

The Religious American

The paper is in itself a statement of facts: that the American has always been a “homo religiosus”, and that religion has shaped the American character starting with the early construction of America and until the current 21st secular century. America today is still indebted to the Puritans’ utopian consciousness of a divine call to restore Paradise on earth. Mircea Eliade helps this reading of America, he himself an exiled that experienced the quest for the Center of the world and of the self. To the eyes of a Romanian, America of the past two decades has revealed a steady growing Eastern Orthodox Church rooted in unspoiled traditions and values, a path worthy of further exploring.

“It seems to me totally impossible to imagine how the human spirit could function without the conviction that an irreducible *re a l* exists in the world.” (Mircea Eliade, *Incercare a Labirintului*)

Beyond cultures, epochs and geographies of the world, there have been two ways of being, two existential modes assumed by man in history: sacred and profane. Religiousness as an attitude in life and perception of existence is connected to the sacred. *Homo religiosus* of traditional societies found it natural to relate to the sacred quality of life. Contemporary religious man shares the same need of being closer to God but regains sacred values with difficulty in an increasingly secularized world, while non-religious man chooses the profane dimension of existence.

In his exquisite phenomenological approach, historian of religions Mircea Eliade distinguishes the sacred from the profane and shows the gap between the two coexisting conditions. By definition, the religious man recognizes those qualities of space and time that are sacred.

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To the religious man, space is not homogenous, it has discontinuities in powerful “points” in which hierophanies take place, the sacred manifests itself. A church is part of a different space than the street it is on, its doorway separates two modes of being in the world: religious and non-religious. Inside it, space is sanctified, the profane world is transcended. As sacred space and time are inseparable, by entering a church, the religious man joins the state of prayer and finds the sacred time of the event celebrated as it first happened, centuries ago, becoming contemporary to the sacred event. Christians attending a religious service are part of the liturgical time, a historical time sanctified through the presence of the Son of God in the historical person of Jesus Christ. In church, during the liturgical service, Christians experience theophany.

Therefore, the religious man lives in two kinds of time: the sacred as an eternal present, endlessly repeatable, always equal to itself, never changing, never ending, and the profane, the historical present. To the non-religious man, time has duration, the profane time is irreversible, devoid of religious significance and of the mystery of the divine presence. Non-religious man has a deep existential perception of life that starts in birth, passes, and ends in death.

Religiousness has had its specific dimensions in the United States starting with the first settlers. “Fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom”, says the Book of Proverbs. The Puritan settlers may not have sought wisdom when they set foot on land and embraced with their eyes the vast spread of space that was to become their home. But they proved wise in their enterprise. Settlers lived the religious experience of a newly found space. They felt their presence there saturated with a sense of mission.

Like any space that started being organized, America was then, to borrow Eliade’s terms, “susceptible to become sacred.” “Settling in a territory is equivalent to founding a world” Eliade explains (Eliade *Sacral* 46). Assuming the responsibility of “creating” the world in which to live, the Puritans repeated the experience of the religious man in traditional societies who sanctified the small universe making it similar to the divine world. “Religious nostalgia makes man want to live in a pure and sacred Cosmos as it was when it first came

out of the Creator’s hands” (Eliade *Sacral* 63). Eliade’s interpretation of the reiteration of cosmogony in every consecration of space seems perfectly valid for the early construction of America.

Analyzing the religious implications of the discovery and colonization of America, Mircea Eliade identifies paradisiacal and eschatological elements, as any new beginning needs the death of the old values, structures, and self. English colonists believed they had the mission to bring religion, the word of God, to the new territories. Products of the Protestant Reformation, they felt chosen by God to renew the Christian world and build an exemplary “city upon a hill”. Eliade highlights the utopian aspects of this mission and recognizes in it the roots of a lasting feature in American character: “What must be emphasized (...) is that the certainty of the eschatological mission, and especially of attaining once again the perfection of early Christianity and restoring paradise to earth, is not likely to be forgotten easily. It is very probable that the behavior of the average American today, as well as the political and cultural ideology of the United States, still reflects the consciousness of the Puritan certitude of having been called to restore the earthly paradise.” (Eliade *Paradise* 99).

Puritans’ religiousness moved beyond an ecstatic attitude towards the sacralized nature to a confident transformation of the “American Paradise”. The rapid progress in turning landscape into a garden, Eliade believes, “gave rise to the myth of indefinite progress and American optimism” (Eliade *Paradise* 91). In the centuries to follow, Americans’ notion of progress would not be “a philosophical idea, but a commonplace of experience” (Commager 5) seeing the wilderness become village, villages grow into cities and communities rise into a wealthy powerful nation.

In addition to the human transformation of nature, “a religious attitude that still moves in the culture,” Martin Marty recognizes the sense of covenant, Puritans’ belief they had an agreement with God and what they did was an “earthly acting out of a heavenly destined drama. (...) The American character is marked by a sense of the endowment that comes to the work and doings of each day” (Marty 306).

Religion does have the power to shape character and culture. Marty acknowledges the contributions of religion to America. "A vision of heaven and hell, a sense of mission and a millennial world view conspired in creating an imperial outlook in Catholic and later Christian America" (305) he says, adding in reference to the other mainstream religion that the "melange of Protestantism formed the American colonies and shaped early national life." (305) Then Enlightenment took the stage professing science and reason instead of faith. But the divine purpose was still there, available to all.

"Almost all of the principal founders of the United States, including Thomas Jefferson, were convinced that the health of republican government depends on moral values derived from religion" (Reichley 340). The Continental Congress often acknowledged dependency on God, Benjamin Franklin related the founding of the nation to God and expressed conviction that "God governs in the affairs of men." In his Farewell Address to the Continental Congress in 1783, George Washington commended the interests of the country "to the protection of Almighty God." He said: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supporters." Morality and religion were seen as inseparable, Washington doubted that "national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." The sense of morality is traceable to Puritan origins and has been an enduring quality of Americans. As with morality, from the beginning of the American history, religion and the practice of democracy have co-existed.

Religion in America is of course as diverse as the nation itself. Indeed one speaks of religions. Transplanted to the New World by immigrants, the multitude of sects found in the freedom and individualism there the right medium to flourish. As Marty notices, "people were free, thanks to the voluntary climate, to be members of this church instead of that" (Marty 307). The American model enabled the practice of religious independence. In a landscape of religious pluralism, there was a need for tolerance, and the freedom of religion was stipulated in the supreme law of the land. The First Amendment to the Constitution separated church and state

both in order to protect the right to worship, and to keep the state, according to the Supreme Court of Justice interpretation "wholesomely neutral".

The Enlightenment had a universalizing tendency that reconciled its emphasis on the scientific inquiry versus religious dogma by asserting the manifestations not of a specific God of Israel but of a divine force accessible to all faithful people. Then Transcendentalism softened the tone through its intuitive approach, only to give way to Darwinism and scientific determinism and pragmatism that advocated man's perfectibility in the universe.

But Americans never truly became non-religious, despite their materialism and practicality, and in spite of the tribulations of extremes like revivalists, or the cult of the irrational, or the 20th century scientific discoveries that made the Earth look like a speck of dust in an unlimited universe indifferent to man. Their optimism was impenetrable. Although Calvinism had deplored the depravity of man and promised a better after life, Americans could not accept the idea of predestination, continued to believe they lived in the best of worlds, a Paradise on earth, and "when they imagined heaven, they thought of it as operating under an American constitution (Commager 162). One does not dispute faith.

As Justice William Douglas repeatedly pointed out in the Supreme Court opinions on church and state in the 1950s, Americans have always been "a religious people." (Reichley 2) And Martin Marty adds: "Americans want to be religious." (Marty 302) The need has often been declared. According to sociologist Talcott Parsons cited by Marty in "Religion in America", "Human culture cannot tolerate a merely random existence. Things have to mean." (Marty 302) Americans think of their nation as the Pledge of Allegiance states: "one nation under God", they even expressed their creed where least expected, on the dollar bill which states: "In God we trust."

There has been religious continuity in America and Gallup polls provide figures.

A December 2005 poll shows that religion is "very important" in the lives of 57% Americans. Over the years, 9 out of

10 Americans said they believed in God or a universal spirit, and the results of another December 2005 poll show that 78% are convinced that God probably exists, while 1% expressed doubt. Americans define themselves as essentially spiritual or religious but are very much aware that they live in a secular society. As far as their worship behavior is concerned, according to the Gallup poll of January 2006, 4 out of 10 Americans, or roughly 43%, attend weekly church, synagogue or mosque service. Gallup surveys in the past decade on “unchurched” Americans, showed that 66% are members of a church, synagogue or mosque, with steady affiliation to a denomination or other.

Like elsewhere, in the United States people are simply born into a religion, therefore individuals belong to a faith because they inherit it by birth. In recent years, statistical data announce an estimated total number of 220 recognized denominations in America, and 1200 religious groups. Of course figures are an indication of the relative outward size of religiosity and not necessarily of the depth of religious experience.

While acknowledging the ever growing diversity also in religious groups, and despite criticism of the “single construct” of ‘Christian America’, the United States has actually been primarily a Christian nation. Certainly, in America, “the Christian message has been especially determining” (Marty 118) and would be recognizable to a Romanian Orthodox Christian visitor. What however surprises the visitor used to a stable big church is to find a religious mosaic and to encounter a religious liberalism that tends to become laic. At the same time, there is the practical aspect of American religiosity, more often churches provide social activity rather than spiritual experience. There is also another tendency at work: in an increasingly secularized world, religious man tends also to intellectualize faith and turn it into private individualized practice.

In America or elsewhere on God’s land, an Orthodox Christian seeks the sacred space of liturgy, of the Eucharist and of the other Sacraments. To be closer to God, as Mircea Eliade terms it, is to an Orthodox Christian to participate in the deified humanity of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Through the sacraments and the worshipping in the Orthodox Church, the individual is called to theosis or deification, for “God became human so that humanity may be divinized.” Salvation in the Eastern Orthodox Church is personal, also communal, implies sharing, and is based on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, in continuity with the Apostolic church. Due to the stability of its traditional values in the superfluous material contemporary world of rapid change, the Eastern Orthodox Church has grown steadily in the past decade in the United States. But this would be another path for further exploration in a future paper.

The present paper has attempted a reading of America as home to the religious mode of being, home to the soul. For more than 300 years, its geography received people dislocated from all over the world and entered dialog with their inner homelands. Mircea Eliade’s sacred homeland is the city of his childhood and adolescence — Bucharest. Claimed both by Romania and America, Mircea Eliade does not see his exile as a break from the Romanian past and culture, but rather as part of the Romanian destiny. He assumes his dislocation and valorizes it as an initiatory experience: “Every exiled is a Ulysses traveling toward Ithaca... toward the center, in other words, toward himself” (Incerarea Labirintului, 86).

Eliade finds no contradiction or tension between the world and the homeland, since: “Everywhere there is a Center of the world. Once you’ve found it, you are at home, you are truly with your true self and in the center of Cosmos. Exile helps you understand the world is never foreign as soon as you have a Center. This symbolism of the Center, not only do I understand it, I also experience it.” (Incerarea Labirintului, 90-91).

To Eliade remembering is very important. What is remembered is present and therefore real, and what is real is the encounter with the sacred. Memory, anamnesis, is the way religious man remembers the divine human condition. One may become estranged from a territory, may become de-territorialized, to use Gilles Deleuze’s term, but the serious de-territorialization lies in the generic dislocation of modern man in the contemporary secularized world.

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