

ELIADE ON SACRED AND CENTER

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Motto: „Man becomes himself when he acknowledges his history.”

Abstract. The subject of Eliade’s research is constituted by the *experience* of space as it is lived by the religious man, as well as by the man rejecting the sacredness of the world, the center, assuming a profane existence that seems purified of any religious presupposition. An *entirely* profane World, the totally de-sacred Cosmos, seemed possible in the newer visions brought about by the industrial society. Yet, reality proves that the profane *existence* does not manifest itself in a pure state, although the degree of de-sacredness of the World has increased. Eliade used to believe that the sacred is hidden within the profane, as well as for Freud or Marx profane was hidden within the sacred. He sustains that the upmost de-sacred existence keeps yet the traces of a religious valorization of the World, especially privileged places, qualitatively different from all the others such as the natal land, the ambient of the first love, etc., favoring the instances of „crypto-religious” behavior of the profane man.

Key words: Eliade, center, religious existence, profane existence, de-sacredness, „crypto-religious” behavior

Mircea Eliade has given six decades of his life to the science and philosophy of religion. The articles from the Romanian press and the correspondence with the great Italian scientists dedicated to spirituality, but especially the courses at Bucharest University of his brilliant Professor and mentor Nae Ionescu, prove him as early as the age of 19-20 years old preoccupied by the specific character of the religious experience, especially of the mystical one. The fundamental book entitled *The Sacred (Das Heilige, 1917)* of the German Rudolf Otto strongly influenced his own research from the perspective of „religion as an attitude of the spirit” and of the *numinos* – the irrational element of the religious experience. These sources provide the foundation for Eliade’s audacity to affirm as early as the age of 20 that „religious feeling can pretend to represent next to reason the other center of human consciousness”. Eliade entertained relations of collaboration, friendship and mutual appreciation of their scholar work with the reputed Professor from Marburg University (where he had as a colleague Heidegger, nevertheless, as famous). However, among the nouns for *sacred* in different

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languages, the Romanian scholar appreciated as the most representative the German one: *Das Heilige*.

In the articles dedicated to Papini's Christianity published in the newspaper *Cuvântul* [*The Word*] or in *Est-Vest* [*East-West*] in 1927, or in *Itinerar spiritual X* [*Spiritual Itinerary X*] he evokes Unamuno and Buonaiuti to highlight „the formidable and permanent wonder which is Christianity (...)” considering that it is „the most perfect religion (...)” for it „brought man the closest to his Creator”(…) and that „return to Church is both redeeming and necessary”.

The pulsing of teenage and maybe even the wish to astonish, as well as the influence of the lectures from Papini that arose his admiration for ascesis and heroism, urged Eliade, at the age of 20 years old, to „describe Christianity as a religion of heroism and individual fight, but not of divine grace.” Țurcanu quotes from *Gaudeamus* (the 1929 novel of Mircea Eliade): „I do not believe in God. I only believe in Jesus Christ, the first and foremost hero of Christianity”.

As known, during the next three years (1928-1931) Eliade will study in India the autochthonous myths and religions, the tantric texts, the Sanskrit language and he will learn ascesis in an ashram in Himalaya. In his talks with Claude-Henri Rocquet, Eliade will affirm that the most powerful religious, mystic and spiritual experience was the one he lived in India. And from there on his career of scientific, philosophic and literary excellence took off. During the third and the forth decades of the last century he consolidates his reputation as Orientalist and as reputed scholar in the morphology of the religious phenomena. He had the idea of the *Prolegomena to the Compared History of Religions* within the anti-aerial shelter of the Romanian Legation from London, bombed night after night by the *Luftwaffe*, philosophical work where not really the diachronic aspect is predominantly relevant, but the structure, concepts and symbols, and also there appeared the inspiration for the literary state-of-the-art novel *Noaptea de Sânziene*. At that time the coordinating convictions at the basis of his entire scientific, literary and philosophical activity gained shape, along with the idea of unity and sacredness of Cosmos and life, as well as the idea of interrelation among spirit, freedom and sacredness.

The consciousness of a real and meaningful world – said Eliade at old age in his memoirs *Încercarea labirintului* [*The Trial of the Maze*] – is intimately related to the discovery of the sacred. The sacred is not just a stage in the history of the consciousness; it is an element in the structure of this consciousness. „The sacred does not imply the belief in Gods or in spirits. It is – and I underline this – the experience of a reality and the spring of the consciousness of the existence in the world.” Until Eliade *the sacred* was used predominantly as an attribute, not as a substantive, sustained in a study of Paola Pisi. The critic Florin Țurcanu remarked that adopting on a broad scale the term „sacred” in his theoretical vocabulary Eliade made it the key term of his postwar thought.

In his preface to *Traité d'Histoire des Religions* Eliade pleaded for an objective and well-balanced approach in his researches: „any manifestation of the spirit is important; any rite, any myth, any belief or divine figure reflects the *experience* of the sacred and, as a consequence implies the notions of being, meaning and truth (...). By the experience of the sacred, the human spirit noticed the difference between what reveals itself as real, powerful, rich in meanings, and what lack any of these qualities, that is, the chaotic and dangerous flow of things, their fortuitous apparitions and disappearances, deprived of meaning.”

Georges Dumézil, the academician and the steady friend and supporter of Mircea Eliade's career in France, said about the value of the *Traité* edited at Payot: «On est venu – ou revenu – à l'idée qu'un religion est un système, déférent de la poussière de ses éléments; qu'elle est une pensée articulée, un explication du monde. Bref, c'est *sous le ligne du logos et non sous celui de mana que se place aujourd'hui la recherche*”. („They come – or, they have returned – to the idea that religion is a system, different from the myriad (*la poussière*) of its elements; that it is an articulated thought, an explanation of the world. Briefly, religion is under the sign of *logos* and not under that of *mana* under which the present research is placed.”

Mana is in the beliefs of the Melanesians and Polynesians a force or a supernatural power attributed to the persons, spirits or matter deprived of soul. It has a dual character; it can be good or bad, related to *powerful beings or objects*. The West used it in the 19th century only with relation to religion, but during the last century it interpreted it as a symbolic manner of expressing the special qualities of important persons, as social position, or to explain unluckily actions or failures. To the latter explanation was Dumézil referring pejoratively, underlining that the treaty of Eliade was under the superior sign of *logos*.

Each of the great domains of the human knowledge and human creations is constituted as a system organized around a central, dominant value as a pivot on which the others are aggregated. *The sacred* is in religion the equivalent of what represents *the truth* in science, *the beautiful* in art, *the good* in morals, *the doubt* in philosophy, *the information* in mass-media, etc.

The most natural definition for the sacred was obtained by the opposite or the contrary of certain concepts. „Man acknowledges the existence of the sacred because it manifests and presents itself as a totally different thing from the profane” – stated Eliade in one of his essayistic works, destined to broad audiences, with the observation that he does not approach the subject solely from the perspective of the discipline that consecrated him – the history of religions. *Homo religiosus* presents interest also for the philosophical anthropology, phenomenology, and psychology. „The experience of the sacred is the manner of existence”, concludes Eliade from an ontological perspective.

He turns to the term *hierophany* to explain the act of the „manifestation of the sacred”. The hierophany expresses only what is comprised within the

etymological meaning: that is, we are shown *something sacred*. One may say that the history of religions, from the most primitive to the most elaborate, is composed of an accumulation of hierophanies, of the manifestations of the sacred realities." Exemplifying, Eliade shows that there is no rupture between the most elementary hierophany, as a manifestation of the sacred in a stone beneath a tree, to the supreme hierophany, which is, for the Christian, the embodiment of God in Jesus Christ.

The famous hierophanies of Eliade say, hence, about the stone, or about the sacred tree that „they are not adored as such”, but because they „show” something which is neither stone nor tree, but sacred, *ganz andere*”. We are, obviously, in front of a paradox. Expressing the sacred, any object unspecific, becomes *something else*, without ceasing to be *their own self*, because they continue to belong to its cosmic universe. The whole Nature could present itself to the people who have a religious experience as cosmic sacredness. „The Cosmos, in its entirety, – generalizes Eliade – could become a hierophany”.

At origin, within the archaic societies, in fact, in all the pre-modern societies, sacred means power, and then, in its process of becoming, it means *reality*. The wish of the religious man *to be*, more precisely, to be a part of reality, determines sacredness to be saturated of being, to feel saturated of power.

Sacred and *profane* – writes Eliade in *Das Heilige und das Profane* (the edition published in Germany in 1957) are two manners of existence in the world, two existential situations assumed by the human being in history, actually, determined by the different positions conquered by the human being in Cosmos.

The subject of Eliade’s research is constituted by the *experience* of space as it is lived by the religious man, as well as by the man rejecting the sacredness of the world, assuming a profane existence that seems purified of any religious presupposition. The *entirely* profane World, the totally de-sacred Cosmos, seemed possible in the newer visions brought about by industrial society. Yet, reality proves that the profane *existence* does not manifest itself in a pure state, although the degree of de-sacredness of the World has increased: “I believe that the sacred is hidden within the profane, as well as for Freud or Marx, the profane was hidden within the sacred.” As following, Eliade sustains that the upmost de-sacred existence keeps yet the traces of a religious valorization of the World, especially privileged places, qualitatively different from all the others such as the natal land, the ambient of the first love, etc., favoring the instances of „crypto-religious” behavior of the profane man.

The sacred space eases the acquiring of a „fix point”, the possibility of orientation within the homogeneous chaos, envisions the „creation of the World” and the real feeling, while the profane experience maintains the relativity of the space. In the profane, the *true* orientation disappears because the „fix point” of support does not have a unique ontological status anymore, appearing and

disappearing according to the daily needs of the industrial society. Therefore, the World and the space look as „some fragments” of a shattered universe, the amorphous mass of an infinite number of „places”, predominantly neutral.

The classic examples for sacred space are well-known: the Church, the temple, the sanctuaries within which premises the profane world is eluded, where the communication with the Gods is possible usually through the images and the symbols of certain *openings* towards the heights, most of the times named the „Gateways to Heavens” – places of passing, between the Sky and the Earth. Other places could be added, all bearing meanings, suspending relativity and confusion, emphasizing the sacredness of certain places, and the incentive to piety and recollection.

The conclusions of the researchers on the experience of the sacred space show that it permits the founding of the World, where it *unveils the real* and the World begins to exist. Eliade sustains also that the „irruption of the sacred does not project only a fix point of support amidst the amorphous fluidity of the profane space, a „Center” in the Chaos, but also a rupture of level, „opens communication between the cosmic levels (the Earth and the Sky) easing the passing through, of an ontological order, from a manner of existence to the other.”

As well from this ample ontological perspective, Eliade concludes that the religious man cannot live but in a sacred world, because only this world participate to the being and *truly* exist. This religious necessity mirrors an unquenchable ontological thirst. „Religious man is thirsty for being”.

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We shall not insist here anymore on the component of the *sacred time* and the profane length, on the primordial mythical time, of the regeneration through return to the *time of origin* or the *festive Time* and structure of the holidays, brought back into the present time to sooner arrive at the symbolism of the Center. Only two decisive phrases from Eliade’s vision: „The experience of the sacred Time will allow the religious man to find again, periodically, the Cosmos as it were, *in principio*, in the mythical moment of Creation” (...). „This religious nostalgia mirrors in fact the *wish to live in a pure and holly Cosmos, as it were at the beginnings of times, when it exited the hands of the Creator*”.

The Hierophany of Space reveals the necessity of an absolute fix point named „Center”. Nothing occurs within the sacred space without an anterior *orientation* and any orientation presupposes acquiring a fix point. This is the reason why religious man strived to situate himself in the „Center of the world”.

The Earth, the Sky, and the inferior regions – the world of the dead can communicate by the means of an image of a universal column (*Universalius columna*), there where is a rupture produced amongst the three cosmic levels. This

Axis mundi, in popular terms „the belly button of the world” is the Center of the World, whose coherent and complex symbolism renders comprehensible the traditional behavior toward the „space of life” of the religious man. The Center of the World can be the mythic or real Cosmic Mountain, for instance „The Mountain of the Countries in Mesopotamia”, or „the Belly Button” in Palestine, which is to be considered the highest place of the World, where Christians think there is Golgotha. From this perspective we understand the assertion that „our world” in its entirety is holly land, because it is constituted as *the closest place to the skies*.

Other cosmologic images and religious beliefs situate in the Center of the World holly cities (Jerusalem, the Capital of the Chinese Sovereign) or in sanctuaries, in the temples that make the „connection” between Sky and Earth, in countries situated with predilection in the middle of the World such as Iran, or the Babylonian sanctuaries, etc. Each of these envisions at the same time an image of the world, *imago mundi*.

„The man of the pre-modern societies – Eliade writes – wants to be situated as close as possible to the Center of the World”. Even more than that, he also wants that his own house is *imago mundi*. *Homo religiosus* felt the need to live always in the Center, as did Achilpa Australians who took along with them everywhere their earthly but sacred pole. Similarly, the creation of man represents a replica of cosmogony, for the first man was made in the „belly button of the Earth” according to the Mesopotamian tradition, in the Center of the World (in conformity with the Iranian tradition) or at Jerusalem (according to the Judeo-Christian traditions).

Eliade raises even higher the meditative level within the series of hierophanies, as well as the level of his hermeneutic vision, of the ontological interpretation. „The Genesis of the World becomes the archetype of any creator gesture of man, whichever would be his plan of reference.”

The Cosmic symbolism of the village is illustrated through the tradition from Bali Island to set the village placing the landmark at a natural cross-road, where two paths naturally unfold perpendicularly, as a consequence, dividing also the rural community in conformity with the original division of the Universe in the four horizons. Ancient Italy or pre-Medieval Germany offers the example of similar structures, such as *Roma quadrata*, or the Germanic villages and cities and the pre-Medieval cities systematized according to the same cosmologic scheme and the same ritualist scenario.

Thus, we arrive at what Eliade considered the highest representation of the Center precisely for the human being. Another more expressive explanation is offered by the symbol of Maze. „The Myth of Ulysses – said Eliade to Claude-Henri Rocquet – is very important for us. Each of us will have something of Ulysses, and as him, we are in a search for ourselves, hoping to arrive, and then,

undoubtedly, finding again the country, the home, we succeed to find ourselves again. But, as in the Maze, in any peregrination there is risk to lose oneself. If you succeed to exit the Labyrinth, to find your home again, then you become a different being”.

Asked how dialogues the polyglot, the peregrine of cultures, of the countries, of the houses in his inner self, Eliade answered: „For any exiled, *Patria*, the country, is the maternal language that he continues to speak (...) it is the language in which I dream and in which I am writing my diary. Therefore, it is not only an inner oniric country (...) and there is no contradiction, even more, there is no tension, between the world and the country.”

This calm and planetary emplacement of the self in space and time he explains also by the *Axis mundi*. „Anywhere there is a *Center of the World*. Once situated in this center, you are at home; you are truly within your genuine self and within the center of the Cosmos, too (...) And we continue: This „symbolism of the center” not only that I understand, I am also living it”. „I want to recognize myself – in a philosophical meaning – in my brother: as a Romanian, I was like him, thousands of years ago. Due to this thought, I feel the man of my epoch; if there is indeed any original and important discovery that could characterize our century then this is it: the historical unity of the human spirit. This is the reason why I do not „de-mystify”.

With the correctness and the consciousness of the limitation which is absolutely necessary to the researcher, Eliade shows that the great symbols that correlate the cosmic existence and the human existence contain a secret of the universe that is also the secret of the human condition, both expressions of solidarity and yet different for each human being, for each specific destiny. This fluctuation in individuation he explains by the fact that the „symbol is always open”. Even when”it is clearly my interpretation, and being my interpretation, I do not have to forget that it belongs to a contemporary researcher. An interpretation is never perfect.”

For closing I would choose a question with indirect scientific importance and one to which Eliade never intended to answer clearly! What does he believe in? *Is he a homo religiosus himself?* Petre Țuțea, his former colleague of generation and cordial disputes during the fertile '30 to *Corso* coffee shop in Bucharest, attempted to answer it. During the post-war period they met each other only in their mediated dialogues, in correspondence and memoirs, while Țuțea consecrated him a book, entitled *Mircea Eliade*.

The dominant idea of the author, a profoundly religious man, sounds as following: „The metaphysical man can search, but the religious man receives (...) the center at Mircea Eliade, that is, the sacred space, where the man exist, and his origin as well as the origin of the world are revealed to him, their order and unity being impossible to be conceived and phrased outside the divine logos, that is,

outside creation.” And as Chesterton said to the end of his book „the ones who are religiously fulfilled «look alike everyone else», phrasing with reference to the great men of first rank, for example Shakespeare. Mircea Eliade is a religiously fulfilled man.”

And there is something else, too, – something that we should never forget: Mircea Eliade was the author of world fame who broadly, constantly and convincingly showed in his work that the ancestors of Romanians created one of the main religions of the ancient times, which is a sign of spiritual nobility, of cultural and civilization genesis, for the origins are decisive in the religious phenomenon and in the birth of a people. Eliade made our fundamental myths ”hidden” in the pages of the Romanian lyrics with metaphysical resonances (*Miorița* and *Meșterul Manole*) known to the world and the remarkable Romanian laic or Orthodox philosophical currents, in modernity. Were it incidental that simultaneously with the prodigious creation of Eliade, starting in the ’40s and until nowadays, the work of Dumitru Stăniloae saw the light of print in the West, a work of great consistency of ideas and a superb style of the Romanian prelate considered by several academic authorities from Paris, Tübingen or New York, the most important theologian of the Eastern Orthodoxy.

It was also the opinion of Olivier Clement, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Mayerdorff; the last also signed the New York editions’ prefaces of his work, where he wrote, among other considerations: Stăniloae remains, by the example of his own life and the perseverance of the testimony, a theologian of hope (...) He is indeed a man of the Church, and his voice is worth to be listened everywhere”.

The half of century of the universal creation signed by Eliade and Stăniloae was our moment of grace in the great flow of the *sacred time*.

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