

MIHAELA PARASCHIVESCU

MIRCEA ELIADE AND THE QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS MEANING

Mihaela Paraschivescu

Department of Foreign Languages, Bucharest University, Bucharest, Romania.

Email: mihaelap2005@gmail.com

Abstract: As Mircea Eliade's translator and biographer Mac Linscott Ricketts states, Eliade involved the whole discipline of the history of religions in the quest for meaning. The paper examines Eliade's approach of religious documents, with benefits and shortcomings as appraised by some of his American critics, and looks closely at the Eliadean creative hermeneutics and the ambitious mission he envisaged for the discipline he has founded in the United States.

Key words: creative hermeneutics, new humanism, homo religiosus, myth, symbol, image, sacred and profane

“Creative hermeneutics *changes* man; it is more than instruction; it is also a spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself. This is true above all for the historico-religious hermeneutics. A good history of religions book ought to produce in the reader an action of *awakening*.”

Mircea Eliade¹

Within a framework of discussion on exegesis and interpretation of religious texts, Mircea Eliade’s “creative hermeneutics” calls for attention as a method that opened new possibilities for breaking knowledge limits and grasping meanings that otherwise could remain “hidden” in opaque “texts”. Employing both reason and imagination, his endeavor opened up documents for the historian to “see” the spiritual message. I submit that only a person of “double vocation” like Eliade, who operated freely in two registers, scholarly and literary, could enrich the former with the creativity typical of the latter.

In this dual condition Eliade appears as a paradoxical author, himself attracted to paradox in human existence, who designed a “method for understanding and interpretation that is also paradoxical, full, imaginative, vital, and remains always open to the hidden and partial disclosure of essence.”²

Intertwined, religiousness and creativity, that Eliade believes to be the two major human attributes, produce myths, rites, images and symbols, “religious creations” that convey human experiences and carry worlds of meaning. To examine these documents as *creations*, and penetrate to their spiritual substance, the historian of religions needs a special investigative tool. “Hierophanies and religious symbols constitute a prereflective language. As is the case of a special language, *sui generis*, it necessitates a proper hermeneutics” writes Eliade in a *Journal II* entry on June 24, 1968.³

Challenged by Claude-Henri Rocquet in the 1978 interview to talk about hermeneutics, Eliade defines it as “the search for the meaning, or the meanings, that any given religious idea or phenomenon has possessed in time.”⁴ A historical account of the various religious expressions would be incomplete in the absence of a hermeneutical approach that should produce the meanings of the religious data. The “creative hermeneutics” that Eliade advocates discloses layers of meanings. By interpreting universal symbols, one discovers that new significance adds to the previous ones that the symbol held, as the symbol remains open. Using the example of the water symbol, Eliade shows that to the purification meaning of water baptism across the world, Christianity adds a new value that enriches the structure and turns baptism into a sacrament for Christians as an act instituted by Christ. Similarly, the symbol of the cosmic tree, that links two levels of existence, cosmic and human, and

signifies the death-rebirth cycle, is extended through Christianity into the symbol of the cross that holds the mystery of death and resurrection.

In what Bryan Rennie calls a “methodological openness”⁵, Eliade initiates a holistic, cross-cultural, trans-historical humanistic approach of the religious text constituted by every form of religious expression to be found. To be able to investigate the religious thinking and creativity of humankind in its massive variety of forms and expressions, Eliade sets the rule of not focusing on difference, but on the elements of unity, the constants, the common patterns identifiable trans-historically, that “keep” humanity together. To counterbalance his “belief in universals, in the underlying patterns of all religions”, as Wendy O’Flaherty states, was his “respect for the integrity and individuality of each religion.”⁶

Eliade entrusts the historian of religion with a hermeneutical mission. “Religious phenomena express existential situations” that the historian of religions does not merely describe like an anthropologist, but strives to understand “from within” by “living” every situation, assuming it as an actor playing a part. In this endeavor there is a risk, and a call. The risk lies in the closeness to many mythical creatures, symbols and rituals completely alien to the Western mind that is in danger of forgetting the purpose of the investigation. In retrospect, Eliade viewed his own research in archaic religions as a labyrinthine intellectual and spiritual adventure that resembled an initiation ordeal. The call on the historian of religion is to “read” the whole humanity and oneself in the religious forms encountered: “You participate in the phenomenon you are attempting to decipher, as though you were poring over a palimpsest of your own genealogy and the past history of your own self. It is *your* history.”⁷ This history, one with the universal history of the human spirit, is recalled through an effort of anamnesis at the end of which, the historian of religions finds the roots of his/her own culture. “Every historical man carries within himself a great deal of prehistoric humanity (...) This non-historical part of the human being wears, like a medal, the imprinted memory of a richer, a more complete and almost beatific existence.”⁸

Humans are and have always been cultural beings. Eliade looks for the contribution of every culture, modern and premodern, to the history of the spirit: “What really interests me is finding out how a human being reacts when he is forced to exist in an Australian desert or in the Arctic. How did he manage, not merely to survive – but also to survive as a human being, to produce a culture, a religion, an aesthetic? They have lived there as human beings, which means *they have created*. They have not remained content with behaving like seals or kangaroos. That is why I am so very proud of being a human being: not because I am a descendant of that prodigious Mediterranean culture but because I can recognize myself, as a human being, in the existence taken upon himself by an Australian aborigine. And that is why his culture interests me, and his religion, his mythology. That is the explanation of my sympathetic attitude; it is not

some kind of infatuation with the past that makes me want to go back to the world of the Australian aborigines, or the Eskimos. I want to recognize myself – in the philosophical sense – in my fellow man: as a Romanian, I was just like him, thousands of years ago. And that thought enables me to feel totally of my own time with him.”⁹

Eliade believes that, more than other researchers, the historian of religions is privileged to witness the continuity of different stages of the human spirit, and finally the fundamental unity of the spirit. Thus, as its crucial contribution, the history of religions “lays bare the unity of the human condition, and it does so in our modern world, which is becoming a ‘planetary’ one” – or “global”, as we describe it three decades after Eliade’s interview with Claude-Henri Rocquet.¹⁰

In the ‘60s he speaks about an “encounter”, “confrontation”, “dialogue” between two types of mentalities: traditional (including archaic and Oriental) and modern (the secular Western type) and defines hermeneutics in this context as “Western man’s response – the only intelligent response possible – to the solicitations of contemporary history, to the fact that the West is forced (one might almost say condemned) to this encounter and confrontation with the cultural values of ‘the others’.”¹¹ Eliade does not find the Western mind ready for the encounter with non-European cultures. However, he has high hopes about this cultural dialog that should “enrich the Western consciousness” by rediscovering spiritual expressions “universally valid”, with help from the history of religions, a mediator and interpreter in the cultural dialogue. In his view, our encounter with the other helps us know and understand ourselves better, a postmodern seeing ourselves in the eyes of the other, and thus turning an outward pilgrimage into an inward one. “And this is the profound meaning of any genuine encounter: it might well constitute the point of departure for a new humanism upon world scale.”¹²

Eliade pays special attention to this “new humanism” in which the history of religions should play a central role for having attained “a deeper understanding of man.”¹³ The 1961 article “The History of Religions and a New Humanism” focuses equally on methodology in the history of religions and stresses the importance of hermeneutics in understanding the situation that made possible the appearance of a religious form at a given historical time, and in rendering the meaning of religious data intelligible to the modern mind. In the context of the cultural dialog between European and non-European cultures, the history of religions must embrace all cultural and religious forms, and study the religious expressions of cultures. However, most importantly, religious documents disclose their “deeper meaning” only when studied “on their own plane of reference”, namely as expressions of a religious behavior.

In David Cave’s view, Eliade “sought to lead cultures to deeper levels of meaning and creativity by having them persistently interact with their cultural “others”. It was thought that through these interactions, cultures

would bring to the surface their own already-existing structures of meaning.”¹⁴

Eliade views the encounters as “culturally stimulating”, inspiring new artistic and cultural forms, in themselves “parareligious experiences” in the secularized society. The idea alludes to Eliade’s view of camouflaged religiousness. He excludes the possibility of a ‘pure’ profane state; even in the most desacralized societies, Eliade believes that the indestructible sacred is concealed in “the imaginary universes”.¹⁵

In the “hope for a new humanism”, David Cave identifies “the visionary impulse behind the totality of Eliade’s prolific and manifold life work, as both a scholar and a writer”.¹⁶ Cave proposes that “the new humanism is the primordial archetype of Eliade’s work and life.” Indeed, this seems to be the direction of Eliade’s concepts and thought. Examining several Eliadean ‘archetypes’ (myth, symbol, homo religiosus, freedom, culture, creativity, initiation), all constructs of the new humanism, Cave finds that “creativity” synthesizes them all, and it is the human value that Eliade praises the most. His “creative hermeneutics” is limited only in as much as the human condition itself is limited by the number of “universes of meaning” it can get initiated into.

As the head quotation of my article indicates, the Eliadean hermeneutics has a double function: to disclose meanings through interpretation and to “awaken” consciousness – both of the interpreter and of the reader. Eliade proposes this twofold mission of the history and hermeneutics of religions in response to the spiritual crisis of the modern secularized (Western) society and as a solution for renewal, in the context of increased dialogues with a non-(Western) European “other”.

The “other” is both an inner and an outer one. In the first instance, it is the “holy” “other”, the *sacred* camouflaged in the profane unconscious of secular modern humanity. At a more immediate level of meaning, the West “awakens” to its own “all but forgotten religious heritage,” but at a deeper level, humanity regains archaic mythical meanings.¹⁷ It is at this level that the historian of religions’ quest for religious meanings attains what Eliade calls “a deeper knowledge of man” bound to produce “a new humanism.” Secondly, the outer “other” is the non-European, particularly non-Western, religious humanity with its own “spiritual universe”. Eliade’s new humanism embraces widely the entire humanity. He insists that “the history of religions can play an essential role in this effort toward a *planetisation* of culture; it can contribute to the elaboration of a universal type of culture”.¹⁸ And as cultures have a religious matrix, any other approach risks reducing the spiritual dimension that both unites and differentiates. Eliade’s antireductionist attitude, according to which the phenomenon of religion ought to be approached only from a religious perspective or else the irreducible sacred is missed, is reiterated: “How to assimilate *culturally* the spiritual universes that Africa, Oceania, Southeast Asia open to us? All these spiritual universes have a religious origin and

structure. If one does not approach them in the perspective of the history of religions, they will disappear as spiritual universes; they will be reduced to facts about social organization, economic regimes, epochs of precolonial and colonial history, etc. In other words, they will not be grasped as spiritual creations; they will not enrich Western and world culture.”¹⁹

Eliade believes that the historian of religions is in the position to recognize the spiritual meanings knowing that “‘profane culture’ is a comparatively recent manifestation in the history of the spirit.” The creative hermeneutics discovers and recovers those “lost”, “forgotten” meanings, touches consciousness and changes the way the interpreter and the modern reader view existence. This way, creative hermeneutics is “among the living sources of a culture. For, in short, every culture is constituted by a series of interpretations and revalorizations of its ‘myths’ or its specific ideologies.”²⁰

Contrasting “modern man”, consciously non-religious humanity, to the premodern homo religiosus, Eliade urges “remembering”. The history of religions is envisaged as the only discipline capable of “reminding”. The non-historical mythical part of humanity stored in the unconscious may be “reactivated”, brought up to the level of consciousness. “Symbols never disappear from the reality of the psyche,”²¹ images and symbols change form, put on modern “masks” and survive, ordinary nostalgias lead back to the image of the “Nostalgia of Paradise”. “It is up to the modern man to ‘reawaken the inestimable treasure of images that he bears within him, to reawaken the images, contemplate them, assimilate their message.’”²² At the end of his hermeneutical effort, the historian of religions renders the myths and symbols intelligible to the modern man, who “escapes” from his “historic moment” to recognize sacred structures and rediscover religious behavior. Modern man “will obtain a new existential dimension, totally unknown to present-day existentialism and historicism: this is the authentic and major mode of being, which defends man from nihilism and historical relativism.”²³

Douglas Allen notes that such “personal judgments” and “philosophical claims” should require “more developed philosophical reflection.”²⁴ He also finds the idea of a “passive” recognition of “given” sacred structures to be “misleading” and supports the understanding of the sacred as a more “dynamic constituted given”, actively apprehended by the human subject.²⁵

While commenting on Eliade’s study of “mythologies of memory and forgetting” in *Myth and Reality* and *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, Allen brings in the interpretation that Matei Calinescu provides to the concept of “hermeneutics” linked to the idea of “memory” and “mythical truth” in the analysis of Eliade’s novella *Nineteen Roses*. Allen is thus alluding to the fact that the two registers of Eliade’s opus may sometimes inform each other. Defined by a character as “a mode of giving meaning to the events of one’s life” is “anamnesis” achieved through theatrical performance, an

acting-out of myths.²⁶ Calinescu identifies and opposes the “hermeneutics of trust” in this story (reading the signs leads to a recovery of mythical truth) to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” practiced by the secrete police investigators in *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats* in which myth embodied by the old man survives through endless tale-telling.

Even in disregard of mythologies, modern man cannot avoid to “feed upon decayed myths, degraded images”.²⁷ Eliade provides an illustration of the soteriological role of myths by emphasizing that in situations of most terrible historical crises (such as in the Nazi and Soviet camps) men and women gave up food to be able to listen to stories, in themselves “projections of myths” that helped them stay alive.

Much that Eliade values each field, religious studies and literature, and operates in both, he never confuses the planes. He believes that the historian of religions is privileged to have access to genuine archetypes, unlike the psychologist or literary critic who work with “approximate variants of the archetypes.”²⁸ And even when literary critics use symbols and rituals of initiation to interpret literary works, he specifies that “it’s not a matter of homologous phenomena: the pattern of initiation survives in literature in relation to the structure of an imaginary universe, while the historian of religion has to do with lived experience and traditional institutions.”²⁹ It is true, however, that literature conjures imaginary worlds with their own laws, and certain qualities of time and space are not unlike the sacred space and time, different from regular profane space and time. Eliade’s own choice to write fantastic fiction is not accidental as it is there that he can take his principle of the camouflaged sacred and ‘translate’ it into a camouflage of the fantastic in the real daily life. In the fantastic “zone” (the gypsies’ villa behind the walnut trees in the novella *With the Gypsy Girls*, or Dominic Matei’s change of status to immortality in *Youth without Youth*), Time is suspended and characters’ lives change; in the end Time catches up with them and they die suddenly while the real world resumes being ruled by the laws of physics.

“I have a limitless confidence in the creative power of the mind,” records Eliade in the *Journal II* entry of November 25, 1959. Both as a historian of religions and writer, Mircea Eliade’s whole lifework stands under the sign of creativity. His open attitude is reflected in an open work, constituting one piece that may be and is subject to endless hermeneutics. In alternating his research with fiction writing, for instance interrupting his work on *Shamanism* to write *The Forbidden Forest*, Eliade takes each equally seriously and is convinced that “spiritual equilibrium – the condition indispensable to any creativity, is assured by this oscillation between research of a scientific nature and literary imagination.”³⁰

Not being able to decide whether he is primarily a scholar or a writer, Eliade carries out his quest for religious meanings in both and seeks messages to convey in each. Is his creative hermeneutics too creative, are his theoretical assumptions formulated in a “literary style of exposition”

that is both his curse and his blessing?³¹ “It is however a work without closure, always in process and waiting to be finished by ‘someone else’.”³²

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Notes:

¹ Mircea Eliade, "Crisis and Renewal", in *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 62. It is in this article that Eliade expresses his disappointment with historians of religions' shying away from "interpretative cultural syntheses" and in which he attributes some of the boldest tasks to the discipline he founded.

² Norman J. Girardot, "Introduction. Imagining Eliade: A Fondness for Squirrels," in *Imagination and Meaning. The Scholarly and Literary Works of Mircea Eliade*, eds. Norman J. Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 2.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Journal II 1957-1969* Transl. Fred H. Johnson, Jr, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 313.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 128.

⁵ Bryan Rennie, ed., *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2007), 14.

⁶ Wendy O'Flaherty, "Remembering Eliade: 'He Loved It All'" in *The Christian Century*, Vol. 103, Issue 19 (1986)

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 121.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Transl. Philip Mairet (Kansas: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1961), 12-13

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 137.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 122.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*. Transl. Philip Mairet (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1975), 8.

¹² *ibid.*, 245.

¹³ Mircea Eliade, "The History of Religions and a New Humanism" in *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2.

¹⁴ David Cave, *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 192.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, "Initiation and the Modern World" in *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 126.

¹⁶ Cave, 3.

¹⁷ Mac Linscott Ricketts, "On Reading Eliade's Stories as Myths for Moderns" in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader* ed. Bryan Rennie, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2007), 367.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, "Crisis and renewal" in *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 69.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 70.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 68.

²¹ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Transl. Philip Mairet (Kansas: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1961), 16.

²² *ibid.*, 19.

²³ *ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Garland Pub. 1998), 327, n11

²⁵ *ibid.*, 298-299

²⁶ Matei Calinescu, "Introduction: The Fantastic and Its Interpretation in Mircea Eliade's Later Novellas" in Mircea Eliade, *Youth Without Youth and Other Novellas*, Ed. Matei Calinescu and trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1988), xxx-xxxii.

²⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Transl. Philip Mairet (Kansas: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1961), 19.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 20.

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, "Crisis and renewal" in *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 66.

³⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography I Journey East, Journey West* Vol I 1907-1938. Trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 199-200.

³¹ Cf. Mac Linscott Ricketts, "Forward" to Bryan Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), vii.

³² Norman J. Girardot, "Introduction. Imagining Eliade: A Fondness for Squirrels," in *Imagination and Meaning. The Scholarly and Literary Works of Mircea Eliade*, eds. Norman J. Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 2; Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 72.