

**Durac, Livia**

(„Petre Andrei” University, Iasi, Romania)

***Mircea Eliade: the hermeneutics of the religious phenomenon***

“The only purpose of existence is to find a meaning for existence.”  
(Mircea Eliade)

*General Considerations*

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1907 in the capital of Romania was born the man who was going to become the worldwide-known scientist and writer whose Renaissance-like personality has built the background of his becoming. When we speak of *Mircea Eliade* we think of the historian of religions, the Orientalist, the ethnologist, the sociologist, the folklorist, the essay, short story, novel and memoirs author, the playwright Mircea Eliade, if we are to stop at enumerating the defining dimensions of his monumental activity. He became an outstanding specialist in the history of religions in 1925-1926, an obviously early stage of his life for such a bold enterprise; topics such as orthodoxy, Taoism, Buddhism, Orphism, Tantrism have been a concern even since before the “Indian experience” that systematized and deepened his knowledge. For this great Romanian thinker, the history of religions is a *complete* discipline, which he places in the foreground of cultural life; linguistics, literature, etymology, ethnology, the philosophy of history, esthetics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, all combine in harmony, synchronically, to complete the field of the history of religions.

From his concerns with the field of the history of religions could not miss the “working” coordinates necessary to the specialist in the mentioned field. Therefore, the historian of religions must recompose, first of all, the history of religious *forms*, and only afterwards develop the social, political and cultural context of each of these forms. Without exaggerated claims, we can state that the historian of religions is, from certain points of view, an anticipator in the field, since he observes the results of the

research of Orientalists and ethnographers, as the great Asian religions or the religions of people without a writing system represent important sources for the culture of humanity. Religious phenomenology must be placed outside the sphere of the specialist's concerns with the history of religions, and we refer to the phenomenology of the sacred, and respectively with enlarging the research sphere from the known important religions to archaic religions.

Another significant specific element that characterizes a historian of religions is the fact that he has to place the religious phenomenon within the spiritual field, identifying that "something" that the religious act denotes as trans-historic. This clearly refers to *hermeneutic research* that consists, on the one hand, in the understanding of the message by the religious person, a witness to the hierophantic experience, and on the other hand in the message that the religious person transmits to modern world. Explaining the encounters of man with the sacred, starting from pre-history until present – as a way of solving the requirements promoted by contemporary history – the cultural and spiritual invigoration of the peoples of Australia, Africa and Asia, all are included in the subject field of the history of religions.

### *The Hermeneutic Perspective of the Renewal of the Religious Phenomenon*

In a work published in Paris in 1971, Mircea Eliade tells us that the religious phenomenon should use *complete hermeneutics*. He considers necessary for the activity of the historian of religions to be based on both the phenomenological and the hermeneutical approach: "Concerned with, and often overwhelmed by collecting, publishing and analyzing religious data, a work without any doubt both urgent and indispensable, scientists have often forgotten to study their meaning. But this data is the expression of varied religious experiences; in a final analysis, they represent positions and situations assumed by man during his history. Whether he likes it or not, the historian of religions has not completed his work after having retraced the history of a religious form or after having determined its sociological, economical or political context. Apart from all these, he must understand his own meaning – in other words – identify

and clarify the situations and positions that made possible his appearance or triumph in a specific moment of his history”.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the author adopts such explicit positions places him in favor of a unitary approach, and within this frame, phenomenology fulfills one of the most important functions.

The author believes in the necessity of *renewing* the religious phenomenon from a hermeneutical perspective; although he does not minimize any of the scientific fields accessory to religion, acknowledging the applicability of each of them, Eliade states however that, irrespective of the nature of the information provided by one or another of these fields, it cannot account for the religious phenomenon *as a whole*. Therefore, a hermeneutic of the religious phenomenon would be characterized mainly by the fact that, by studying the variety of religious aspects, the discipline of religions must identify the universal religious configurations whose action frame is represented by unique facts. It is necessary to mention that Eliade’s attempt to present the morphology of the sacred takes place *beyond* the religious phenomenon. Considering the efforts to grasp and understand meanings, Mircea Eliade’s exegesis intensifies, including the forms characterized by permanence and constancy, brought “to light” through myths and symbols. Eliade’s hermeneutics acquires a creative dimension as it allows speaking of a structure of the forms of religious expression; this poses the problem of presenting the stages in the individual’s trans-conscience, which “exhales” forms of religious expression. Actually, we can speak of a tremendous interest of the author in seeing and knowing *homo religiosus*. Starting with the Paleolithic until nowadays, symbols have offered to the religious person – who has lived the sacred dimension of his existence during all this time – an openness towards the trans-historical world, connecting him with the transcendent dimension. Moreover, Eliade considers that myth is a universal phenomenon on which reality is structured, detailing – at the same time – the existence of supernatural creatures.

Eliade faces the individual, as a subject of the religious experience, with the object of this experience, a context in which he speaks of *hierophany* or the manifestation of the sacred. The place of encounter of the religious

person with the sacred is directly determined (conditioned) by the behavior of the religious persons themselves.

Julien Ries noted that all hierophany is based on three important elements: *the natural object*, placed (and mentioned) in its normal context; *the invisible reality* that forms the presented contents; *the mediator*, which is nothing else but the object consecrated through a new dimension, the sacred.<sup>ii</sup>

“1) *The sacred* is qualitatively different from *the profane*, however it can appear anytime anyhow in the profane world, with the power to transform any cosmic object into a paradox through hierophany (meaning that the object stops being itself as a cosmic object, but still remains apparently unchanged);

2) This dialectics of the sacred is valid for all religions, not only for the so-called “primitive forms”. This dialectics is verified both in the “worship” of stones and trees and in the scientific view on Indian metamorphoses or in the supreme mystery of incarnation;

3) *Purely* elementary hierophanies are impossible to find (...), they are combined with religious forms considered, from the evolutionary perspective, superior (Supreme Beings, moral laws, mythologies, etc.);

4) We can find everywhere, even outside these superior religious forms, a *system* in which elementary hierophanies are ordered.”<sup>iii</sup>

Douglas Allen believes that Mircea Eliade’s methodology is characterized by two essential ideas: “the dialectics of the sacred and the profane and the dominant character of symbolism or of symbolic structures.”<sup>iv</sup>

In his paper *Introduction to the phenomenon of religion*, the Spanish author J. Martin Velasco, referring to what is called interpretation, from the point of view of the analysis of the religious phenomenon, considers that a structure cannot be conceived if it is not evaluated, interpreted – and especially – understood *from the inside*. Therefore, phenomenological research has, implicitly, a hermeneutic component or dimension. Together with renown representatives such as J. Wach and G. Van der Leeuw, Eliade will contribute to enriching this approach: considering himself both a historian and a phenomenology researcher of religions, we

can speak of a combination of the two perspectives, which defines the originality of his contribution to a fascinating field such as that of religions.

*The Primordial Dimension of the Sacred in the Becoming of the Human Being*

The approach of religious phenomenology is, in its essence, a meditation as well as a reference to the idea of the time factor. We will find this meditation on time specific to Eliade in most of the work of the Romanian scientist, as the holistic reach of the meanings of the religious depends on it. Indeed, we can say that the problem of time dominates Eliade's creations.

As we will demonstrate later, human objects and actions can represent hierophanies (ontophanies); what we wish to mention here is that not only they can acquire such an attribute, but also even space and time receive the valences of the sacred. For the man in archaic cultures, space is not homogenous, as it is the case for the space in which the modern scientific man lives, meaning that certain areas of this space differ from one another from a qualitative point of view. Sacred spaces exist and, therefore, there also exist significant non-sacred amorphous spaces, lacking structure and consistency. Moreover, this lack of spatial homogeneity determines the religious person to experience an opposition between the sacred, unique, real space, with a significant existence, and the completing amorphous ambient around it: "We will see to what extent the discovery, that is, the revelation of the sacred space has existential value for the religious person: nothing can start without a prior orientation, and any orientation implies setting a fixed point. This is why the religious persons strive to set themselves at «the Center of the world»."<sup>v</sup> The condition for us to be able to live in a world must be created, "and no world can be born in the «chaos» of homogeneity and relativity of the profane space. Discovering or designing a fixed point - «the Center» - means Creating the World."<sup>vi</sup> The phenomenological premise according to which the sacred is irreducible characterizes the work of Mircea Eliade, for whom the sacred imposes itself both as an explanatory principle of religion and as an

absolute concept of a unique ontology, which we can also find in the religious act, irrespective of its nature: “But it is maybe too late to look for another word, and «religion» can still be a useful term, with the condition that we always remember that it does not necessarily imply the belief in a God or in spirits, but it refers to the experience of the sacred and is therefore related to the ideas of being, sense and truth.”<sup>vii</sup> Speaking in terms of the position of the sacred as an ontological basis, Eliade explains: “Through the exception of the sacred, the human spirit has apprehended the difference between what proves to be real, strong, rich and significant, and what does not have these qualities, that is, the chaotic and dangerous flow of things, their random and meaningless appearances and disappearances.”<sup>viii</sup>

All this leads to the idea that, if in the becoming of the human being, there is something with a primordial character, that “something” is, without a doubt, the appearance of the sacred; therefore, the sacred proves to be an immense force and its act, its manifestation, is included in the term *hierophany*. Actually, the evolution of the history of religions – from the most rudimentary to the most advanced ones – is made up of a large sum of hierophanies, that is, of manifestations of the sacred reality.

In this entire frame, what would be the role of phenomenology? Julien Ries offers a possible explanation according to which this role is played in understanding the religious structures and phenomena, in interpreting the meaning of each hierophany, as well as in extracting the revealed meaning and the religious sense.<sup>ix</sup> Anything that existed or still exists can be a receiver of the sacred: “After all, we do not know if there is anything – object, gesture, physiological function or game, etc. – that has never been transformed into hierophany, somewhere, during the history of mankind.”<sup>x</sup>

In the conception of Eliade, religious imaginary is wide open for any object of the cosmos or of human life, with the necessary and only condition that, during its evolution, it had been transformed into hierophany.

The religious person can become, systematically, contemporary with the gods, through myths and rituals; this occurs if the person is able to update

the primordial Time when the divine works took place. We must remember that this rhythmical return to the sacred Time of origins does not represent a refuse of the concrete world, as it is neither an escape from dreams and imagination but, on the contrary, it is what Mircea Eliade pointed out as an essential characteristic of man in primitive and archaic societies, using the phrase *ontological obsession*.

If we start from the basic idea that everything comes down to an archetypal model, which appears in different avatars, the natural consequence is to compare these manifestations of the sacred. Hence we witness the creation of a structure based on this exact comparison as well as on the common elements with a repetitive character. For Eliade, structure is not the final consequence in the analysis of the religious fact; it is formed based on this comparison and is prior to the meaning that results from it. The meaning of hierophanies in the world has a trans-historical character; that is why, for the Romanian scientist, the primary role is played by *meaning*, which transcends time and history seen as an existential level of man, as well as a structure. Therefore, we can say that everything starts from historic facts, which are manifestations with a much deeper significance than a simple common apparition. We must also mention that history does not contradict the idea of reversibility, as the comparative approach sends us to very different moments from a chronological perspective. If we were to analyze the “consequences” of such a fact, we could state that the methodological dimension is actually manifested in a scenario of a real spiritual adventure. The ability to decipher a hierophany is beyond history, acquiring – in the case of Mircea Eliade – connotations that surpass habitual research. We should remember that the problematic of time is immanently related to the system of deciphering the meaning of all religious phenomena. In other words, meaning is – as the author himself explains – beyond time, and not in the actual historical time. In what concerns the historian of religions, this is just a starting point, and not a final result.

The aspiration of integration in the origin time is perfectly comparable to the aspiration of recovering a strong, ideal and ingenuous world, the world of *illo tempore*. Therefore, religious imagination is inspired from

the thirst of being, from the ontological dominant of the archaic man, which determines the latter to sanctify religiously the entire universe, modeling its structure and symbolic consistency in a strict relation with the personal ontological need and to a re-dimensioning of space and time. But man does not ontologically sanctify only the universe, but equally himself, or some of his fellows.

*Myth, a Connection between Present and Primordial Time*

A good knowledge of myths and hence an exemplary accomplishment of rituals places the religious person at the beginning of time. The function of myth is of enthronement, as it makes a connection between the present and the primordial time, showing how present behavior should reanimate the primordial event. As Julien Ries pertinently states, Mircea Eliade "has truly renewed the study of myth"<sup>xi</sup>.

Trying to define myth, Eliade says: "From my point of view, the definition that seems the least imperfect, since it is the broadest, is the following: myth tells a sacred story; it speaks about an event that took place in the primordial time, a fabulous time of the «beginning». In other words, myth tells about how, thanks to the actions of supernatural beings, a reality was born, either a complete reality, the Cosmos, or mere fragments: an island, a vegetal species, a human behavior, an institution. Therefore, it is always the story of a «birth»: we are told how something was produced, how it started to exist. Myth only tells about what has been completed. The characters of myths are supernatural beings. They are known especially because of what they did in the prestigious time of the «beginning». Consequently, myths present their creative activity and the sacred (not only «supernatural») character of their work. Actually, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic bursts of the sacred (or supernatural) into the world. This very burst of the sacred is in fact the basis of the world and makes it what it looks like today. What is more: precisely as a result of the interventions of supernatural beings, man is what he is today, a mortal sexed and cultural being."<sup>xii</sup>

The universe is compared to an aging organism that loses its vitality and becomes senile; this is the moment that demands destruction in order to

be able to be born again as a young vigorous world. In this context we can point out the idea of a *cyclic time* previously mentioned by Eliade and related to other aspects that characterize archaic thought.

A significant part is played in this context by the ritual of *initiation*, which consists in the experience of death (be it that of the shaman or of the individual arrived at puberty, an experience followed by that of the rebirth at a new higher ontological level. For boys (and sometimes even for girls), puberty rituals presuppose completing an initiating period; this implies assuming death and requires the presence of signs that indicate the fact that they are dead: they live inside a forest, which is by definition a land of death and darkness, they paint their bodies using colors specific to corpses, or they are not allowed to speak or use their hands to eat, and in winter time they are willingly forgotten by their friends and families. *Death* is followed by *rebirth* at a new higher level. What is the role of this complex process, and especially why must the individual tend towards completing the initiation process, towards its end? Because, during initiation, the beginner has the chance to discover myths, respectively the sacred history of the world and of the community he lives in, of the origin of institutions and behaviors, discovers names of gods, and sometimes his own secret name.

An important result of the efforts made by the Romanian scientist in the direction of “perfecting” the field of the history of religions is to be found at the highest point of his career, between 1976-1983, when the author published in Paris, in three volumes, the work entitled *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses* (The History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas). It represents a synthesis of the main actions of the religious person, starting from pre-history until present, and its incontestable originality resides precisely in its approach and in the perspectives it offers. Dedicated to the analysis of what represents the fundamental unit of religious phenomena, Mircea Eliade draws the reader’s attention to the infinite indivisibility of the expressions included in them. The famous historian of religion suggests a new mentality that explains the message based on the sacred and perceived through symbols and myths, and following this “path” he gets to the understanding of the religious person.

Mircea Eliade is the only historian of religions of his predecessors who wrote a *history of religious ideas and beliefs*. What differentiates him from the rest is that he makes a distinction between a history analysis lacking a generalizing perspective and a history of religious ideas, although we should remember that he was once criticized for being an anti-historian. The Romanian scientist, unlike his predecessors in the field, used a more detailed approach of history and therefore of time, far from satisfied with their being placed in parentheses and considering that this way he has fulfilled his complex mission. Eliade considers that it is not at all normal for the time when religious phenomena appeared to be ignored; on the contrary, the identification of the structures and meanings specific to religion requires them to be correctly placed in time and space. Adrian Marino's work *Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade* (The Hermeneutics of Mircea Eliade) includes a very detailed analysis of Mircea Eliade's relation to history. A. Marino stresses the hermeneutic character of Eliade's approach, placing him on the orbit of the best-known hermeneutic scientists.

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As it happens with any representative name in a field, Eliade could not have stayed in the readers' "reserve". They have always existed and definitely will always exist; in the end nobody denies their value and usefulness. All in all, with criticisms and appreciations, Mircea Eliade's work is one of reference for the science of religions, and his contribution to investigating the religious imaginary is – without a doubt – remarkable. We mention only Gilbert Durand, who, discussing the exceptional personality of the Romanian scientist, compared him to Henry Corbin: "The difficulty of historicist explanations of the sacred determined in the first years of our century an entire flow of «phenomenological» analyses of the sacred (that is, sticking to «the thing itself», to the object specific to *homo religiosus*). To this trend belong two of the main restorers of the role of imagery in religious apparitions / «hierophanies» in human

thought: the Romanian Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and the French Henry Corbin (1903-1978).<sup>xiii</sup>

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9. Ries, Julien, *Histoire de religions, phénoménologie et herméneutique*, in Les Cahiers de l'Herne Mircea Eliade, Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1978.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Nostalgia originilor*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994 p.14
- <sup>ii</sup> Julien Ries, *Histoire de religions, phénoménologie et herméneutique*, in Les Cahiers de l'Herne  
Mircea Eliade, Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1978.
- <sup>iii</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p.46.
- <sup>iv</sup> Douglas Allen, *L'analyse phénoménologique de l'expérience religieuse* in Les Cahiers de l'Herne - Mircea Eliade, Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1978, p.128
- <sup>v</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le sacré et le profan*, Ed.Gallimard, 1996, p.31.
- <sup>vi</sup> Mircea Eliade, *quoted work*, p.63.
- <sup>vii</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p.5.
- <sup>viii</sup> Mircea Eliade, *quoted work*, p.6.
- <sup>ix</sup> Julien Ries, *quoted work*
- <sup>x</sup> Mircea Eliade, *quoted work*, p.25
- <sup>xi</sup> Julien Ries, *Sacrul în istoria religioasă a omenirii*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2000, p.65
- <sup>xii</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Aspecte ale mitului*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1978, p.5-6
- <sup>xiii</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Aventurile imaginii. Imaginația simbolică. Imaginarul*, Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p.172