

A Synopsis of Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane

Crucial to an understanding of Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* are three categories: the Sacred (which is a transcendent referent such as the gods, God, or Nirvana), hierophany (which is the breakthrough of the sacred into human experience, i.e. a revelation), and homo religiosus (the being par excellence prepared to appreciate such a breakthrough). One of Eliade's aims is to acquaint readers with the idea of the numinous, a concept provided in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. The numinous experience is that experience of the Sacred which is particular to religious human beings (homo religiosus) in that it is experientially overwhelming, encompassing the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, both the awesomely fearful and the enthrallingly captivating aspects of the Holy, or, the Wholly Other. In expanding and expounding the phenomenological dimensions of the Sacred, Eliade points out that the Sacred appears in human experience as a crucial point of orientation at the same time it provides access to the ontological reality which is its source and for which homo religiosus thirsts. According to Eliade, homo religiosus thirsts for being. In terms of space, the Sacred delineates the demarcation between sacred and profane and thus locates the axis mundi as center. Thus temples and teepees, homes and hearths become sacralized for homo religiosus. Numerous examples of the consecration of sacred space illustrate the importance of cosmogony as a paradigmatic model for practically every creative endeavor. Such cosmogonic activities as were done "in the beginning" (in illo tempore) are recapitulated periodically in ritual and myth to sustain and renew the world, hence, not only does space become sacred, but time as well. The festival, such as New Year's Celebration, has a way of tapping into primordial time and harnessing the forces of creation into re-creation, dipping into chaos and re-emerging with new order. "Symbolically man became contemporary with the cosmogony, he was present at the creation of the world," (p 79) and/or periodically contemporary with the gods. Thus, homo religiosus can insure the life of animals, plants, crops, culture... Myth as the repetition and imitation of divine models allows homo religiosus to (1) remain in the sacred, "hence in reality;" and, (2) sanctify the world. "It is not without interest to note that [homo religiosus] assumes a humanity that has a transhuman, transcendent model (p99)." "For our purpose, what demands emphasis is the fact that religious man sought to imitate, and believed that he was imitating, his gods even when he allowed himself to be led into acts that verged on madness, depravity, and crime (p 104)."

One important innovation in the experience and repetition of time is the linear concept of history as presented by Judaism. "Compared with the archaic and palaeo-oriental religions, as well as with the mythic-philosophical conceptions of the eternal return, as they were elaborated in India and Greece, Judaism presents an innovation of the first importance. For Judaism, time has a beginning and will have an end. The idea of cyclic time is left behind. Yahweh no longer manifests himself in cosmic time (like the gods of other religions) but in a historical time, which is irreversible (p 110)." Christianity further valorizes historical time by the incarnation which takes place "in the fullness of time" and thus becomes the pivotal juncture in history and the Christian sacred calendar. "Hegel takes over the Judaeo-Christian ideology and applies it to universal history in its totality: the universal spirit continually manifests itself in historical events and manifests itself only in historical events. Thus the whole of history becomes a theophany; every thing that has happened in history had to happen as it did, because the universal spirit so willed it. The road is thus opened to the various forms of twentieth-century historicistic philosophies (p 112)." Through this process which leads from sacred revalorization to an eventual secularization by the very sacralization of "the historical event as such, that is, by denying it any possibility of revealing a transhistorical, soteriological intent," the terror of infinite time, though no longer cyclical, "presents itself as a precarious and evanescent duration, leading irremediably to death (p 113)."

In speaking of the "Sacredness of Nature and Cosmic Religion," Eliade points out that "nature is never only 'natural'; it is always fraught with a religious value." This sacrality is not simply based on a divine communication that has designated it or consecrated it as sacred, for within nature are "manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena (p 116)." The fact that it is a cosmos, not a chaos, that it is ordered and not helter-skelter, by its very existence displays in multiple variety the divine work. The sky reveals and displays transcendence in its infinite distance. The earth nourishes in maternal fecundity and sustenance. "The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once real, living, and sacred; it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and of sacrality. Ontophany and hierophany meet (p117)." For homo religiosus the supernatural shines through the natural, "nature always expresses something that transcends it (p 118)." The spatial expanse conveys infinity of height, and the "Most High" represents a divine attribute. Ascension becomes a metaphor and a realization of transcendence. "The Sky god of the Yoruba of the Slave Coast is named Olorun, literally Owner of the Sky. The Samoyed worship Num, a god who dwells in the highest sky and whose name means sky. Among the Koryak, the supreme divinity is called the One on High, the Master of the High, He Who Exists. The Ainu know him as the Divine Chief of the Sky, the Sky God, the Divine Creator of the Worlds, but also as Kamui, that is, Sky.

The list could easily be extended (p120)."

"The history of supreme beings whose structure is celestial is of the utmost importance for an understanding of the religious history of humanity as a whole (p121)." One fact is that they tend to disappear or become obscured from religious practice. They remove to inaccessible distances from humans and become inactive (*dei otiosi*). The supreme god thus loses religious currency. Yet, in times of dire necessity when all else has failed such a god becomes the last resort "not only among primitives." "Each time that the ancient Hebrews experienced a period of peace and prosperity, they abandoned Yahweh for the Baals and Astartes of their neighbors. Only historical catastrophes forced them to turn to Yahweh. 'And they cried unto the Lord, and said, We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served Baalim and Ashtaroth: but now deliver us out of the hands of our enemies, and we will serve thee (I Sam. 12:10)' (p 126)." "The various divinities who took the place of the supreme beings were the repository of the most concrete and striking powers, the powers of life. But by that very fact they had become 'specialists' in procreation and lost the subtler, nobler, more spiritual powers of the Creator Gods. In discovering the sacredness of life, man let himself be increasingly carried away by his own discovery; he gave himself up to vital hierophanies and turned from the sacrality that transcended his immediate and daily needs (p128)." Though the celestial gods lose currency their symbolism retains "a preponderant place in the economy of the sacred (p128)." "...no world is possible without verticality, and that dimension alone is enough to evoke transcendence (p129)." Thus the sky ever draws eyes up into its vastness as it evokes and symbolizes the loftiness of the sacred.

In turning to Aquatic symbolism we discover another rich source of religious symbolism. The waters not only pre-exist the earth as in the Genesis account, water is one of the symbolisms through which a variety of religious expressions elucidate and make transparent the world and portray the transcendent. "The waters symbolize the universal sum of virtualities; they are *fons et origo*, 'spring and origin', the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and support every creation. (p130)." Lands (especially but not exclusively, islands) emerge from the waters. Immersion causes the dissolution of forms. Water implies both death and rebirth. The Flood, Periodical Submersion of the Continents such as in the Atlantis Myth, Baptisms, and a variety of hylogonies (formation of humanity from water) involve, display, and recapitulate "temporary reincorporation into the indistinct, followed by a new creation, a new life, or a 'new man,' according to whether the moment involved is cosmic, biological, or soteriological (p131)." Eliade points out in several examples that "The Fathers of the Church did not fail to exploit certain pre-Christian and universal values of aquatic symbolism, although enriching them with new meanings connected with the historical existence of Christ (p132)."

The universality of symbols was used to great advantage in the advancement of Christianity among the cultures it encountered. "Certain Fathers of the primitive Church had seen the value of the correspondence between the symbols advanced by Christianity and the symbols that are the common property of mankind (p136)." Theophilus of Antioch, for example appealed to the cosmic cycles of seeds and harvest, and Clement of Rome to day and night as demonstrating resurrection within the very structure of nature. "For the Christian apologists, symbols were pregnant with messages; they showed the sacred through the cosmic rhythms. The revelation brought by the faith did not destroy the pre-Christian meanings of symbols; it simply added a new value to them. True enough, for the believer this new meaning eclipsed all others; it alone valorized the symbol, transfigured it into revelation. It was the resurrection of Christ that counted, not the signs that could be read in cosmic life. Yet it remains true that the new valorization was in some sort conditioned by the very structure of the symbolism; it could even be said that the aquatic symbol awaited the fulfillment of its deepest meaning through the new values contributed by Christianity (p137)." Even though Christianity pivots upon a decisive breakthrough of God into history it neither abolishes nor dismembers the archaic structure of aquatic symbolism. History adds its innovative meanings but never-at-the-expense, only-to-the-embellishment of the archaic structure of the symbol. This is so because *Homo Religiosus* always views the world as revealing a sacred modality. "Every cosmic fragment is transparent; its own mode of existence shows a particular structure of being, and hence of the sacred," since, for *homo religiosus* "sacrality is a full manifestation of being (p138)." Cosmic sacrality is thus primordial and yet ever-present in its distant revelation and ongoing revelatory capacity.

The symbolizations of *Terra Mater*, Mother Earth, are replete and pregnant with symbolic implications. It is the womb, nourisher, sustainer of life par excellence that draws hymns of praise and gratitude to the Great and Primordial Mother world-wide, who, according to Aeschylus "bringeth all things to birth, reareth them, and receiveth again into her womb." People are often referred to in a variety of languages as "the earthborn." "Even the European of today still preserves an obscure sense of mystical solidarity with his native soil. It is the religious experience of autochthony; the feeling is that of belonging to a place, and it is a cosmically structured feeling that goes far beyond family or ancestral solidarity (p140)." The return of a corpse to its "native soil"; the idea of the dead as "returning to the Earth"; and burial inscriptions such as, "Here was he born, here is he laid," illustrate this sense. As well, the idea and

practice of giving birth on the ground or laying the infant there shortly thereafter reinforces the idea of the human mother as only the surrogate of the telluric Great Mother. Human birth thus recapitulates the primordial act of life's original generation from the womb of the earth. In the case of sickness (physical, mental, or social) or other such needs for regeneration or restoration, symbolic burial can be the equivalent of baptismal regeneration and its appeal to rebirth symbolisms. Even breaches in the moral, ethic, or social order can be mended in the earth. "This explains the Scandinavian belief that a witch can be saved from eternal damnation if she is buried alive, seed is sown over her and the resulting crop harvested (p144)." Initiation rites among many primitives include some sort of burial from whence a "new man" emerges.

The fecundity of the earth, its fullness and fertility is mystically reflected in the woman's ability to give birth. "All religious experiences connected with fecundity and birth have a cosmic structure. The sacrality of woman depends on the holiness of the earth. Feminine fecundity has a cosmic model--that of Terra Mater, the universal Genetrix (p144)." Some religious symbolisms go so far as to depict the self-inseminating goddess whose self-sufficiency and autonomous fertility dispense with the need for a male counterpart, while others see the cosmic creation or its completion as the sacred union (hierogamy) between the Sky-God and the Earth-Mother. "That is why human marriage is regarded as an imitation of the cosmic hierogamy (p145)." Cosmogonic paradigms thus become the model for human sexual behavior. "For nonreligious man of the modern societies, this simultaneously cosmic and sacred dimension of conjugal union is difficult to grasp. But as we have had occasion to say more than once, it must not be forgotten that religious man of the archaic societies sees the world as fraught with messages. Sometimes the messages are in cipher, but the myths are there to help man decipher them (p146)." The embrace of ritual orgies in unlimited genetic and abandoned frenetic activity not only recapitulates a cosmogonic reality far exceeding the capacity of any pair of individuals to assimilate or comprehend, whether it be for the purpose of crop fertility or not, it also, nonetheless, dips back into the primordial state of non-indifferentiation into the pre-creation chaos which is itself symbolic of an unlimited potential. "This is why certain New Year ceremonies include orgiastic rites: social confusion, sexual license, and saturnalia symbolize regression to the amorphous condition that preceded the Creation of the World...a return to the cosmic night, the preformal, the waters, in order to ensure complete regeneration of life...(p147)"

The symbolizations of Earth-Mother conveys fecundity, generation, life, and abundance. For homo religiosus "the appearance of life is the central mystery of the world. Life comes from somewhere that is not this world and finally depart from here and goes to the beyond, in some mysterious way continues in an unknown place inaccessible to the majority of mortals...Hence...death does not put a final end to life. Death is but another modality of human existence (p148)." This is all coded and ciphered in the cosmic rhythms. To decipher or decode the manifold modes of the cosmos is to comprehend the mystery of life. "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. This is why the cosmos was imagined in the form of a gigantic tree...(p148)" Whereas to profane mentality and experience vegetation would suggest a mere series of births and deaths, the sacred mentality intuits, or deciphers a deeper meaning in the rhythm of vegetation, "ideas of regeneration, of eternal youth, of health, of immortality. The religious idea of absolute reality, which finds symbolic expression in so many other images, is also expressed by the figure of a miraculous fruit conferring immortality, omniscience, and limitless power, a fruit that can change men into gods...the tree came to express everything that religious man regards as pre-eminently real and sacred (p149)." Thus, "according to some writers, all of the plants that are in cultivation today were originally regarded as sacred plants (p150)." Though largely desacralized in the modern mentality, no one no matter how irreligious, "is entirely insensitive to the charms of nature. We refer not only to the esthetic, recreational, or hygienic values attributed to nature, but also to a confused and almost indefinable feeling in which, however, it is possible to recognize the memory of a debased religious experience (p151)."

Other aspects of the natural world become the occasion for hierophanies and ontophanies as well. Stones, in their immutable permanence reveal a mode of existence "invulnerable to becoming." Animals as well as solar and lunar cycles are replete with revelation. For example, "it was lunar symbolism that enabled man to relate and connect such heterogeneous things as: birth, becoming, death, and resurrection; the waters, plants, woman, fecundity, and immortality; the cosmic darkness, prenatal existence, and life after death, followed by a rebirth of lunar type ('light coming out of darkness'); weaving, the symbol of the 'thread of life,' fate, temporality, and death; and yet others. In general most of the ideas of cycle, dualism, polarity, opposition, conflict, but also of

reconciliation of contraries, of *coincidentia oppositorum*, were either discovered or clarified by virtue of lunar symbolism. We may even speak of a metaphysics of the moon, in the sense of a consistent system of 'truths' relating to the mode of being peculiar to living creatures, to everything in the cosmos that shares in life, that is, in becoming, growth and waning, death and resurrection. For we must not forget that what the moon reveals to religious man is not only that death is indissolubly linked with life but also, and above all, that death is not final, that it is always followed by a new birth (pp156-157)."

In turning to issues of "Human Existence and Sanctified Life" Eliade points out that in the contemporary world "religion as a form of life and *Weltanschauung* is represented by Christianity (p164)." A factor which can limit one's understanding of the total gamut of religious expression and expressivity available within the mental universe of *homo religiosus*. Indeed, to have studied the great classical religions and the high-religions of other cultures is of some advantage, but other data need to be considered far beyond that. "To gain a broader religious perspective, it is more useful to become familiar with the folklore of European peoples; in their beliefs and customs, their attitude toward life and death, many archaic religious situations are still recognizable." This is so because many of the religious expressions of rural peasant Christians in these European countrysides have incorporated a primordial, ahistorical Christianity that preserves a cosmic religion from pre-historic times not readily seen in the more urbanized Christianities of the secular cities. But beyond this there is the "primitive" world of "nomadic herdsmen, of totemistic hunters, of peoples still at the stage of gathering and small-game hunting (p164)" for whom the world exist in total sacrality, and for whom every aspect of existence reflects a sacred connection. "This is why, beginning at a certain stage of culture, man conceives of himself as a microcosm. He forms part of the god's creation; in other words, he finds in himself the same sanctity that he recognizes in the cosmos. It follows that his life is homologized to cosmic life; as a divine work, this cosmos becomes the paradigmatic image of human existence (p165)." "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 (p167)." There are a vast number of homologies between humans and the universe, "for example, the homology between the eye and the sun, or of the two eyes to sun and moon, of the cranium to the full moon, or again, of breath to the winds, of bones to stones, of hair to grass, and so on (pp168-169)." *Homo Religiosus* lives in an open cosmos and is in turn open to the world. "This means (a) that he is in communication with the gods; (b) that he shares in the sanctity of the world. That religious man can live only in an open world, we saw when we analyzed the structure of sacred space; man desires to dwell at a center...His dwelling is a microcosm; and so too is his body. The homology house-body-cosmos presents itself very early (p172)." "It can come about that in a noncosmic religion, such as that of India after Buddhism, the opening to the higher plane no longer represents passage from the human to the superhuman condition, but instead expresses transcendence, abolition of the cosmos, absolute freedom. There is an immense difference between the philosophical meaning of the Buddha's broken egg or the roof shattered by the Arhats and the archaic symbolism of passage from earth to heaven along the axis mundi or through the smoke hole. Yet the fact remains that, among symbols capable of expressing ontological breakthrough and transcendence, both Indian philosophy and Indian mysticism chose this primordial image of shattering the roof. This means that passing beyond the human condition finds figural expression in the destruction of the 'house,' that is, of the personal cosmos that one has chosen to inhabit (pp177-178)." It thus represents the abolition of conditions of mental and physical habitation and habituation, in other words, historical conditioning of any sort, in short, all situations. "As for the Christianity of the industrial societies and especially the Christianity of intellectuals, it has long since lost the cosmic values that it still possessed in the Middle Ages. We must add that this does not necessarily imply that urban Christianity is deteriorated or inferior, but only that the religious sense of urban populations is gravely impoverished (pp178-179)."

Rites of passage such as birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, and death reflect deeply significant transitions in human modes of being that have not entirely vanished from the cultural experiences of modern humans. Though we desacralized the world and secularized our modes of thought many vestiges, camouflages, and substitutes retain a bit of the heritage from whence they originated. The "dream factory" of cinema, for example, "takes over and employs countless mythical motifs--the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaal landscape, hell, and so on). Even reading includes a mythological function, not only because it replaces the recitation of myths in archaic societies and the oral literature that still lives in the rural communities of Europe, but particularly because, through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an 'escape from time' comparable to the 'emergence from time' effected by myths (p205)." Other examples are found in intellectual movements such as Existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis.