essentially involves the “dialectic of the sacred and the profane” or the “dialectic of *hierophanies*.”<sup>2</sup> This dialectic involves the experience of how the manifestations of the sacred (the transcendent, the infinite, the eternal, the non-historical) gets manifested in ordinary profane historical events (for example, how the transcendent can manifest itself in ordinary animals and plants, in historical beings, in dreams or religious human experiences, or even in imperfect human language). Although this experience may be paradoxical and incomprehensible to the rational scientific mind, Eliade attempts to show how there are *universal symbolic systems* across all cultures that provide the framework for religious meaning. For example, the dialectical structure found in the supreme Christian mystery of the Incarnation, in which a perfect God becomes man, is reflected in different forms in many of the major religions.

## Creative Hermeneutics

Modern human beings, surrounded by their machines, money, and the secular institutions, have lost their relation to the sacred. There is therefore an urgent need for a “cultural renewal” and a “new humanism.” Eliade called for a “creative hermeneutics” that would decipher the sacred meanings hidden in modern profane culture and re-establish an appreciation of the religious dimension of life present in both Western and non-Western cultures.

## Influence

Although Eliade’s scholarly work on his specializations is respected, he has been criticized for being subjective and unscientific, ignoring rigorous methods of verification, making many hasty generalizations, and reading his own metaphysical and theological views into his interpretations of religion, resulting in a selective distorted picture of religious phenomena. Specifically, he has been accused to favouring archaic and Asian religions (particularly Hinduism) and nature-oriented “cosmic religions” (including the “cosmic Christianity” of Romanian peasants that see sacred Christian revelations in nature and in cosmic patterns and cycles). His defenders claim that his critics often presuppose the reductive attitude towards religious phenomena that Eliade rejects and that he should perhaps be viewed as a *creative literary figure* who raises neglected philosophical, theological and religious issues and provides answers to humanity’s contemporary existential and historical situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, “Mircea Eliade: Romanian Historian and Author”

<sup>2</sup> Allen, “Mircea Eliade: Romanian Historian and Author”