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## THE SYMBOL, THE REAL AND THE SACRED IN THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIRCEA ELIADE (1907-1986)

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*Motto: «Reality in state of complicatio is the  
contraction of God as explicatio». (Nicolaus Cusanus)*

### Abstract

From the idea that man is a "religious being" (homo religiosus) follows all the basic concepts and ideas of the history of religions as understood by M. Eliade and which inevitably lead to the postulate of the indestructible, absolute unity of the human spirit. The centrality of phenomenology over history in Eliade is reflected in his general understanding of the religious phenomenon as 'hierophany', that means any 'manifestation of the sacred'. Meaning is found in the 'modalities of the sacred' revealed by the hierophany. And the identification of the modalities of the sacred is 'more important' than 'tracing the history of a hierophany. The experience of the sacred as construed by Eliade in terms of coincidentia oppositorum draws inspiration from Rudolf Otto's notion of mysterium tremendum et fascinans. Eliade asserts that 'myth reveals the actual structure of the divinity, which transcends all attributes and reconciles all contraries'. On the other hand, the symbol has a unifying function, and it highlights the fact that man has a synthetically structured consciousness and that he can intuit the cosmos in a unitary way. Homo religiosus manifests at all levels of culture, the desire to live according to the symbol, so he can be also called «homo symbolicus». Like the sacred, the symbol is a given of the integral consciousness of man. For Eliade the desire to live in the sacred is equated with the desire to possess sacred power and live in objective reality. He equates the sacred with being, hence, the existential desire for the sacred is reflected in a thirst for being. "Homo religiosus always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real".

**Keywords:** Eliade; symbol; the real; the sacred; hierophany; phenomenology; myth; coincidentia oppositorum, divinity;



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mircea Eliade, who died in April 1986 at the age of seventy-nine, had a remarkable career, first as a major literary figure in his native Romania and then as a historian and phenomenologist of religion. Romanian was his literary language, but his major scholarly works, from *Traité d'histoire des religions* and *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* in 1949 through the third volume of *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses* (1983) and *Briser le toit de la maison* (1986), were written in French. Approximately thirty-five of Eliade's books have been published in English.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, Mircea Eliade is more studied than ever. This is evidenced by the high number of volumes on Mircea Eliade's life and work, which are being published all over the world. Whether one refers to his correspondence, his literary or scientific works, or to his slightly political articles from the interwar period, Mircea Eliade – his oeuvre as well as his personal life – is still taken up by specialists and the public.

The Romanian historian of religions is an ecumenical thinker, who raises the issue from the perspective of a "total hermeneutics" of religious facts. Being "totality-oriented" it cannot be "totalitarian", i.e. exclusive. Eliade's concepts are those of a history of religions, in the true sense of the term. The universality and the orientation towards the archetype are the consequences of practicing such a hermeneutics. This is based on two principles that connect the various themes of the Romanian scholar's thinking; the first principle pertains to the perenniality of the sacred, from a structural point of view, embedded even in the structure of consciousness, and the second concerns the thesis of man's religiosity, so that all religions are a kind of extensions of religious feeling. The foundation of religions is religiosity, not a particular religion. From the idea that man is a "religious being" (*homo religiosus*) – and not a practitioner of a certain religion – results all the basic concepts and ideas of the history of religions as understood by Eliade and which inevitably lead to the postulate of the indestructible, absolute unity of the human spirit.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. ELIADE, HISTORY, AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Eliade identifies himself as a 'historian of religions', a designation that turns out to be misleading. Historical method, for Eliade, is only a first step, leading to a phenomenological or philosophical approach to religion;<sup>3</sup> 'the history of religions does not merely describe religious phenomena – it goes on to 'systematize ... and ... reflect on [their] structure'<sup>4</sup>. Setting aside Eliade's own claims to consider what he actually does, this second step turns out to be definitive of his method as whole. Eliade's approach is guided and shaped by implicit presuppositions and concerns that are essentially phenomenological. 'General structures', 'universal systems', 'the sacred', 'modes/modalities of the sacred' are primarily used in a phenomenological sense to refer to structures of consciousness, elements in such structures, or systems of structures that constitute a religious mode of relating to one's world. The structure Eliade considers fundamental – that which defines the religious as religious – is the intentional relation between believer and the sacred, where 'sacred' is phenomenologically understood as that category of objects construed in the mind of the believer as both ultimately real and other with respect to the profane/material world.

The centrality of phenomenology over history in Eliade is reflected in his general understanding of the religious phenomenon as '*hierophany*'. For Eliade, the hierophany is any 'manifestation of the sacred', and as such, has two elements: 1. the 'modality of the sacred' and 2. the expression of that modality as a concrete historical phenomenon. 'Modality of the sacred' is a phenomenological expression, referring at its most basic level to the structure of relation between the believer and the sacred. The hierophany as 'historical incident', on the other hand, is the historically particularized form of this

<sup>1</sup> Douglas ALLEN (University of Maine at Orono), "Eliade and History", in: *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Oct. 1988), p. 545.

<sup>2</sup> Bogdan SILION, *Mircea Eliade și misterul totalității*, Editura Eikon, București, 2016, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea ELIADE 'Methodological remarks on the study of religious symbolism', in Mircea ELIADE and Joseph M. KITAGAWA (eds) *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959, 88.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

underlying structure, 'reveal[ing] some attitude man has had toward the sacred.'<sup>5</sup> At this level, the hierophany represents a concrete, historically conditioned way in which the sacred was conceived and therefore experienced. Approaching the religious phenomenon as hierophany, then, involves focusing on 'the religious significance to the believer',<sup>6</sup> either in terms of conscious experience, attitudes, and beliefs (which are historically particularized) or in terms of the phenomenological structures informing these attitudes, i.e., the modalities of the sacred.<sup>7</sup>

Eliade states that 'the history of religions is ... largely the history of the devaluations and the revaluations which make up the process of the expression of the sacred'<sup>8</sup> – in other words, the history of what people have valued as sacred. Historical analysis is also concerned with a given phenomenon's context. Eliade claims that 'all expressions or conceptual formulation of... religious experience is imbedded in a historical context'<sup>9</sup> But Eliade does not practice this level of analysis. 'I have not tried', he writes, 'to study religious phenomena in their historical framework, but merely as hierophanies.'<sup>10</sup> He goes on to claim that historical context is irrelevant to the extent that one's focus is on the content and structure of religious experience itself.<sup>11</sup>

Meaning is found in the 'modalities of the sacred' revealed by the hierophany. Eliade's approach, then, naturally focuses on these modalities', downplaying historical considerations in favour of phenomenological analysis. As Eliade states, 'the religious historian ... must first of all understand and explain the modality of the sacred that that hierophany discloses'. Identifying the modalities of the sacred is 'more important' than 'trac[ing] the history of a hierophany'.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. MIRCEA ELIADE AND THE STUDY OF THE SACRED

The influence of Rudolf Otto on Eliade's notion of the sacred is apparent in the title of Eliade's book *The Sacred and the Profane*. Originally published in German in 1957 as *Das Heilige und das Profane*, the first lines from that text cite Otto's *Das Heilige*.<sup>13</sup> In addition, in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, Eliade explicitly acknowledges Otto's influence: "From the penetrating analysis of Rudolf Otto, let us retain this observation: that the sacred always manifests itself as a power of quite another order than that of the forces of nature."<sup>14</sup> In this way, Otto's description of the holy does provide a starting point for Eliade. Bryan Rennie concurs: "There is no doubt that Eliade accepts as his starting point Otto's concept of the sacred as *ganz andere*, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which is seen as the source of numinous experience."<sup>15</sup>

However, taking Otto's concepts as starting point, Eliade seeks to develop his own notion of the sacred in its dialectic with the profane.<sup>16</sup> It is by construing the sacred in terms of its dialectic with the profane that leads Bryan Rennie to claim that Eliade was more influenced "by Durkheim than by Otto in

<sup>5</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York NY: Sheed & Ward, 1958, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>7</sup> Randall STUDSTILL, "Eliade, phenomenology, and the sacred", in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jun., 2000), Cambridge University Press, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> M. ELIADE 'Methodological remarks', p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> ELIADE, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 461.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, tr. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959; reprint, 1987; originally published as *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Munich: Rowohlt Deutsche Enzyklopädie, 1957).

<sup>14</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, tr. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan S. RENNIE, *Reconstructing Eliade* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> The distinction of the sacred and profane is not unique to Eliade, see for example, Emil DURKHEIM's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, tr. K. E. Fields (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 34–39.

his conception of the sacred.”<sup>17</sup> However, some other scholars disagree. While it is impossible to determine exactly how much Eliade is indebted to either of these thinkers, there is at least enough evidence (and sufficient agreement among scholars) that Otto’s *Idea of the Holy* had a substantial influence on Eliade’s notion of the sacred, points out John Dadosky.<sup>18</sup>

In an essay on the power of hierophanies Eliade states: “From the penetrating analysis of Rudolf Otto, let us retain this observation: that the sacred always manifests itself as a power of quite another order than that of the forces of nature”<sup>19</sup>. He makes a similar statement when referencing Otto in *The Sacred and the Profane*: “The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities”<sup>20</sup> Hence, he invokes Otto’s language albeit he goes on to say that Otto’s language of the holy as “irrational” is not sufficient in and of itself. Therefore, he suggests that the “first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is *the opposite of the profane*” (SP, 10). In this manner, Eliade invokes the distinction of Durkheim, although he makes no direct reference to Durkheim in this regard. In fact, unlike his references to Otto, one is hard pressed to find any direct references to Durkheim whenever Eliade defines the sacred. According to Eliade, Durkheim’s fundamental explanation for religion is totemism – not, as one might expect, the distinction between the sacred and the profane. However, we can assume that Durkheim’s dialectic of the sacred at least indirectly influenced Eliade.<sup>21</sup>

The experience of the sacred as construed by Eliade in terms of *coincidentia oppositorum* (a coinciding of opposites) draws inspiration from Otto’s notion of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Moreover, Otto’s antireductionism, according to Douglas Allen, would appeal to Eliade. Allen writes: “Here we have the twentieth-century, antireductionist claim made not only by Eliade but also by Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, and many others; investigators of mythic and other religious phenomena must respect the irreducibly religious nature of religious phenomena.”<sup>22</sup> Durkheim was not an antireductionist.

According to Eliade, the field of research for the historian of religions is inextricably intertwined with the study of the sacred. “It could be said that the history of religions – from the most primitive to the most highly developed – is constituted by a great number of *hierophanies*, by manifestations of sacred realities” (SP, 11). As such, the data collected by historians of religions yield a plethora of information. Therefore, in order to organize and interpret this vast amount of data, the history of religions involves a search for a general hermeneutic theory for understanding the various manifestations of the sacred (hierophanies).<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the existence of historical misinterpretations of religious data, the history of religions, according to Eliade, retains the task of searching for a “total hermeneutics,” wherein scholars are “called to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter of man with the sacred”<sup>24</sup> This can seem like an immense task. Eliade concedes that historians of religions can at best only master the knowledge of a few religions, and they should then attempt to “formulate general considerations on the religious behavior” of humanity.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the historian of religions “does not act as a philologist, but as a hermeneutist” anticipating the emergence of a general perspective – that is, a heuristic structure for the interpretation of religious data.

<sup>17</sup> B. RENNIE, *Reconstructing Eliade*, p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> John D. DADOSKY, *The Structure of Religious Knowing Encountering the Sacred in Eliade and Lonergan*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> M. ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> See DURKHEIM, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 34–39.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas ALLEN, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> John D. DADOSKY, *The Structure of Religious Knowing Encountering the Sacred*, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> M. ELIADE, *Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, (QT), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Mircea ELIADE, 'Methodological remarks on the study of religious symbolism', p. 89.

As a phenomenologist, Eliade is interested in discovering the structures of consciousness that constitute religious experience. The fundamental structure he identifies is the relation between the believer and 'the sacred'. The phenomeno-logical nature of Eliade's approach would immediately suggest what he means by this term. As stated above, 'the sacred' is a cover-term for that category of 'objects' constituted in the mind of the believer as both 'ultimately real' and as distinct from the profane world.

Many scholars would dispute this interpretation, arguing that Eliade's 'sacred' refers to what he considers to be a really existing divine reality. According to Eliade, 'every religious act and every cult object aims at a meta-empirical reality [i.e., the sacred]'<sup>26</sup>. Religious symbols (a medium of the sacred) 'reveal reality' or 'a profound structure of the World'.

'The religious symbols which point to the structures of life reveal a more profound, more mysterious life than that which is known through everyday experience. They unveil the miraculous, inexplicable side of life, and at the same time the sacramental dimensions of human existence.' Eliade also asserts that 'myth reveals ... the actual structure of the divinity, which transcends all attributes and reconciles all contraries'.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this 'divine personality is not to be simply looked upon as a mere projection of human personality'. 'Sacredness', Eliade states, 'is, above all, *real*'.<sup>28</sup>

**Dialectics.** Eliade has concentrated the links between the complexes of the sacred and the profane on the plane of appearances, introducing the inspired concept of hierophany. A hierophany exposes the sacred in the profane. Since there are numerous hierophanies (though the same ones do not always appear everywhere), he sets up a dialectic of hierophanies to explain why an object or an occurrence may be sacred at one moment but not at another. Such an approach makes it possible to examine every historical datum and identify it as sacred or profane – and in so doing to write a new history of religions within profane history. In addition, one can draw conclusions about the objectivity of the sacred, which is satiated with being and therefore has the power, functioning through the hierophanies (including even their profane element), to become apparent. Eliade does both. The former demonstrates a historical phenomenology, and points toward an as yet unrealized historical psychology of religion. The latter is subject to the same criticism as the ontological proof of God.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. THE SACRED SYMBOLS

"The historian of religions," states Eliade, "is preoccupied uniquely with religious symbols, that is with those that are bound up with a religious experience or a religious conception of the world."<sup>30</sup> So it is through religious symbolism that the historian of religions seeks to understand the nature of the sacred and the religious life of human beings.

For Eliade the historian of religions interprets data from religious traditions in order to "decipher" general structures or patterns from the vast amount of data while simultaneously attempting to understand the cultural historical context of the specific religious facts. Obtaining a balance between these two tasks is difficult, and Eliade has been accused of making "uncritical universal generalizations."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> ELIADE, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 419.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459. See also RENNIE, *Reconstructing Eliade*, pp. 20, 196.

<sup>29</sup> Carsten COLPE (1987), "The Sacred and the Profane", in: Lindsay JONES (editor in chief), *Encyclopedia of Religion (ER)*, 2nd edition, vol. 12: *Rnying Ma Pa School • Soul*, Macmillan Reference, USA, p. 7976.

<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in *History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas ALLEN, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, xi; see also Robert F. BROWN, "Eliade on Archaic Religion: Some Old and New Criticisms," *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses* 10/4 (1981), 432; and John A. SALIBA, "Homo Religiosus" in *Mircea Eliade* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 104–16.

Conversely, Eliade has been described as an “intuitive genius.”<sup>32</sup> That is, his ability to “decipher” patterns of religious symbolism is one of the strengths and enduring qualities of his method.<sup>33</sup>

The primary function of symbols for Eliade is to “reveal” various levels of meaning some of which are at profound depths. Specifically, “religious symbols are capable of revealing a modality of the real or a structure of the World that is not evident on the level of immediate experience.”<sup>34</sup> He means by this that the sacred, which human beings are not always directly conscious of in their profane everyday experience, can be mediated through sacred symbols. For Eliade, the “primitive” or “archaic” mind is constantly aware of the presence of the sacred and it is no surprise that for them all symbols are religious. Accordingly, through symbols human beings can get an immediate apprehension or “intuition” of certain features of the “inexhaustible” sacred.

In keeping with the function of religious symbolism to reveal the structures of reality there is the *multivalence* of symbols. By this he means a symbol’s “capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.”<sup>35</sup>

Images by their very structure are *multivalent*. If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things, it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts. (We know what desperate efforts have been made by various theologies and metaphysics, oriental as well as occidental, to give expression to the *coincidentia oppositorum* – a mode of being that is readily, and also abundantly, conveyed by images and symbols.) It is therefore the image as such, as a whole bundle of meanings, that is *true*, and not any *one* of its meanings, nor one alone of its many frames of reference.<sup>36</sup>

Imparting the idea that human nature is that of an animal which symbolizes (*animal symbolicum*), Eliade speaks of the need for the existence of a *mediation*, facing the absolute otherness that is revealed by the chance of coming into contact with the sacred. For the positioning of man in the world, one always relies on words that express the idea of “connection”. The sacred is introduced into people’s experience through the mediation made by the symbol, whose essence is *dual*: it has a rational side that can be made known to people and also a mysterious or irrational one.

The Romanian philosopher notes the idea that the symbol refers primarily to *hierophany* and that it makes a connection between the sacred and the profane. Furthermore, the symbol prolongs a hierophany, gives it spatial and temporal reality. Moreover, “a symbol is important not only because it extends or replaces a hierophany, but, above all, because it can continue the process of hierophanization and, especially, because at that particular moment, it is itself a hierophany, that is, it rediscovers a sacred or cosmological reality that no other revelation could discover”.<sup>37</sup>

If according to Eliade, the religious history of mankind begins with the experience of the sacred, with those infinite hierophanies that organize the world and load it with meanings, then we are justified to assert the anthropological importance wherewith Eliade invests religious symbolism. The fact that *homo religiosus* discovers, at all levels of culture, the desire to live according to the symbol, demonstrates that religious symbolism created humanity, in other words it differentiated it from animals. The symbol has a

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<sup>32</sup> ALLEN, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, xii, xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, an elaborate response to the criticism lies beyond the scope of this study and is further complicated by the fact that Eliade never responded to his critics in any substantial way. John D. DADOSKY, *The Structure of Religious Knowing Encountering the Sacred*, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Mircea ELIADE, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism”, p. 98.

<sup>35</sup> ELIADE, “Methodological Remarks,” 99. For an overview of the various meanings that Eliade ascribes to lunar symbolism see chapter 4, Mircea ELIADE, *Patterns in Comparative Religion (PCR)*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Images and Symbols*, P. Mairet (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, trad. Mariana Noica, Bucuresti, Humanitas, 1992, p. 407.

unifying function, and it highlights the fact that man has a synthetically structured consciousness and that he can intuit the cosmos in a unitary way.<sup>38</sup>

Eliade refers to those symbols that reflect a *coincidentia oppositorum*, or those that represent the “passage from a profane mode of existence to a spiritual existence.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, for Eliade, “an important consequence” follows from the multivalent feature of religious symbolism. He explains: “the symbol is thus able to reveal a perspective in which heterogeneous realities are susceptible of articulation into a whole, or even of integration into a «system»” He clarifies: “the religious symbol allows man to discover a certain unity of the World and, at the same time, to disclose to himself his proper destiny as an integrating part of the World.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the religious symbols convey to the religious person a profound sense of meaning and purpose. That is, there is an existential function to religious symbolism, which enables human beings to apprehend a surplus of meaning in existence. “The religious symbol not only unveils a structure of reality or a dimension of existence; by the same stroke it brings a meaning into human existence.”<sup>41</sup>

It is necessary to underline the *existential value* of religious symbolism, that is, the fact that a symbol always aims at a *reality or a situation in which human existence is engaged*. It is above all this existential dimension that marks off and distinguishes symbols from concepts. Symbols still keep their contact with the profound sources of life; they express, one might say, the “spiritual as lived” (*le spirituel vécu*). This is why symbols have, as it were, a “numinous aura”; they reveal that the modalities of the spirit are at the same time manifestations of life, and, consequently, they directly engage human existence.

## §§

In the present condition of modern man, the symbol no longer corresponds to the human nature of being-into-sacred, the symbol is but a personal, individual, contingent initiative<sup>42</sup>. But from the religious experience of the archaic world, we learn that the symbol is the product of the spiritual activity of a given community. Therefore, the symbol obeys the laws of the spirit that are meant to integrate the individual in an order that transcends him.

*Homo religiosus* manifests at all levels of culture, the desire to live according to the symbol, so he can be also called «homo symbolicus». Like the sacred, the symbol is a given of the integral consciousness of man. It is also a concrete phenomenon or object, to which is added the sacred (the divine), the absolute reality as an external force, which becomes immanent, so that it appears more clearly than if it were expressed in words<sup>43</sup>. If the **symbol** as a sign, image, derives from the fullness of the original image or absolute reality, then *symbolon* means what is put together, meeting point between *esse* and *non esse*, between eternity and time. To tell how this paradoxical encounter takes place, Eliade uses the formula “coincidentia oppositorum”, which is related to what he calls the *dialectic of the symbol*, as the function of the symbol is to hide and reveal, at the same time, the Ultimate Reality<sup>44</sup>.

In short, here is what the symbols reveal to Eliade:

1. Firstly, symbols may reveal a **mode** of reality or a structure of the world that are not manifest in the immediate experience.

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<sup>38</sup> Regarding the function of the symbol, Eliade noted: “once constituted, the symbol is invested with a double function: existential and cognitive. On the one hand, a symbol unifies various sectors of reality (...); on the other hand, the symbol is always open, in the sense that it is likely to reveal transcendent meanings, which are not given (not obvious) in the immediate experience”. Mircea ELIADE, *Jurnal, Humanitas*, vol. 1, 1993, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup> ELIADE, “Methodological Remarks,” pp. 101–102.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> This is why even symbols aiming at the ultimate reality conjointly constitute existential revelations for the man who deciphers their message. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> ELIADE, *Fragmentarium.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>43</sup> Wilhelm DANCĂ, *Mircea Eliade – Definitio Sacri*, Ars Longa, București, 1998, p. 235

<sup>44</sup> ELIADE, *Mefistofel și Androginul.*, p. 191.

2. Secondly, for primitive populations, the symbols are always religious, because they aim at the real. And the **real** is equivalent to the **sacred**.
3. Thirdly, religious symbolism is **plurivalent**, i.e. it can simultaneously express several meanings whose solidarity is not obvious in terms of immediate experience. Consequently, the symbol can reveal a perspective that would allow heterogeneous realities to be articulated as a whole or even to be integrated into a system. The most important function of the symbol, according to Eliade, is its ability to express paradoxical situations or certain structures of the Ultimate Reality impossible to render otherwise.
4. Finally, symbolism has an **existential** value, in the sense that it always refers to a reality or situation that directly engages human existence. The man who understands a symbol opens up to the objective world of the universe and transforms his individual existence into a spiritual act. Through the symbol, man opens himself up to the dimension of the Spirit who creates history.<sup>45</sup>

## 5. THE SYMBOL AND THE HIEROPHANIES

It is interesting the idea that symbolism not only reveals the position of man in the cosmos, but also capitalizes on man's position towards the divine, as absolute reality, and towards history as well. In other words, the symbols with cosmic structure are the product of the intuition of the cosmos as a unit and of man as a way-of-being in history. For example, the feeling provoked by the presence of the symbol – be it the branch, the tree – ends in the same fundamental intuition and in the same tendency to celebrate the cosmic event in a microcosm and to celebrate it symbolically.<sup>46</sup>

Due to its integrative function, the symbol transforms an object or an act into something different from what is to be found in the profane experience<sup>47</sup>, as in the example of life that is manifested through a plant symbol. Vegetation becomes a hierophany – it incorporates and reveals the sacred – insofar as it signifies something different from itself.

"A tree or a plant is never sacred as a tree or a plant. They become sacred through their participation in a transcendent reality. By its consecration, the concrete, profane plant species is transubstantiated. According to the dialectic of the sacred, a fragment (tree or plant) is worth as much as the whole (cosmos, Life), a profane object becomes a hierophany<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, if the symbol mediates participation in a transcendent reality, hierophany consecrates a profane object and makes it sacred. However, the *symbol* is superior to hierophany, in the sense that everything that is not directly consecrated by a hierophany can become sacred thanks to its participation to a symbol. Moreover, most hierophanies can become symbols.<sup>49</sup>

Mircea Eliade speaks of a progressive hierophanization of the world, which manifests itself by the need of man to find doubles, substitutes and participations in a given hierophany or by the tendency to identify hierophany with the whole Universe.

"Strictly speaking, the term symbol should be reserved for symbols that extend a hierophany or are themselves an inexpressible revelation through another magical-religious form. In the broadest sense of the word, however, anything can be a symbol or can play a symbolic role, from the most rudimentary kratophany (...) to Jesus Christ, who, from a certain point of view, can be considered a symbol of the miracle of the divinity's incarnation into man"<sup>50</sup>.

The ability of symbols to continue the dialectic of hierophanies calls into question the validity of the sacred-profane dichotomy, in the sense that emphasizing the complete dissimilarity between sacred and profane makes the dialectic of the symbol not the same as the dialectic of hierophany. In the perspective of the opposition between sacred and profane, the symbol is closely related to hierophany,

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<sup>45</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Oceanografie*, Humanitas, București. 1991, p. 146.

<sup>46</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Morfologia religiilor*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>47</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, p. 406.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>49</sup> Wilhelm DANCĂ, *Mircea Eliade – Definitio Sacri*, p. 246.

<sup>50</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, p. 408.



because the symbol translates at the noological level, the relationship established through hierophany.<sup>51</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Eliade recognizes that most hierophanies are capable of becoming symbols<sup>52</sup>, and on the other hand he conceives the dialectic of the symbol in a different way from that of hierophany.

Our author speaks only once about the *dialectic* of the *symbol*: "The symbol continues the dialectic of hierophany, transforming objects into something other than what they appear to profane experience." (Dancă, p. 248)

Finally, based on Indian ontology, Eliade introduces another type of dialectic of the sacred, namely the true dialectic of the sacred, in which he capitalizes on the concepts of *symbol*, *coincidentia oppositorum* and (ontological) level rupture.<sup>53</sup>

Turning to **semiotics**, religious symbols raise equally fundamental questions. Early in the twentieth century, the Swiss linguistic theoretician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) set the tone for much of general symbolic theory. He had *three objectives*: to identify the signifier, to determine just what it is signifying, and to describe the mechanism by which the signifying process takes place. Yet another aspect, one that Saussure purposefully neglected in his own work, has proved to be essential to many of the most creative modern studies of religious symbolism: namely, the nature and extent of the relationship between signifier and signified, apart from the actual mechanism by which it is established.

Mircea Eliade made one of the boldest attempts to describe this relationship in terms appropriate to *religious symbolism*. (Echoing the Symbolists and Romantics) Eliade contended that the symbol reveals certain *dimensions of reality* that would otherwise elude understanding. For him, these deeper dimensions are disclosed not only through the reflection of the interpreter of the symbols, but also in the "internal logic" of the symbols. This idea, however, depends on the premise that there is something contained "in" the symbol that is being disclosed. He and Rudolf Otto, call this embedded something "the sacred," a reality of an order distinct from the natural and possessed of a power beyond humans' comprehension and control. This shift away from the knowing subject does not deny the assertion that symbols are constituted subjectively, nor that they are basically cultural phenomena. Rather, it moves away from the anthropological approach to one that seeks to remove the arbitrariness from the symbol, through an assertion that the symbol reveals something else, something outside the closed system of human cultural production.<sup>54</sup>

## 6. THE SACRED AS "THE REAL"

The problem with Eliade's presuppositions regarding the sacred and profane is that it is questionable whether or not in his view objects belonging to the sphere of the profane exist or not. One is left with the impression that the profane sphere is illusory. He states:

"[F]or primitives as for the man of all premodern societies, the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with being. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy. The polarity sacred-profane is often expressed as an opposition between real and unreal or pseudoreal. [...] Thus, it is easy to understand that religious man deeply desires to be, to participate in reality, to be saturated with power". (SP, 12–13)

Eliade claims that, when the manifestation of the sacred in profane space occurs, the hierophany reveals "absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse" (SP, 21). The surrounding expanse or "profane space represents absolute nonbeing" (SP, 64). He also indicates that

<sup>51</sup> Sergiu AL-GEORGE, *Arhaic și universal. India în conștiința culturală românească (Archaic and universal. India in the Romanian cultural consciousness)*, Herald, București, 1999, p. 188.

<sup>52</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, p. 407.

<sup>53</sup> Wilhelm DANCĂ, *Mircea Eliade – Definitio Sacri*, p. 254.

<sup>54</sup> This attitude opens a path to understanding "natural symbols" that goes beyond investigations into the natural capacity of mind, and establishes symbolic conventions in order to capture invariable patterns of meaning that those conventions communicate. V. Peter T. STRUCK (2005), "Symbol and Symbolism", in: Lindsay JONES (editor in chief), *Encyclopedia of Religion (ER)*, 2nd edition, vol. 13, p. 8913.

sacred time “is an ontological, Parmenidian time; it always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted” (SP, 69). His reference to Parmenides suggests a possible monistic interpretation of the distinction between sacred time and profane time in the sense that profane time functions as a veil of illusion concealing sacred time. Indeed, Eliade’s claim that the sacred “unveils the deepest structures of the world” would seem to indicate that the profane world is illusory, disguising a deeper sacred reality.<sup>55</sup>

For Eliade the desire to live in the sacred is equated with the desire to possess sacred power and live in objective reality:

” The sacred is pre-eminently the *real*, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity. Religious man’s desire to live *in the sacred* is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion. (SP, 28)

He equates the sacred with *being*: “on the archaic levels of culture *being* and *the sacred* are one” (SP, 210). Hence, the existential desire for the sacred is reflected in a *thirst for being*:

” This is as much to say that religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a *real existence*. This religious need expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for *being*”. (SP, 64)

Moreover, the existential thirst for being is at once a thirst for the real (SP, 80).

Finally, one gets a sense of the ontological status of the sacred and profane from Eliade’s juxtaposition of *homo religiosus*, or the paradigmatic person committed to living in the sacred, with the nonreligious person. For Eliade *homo religiosus* is exemplified by archaic, or primitive, religious living; however, for the modern secularized person, this mode of being lies dormant for the most part in the unconscious. On the one hand, “*homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real” (SP, 202). On the other hand, the nonreligious person “refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of ‘reality,’ and may come to doubt the meaning of existence” (SP, 203). Hence, one could say that for Eliade, a fundamental difference between the religious person and the nonreligious person is the pursuit of fundamental truth and meaning by the former as contrasted with the relativity of truth and lack of meaning espoused by the latter.

## 7. CONCLUSION

There are philosophical presuppositions in Eliade’s notion of the sacred that suggest he posits for the archaic person that the sacred is the *real* while the profane is *illusory*. He indicates that the **sacred** is equivalent to the **real**, to absolute truth, and to being. It appears that he construes the profane, at least for the archaic or primitive person, to be unreal or illusory<sup>56</sup>. In addition, we can add that the sacred is meaningful or valuable while the profane is meaningless.

*Homo religiosus* is at the same time *homo symbolicus*. In his *Treatise*, speaking of the logic of symbols, Eliade states: “The magical-religious experience allows the transformation of man himself into a symbol. All anthropocosmic systems and experiences are possible to the extent that man himself becomes a symbol.”<sup>57</sup>

In the last **resort**, we might say that in Eliade’s phenomenology the **symbol** is to be identified with the **sacred** (*Homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus*), while the latter is pertaining or even more, coincides with the Real.

Once Eliade paid a high tribute to his friend and colleague, Paul Tillich, at the latter’s memorial service in Chicago, and if the name of Tillich is replaced with that of Eliade, it portrays the latter

<sup>55</sup> John D. DADOSKY, *The Structure of Religious Knowing...*, p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> John D. DADOSKY, pp. 101-102.

<sup>57</sup> ELIADE, *TIR*, p. 414.

admirably: “Faithful to his vocation and his destiny [Eliade] did not die at the end of his career, when he had supposedly said everything important that he could say. Thus, his death is even more tragic. But it is also symbolic”.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps everything that the great Romanian historian of religions thought about the problem of the sacred and the symbol is summarized in the following sentences, a legacy of the Eliadian thesaurus:

”If God does not exist, everything is ash ...

Death is a second birth, the ultimate initiation.

Any cosmic existence is doomed to passage.

You have to die to be reborn in immortality.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Criterion* 5, no. 1, 1968, p. 15, apud Joseph M. KITAGAWA (1987), ”Eliade, Mircea” [First Edition], in Lindsay JONES, (*ER*), vol. 4, p. 2757.

<sup>59</sup> Mircea ELIADE, in *Eliadiana*, Cristian Bădiliță (ed.), Polirom, Iași: 1997, p. 24.

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