The Transcendental Structure of the Archaic Universe. Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*

Valentin Cioveie

*ANNALS of the University of Bucharest*  
*Philosophy Series*  
Vol. LXIV, no. 1, 2015  
pp. 83 – 112.
THE TRANSCENDENTAL STRUCTURE OF THE ARCHAIC UNIVERSE.
MIRCEA ELIADE’S THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

VALENTIN CIOVEIE

Abstract

The argument of the present paper shows that Mircea Eliade’s book *The Sacred and the Profane* is not conceived just as a simple introduction into the history of religions. This book dares to formulate an ontology and an anthropology which are more originary (in the phenomenological sense) and complete than those of Plato at the beginning of European philosophy and those of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* at the other end of philosophy’s history. Although not explicitly expressed, *The Sacred and the Profane* together with other similar works by Eliade aims to expose the profoundest – according to Eliade himself – ontology and anthropology ever thematised. In this article I try to systematize Eliade’s ontological and anthropological discourse and to show its transcendental dimension.

Keywords: sacre, profane, ontology, anthropology, Eliade, Heidegger.

I. Introduction

The work that will be analyzed in what follows was written in 1956 and was published in 1957 under the title *Das Heilige und das Profane (The Sacred and the Profane)* in Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, Reinbeck bei Hamburg. It is explicitly conceived by the author as a general introduction to the phenomenological and historical study of religious acts and it “describes the modalities of the sacred and the situation of the human being in a world charged with religious values” (Eliade 1957, 18). More precisely, it is a presentation of the experiences,
beliefs and behaviour of *homo religiosus*, above all of those of the human being from traditional and oriental societies. Eliade includes here archaic societies among traditional societies, although the distinction between archaic and traditional repeatedly appears in the work. The book will reveal “the logic and greatness of their conceptions upon the world”, “that is of their religious behaviour, symbolism and systems”, will highlight “the specific categories of a religious existence that is archaic and traditional” (18). In order to be clearer through contrast to people living today, but also for the general message of the book destined to them, Eliade will present the religious human being “as compared to the human being lacking in religious sentiment, of the human being living ... in a desacralised world” or, to put it differently: “Our primary concern is to present the specific dimensions of religious experience, to bring out the differences between it and profane experience of the world.” (17)

Although Eliade does not deal with the process of degeneration of the religious phenomenon, he contrasts the result of this degeneration brought about by secularization, which is the behaviour of the modern individual, impoverished and lacking in coherence, with the experience and behaviour of the *homo religiosus* as an archaic, traditional and oriental human being.

II. The Nature of the Sacred

The sacred as primary indefinable category is borrowed by Mircea Eliade from Roger Callois (who is only mentioned in the Forward to *Traité d’histoire des religions*), and both relate, of course, to Rudolf Otto’s work, *Das Heilige* (1917). If Callois is no longer mentioned in *The Sacred and the Profane*, Otto’s concept is briefly sketched in order to underline the differences from Eliade’s approach. Otto analyses the fundamental dispositions generated inside an individual by numinous experience,

---

1 For example, in the Forward (to the French edition) etc.
2 Nor does he deal with the significant theme of the resacralisation of the profane, which represents a theme that is currently under discussion; however, he points out three possible directions of development for this process (Forward to the French edition).
translated through the terms *tremendum*, *majestas*, and *fascinans*. Eliade believes (taken the subtitle of Otto into account) that this is the analysis of the irrational side generated by the relationship with the sacred, while he will present the phenomenon in its entire complexity, beyond the dichotomy between the rational and the irrational. The terms most often used are *experience* (without making any distinction between the rational and the irrational side) and *behaviour*.

According to the authors mentioned above, the sacred cannot be defined, it represents the ultimate reality that is inexpressible *par excellence*: it can only be said that “it is the opposite of the profane” (10). What could be characterized positively are only its manifestations in the world and in time for the consciousness of human being, manifestations which belong to the most different categories. In this context, Eliade makes a statement which clearly reveals the fact that, for him, sacred reality is monolithic and indistinct (unitary), in total opposition to the heterogeneity of hierophanies and also that he supports a relativistic point of view in the history of religion:

From the most elementary hierophany – e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree – to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. (That means: they do not evolve one from another – V.C.). In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world. (11)

The same reality, that of the sacred, through the same mysterious act, gives birth both to the hierophanies from the sacred stones, as well as to the most complex and non-dual hierophany in the history of religions, Jesus Christ. Even if you are not Christian (and thus scandalized by this levelling inside the realm of the Unseen), as a historian of religions you cannot help being surprised by this extreme simplification. And the conclusion that one must reach is that a simple and monolithic reality, even if it is being (*Being*) itself, as Eliade would state, cannot directly bring about the quasi-infinite variety of hierophanies, cratophanies, teophanies and revelations of the sacred,
without the mediation of some other sacral levels. For this reason, a variety inside the sacred per se needs to be conceived, probably ordered in a hierarchy of stages that accounts for the variety perceived throughout history. And this is an aspect that Eliade does not achieve in any of his works, unless we accept a realist position with regard to the categories present in the Treatise, obtained through phenomenological reduction. In this case however, the use of the concept of the sacred as being beyond these categories would go in the direction of an absolute transcendent, apophatic reality and would overlap what the Abrahamic traditions consider to be God in His hidden nature or the ultimate reality in Hinduism etc. We cannot however find any statements in Eliade’s work to support this point of view, with the exception perhaps of the impossibility of defining the sacred and of making the latter synonymous with being (which however is distinct and ontologically subordinated to God in the Christian tradition: the truly ultimate Reality goes beyond being, according to Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, for example).

The sacred is equated by Eliade also with reality itself, with the saturation by being and with power. The opposition sacred – profane can be translated through the opposition real – unreal. As this is a reality filled with power, the sacred acts efficiently in the world and it is perennial.

As the reader can see from our considerations and from many other claims in the huge work of Eliade, it is very hard to find just one sense of the word. I propose instead to accept different meanings which are mutually complementary. These meanings can be divided into two main categories that I will call ‘ontic claims’ and ‘epistemic claims’. I use the term ontic as being different from ontological, the last one implying a structure, the first one just a claim regarding the reality of the sacred outside the human consciousness.

In my opinion, we cannot treat the work of Eliade without taking into account a certain evolution through time. Regarding the concrete problem which is of interest here, the nature of the sacred, it would be inappropriate to think that the Traité (and the Prolegomena) shared

---

3 Eliade uses numerous terms from the same semantic area to refer to the phenomenon of the manifestation of the sacred: hierophany, epiphany, ontophany, kratophany, teophany, the revelation or irruption of the sacred, the appearance of a sign.
exactly the same conception with *The Sacred and the Profane*. I find it significant that in the first book (appeared in 1949, but written between 1940 and 1948) just the name of R. Callois is mentioned, but not that of R. Otto, while in the second book we find the ideas of Otto presented, but Callois is not even mentioned. Here we have to remind the reader that Callois came from the sociological school of Durkheim and that supported Eliade explicitly against Durkheim’s views an anti-reductionist stance and an anti-evolutionist view in the history of religious traditions. But there are many claims of Callois himself that Eliade accepted in their entire formulation, maybe with another justification.

The sources of the epistemic theses regarding the nature of the sacred represent, on one hand, the fact that the sacred manifests itself for the human consciousness, according to the structures of this consciousness. We have no direct, unmediated experience of the sacred as noumenal realm, as we already know from Kant. On the other hand, not just the individual structure of consciousness contributes to what we experience as the sacred, but also the human community as a sociological reality.

The first source of the ontic thesis regarding the nature of the sacred is Otto’s idea, borrowed from Kant, that in order to have an experience of the world as something sacred, there must be a *noumenal* reality out there, the sacred is not just a modality of our consciousness. The second source is the idea of a real power out there, mentioned by Dumézil in his *Preface* to the *Traité: mana* as a mystical force without form but being capable of taking any form.

As Bryan Rennie in his book *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (1996) proposes, there is a conjunction in Eliade between what I call the *epistemic* and *ontic* theses. But Rennie accentuates so much the epistemic thesis that the reader has the impression of excluding the other. In an article not yet published, supporting the attribution theory regarding the sacred in Eliade against a *sui generis* discourse, he is explicitly making this step.
I want to mention five senses in which the word ‘sacred’ is used in Eliade without supporting each of them with texts, because my aim in this paper is the transcendental doctrine of Eliade. However, for any transcendental doctrine there must be a real counterpart outside the consciousness.

1. The sacred as a reality absolute transcendent to the cosmos (and being), irreducible and apophatic: the noumen. About the sacred in this sense we can only say that is opposed to the profane. It does not mean an entity and it does not imply a specific ontology, but it is independent ontic of all other realities. It appears in different traditions as the Supreme Being who becomes deus otiosus.

2. Closely connected with the first sense is the second one: the sacred as a force (energy) without form, but capable of taking any form.

3. As being itself, manifested through the cosmically hierophanies, but irreducible to the mundane aspects of these. It is specific to cosmic religiosity which is opposed to what I called the apophatic sense of the sacred and its experience.

4. The sacred as archetypes (which have three different meanings according to I.P. Culianu).

5. The sacred as adjective referring to the modality of human experience, to the relation of consciousness with the real, but not to the real itself. It is the thesis of this paper that the human modality of experiencing the sacred in the first senses has a transcendental structure.

The manifestation of the sacred is a paradoxical process: something of a completely other nature manifests itself in an object or in a being in the world over here, in the profane world:

---

4 Julien Ries distinguishes in the second chapter of his excellent book Il sacro nella storia religiosa dell’umanità (1995), when he analyses the conception of Otto, between what I consider the first sense from the transcendental sense and from the sacred as value. The three meanings appear again in his book in the chapter dedicated to Eliade.
By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. (12)

It is the first process of the duality sacred-profane (to which we shall return) and it consists exactly in this paradoxical merging of a reality beyond with natural realities from here. But the most important intrication is with the human consciousness.

III. Underlining the Importance of Eliade’s Work

The first thesis of the anthropology of a religious individual is the following:

The individual of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The desire of the religious individual to live in the sacred is in fact the same as his desire to situate himself in objective reality, not to let him be paralysed by the endless relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and efficient world – and not in an illusion. (12)

We speak here of an ontic yearning.

In order to develop this anthropology and the ontology implicitly related to it, Eliade will analyze in antithesis the two manners of being in the world, from the point of view of space and living, of the experience of time, of the relation with nature and tools, of the perception of human life itself constituted from its concrete acts.

The ontology is absorbed in the transcendental anthropology exactly in the manner in which this is done in Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit: world is a moment of the transcendental structure of Dasein ‘being-in-the-world’ and no more than this. I think that this transcendental discourse is late and not to be found in Traité.

The method used is that of comparison between the most different ‘primitive’ cultures, removed from each other both in time and space, followed by traditional cultures (India plays a central role here), then the Judeo-Christian tradition and, at last, modernity. The purpose is to highlight the common transcendental traits of religious experience as
opposed to profane experience, ignoring the differences between historical and cultural contexts. We speak here of the approach that is typical to the philosophical tradition of categorial thinking, as it was shown above. Eliade is of course aware of the importance of historical, social, psychological etc. determinations of the experience of the sacred, as becomes obvious both from his explicit statements present in different works, as well as in the mode of analysis present in the three volumes of the *History*, as in numerous other works. There are however in his writings two processes of abstracting the general from the concrete: a) on the one hand, it means reducing historical, social, psychological etc. determinations, in order to arrive at what is irreducible in the experience of the sacred; b) on the other hand, it means searching for the common traits of the experience of the sacred in very different cultures.

Although ‘reductionist’ in this double (phenomenological) sense, his position is militantly anti-reductionist in a completely other sense. He argues explicitly against reducing religious experience to one of its historical, social etc. contexts, hence Mircea Eliade affirms the irreducibility of the experience of the sacred and of its reality (see *Foreword to Treatise upon the History of Religions* etc.)

As we speak here of a work that has the character of an introduction into the study of religious phenomena, I will present its contents using Eliade’s own terms. There might be a category of readers who are somewhat troubled by the ‘thesist’ manner of presenting the paper. I tried through this analytical approach to highlight as best as I could the central statements and the structure of archaic ontology and anthropology, so that they can be distinguished from the many examples in the work and from other statements with an explanatory role, and in this manner the groundwork will be laid for eventual further research for this other type of *Existential Analytics* (that is, the comparison with Plato’s ontology and with the work *Being and Time* by Heidegger, as will be shown later on).

What is essential to note in Eliade’s thematisation is the shift that is produced by the understanding of the archaic mind in the conceptualization of the classical binome *logos – mythos*; for Eliade the whole realm of myth is related to *logos* too, that is to reason; however, we speak here of a logic of the symbols present in the pre-theoretical
mode in the *behaviour* of the traditional and archaic individual, and opposed to the logic of the concepts (Aristotelian etc.).

Eliade’s purpose in this paper is purely philosophical; this is only visible at first glance for the reader who notices that the central terms of the first chapter are *space, world, inhabiting, being, two modes of being in the world*. These are Heideggerian terms, and the influence of Heidegger’s ‘Existential Analytics’ on Eliade is also attested by Culianu. The thesis of the present article is that Mircea Eliade tries through this work to present another, more original, *Existential Analytics*, starting from the experience and behaviour of the religious individual in opposition to the profane individual. We deal therefore with a transcendental phenomenological discourse. This is not the place to analyse the relationship between these two proposals for transcendental anthropology (Heidegger and Eliade). We do however have to emphasize the superficial impression that the religious individual could be identified with Heidegger’s authentic *Dasein*, although an analogy between the two concepts is possible. From a certain perspective we can even speak of an opposition between *Dasein* and *homo religiosus*. We would venture the thesis according to which Eliade’s analysis from this work is *transcendental* in the strictest sense of the word, meaning that we deal here with structures of the individual that make possible a type of experience and a certain behaviour. We do not speak here only of structures of consciousness, as in the case of the transcendental tradition from Kant to Husserl. Eliade speaks of experience at the level of the whole human being and, referring to R. Otto, he includes the irrational level in his analysis. Therefore, the sense

---

5 Eliade’s critics pass very quickly over this influence. See an extended discussion in the Annex.

6 An argument certainly not lacking in significance can be taken up from Eliade’s literary works (enough has been written about the unity of the academic and literary works for us not to insist upon the matter here). In *The Forbidden Forest* Ştefan Viziru opposes a saint’s vision upon time with the heideggerian one defended by Biris. Culianu (previous note) speaks about Eliade’s interest for the *ontic*, as opposed to the heideggerian interest for the *ontologic*.

7 If there several transcendental discourses upon the level of conscious experience do exist, there are very few attempts to offer a transcendental analysis of the unconscious. We are personally only aware of Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu’s (1998) excellent analysis. The transcendental analysis of the total human being is Mircea
of the term ‘transcendental’ is widened with respect to that of a Kantian origin (the second thesis of this part of our article). There is also a lack of distance between transcendental and empirical as in Kant and Heidegger: for Eliade the transcendental discourse is constantly illustrated with examples. *The Sacred and the Profane* is not an anthropology *per se*, in the sense from which Heidegger distances himself in *Being and Time* (that is, purely empirical research). Unlike Heidegger however, Eliade goes beyond the strict distance between transcendental discourse and empirical discourse, offering numerous examples from different cultures in order to illustrate his theses. Exercising a certain care, it would be possible to systematically reconstruct Eliade’s book in the sense of isolating the transcendental dimension. It can be argued that the discourse of Eliade here and in other late papers is of the kind called “naturalized transcendental”.

The third important statement argues that Eliade’s achievement competes with Plato’s: the ontology present in Plato’s philosophy is inspired by the archaic. Eliade himself considers his own achievement as an attempt to crystallize a *pre-Socratic ontology* (pre-theoretical), starting from the experiences and behaviour of the archaic individual. The result of Eliade’s research is more originally archaic (because he does not elaborate an intellectual ontology) and, at any rate, more general (because he draws on cultures that Plato most certainly did not have access to). If it has been possible to say of European philosophy that it represents no more than a series of notes upon Plato’s philosophy (Whitehead), we can imagine at this moment the importance of Eliade’s achievement for the entire European and Western culture. Eliade himself was perfectly aware of this: he states on repeated occasions, in different works, that the encounter with archaic (but also oriental) ontology and religiousness has the purpose of bringing the Western person out of his *provincialism*.8

---

8 Eliade’s aim in this paper. For an attempt at a total transcendental ontology and anthropology (conscious and unconscious), see Virgil Ciomoș (2008).

8 The relationship between archaic ontology brought to light by Eliade (in *The Sacred and the Profane*, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and in *Treatise upon the History of Religions*) and, on the one hand, Platonic philosophy and, on the other
The first indication supporting the thesis that Eliade’s reflection is of a transcendental type is the general and categorial character of his reflections. I will provide two examples. The term ‘Chaos’ is a transcendental concept designating a structure of human consciousness that makes possible the (different) experiences of non-consecrated spaces. In distinct cultures these spaces will bear different names. ‘Axis Mundi’ plays the same role. The term itself may not appear in any religious tradition, where we encounter pillar, stairway, mountain, tree, climbing plant etc. The latter are symbols that have been particularized in one culture or another and related to particular experience of sacred habitation. ‘Axis Mundi’ is forged as a term by Eliade to designate the transcendental category corresponding to the structure of maximum depth that makes possible every religious experience and behaviour of living in an oriented space.

The general discourse couched in general terms is perhaps insufficient (not any general discourse is transcendental), as is the occurrence of certain linguistic expressions of possibility, a concept that is specific to transcendental discourse. The decisive argument for the transcendental reading of the work that I propose can only be found in one place in the book (but see also the indications in the Annex I). At page 119, Eliade states that what is contained in the symbolism of the ‘Sky’ is not from the realm of a “logical, rational operation.” And then he adds:

The transcendental (my emphasis – C.V.) category of height, of the superterrestrial, of the infinite, is revealed to the whole man, to his intelligence and his soul.

In other words, it is an existential marker. Q.e.d.

To this argument we can of course add the manner in which Eliade discerns a transcendental level of experience (which is universal) and which he expresses through the syntagm fundamental experience. This level is explicitly distinguished from concrete experience in a certain religious space.

I will add here Eliade’s own statement from The Nostalgia of Origins according to which his endeavour (his general work as a historian of religions, beyond the work analyzed here) can be understood in the sense of a new phenomenology of the spirit. Hegel is the

hand, Heidegger’s Existential Analytic from Being and Time is one worth being investigated in a separate paper.
author whom Eliade explicitly uses as a reference not only in the scholarly work (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*), but also in the literary work (*19 Roses*). Of course, it is not the phenomenology of Hegel itself that entirely inspired Eliade, but the state of phenomenology of his time.

We can ask ourselves what is the difference between the results that Eliade reaches and Plato’s ontology itself. The answer lies implicitly in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Firstly, Eliade starts from the result of field research into the *behaviour* of the religious individual in different archaic cultures. The archaic person’s vision upon the world is not contained, as in Plato’s case, in a system of theoretical statements, but rather in concrete behaviour, representing ritual acts (hunting, war, marriage, sexuality and nutrition etc.) and, afterwards, symbolically, in myths. Eliade tries to obtain not only a more general result, or to build a system, but rather to highlight those (systematic, of course) beliefs that make possible the behaviour of the archaic and traditional individual. Secondly, unlike Plato, who duplicates the visible cosmos with the world of Ideas, Eliade shows that the world of objects and concrete gestures from below is also doubled above by a world of objects and *concrete* gestures (not of Ideas), but of a maximum degree of perfection. Thirdly, Plato is interested in a *dialectical justification* of his own ontology, while for the archaic person what is important is not the theoretical attitude, but rather the behaviour that is full of power (sacredness). Fourthly, it is a question of the degree of generality relative to the number of archaic cultures considered. Plato is inspired by his own archaic culture while Eliade gives the impression that he has investigated all the archaic cultures of the world.

### IV. Transcendental Anthropology and Ontology

We cited the first thesis of this *new Analytics* above:

*Thesis I*: The individual of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects.

We speak here of an ontic thirst, a longing for Being. (Also see thesis 8, concerning nostalgia).
Chapter I: Sacred Space and the Sacralisation of the World

For the religious person, ‘space’ (in an existential Heideggerian sense, not in a purely geometrical one) is not amorphous. There is, on the one hand, sacred space (real, true) and, on the other hand, unformed, profane space surrounding it.

Thesis 2: The Experience of the Non-homogeneousness of Space is a Primordial religious Experience.

In an initial ‘uninhabited’ space (in a Heideggerian sense) the sacred manifests itself (initial hierophany or teophany, sometimes a sign is sufficient). This first point of manifestation will become the central axis of any future orientation. It implies a foundation of the ‘world’ (again in a Heideggerian sense).


It is from here that the significance of the symbolism of the Centre derives, and it shall play an essential role in Eliade’s whole work and it represents an existential that does not appear at all in Heidegger’s work.

Thesis 4: Settling down in a territory was the equivalent of the foundation of a world.

It is from here that the necessity for the consecration and ‘construction’ of space arose. The consecration of a territory was effected through the repetition of cosmogony, because any creation follows this exemplary model.

Thesis 5: The Religious person senses an opposition between inhabited and consecrated territory and the unknown and undetermined space surrounding it, between cosmos and chaos.
The Cosmos and the World represent territories where the sacred has already become manifest. The hierophany that consecrates a space represents a rupture at the level of the three cosmic tiers: Earth, Sky, lower regions. The vertical dimension uniting these three regions is the *Axis Mundi* itself.

Given these representations, habitation and space give rise to a system of relations characteristic to traditional societies (37):

a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space.

b) this break is symbolised by an opening through which it is possible to pass from one cosmic region to another (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld)

c) communication with heaven is expressed by one image or another, all referring to the *axis mundi*: pillar (cf. the universalis columna), ladder (cf. Jacob’s ladder), mountain, tree, vine etc.⁹

d) around this cosmic axis lies the world (= our world), hence it is the Centre of the world.

The World is holy because it is placed as close as possible to the sky, that is, to gods. The Symbolism of the Centre explains other cosmological images and religious beliefs:

1. sacred cities and sanctuaries are located in the Centre of the World;

2. temples are replicas of the Cosmic Mountain and constitute the ‘link’ *par excellence* between the Sky and the Earth;

3. the foundations of the temples penetrate deep into the lower regions.

The attack upon the world of the religious individual is assimilated to the attack upon the cosmos carried out by the primordial dragon. The forces of Chaos are demonic. It is for this reason that the fortifications of inhabited space were initially magical.

---

⁹ The film *Avatar* (2009) is an interesting illustration of an archaic society with magical powers, in which these symbols can be found. The film presents, somewhat naively, the destructive force of what is most sacred in this culture (*The Tree of Life*), a force that drives profane mentality (in the film, supertechnological american society), whole sole interest is the rush for resources and scientific curiosity, and these interests transform the other into an object of consumption or study. The film’s message tells us in fact that, once in outer space, humans will repeat the same behaviour it exhibits on the limited space of Earth.
There are two modalities or types of behaviour for habitation: traditional and modern. The profane, modern experience of space perceives the latter as homogenous, relative, lacking in any orientation. For the profane person the house is a ‘habitation machine’, for the religious person it is an *imago mundi*.

A whole country (Palestine), a city (Jerusalem), a sanctuary (The Temple of Jerusalem) represents, in turn, an *imago mundi*.

**Thesis 6:** The habitation symbolises the Universe that is reconstructed through the imitation of cosmogony.

As said above, the foundation of space and of the world is effected through the ritual celebration of cosmogony. As some cosmogonic myths tell the story of the birth of the world through the sacrifice of a primordial dragon (or of another creature), the founding of the world is carried out through sacrifices that imitate the primordial sacrifice.

Any construction and inauguration of a habitation equates a new beginning, a new life. Hence Eliade’s theme, which traverses his entire work and life: *incipit vita nuova*.

**Thesis 7:** All symbols and rituals related to temples, fortresses, and houses derive, in the end, from the primary experience of sacred space.

**Thesis 8:** The profound nostalgia of the religious person for inhabiting a ‘divine world’ expresses the wish to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as in the beginning.

**Chapter II: Sacred Time and Myths**

The theses of this chapter are analyzed in more detail in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

**Thesis 1:** Time is, for religious the religious person, neither homogenous, nor continuous.
We speak, on the one hand, of intervals of sacred Time (the periodic time of celebrations), and, on the other hand, of profane Time, in which acts with no religious significance are inscribed.

**Thesis 2:** Sacred time is in itself irreversible, irrecoverable; that is, it is primordial mythical Time, which becomes present periodically, through rites.

Celebrations do not commemorate an elapsed time, but rather actualize primordial time (*illo tempore*).

These transcendental characteristics can be found in a camouflaged manner in the case of the profane person as well: for the unreligious human being, too, time is discontinuous (time of work and time of celebration, of love, etc.), but the origin of qualitative time, that is different from mundane time, is no longer transhuman. For the religious person, *illo tempore* can be equated with a type of eternity.

The novelty of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the identification of mythical time with a historical moment.

**Thesis 3:** There is solidarity of significance between the world and cosmic time, between temple and time.

This relationship is visible in some archaic cultures through synonymous expressions: ‘the world has passed’ and ‘a year has gone by’.

The circularity of time finds its equivalent in the periodical renewal of the world through rites. The New Year is a re-enactment of cosmogony (the most important epiphany) and a re-commencement of Time from the beginning. Originary holiness is sought, so purification rites are related to this moment. In order to be purified and reborn, the world (or the human being) must first regress into chaos, into a field lacking determined forms.

Life cannot be repaired, only recreated, through the symbolic repetition of cosmogony, which is an exemplary model for any creation.

**Thesis 4:** Any human act has a transhuman model.
This thesis actually represents the central thesis of the last chapter and would belong there, systematically.

The manner in which the deeds of gods (transhuman models) from the *illo tempore* are told is represented by myth, and the most important one is, of course, the cosmogonic myth. Myth speaks of what is truly real (as opposed to human acts, lacking in significance). For archaic and traditional civilizations, myth represents the correspondent of ontology, and it must be mentioned that its function is of an efficient-pragmatic nature, and not of a theoretical nature. The basic function of myth is the revelation of exemplary models for all human activities.

**Thesis 5:** It is only through the repetitive imitation of the deeds of the gods that human acts gain reality. You only really become a human being if you conform to the wisdom of myths, imitating the gods.

Hence the importance that myth has for the religious person: it transmits the paradigmatic acts for the human behaviour of gods (or of other supernatural beings). Myth, rite, the rite of initiation respectively, as well as the symbol are themes that are addressed cursorily in this introduction to the history of religions. As we shall see, they will be approached systematically by Eliade in other works.

The modern human being, ever interested in novelty and progress, in the individual manifestation of himself, lies at the opposite end of the religious person with regard to his concept of what counts as real and significant. The modern individual is a random product of history and builds himself creatively; while the religious individual is not simply given in profane history, he is ‘forged’ by the spiritual masters who reveal divine models to him. The imitation of divine models implies a serious responsibility.

In the history of religions, two phenomena arise as a result of this perspective upon time and reality. Firstly, the original sense of this pre-Socratic ontology is lost: cyclic repetition does remain, but it no longer produces an integration into being; from here results a metaphysical and religious pessimism (the doctrine of the huge Indian cosmic cycles). Secondly, Judaism will introduce the concept of linear time, which has a beginning and an end. God will manifest Himself within this time
frame, within the framework of history. Epiphany does not occur in *illo tempore*; rather, intra-historical moments represent the teophanies of Jahve and, among these, the Embodiment of Jesus Christ (for Christians) is of central importance. For Hegel, history in its entirety is a teophany.

When the European concept of the world is desacralised, we will reach historicism (the mere enumeration of facts), as a result of the desacralisation of the Christian concept of time: history is nothing but a series of events with no transhuman significance.

**Chapter III: The Sacredness of Nature and Cosmic Religion**

**Thesis 1:** For the religious person the cosmos is not the mere presence of an object; rather, it is laden with religious value. Therefore, the Cosmos is a real, living and sacred organism.

This does not refer to the manifestation of the gods in the Cosmos, but to the fact that in the act of the divine creation of the Cosmos, sacredness entered the very structures of the World.

Whether we speak of the Sky, of cosmic rhythms, of Waters or of the Earth, of stones, animals, the Sun or the Moon, the religious person contemplates in them some modality of the sacred.

**Sub-thesis 1.1:** The mere fact of being other than the sublunary world (high, infinite, other) confers onto the Sky an attribute of divinity.

This is the habitation of the gods.

For many primitive peoples, the supreme gods have names that designate height, the sky etc., but this does not mean that we have identification there.

At this point of the book Eliade speaks briefly of a phenomenon that is essential for the whole history of religions: the modification of a Uranian religiousness, through the transformation of the celestial god into a *deus otiosus*, into a telluric religiousness (Eliade calls it *cosmic*), meaning that the experience of the sacred passes from a transcendent to
an immanent regime. Interest is shifted towards terrestrial fecundity and towards the individual’s own religious, cultural and economic discoveries.

Sub-thesis 1.2: The second manner in which the sacred is manifested is related to Earth, the Great Mother Goddesses and the Powerful Gods, to fecundity and to the mythology of the feminine.

It is only in cases of extreme catastrophes that the religious person turns again towards transcendent religiousness.

Even if removed from the cult, the Urarian god is kept alive through symbolism.

Sub-thesis 1.3: The waters symbolize the universal totality of virtualities. The immersion in water signifies the return to the pre-formal, chaos, that is, to death. Immersion is the equivalent of a rebirth, regeneration.

As in the case of other themes (for example the theme of temporality), Eliade follows the novelty of the Judeo-Christian tradition when compared to archaic and traditional concepts. Immersion and emersion in water through the Christian baptism signify the death of the old person and the birth of the new one. The value of baptism also relates to the symbolic repetition of the Flood, and also to the idea of Christ vanquishing the demons. According to Eliade, the new values associated with baptismal symbolism do not contradict a universal aquatic symbolism.

Thesis 2: The experience of a Nature that has been radically desacralised is a recent discovery.

Eliade does not speak in this chapter of other important cosmic hierophanies: those related to the Sun and the Moon, to stones, animals, etc. Each of them reveals a modality that is specific to the sacred. These were analyzed in the Treatise upon the History of Religions.
Chapter IV: Human Existence and Sanctified Life

After a short introduction announcing the ultimate purpose of the historian of religions, which is to know and explain the behaviour of *homo religiosus*, Eliade indicates the wide area of religious traditions that a historian of religions must master. He himself observes how diverse the experience and behaviour of *homo religiosus* is; and yet, in the manner of the tradition of categorial thinking, he speaks of this experience and behaviour as though it constituted a unitary block. The attention paid to the differences between different *homo religiosus*, which could be more important than the similarities, would certainly lead to the existence of a family or families of *homo religiosus*; between whose members there would only be family resemblances, in a Wittgensteinian sense. Even within the category of the archaic religious person, which is *paradigmatic religiousness* for Eliade\(^\text{10}\), we can find countless families. If a researcher of Australian religions were to rewrite Eliade’s book after carrying out research based on fragmentary methodology (that is, attention is paid to differences between the various archaic tribes and cultures in Australia), the result would be considerably different.

The first concept analyzed in this chapter dedicated to human existence is that of *world*, and this might seem strange if we had not already indicated Eliade’s relationship with the Heideggerian *Analytic*: the *world* of the religious person is not a neutral universe, but a transcendental existential structure. The world is a cosmos and it is absorbed in the fact-of-the-person-being.

As a whole, there are only three main theses in this chapter, which, together with the first thesis of the first chapter, can be considered the central theses of the whole book. The remaining reflections comprise numerous examples of *sui generis* equivalences made between the human being and the cosmos (exemplifications for the second thesis of the chapter), several subchapters about *initiation* and a last subchapter about the sacred and the profane in the modern world.

\(^\text{10}\) This statement is commonplace for Eliade specialists, yet I do indicate Eliade’s statement in this sense in chapter IV: “To come to know the mental universe of *homo religiosus*, we must above all take into account the men of these primitive societies.” (165).
**Thesis 1:** The world exists because it was created by the gods. It is therefore transparent for the sacred in its very structures.

**Thesis 2:** The individual perceives himself as a microcosmos, a creation in the framework of the great creation of the Cosmos.

Therefore: he can find originary ‘holiness’ in himself. There are therefore numerous equations between the cosmological and the anthropological level. These equations are lived at an existential level, these are not theoretical ideas.

Through the existential dimension that is permanently ‘open’ towards the cosmos and the gods, human life gains a transhuman dimension (which the modern individual has lost).

**Preliminary statement to thesis 2:** All the organs and physiological experiences of (archaic and traditional) religious man have a cosmic symbolism and a sacred significance.

Physiological acts were inaugurated by the gods in the *illo tempore*. Food, sexuality, work and play all have a sacred significance and take the acts of the gods as models. Numerous analogies between the micro- and the macro-cosmos are exemplified by Eliade: the woman, assimilated to the soil and to Mother Earth, the sexual act assimilated to the hierogamy between Sky-Earth and to sowing, the eye assimilated to the Sun, breathing to the wind, bones to stones and hair to grass. In addition, the belly or the uterus is assimilated to a cave, the intestines to labyrinths, and the backbone to the *Axis Mundi*. The equation between house-body-cosmos is granted the largest space in Eliade’s analysis. The skull, for example, is assimilated to the roof and, therefore, it is considered that, after death, the soul leaves the body through the centre of the head, but also through the chimney of the house. Bursting through the roof and flying through the air are symbols not only for the ultimate liberation, but also for any experience leading to spiritual freedom (mystic experiences of surpassing the common human condition).

Eliade continues with the opposition between this manner of being in the world and that of the (profane) modern person:
Just as the modern man’s habitation has lost its cosmological values, so too his body is without religious or spiritual significance. (178)

The symbolism of a superior opening signifies, more widely, the passage from one mode of being to another, which refers us to the idea of the human being’s spiritual evolution (the human being is not perfect, but in evolution), to rites of passage (initiation). In the context of arriving at the maximum level of existence (we would say the insistentential level) pilgrims and anchorites “declare ...... their desire to go out of the world, the refusal of any worldly situatedness”. This search is identified in much evolved religions with the search for the Deus absconditus. At this point of the work, there clearly arises the possibility of surpassing Heidegger’s Existential Analytics in order to arrive at an Insistentential Analytics (surpassing in-der-Welt-sein through an epektatic structure), a possibility that is not actualized by Eliade in any part of his work. There is a double explanation for this: on the one hand, the fascination for archaic religious experience which, although aware of the Supreme god, only remembers Him in extreme cases (deus otiosus). Its typical religious experience is telluric and cosmic, which fascinates the historian of religions to the detriment of apophatic experience. And there is a second reason why Eliade does not arrive at an Insistentential Analytics. This can also be observed from the spiritual types that Eliade chooses for detailed analysis (the shaman, the alchemist and the yogi): all these types are related in different degrees to a cosmic experience. Radical mystic types, linked to experiences that negate the cosmos, did not lead to a large-scale analysis in Mircea Eliade’s work. He was of course aware of this other type of religious experience (in the first volume of the History he speaks of the new religious modality revealed in Judaism and which he calls the Abrahamic faith), but the accents that are evident retrospectively in the framework of his entire work are clear: nostalgia for a paradisial cosmic religiousness.

---

11 The theme is treated in extenso in Mythical births, but also in Myths, dreams and mysteries.

12 Or with Apophatic Anthropology: as a correspondent to Deus Absconditus there is a homo absconditus.
Thesis 3: The individual man of the primitive societies, as he finds himself given at the “natural” level of existence, does not consider himself “finished”. To become a human being in the proper sense he must die for this first (natural) life and be reborn for a higher life, which is at once religious and cultural. (187)

Access to spirituality is expressed, in archaic societies, through a symbolism of Death and of a new rebirth. The rites of initiation that comprise this symbolic death and rebirth were founded by the gods, by civilizing heroes or by mythical ancestors.

The theme of the last subchapter of the work is the modern individual. It starts however with the idea (not explicitly formulated here) that the discipline of the history of religions is an exercise that leads to the whole person through the assumption of all (or of as many as possible) existential religious situations which, although overcome by history, have contributed to what we are today. Is this not however the statement of a modern person (that is, of a profane person!)? Is it not Eliade himself who teaches us that only the profane individual allows himself to be made by history? In this case, Emil Cioran’s reproach to the friend from his youth is justified. He asserted that whoever tries to catalogue all possible types of deities from all the traditions of the world cannot really be a religious person. The religious person (who practices a tradition) has a justified exclusive religious experience. However, we can see Eliade’s statement differently, in continuity with the Judeo-Christian experience of time. Just as Jahve reveals Himself in history and as through the increasingly complex succession of His theophanies we reach a succession of revelations of the human being to himself, so too in a linear understanding of history the multitude of hierophanies of any type can generate a deepening and an extension of an understanding of the human being that is not limited to that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A Christian – such as the author of these lines – can of course ask himself whether these supplementary revelations ensure a deeper salvation. Whether Christian or not, a historian of religions who carries out the history of religions as an exercise in the anamnèse of each period of illo tempore for all the religious traditions of the world will surely, as
Eliade himself suggests, transform the discipline of the history of religions into a spiritual technique.\textsuperscript{13}

The theses from this last part of chapter IV are related to the modern individual:

\textit{Thesis 4:} The nonreligious person refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of the meaning of life and even doubts the existence of this meaning.

Although, as Eliade writes, it is possible that he might have existed at the archaic levels of culture (without being mentioned as such), the nonreligious person only fully manifests himself in modern societies.

\textit{Thesis 5:} The nonreligious person recognizes himself only as a subject and agent of (immanent) history.

\textit{Thesis 6:} He forges himself by the explicit refusal of the sacred.

He cannot consider himself fully free until he has killed the last god, Eliade will say. This presupposes the assumption of a tragic existence, which Mircea Eliade does not consider devoid of greatness.

The profane person was constituted historically from the religious person, through opposition to the latter, but without managing to completely abolish him.

\textit{Thesis 7:} The profane person still maintains traces of religious behaviour, purged however of their religious significance. Or, put differently: in his deeper being, even the most avowedly nonreligious person still shares in a religiously oriented behaviour. (211)

He still has available to him a whole camouflaged mythology and numerous degraded ritualisms. Camouflaged religious behaviour is

\textsuperscript{13} In this context, there is an interesting mix between literature, the cultural field that, according to Eliade, best maintains the traditional function of myth, and the history of religions as soteriological technique. See the author’s \textit{Adieu} and \textit{19 Roses}. 
noticeable in pseudo-religious movements − “the sheer travesty of religion” (206) − in political mystiques (for example: Nazism, communism), in lay movements and even in those that explicitly declare themselves to be antireligious.

Eliade’s main observation is that “the contents and the structures of the unconscious (of the modern person – C.V.) exhibit astonishing similarities to mythological images and figures.” (209). Also: “the contents and the structures of the unconscious are the result of immemorial existential situations ...” (210).

It is appropriate to remark here that this thesis about the camouflage of sacred living in the modern unconscious represents the analogue of the Freudian thesis on repression: as for Freud sexual content is repressed in the unconscious and reach the surface in a masked symbolic form (‘the return of the repressed’), so too for Eliade the experience of the sacred is repressed by the modern individual to the unconscious and returns under masked forms in art (the novel, film, painting) and in oniric or imaginary experiences. The central difference with regard to the religious person is that this content is not integrated in a coherent vision upon the world and does not lie at the basis of a certain type of behaviour.

V. Conclusions

At the end of this presentation of the work The Sacred and the Profane, in which I tried to highlight the transcendental philosophical structure of Eliade’s reflections upon homo religiosus as opposed to the profane individual, we would like to return in brief to the essence of Eliade’s contribution and to indicate the direction in which research could delve more deeply in future. Firstly, let us clarify what the idea of this transcendental discourse is: Eliade starts from the experiences and behaviour attested by documents gathered over time by archeologists, ethnologists, sociologists, missionaries etc. and asks: what structures of consciousness and unconsciousness and what attitudes make possible the experiences and behaviour described in the documents? The answer is contained in a concentrated manner in the 22 theses mentioned above
and presented in the four chapters of the work *The Sacred and the Profane*. They constitute the nucleus of pre-Socratic ontology, meaning that ontology preceding the appearance of philosophy in European culture and, generally speaking, the appearance of any type of systematic thinking upon the Real on Earth. This *sui generis* Analytics of the religious human being is not prior to the different systematic elaborations of religious experience (because we still encounter archaic mentalities today in the tribes that have survived in the different parts of the world); rather, it is *originary* in a phenomenological (Heideggerian) sense by reference to any type of systematic reflection. The *Weltanschauung* of the archaic person never constituted a theory; it was present at the level of the ritual behaviour of archaic peoples. Any systematic reflection (philosophical, theological or generally religious) has only served to distil this implicit archaic ontology. The significance of Eliade’s endeavour is, therefore, that he reveals the most originary source of any human experience. The main problem is not whether he succeeded or the truth value of his project, but to understand firstly the ambition of Eliade’s project in its true dimension. Eliade did not have a strange – or, according to some opinions – a sick fascination for the archaic individual; rather, he generally sought the human being’s most originary transcendental layer. A suggestion from our text indicates the fact that it is still possible to go a step deeper, but this can only happen after Mircea Eliade’s contribution in itself is assimilated. Statements about ‘surpassing the age of Eliade’ etc. seem somewhat rash.

How could this piece of research be completed? Firstly, it is necessary to clarify the relation between Eliade’s archaic anthropology and ontology. If he is of Heideggerian descent, as we suggest, then the so-called anthropology (which is in fact a transcendental endeavour, rather than an empirical one) absorbs ontology: for Heidegger, the *world* is a transcendental structure of the individual. Secondly, this archaic anthropology and ontology can be distilled at greater length by taking into consideration Eliade’s other works, in particular *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and *Treatise upon the History of Religions*. We have only presented the nucleus here. Thirdly, it will be necessary to investigate the relations indicated above with regard to Plato’s ontology and with Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (as well as with Heidegger’s late
philosophy). And lastly, we must raise the problem of an Analytics (anthropology and ontology) which is truly originary, and which, in our opinion, can only be apophatic (‘insistential’).

VI. Annex

There is no investigation in the secondary literature regarding the influence of Heidegger on Eliade, but just some remarks in this respect. Culianu (1995, 125-26) suggests that Eliade did not fully understand Heidegger (providing an adequate quote in this sense), but attests his interest towards Heidegger regarding the issue of death. Ion Lotreanu (1980) in Introducere în opera lui Mircea Eliade, writes on the similarity between interest of Heidegger for the origins of European philosophy (Presocratics) and the interest of Eliade for the origins.

Sorin Alexandrescu, who has offered us one of the best commentary of the novels of Eliade, writes in his essay “Towards a philosophical examination of the work of Mircea Eliade”:

If the phenomenological fundaments of the theory of Eliade can be historical established, it is to the contrary very difficult to demonstrate the influence of Heidegger on him. (Alexandrescu 1998)

Nevertheless, Alexandrescu reads Heidegger and Eliade comparatively and finds a lot of common points (and some differences) regarding the claims on being, respectively on the sacred.

To the negative supposition on the influence my whole present paper represents an answer, but I will bring here other arguments. Eliade himself offers an explicit parallel between his reflection and Heidegger’s in the ‘Conclusions’ of the Traité:

This resistance towards the sacred has its equivalent, from the perspective of existential metaphysics, in the flight from authenticity. (Eliade 1992, 420)

An article that even remarks the existential sense of the term ‘world’ and its centrality in The Sacred and the Profane mentions in passing in a footnote the phenomenological sources of this concept. The
article in question is William E. Paden’s “The Concept of World Habitation”, which in clarifying the concept takes a cue however not from Heidegger but from Nelson Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking*. In the same book edited by Brian Rennie we find another paper which gives more space to the idea of transcendental in Eliade: Tim Murphy’s “Eliade, subjectivity and hermeneutics”. While Murphy has no problem in recognizing a transcendental subjectivity in the work of Eliade even as a main aim of his enterprise in the study of religions, the article proves a superficial judgement of Eliade from the point of view of postmodern ideology (a term like ‘ethnocentrist’ is used like a *Schimpfwort*, as are sometimes used words like ‘white man’, ‘metaphysical thinking’ and others). It makes the mistake he allegedly finds in Eliade: overlooks the specificity of the claims of Eliade himself, his individuality, by not studying carefully the work of Eliade.

**Acknowledgments**

I owe many thanks to Mrs. Roxana Oltean for her suggestions that improved my translation from Romanian into English of the above text.

**REFERENCES**


