

# Mircea Eliade: An Appreciation

DAVID J. LEVY

THE WORK OF Mircea Eliade has found a ready audience among thinking conservatives ever since it began to be widely known in the 1950's. It may seem strange that a current of thought rooted as self-consciously as conservatism in the distinctive religious and cultural heritage of the West should be so stimulated by the writings of this student of oriental and archaic religions. To understand the reasons for this is to grasp not only the meaning of Eliade's work in the context of our present cultural plight but an important point about any coherent conservative philosophy. Let me label that point, the postulate of permanence. It may be expressed as follows: that coherent conservatism rests on the belief that what is permanent in the human condition, that is to say in human nature and in the enveloping reality in which we participate, is more significant for political philosophy than what changes. Eliade's lifelong vocation has been to grasp and communicate the meaning of the symbols, rites and myths of cultures remote from our own. His insistence that these cultural expressions can and must be understood as an integral part of the human response to the mysteries of existence strikes a responsive chord in the conservative consciousness; just as the conservative emphasis on the unchanging character of man's nature and status in the order of being finds a ready echo in Eliade's work. For underlying the stress which he places upon the abiding truth to be discovered in the symbols of oriental and archaic, or non-literate, religions is the recognition that there is an order of being which persists through history—an order to which man responds through the creation of symbols allowing him to discover and express the meaning of his existence. Eliade's voluminous writings and wide-ranging scholarship introduce the

reader to unfamiliar facets of this process. Yet the shock of unfamiliarity is only the prelude to recognition. Exploration prepares the way for *anamnesis* in that the encounter with an apparently exotic world of thought and beliefs can restore awareness of truths that have slipped from Western consciousness. This is an integral part of Eliade's purpose. As he conceives it, the history of religions, of which he is our foremost practitioner, is both a journey into strange territory and a long path home. The encounter with other, religiously centered cultures is meant to reawaken us to the spiritual sources of our own.

Eliade is a Romanian, born in Bucharest in 1907. After graduating from Bucharest University in 1928 he was awarded a scholarship by the Maharajah of Kasimbazar which allowed him to spend the next four years studying in India. This period of immersion in Hindu culture was enormously important for the development of the young scholar's thought. In his experience of Indian life and religion lies the source of Eliade's belief that the central meaning of religion is to be found in man's effort to transcend his status as a historical being subject to change and decay and reach a realm of changeless perfection. "It is difficult," Eliade writes, "to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly *real* in the world, and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could arise without conferring *meaning* on man's drives and experience.... Through the experience of the sacred, the human mind grasped the difference between that which reveals itself as real, powerful, rich and meaningful, and that which does not—*i.e.* the chaotic and dangerous flux of things, their fortuitous, meaningless appearances and disappearances."<sup>1</sup> In Hinduism Eliade first saw something that he

later found to be true of all religion—that the achievement of meaning in human existence and the experience of the sacred are intimately linked. *Homo religiosus* of whatever tradition catches and clings to intimations of the sacred in the profane course of events. What this means is not that the consciousness of religious man rejects the conditions of human existence as unworthy of his true spiritual nature, as the gnostics would have us believe, but that he sees the world as itself symbolic, a universal cipher of a reality beyond. This according to Eliade is at the heart of every religious world view.

When he returned to Romania in 1932 Eliade found that his years in India had given him a new capacity to understand and sympathize with the popular Christianity of the peasantry of his native land. Practices and beliefs that had earlier puzzled and even embarrassed him took on a fresh significance. He now understood, for instance, the religious function of the devotion to icons so characteristic of Orthodoxy: "Before my stay in India," he recalls, "I was rather disturbed by the fetishistic side of such an action, and I thought that 'true religion' was first of all contemplation and meditation, like any Christian who sees himself as an enlightened believer. But when I saw the extraordinary importance of symbolism for the Indian people, I realized that until then I had very much underestimated the existential scope of symbol and image."<sup>2</sup> The power of the symbol, as object of veneration, to open the mind to awareness of the sacred was one of the most important lessons that Eliade learned in India. Another was the value of spiritual disciplines. For during his stay he not only learned Sanscrit and studied Hindu thought but spent some time practicing Yoga in the Himalayas under the noted master Swami Shivananda.

Yoga was the subject of the doctoral dissertation which Eliade presented in 1933. In the same year his first novel *Maitreyi* was published to great acclaim. The young university teacher became instantaneously a well-known figure on the

Romanian cultural scene. Indeed, among his fellow countrymen his reputation as a novelist and teller of tales has always been at least as great as his name for scholarship. When a *Festschrift*, *Myths and Symbols*, was published in his honor in 1969 most of the Romanian contributors chose to write about his literary works which are, even now, scarcely known in the English speaking world.<sup>3</sup> In this they echoed Eliade's own judgment of their importance. Reading his journal, it is clear that at times the demands of scholarship have seemed an almost intolerable distraction from the pursuit of his vocation as a novelist. Nor is this altogether surprising. Eliade comes from a culture in which the scholar, the poet, and the novelist were often one and the same. He sees the novel as a literary form occupying an essential place in modern Western consciousness. The novel is, we might say, the present incarnation of fable and, as such, a privileged ground for the survival of mythical themes and symbols which retain a compelling power over the human psyche. Eliade's sense of the living force of symbol informs his literary no less than his scholarly work.

With the French publication of his book on Yoga in 1936 Eliade began to acquire an international reputation. In 1940 he was appointed cultural attaché to the Romanian legation in London, being transferred to Lisbon the next year. The years surrounding the war provide the setting for Eliade's most ambitious novel *The Forbidden Forest*. It is a long book, almost six hundred pages in English translation, whose scope and manner invite comparison with Proust. Through the life of his central character, Stefan Viziru, Eliade explores a theme which is never far from his mind—man's quest for an escape from time and "the terror of history." The rise of Romanian fascism, the disastrous war against the Soviet Union and the subsequent communist invasion and takeover of the country form the terrifying backdrop to this epic of spiritual survival. Stefan Viziru is caught in the tragic rush of events and yet, as Virgil Nemoianu puts it,

somehow distanced from them by his will "to capture or recapture a secret experience of 'totality' which partakes equally of an absolute love and of a revelation of the sacred in the profane. Ultimately this amounts to a stepping outside Time, which the individual has to attempt, not only for the sake of his personal redemption, but also as a matter of national concern: Romanians can survive only by boycotting History..., by evading its crushing hostility to them through some decisive ontological withdrawal."

Nemoianu's reference to Romanian history is appropriate. There is in every authentic thinker, every true philosopher or lover of wisdom, an intimate relationship between the challenge of life and the path of reflection. In Eliade's case, the consciousness of Romania as a nation more often the victim than the maker of its destiny played an important, if largely covert part in the development of his thought, especially his opposition to every intellectual system that tries to identify ultimate reality with the course of history. If it was the Indian experience that formed Eliade's conception of religion as man's effort to achieve contact with an absolute reality beyond the ravages of time, then it was his consciousness of himself as a Romanian that opened his mind to such a view in the first place and later confirmed its truth in the harsh experience of personal exile and national defeat. Eliade knows as well as anyone that history cannot be ignored—the finger on the trigger is as real as the life it takes—and yet there is, he insists, something more, a realm of being revealed only in religious experience.

Since Eliade is sometimes accused of regarding history as unimportant it is worth quoting a passage in which he makes his position clear: "The expressions 'history' and 'historic' can occasion much confusion; they indicate, on the one hand, all that is *concrete* and *authentic* in a given human existence, as opposed to the unauthentic existence constituted by evasions and automatisms of every kind. On the other hand, in the various historicist and existentialist currents of thought,

'history' and 'historic' seem to imply that human existence is authentic only insofar as it is reduced to the *awakened consciousness of its historic moment*. It is to the latter, the 'totalitarian' meaning of history that I am referring when I take issue against 'historicisms'...the authenticity of an existence cannot be limited to the consciousness of its own historicity."<sup>4</sup> Eliade speaks of love, anxiety, melancholy and joy as fundamental experiences which together constitute the *integral man* "who neither denies himself to his historic moment, nor consents to be identified with it." Historicism, as Eliade describes it, is mistaken because it identifies man's essence with historical existence and does not see that history determines neither the nature of reality nor the consciousness which responds to it. Fundamental experiences of consciousness, love and anxiety, melancholy and joy, happen in history but they are not historically relative. Rather they represent permanent forms of human response. They are the precondition and not the product of history. While existing in the historical stream man never loses touch with that which is beyond history and it is the peculiar function of religious symbolism to express this relationship to the ground of his being—the ultimate reality that makes him what he is and gives meaning to his existence. Religious man, Eliade suggests, does not deny the truth of experience but seeks to grasp its covert meaning. Awareness of the sacred, the "wholly other" which may paradoxically manifest itself in the most familiar item of experience, is a matter of spiritual growth and not sensual atrophy. What Eliade calls "the dialectic of the sacred" is the process by which a being or event becomes the cipher or symbol of something beyond without ceasing to be itself. Employing the vocabulary of Hinduism, *Maya*, the divine play or cosmic illusion of the passing world, is simultaneously *Brahman*, the sign of the absolute. As the *Chandogya Upanishad* put it, for the religious man, "Verily, this whole world is *Brahman*, from which he comes forth, without which he will be dissolved,

and in which he breathes. Tranquil, he should meditate on it." Was Henri Bergson saying anything other when he declared in a lecture that enthralled the young Jacques Maritain: "it is in the *absolute* that we live and move and have our being"? As Eliade frequently points out, while the terms of religious discourse vary from place to place and time to time, the reality which they try to express is everywhere the same. The dialectic of the sacred expresses the mystery of the manifestation of eternal Being in time. It is small wonder if the effort to express it seems at times to break the bounds of what can be said. The inadequacy of expression to experience in the sphere of religion is a fact of life and quite beyond repair. We see through a glass darkly or not at all.

Eliade did not return to Romania after the war. He lived at first in Paris and then, since 1956, in Chicago where he succeeded Joachim Wach as Professor of the History of Religions. America is now his home but his sense of exile remains, giving a unique, personal tone to his continuing meditation on the meaning of religious experience in the frequently distressing course of life. This personal note comes out most clearly in the journal which Eliade kept between 1945 and 1969, a portion of which appeared in English translation under the title *No Souvenirs*. It is a work of the greatest interest to anyone wishing to understand the driving force behind his work, which is found in his belief in the enduring existential relevance of the material he studies. *No Souvenirs* records Eliade's meetings with many of the significant figures in contemporary culture but, more than that, it provides a chronicle of his spiritual Odyssey through the postwar years. Eliade interprets his own fate and that of his nation in the light of his unequalled acquaintance with parallels and archetypes drawn from the full range of human experience. The tragic but not hopeless history of one man and people becomes exemplary for the understanding of permanent features of man's being in the world.

"Every exile," he wrote in 1960, "is a Ulysses traveling toward Ithaca. Every real

existence reproduces the *Odyssey*. The path toward Ithaca, toward the center. I had known all that for a long time. What I have just discovered is that the chance to become a new Ulysses is given to *any* exile whatsoever (precisely because he has been condemned by the gods, that is, by the 'powers' which decide historical, earthly destinies). But to realize this, the exile must be capable of penetrating the hidden meaning of his wanderings, and understanding them as a long series of initiation trials (willed by the gods) and so many obstacles on the path which brings him back to the hearth (toward the center). That means: seeing signs, hidden meanings, symbols, in the sufferings, the depressions, the dry periods in everyday life. Seeing them and reading them even *if they aren't there*; if one sees them one can build a structure and read a message in the formless flow of things and the monotonous flux of historical facts."<sup>5</sup> Behind this passage lies a whole philosophy of man, a philosophical anthropology which stresses the need to find meaning in existence while resolutely facing the fact that there is no reassurance to be found in the temporal order of events. In other words, Eliade introduces his readers to the dimension of meaning conveyed by ancient myth while rejecting the specifically modern, historicist myth, the superstition of "progress" and "the meaning of history" which identifies temporal succession with ontological and ethical order. The experience of the historical disasters of the twentieth century has already done much to undermine this view and Eliade believes that we are now more likely than were our grandparents to understand the *Weltanschauung* of men for whom history was no freeway to redemption but a time of trial and terror. Indeed, he suggests that it is only insofar as we are able to do this that we will avoid the cultural despair typical of recent Western thought and art.

But how can this be done? The cultures of other times and places exist for us as complexes of symbols whose meaning is not transparent but demands interpretation. The theory and practice of interpreta-

tion—hermeneutics as it is often called—thus lies at the center of the history of religions as it must in every area where the works of man are the object of study. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out that Eliade's approach to symbols stands in stark contrast to the hermeneutics of suspicion as practiced by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. While the latter, each in his fashion, aim to demystify symbolic expression in order to expose the harsh and unacceptable reality that lies beneath—class interest, the will to power, and infantile sexuality respectively—Eliade conceives his task in terms of the recollection of meaning, the deciphering of the truth of being embodied in the symbol and culturally maintained in myths and rituals: "Symbolic thinking," he writes, "...is substantial with human existence, it comes before language and discursive reason. The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality—the deepest aspects—which defy other means of knowledge. Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they respond to a need and fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being."<sup>6</sup>

This tendency to treat symbols as coded truths rather than irresponsible fantasies or indices of cultural immaturity is characteristic not only of Eliade's work but of much of the most fruitful scholarship in the humanities. Eric Voegelin, for instance, speaks of an equivalence between experience and symbols, meaning the way in which a certain type of symbol appears in history as a response to certain identifiable circumstances. Eliade for his part says: "The greatest claim to merit of the history of religions is precisely its effort to decipher in a 'fact,' conditioned as it is by the historical moment and cultural style of its epoch, the existential situation that made it possible."<sup>7</sup> To understand the meaning of a particular myth or rite involves setting it in its context. The specific insight of men like Eliade and Voegelin is that there is more to this context than the transient or merely historical. Whatever the course of events that an individual or

group endures, the structure of existence remains the same. Birth, copulation and death, the fact of coming into being and passing away, must be faced in a way consistent with the no less universal need of the psyche to see life as possessing a certain meaning or order.

In Eliade's case the attempt to recollect and communicate the truths expressed in the symbolism of archaic and oriental religions leads him to reject many of the assumptions of previous scholars. Explicitly or not, most of his predecessors in the field have approached the data with minds conditioned by belief in the self-evident superiority of modern Western thought forms. Eliade's opposition to historicism and sensitivity to the coherence of non-Western world views produces a radical questioning of all such complacency. Referring to the author of *The Golden Bough*, he writes: "Where a Frazer could see nothing but 'superstition,' a metaphysic was already implicit, even though it was expressed by a pattern of symbols rather than by the interplay of concepts: a metaphysic—that is, a whole and coherent conception of Reality, not a series of instinctive gestures ruled by the same fundamental reaction of the human animal in confrontation with Nature."<sup>8</sup>

Eliade calls the implicit metaphysic of religious symbolism "archaic ontology." However this is in one sense a misleading phrase, for the conception of reality involved is not confined to the religious universe of archaic, or non-literate, peoples. Rather, it is the living core of the religious view of the world as such, one which neither Indian speculation nor Judaeo-Christian revelation definitively transcend. Archaic ontology embodies the effort to express awareness of an ultimate reality beyond history and change. There is nothing intellectually primitive about it. When the intelligible essence of myth, rite and symbol is grasped what we find is not a shoddy tissue of superstition but a creative interpretation of human existence as participation in universal, cosmological order. Simply put, the fundamental problem which man faces is how he may interpret

his existence as meaningful in spite of the disasters that befall him in life. Somehow the order to which the psyche aspires must be matched to the experienced nature of the cosmos. As Eliade puts it, the terror of history must be overcome, for history tears the fabric of meaning by bringing everything to oblivion.

Insofar as there is a historical dimension to archaic ontology it is a "sacred history." Sacred history, in the form of myth, recounts the origins of the cosmos or any part of it. It tells how the world was made as it is by the gods and of the exemplary deeds of mythical heroes. Through myth man accounts for his own existence and nature as well as that of the cosmos. Myths tell him what he is and why. They "preserve and transmit the paradigms, the exemplary models, for all responsible activities in which men engage. By virtue of these paradigmatic models revealed to men in mythical times, the Cosmos and society are periodically regenerated."<sup>9</sup> Myth recounts events that happened in the time of origins, *in illo tempore*, and this mythical time can be reactualized through the ritual repetition of archetypal gestures and events. To recollect or repeat is to reactualize a time when everything was new and uncorrupted. It is to participate in the renewal of the world through repetition of the original act of creation by which the order of the cosmos was brought out of chaos. This theme of the regeneration of the world is difficult for the modern Westerner to grasp. The image of the arrow of time which expresses the irreversibility of the historical moment is deeply etched in our consciousness. Nevertheless it is not impossible to understand the significance which the repetition of archetypal events and gestures has for archaic man. Our own ceremonies and celebrations—Christmas, Passover, or Thanksgiving for instance—recall culturally or spiritually significant events, while in at least one case, the celebration of Holy Communion, what is involved is nothing less than the reactualization of an event which, in terms of historical time alone, belongs irredeemably to the past. The sacred time of

the Mass and the ever presence of Christ's sacrifice within it testifies to a continuity between Christianity and the most profound conceptions of archaic ontology.

Eliade's analysis of archaic ontology in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* is remarkably successful as an attempt to communicate the meaning of ancient myth and ritual to the modern reader. The universality of the ontology he discovers, as well as the possibility of making it comprehensible to his audience, is rooted in the unity of man as a symbol making animal and the permanence of the fundamental cosmic structures to which the human mind responds. From the conjunction of the two—the creative meeting of psyche and cosmos—there is born a coherent interpretation of existence which, to a unique extent, provides man with answers to the questions that trouble him most deeply. The symbols of religion reveal a continuity between the structures of human existence and those of the cosmos. In doing so, they enable man to transcend a sense of isolation in a cold and heartless universe, to see himself as a partner in a world that manifests order. When archaic man interprets his life and destiny by analogy with the repetitive and cyclical rhythms of nature he lays claim to a unity between psychic and cosmic reality that assuages the fear of oblivion. He is never far from death but he knows that when the moon vanishes from the sky the darkness is only a prelude to its return. The barren surface of the winter landscape is no more than a mask before the promise of spring renewal. As part of the cosmos, archaic man sees his life as participating in the same rhythms. No end is final. No merely historical disaster is more than moment in a process which renews and restores. "The religious symbols which point to the structures of life...unveil the miraculous, inexplicable side of life, and at the same time the sacramental dimensions of human existence. 'Deciphered' in the light of religious symbols, human life reveals a hidden side: it comes from 'another part,' from far off; it is 'divine' in the sense that it is the work of the gods or of supernatural

beings."<sup>10</sup> Thus religious symbols do not only bind the structures of psyche and cosmos in a tight web of meaning but also serve to link the limited space of experienced reality with the mysterious unknown out of which it emerges and into which it passes. What happened *in illo tempore* provides the mind with sufficient reason for the world we know.

Eliade believes that the history of religions can provide the foundation for a new humanism. The reflection of the West upon its own past, the core of traditional humanism, must be supplemented with a dialogue between East and West and a widening of the historical and anthropological horizon to include archaic cultures. "More than any other humanistic discipline," he claims, "...history of religions can open the way to a philosophical anthropology. For the sacred is a universal dimension and...the beginnings of culture are rooted in religious experiences and beliefs. Furthermore, even after they are radically secularized, such cultural creations as social institutions, technology, moral ideas, arts, etc., cannot be understood correctly if one does not know their original religious matrix, which they tacitly criticized, modified, or rejected on becoming what they are now: secular cultural values. Thus, the historian of religions is in a position to grasp the permanence of what has been called man's specific existential situation of 'being in the

world,' for the experience of the sacred is its correlate. In fact, man's becoming aware of his own mode of being and assuming his *presence* in the world constitute a 'religious' experience."<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis upon the discovery of the religious dimension as original to and formative of man's discovery of the truth of his being is certainly a major reason for Eliade's appeal to conservatives. Even among those whose thought is not anchored in Christian or Jewish belief there is a natural affinity for a religious conception of the unchanging conditions of human existence. At the same time the breadth of Eliade's horizon, his incorporation of the widest possible range of data, poses a special challenge. The symbols we encounter are strange and do not yield their meaning easily. As Ricoeur puts it, "*Le symbole donne à penser*": symbolism invites thought, the symbol provokes philosophical reflection which extracts a meaning not visible to the initial glance. If appreciation of the permanence of the human condition is a central feature of any coherent conservative philosophy we can learn as much from other cultures as from our own past. To do this, however, we must first learn to decipher the symbols in which the men of other times and places have articulated their response to the tensions of existence. The sympathy which Mircea Eliade has brought to this task makes him a model for us all.

<sup>1</sup>Mircea Eliade: *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 1. <sup>2</sup>*Encounter*, Vol. LIV, No. 3 (March 1980). <sup>3</sup>The University of Notre Dame has recently published English translations of two of Eliade's novels. These are *The Forbidden Forest* (1978) and *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats* (1979). <sup>4</sup>Mircea Eliade: *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (London: Harvill Press, 1961), pp. 171-2. <sup>5</sup>Mircea Eliade: *No Souvenirs* (London: Routledge

and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 84-5. <sup>6</sup>*Images and Symbols*, p. 12. <sup>7</sup>Mircea Eliade: "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in *The History of Religions*, edited by Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 88. <sup>8</sup>*Images and Symbols*, p. 176. <sup>9</sup>*The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History* (Princeton University Press, 1954), p. xiv. <sup>10</sup>"Methodological Remarks etc.," *loc.cit.*, p. 98. <sup>11</sup>*The Quest*, p. 9.