Religious Tradition and the Archaic Man

Veress Károly

Professor, Ph.D., Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania.

Author of the books:
Paradox (tudat)állapotok (1996); A nemzedékváltás szerepe a kultúrában (1999); Filozófiai szemiotika (1999); Kisebbségi létproblémák (2000); Az értelem értelméről. Hermeneutikai vizsgálódások (2003); Egy létparadoxon színe és visszája. Hermeneutikai kísérlet a nem lehet-probléma megnyitására (2003); Fiinta generationalã si destinul culturii (2003).
E-mail: veressk@hotmail.com

Abstract: My article – as a first step in a comprehensive research program – attempts to verify the hypothesis according to which M. Eliade's morphological and historical investigations of archaic religiousness reveal the outlines of an archaic ontology. For this purpose, the article focuses upon Eliade's conception of religious tradition as the carrier of the indivisible unity of sacred existence and religious experience. The ontological difference found in religious existence and revealed by religious experience is rooted in the essentially hermeneutic nature of religious tradition. Therefore the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics proves very productive in the investigation of this problem.

In contemporary society, wherein the end of history is a frequent topic of discussion, questions of the beginning, the source, and the return have a special intellectual appeal. These are questions that necessarily lead (back) from the review of the factual data of empirical historic research to the philosophical aspects of the problem. Mircea Eliade's life work, and within it his views about archaic religiousness, the *homo religiosus* and religious tradition, offers an outstanding opportunity to follow this spiritual path.

Mircea Eliade's morphological and historical investigations connected to archaic religiousness unfold the outlines of a clear and internally coherent, ontologically-based anthropology, as well as an anthropologically revealed ontology. Their basic connection sheds light on the various phases of religious tradition in such a way that each perspective offers a view of the whole.

Key words:

archaic ontology, hermeneutics, ontological difference, sacred existence, the sacred, sacred space, sacred time, religious symbol, religious tradition, religious experience

The phenomenological and morphological investigations conducted by Eliade reveal the outlines of an admirable uniformity and universality that pervades the empirical diversity of religious forms and the richness and colorfulness of religious experiences bearing culturally and temporally varied features. The further back we go in history, the more emphatic becomes this uniformity and universality. We meet an extensive spiritual tradition, also filtering through later historical experiences, that turns the modern person's attention to the foundations of human existence with an ever greater force.

Religious tradition, to Eliade's mind, is a culturally embedded, universal human state of being. Its essence can be expressed in one single sentence: openness to transcendence. This is a reference both to the critical reconsideration of the prejudices about the un-openness of religious existence, and to the experience of human existence, in the religious experience of diverse cultures and ages, as void in itself and pointing beyond itself.

Religious tradition incorporates a view of life and a form of human self-understanding that contain an interpretation of existence and conferring of meaning in the horizon of transcendence. This interpretation of existence and conferring of meaning unfolds in religious consciousness not so much on a spiritual-conceptual level, but rather on the deeper level of *religious experience,* consolidated by multiple repetitions. It surfaces in the form of images, collective ideas, symbols, and myths. The most archaic strata of religious tradition can be found in various archaic cultures and serve as a foundation for the later forms of modern religiousness. Religious tradition is the universal form of the archaic state of human culture.

In Eliade's view this tradition is witness to the fact that, for the religious person, existence is revealed as *experience*, through religious experience. Religious experience is not a cognitive structure aiming at the knowledge of beings; rather, it is the religious person's mode of being in the most comprehensive sense. The religious person stands within this experience, and in this he lives all sides of his existence. Thus, by the culturally and existentially articulated content of his experiences, the deepest levels of religious tradition become relevant to him.

Religious experience reveals that deeper, essential meaning of human experience according to which human experience is "world-light," that is a state of existence open to, and revealed by, present-ness. The light – and at the same time world-ness – of religious experience is nourished by the light of the sacred. The sacred is the source that spreads light, and in which beings become visible. By the ontic radiation of the sacred, things are not only illuminated, but also partake in the sacred. The perception of beings and their ontic participation in the sacred offers the experience of their realness.

In Eliade's view, the relationship of the sacred and the empirical world is not an externally connected one. The empirical world in itself is thus emptiness, nothingness. The sacred is at one and the same time both the light externally illuminating the world and the source of light radiating from inner experience. The sacred fills the world with content, and the sacred is also the central structuring principle of the whole. The natural world is a "cosmos," that is, a structured world insofar as it appears in experience as the manifestation of the sacred. The human world is the imitation of cosmogony, the exemplary creation of gods, *imitatio dei*. The life-source and interpretive horizon of both is the sacred.

Religious tradition presents the relationship of the world and the sacred in a twofold perspective. On the one hand the sacred appears as a transcendence, transcending *outside* the world, which is the source, the creator of everything. In his analyses in the field of the history of religions, Eliade repeatedly shows that the most diverse religions contain a *distant* form of divine being,

a *Deus otiosus.* The light of this divinity, in its immovable omnipotence, illuminates the whole world but has no role in religious experience and does not become a direct cause of religious experience.[1]**(Endnotes)**

* The text was translated into English by Emese G. Czintos

On the other hand, the sacred appears as an immanent transcendence, which is *inside* the world, as an *active center* that gives life and meaning to everything, as a constant source of religious experiences. Because of this dichotomy, both cosmic and human existence can be grasped in religious tradition in a twofold category: they are at the same time a state and a process of existence. The cosmos and human life are at the same time in the pure and sacred state of the beginning, creation, and in the life-process of the always present, characterized by inter-penetrating unity and at the same time continuous differentiation of the sacred and the profane. The sacred is the *source of life* bursting out in the incipient act of the creation, and the content of reality prevailing in the present process of existence, *reality as such*.[2]

This dichotomy of existence represented in the sacred view of life carried by religious tradition – at the same time a both state and a process of existence – reveals itself primarily in the spatial and temporal structure of existence, and it is from here that it unfolds for a more comprehensive interpretation. The spatial and temporal dimensions of existence define three basic and interconnected features of sacred existence.

The first of these features is *distinctiveness*, which presupposes an supreme, *central point* as the organizing principle of the entirety of existence. According to this view, *sacred space* is space structured around a sacred central point, that is, a spatial structure that has a distinguished center. This center is the place of the sacred event in reference to which the elements of the space are organized in one particular order. Thus the sacred center is at the same time a point with no dimension, and a place with dimension. The dimensionless and unperceivable center itself is at the same time the complete dimension, the sacred space, as it encompasses the entire cosmos. Thus the existential sphere, the religious life-world of a religious person living in a specific religious culture – in a spatial sense – is not only a structured world organized around a center, that is, a cosmos itself, but is also the image of the cosmos encompassing the entirety of the world and the perfection of existence, the representation of its sacred order – *imago mundi* – and the anthropological center of this wholeness. Not only does the religious person live in a world structured around a center, but the world he lives in is the center itself. Thus the human existence revealed by religious experience is not only an existence which draws its foundations from a sacred center, but it is a permanent life source for the world structured around it and constructed by it.[3]

Sacred time, similar to space, is also a time structured around, and revealed by, a sacred center. It is at the same time the dimensionless starting point of the eternal beginning, which is also the incipient event sanctifying the world, as the time of the sacred event – source-time – and the eternal present of the sacred event. The sacred present is nothing else than the return to the source-time by repetition, as well as the actualization and permanent renovation of the source-time via cognition. Thus sacred time is not only a starting point with no duration, but also a universal duration encompassing the entirety of the universe and carrying the perfection of life, eternity itself. The complexity of the whole becomes present in the duration of any sacred event. The religious person lives in sacred time not only in the sense that by the repetition of the incipient sacred event he returns to the source-time, but also in the sense that in his own present he lives in the permanent pres-

ence of sacred time, as an eternal contemporary of sacred and cosmic events. The religious person does not merely live in a time deriving from, and continuously returning to, eternity, but the time he lives in is itself eternity. The religious person lives in his own present in such a way that he at the same time also lives in the source-time that has unfolded eternity from itself. In his own life he carries eternity as the inexhaustible life source of his own existence and the world around him, in such a way that he becomes the center of this source.[4]

Another feature of sacred existence is *-reversibility*. This means that the sacred process of existence has no such outstanding direction with reference to either spatiality or temporality along which the linearly proceeding structures of existence could be formed. The religious person in every second of his being exists at the same time in a spatially and temporally definable point of the process of existence and in an eternal and universally extending perfection of existence. The eternal return to the sacred and the continuous renewal in existence results in a circular structure of the processes of life in which existence constructs and permanently perfects itself along constant repetition. Herein every forward movement is return. Every novelty is repetition. Past is to come in the future. Future transforms past into present. Every new event is an event that has already happened. Existence in all of its particular moments swings out from itself and returns to his own perfection of existence. The religious person in any of the concrete moments of his existence is a carrier and liver of the same perfection of life, and in his existentially delimited state of being lives and carries within himself the perfection of life. Circularity in fact is a continuous pendulant movement from human existence to the sacred and from the sacred to human existence in which human existence is perfected as a sacred mode of existence and the sacred is accomplished as a basic human mode of existence. The religious person is a participant in and at the same time a part of sacred events. These lead to the accomplishment of his human self, just as the human self of the religious person is the medium in which sacred events are accomplished. The sacred events of existence projected in cosmic dimensions are basic fate events happening in a religious person's life. These meet and are rooted in the same anthropological center which/who is nothing other than the religious person himself.

The third feature of sacred existence is connected to this idea, namely the *identity residing in difference*, or the *difference revealed by identity*, the difference that at the same time wants not to be different.[5] The existential foundation and empirical revelation of religious human existence are organically interconnected sides of the same existential unit. Human existence always reveals one of its sides in religious experience, but it is always the existential perfection of the entire existence that shows through. In the difference of 'to be' and 'to be revealed' (Gadamer), it is the ontic unity of the one showing and that which shows itself which can be perceived, because the reality of that which shows itself is revealed by the one showing and the act of showing. This reality is the very accomplishment happening in the act of showing itself. This is how the essential connection, the original unity of the sacred and human side of human existence, can be speculatively perceived in religious culture. The sacred as a mode of being, the reality present in human existence and revealed in human experience, which is the most real exactly in this very act of revelation, is reality as such.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this recognition with regard to the further interpretation of religious tradition: one is related to the role of religious symbols, myths, rites in religious tradition, the other to the relationship of the sacred and the profane. Both conclusions can be brought to light by that *hermeneutic* per-

spective into which religious tradition and religious experience, by the instances of eternal return, circularity and difference residing in identity, can be included.

The Gadamerian recognition related to the speculative structure of language, according to which language in its various particular manifestations carries within itself the difference between being and revealing, and thus the revelation of universal ontological structures of being by concrete, specific linguistic manifestations, proves valid for religious tradition as a whole. The corpus of religious tradition is built upon a web of religious symbols, myths, and rites, as the carrier of such a symbolic-imaginary mode of being the inner nature of which is defined by symbolic representation. Essentially, symbolic representation is built upon the theoretical – that is, *speculative* – identity of the real and the imaginary, the self-revealer and the revealer, or that which appears and that which makes appear. The religious symbol does not only refer to religious content, but also represents it, and thus makes it present. The imaginary revealed by the senses through symbolic representation becomes real, and gains the ontic state of existence. The myth and the rite incorporating symbolic representation carry those forms of existence in which the ontic identity lying within the difference of the real and the imaginary becomes, for the religious person, a perceivable religious experience, penetrating and gripping his entire existence. The eternal return to the sacred as a creative power, as an unfailing source of life, as well as the continuous sacred renovation of human and cosmic existence by repetition, is made possible within the framework of a human life defined by myth and rite. For a religious person, myth is an "exemplary model" that makes possible the imitation of the sacred, and by this imitation, identification with the sacred. Myth as a narrated story draws human history into a mythical story, and presents mythical history as the true history of the *conditio humana*.[6] The rite is an actual standing and living within the sacred, a permanent participation in it, and at the same time an active partaking in maintaining the sacred process of existence.[7]

In Eliade's view, religious existence as a sacred existence lived within myth and rite develops on the level of the real and the imaginary at the same time. In the world of religious experience the imaginary world is revealed as real (as reality); at the same time the experience of reality acquires a spiritual dimension and a horizon of meaning in the sphere of the imaginary in which things and events are filled with sense (and thus become significant) and happenings gain their meaning. The material and spiritual dimension of human existence still forms one organic unit in the human world revealed by religious experience, the actions and events participate in the support and formation of this world with their sense and meaning. The religious person lives in his world as a whole person, in the horizon of a complex life in which every phenomenon or human manifestation appears as a component, a carrier, and a supporter of a broad and universal order. The *speculative structure* of religious experience can be perceived exactly in that natural unity by which it represents the individual and the general, the particular and the universal, the material and the spiritual, the theoretical and the practical, the physical and the metaphysical, image and language as naturally and indivisibly connected sides of the same existential unit, but seen from different perspectives. This world bears a metaphysical meaning which is not so much thinkable and conceptually perceivable, but rather revealing and livable for the religious person. The speculative dimension of religious experience, showing through in symbols, myths, and rites, is carried by images, stories, and actions. This is not so much a thinkable metaphysics, but rather one that can be visualized through symbols and lived through myths and rites.[8] The relation of the particular and the universal is not so much thought of in a

speculative and abstract conceptual language, but rather as a relation that appears to the senses by symbols, and is actually lived in myths and rites. The philosophical nature of the world and life is not crystallized in philosophical systems, but it is revealed as an image and can be lived as an experience of life.

As regards the relationship of the sacred and the profane, Eliade considers *the sacred and the profane* as two modes of a person's existence in the world, as two existential situations, developed in the course of human history.[9] The root of the historical differentiation of the two modes of being lies in that feature of sacred existence that we have called the difference revealed by identity. Human existence revealed by religious experience is grounded in the sacred, or what is more, according to the unanimous conclusions of the morphological and historical analyses of the religious person appearing in different cultures, the source of sacredness lies in human existence itself, and not as a particular, but rather as an ontologically universal, possibility. Still, all these investigations justify that human existence cannot be reduced merely to the sacred in any specific historical-cultural situation. Just like the empirical world, the sacred appears, seen from its existence in the human world, as a dimension of human existence permanently pointing beyond itself, and leading to the foundation of empirical existence beyond its eventualities. Or, seen from the sacred, human existence appears as that which carries and develops, historically speaking, a dimension of sacred existence that permanently points beyond itself and leads out from itself in an empirical direction. The profane mode of being is the side of human existence in permanent differentiation from the sacred, which has no established mode of being with reference to the sacred; just as it separates from the sacred, it always falls back again into it. On the other hand, the *existential fissure* interwoven with the identity of the human existence and the sacred carries the possibility of the profane, or the possibility of any human condition pointing beyond the final identification with transcendence, and leading on from here to the human. Here lies the *historical* possibility of human existence, that it should gradually acquire a mode of being separated from the sacred and grounded in itself, which carries the ontological possibilities of the construction of the *historical world*. The profane's human mode of being is so-to-say encoded into the religious tradition, in which the original sacred unity of human life and the permanent existential differentiation from it forms the field of the all-time and actual religious experience.

The ambivalence that characterizes religious experience lies within this differentiation. On the one hand the religious person lives within the existential security of the sanctified world. His human state of existence is characterized by openness to the sacred, presence in the sacred mode of being, participation and partaking in the sacred. Still, it is the ground of religious experience where the person primarily and principally faces death and nothingness. His everyday life-world is pervaded by the fear of chaos, the dread of nothingness, the anxiety of death. In this state of mind the person experiences the feeling of a permanently threatening lack of existence, an alarming emptiness and destruction as opposed to the perfection of sacred existence, he will be overcome by an excruciating thirst for existence. Thus, the only secure basis of life for him, upon which a true, authentic human life can be built or perfected, will be the grounding of his human existence into the sacred. Partaking in the sacred for a religious person means: partaking in existence, renewal in existence. Eternal return and repetition is what saves human existence from nothingness and death.[10] The person eternally returning to the sacred returns from death to life, from chaos to order, from nothingness and insignificance to his true and authentic

self. By eternal return, the person is strengthened in his own existence.

While having, on the one hand, a subversive effect on religious tradition, the oscillation of existence between the sacred and the profane has, on the other hand, a consolidating effect on it as well. On that ancient cultural level on which existence equates to the sacred,[11] true and authentic human existence is religious existence, and human culture is perfected in the form of religious tradition.

In what sense does Eliade consider religious tradition as the carrier of an *archaic ontology*? The answer to this question lies exactly in the relationship of the sacred and the profane. Religious experience proves to be a twofold experience in its very reference to the sacred and the profane. On the one hand, the experience of the sacred reveals the grounded, authentic nature of existence for the religious person, that is, the way human life partakes in existence. On the other hand, the experience of the profane reveals human existence itself, as a being differentiated from the sacred, as in its specific and particular existence it carries and portrays the universal determinateness of existence. The same ontological difference is revealed in religious experience, by the differentiation of the sacred and the profane, which is grasped by later learned philosophical thinking as the difference of existence and being.

Ontological difference, before ever becoming actually thinkable, is revealed in the world by religious tradition, in the world in which the human being is situated in his own existence, and which, therefore, is a world sanctified by the person's own existence. The archaic ontology residing in religious tradition is rooted in the basically and originally hermeneutical nature of religious experience. Religious experience is a hermeneutical experience in its deepest and broadest sense.[12] The ontological fissure – an ever deepening and broadening crack in the wall of complexity – in which unity incorporates opposition, appears in the hermeneutic circle of religious experience, in the continuous oscillation between the part and the whole, the particular and the universal, the past and the present, the sacred and the profane, in the continuous actualization of the one within the other. It is because of the utterly hermeneutic nature of religious experience that opposition yet wishes to be non-opposition. The divine and the human appear as real, in reference to each other, in the same experience. In religious experience, the person can experience his own realness by the experience of the sacred, just as, by the experience of his own realness, the sacred appears to him as real. Ontological difference has not yet separated from the hermeneutic game of experience. In religious experience, the person contemplates and understands himself as a being living in natural unity with his own existence.

That which is preparing here wishes not yet to be ontology. It is rather proto-ontology. But the future great (existential) history already shows through in the broadening fissure.

Notes:

* The text was translated into English by Emese G. Czintos

[1] One of the most comprehensive approaches to this problem is found in Mircea Eliade: *Tratat de istorie a religiilor* (A treatise on the history of religions), Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995, 51-54.

[2] The "*sacred is the actual real*," writes Eliade. Everything that belongs to the sphere of the sacred partakes in existence. Mircea Eliade: *A szent és a profán* (The sacred and the profane), Budapest: Európa, 1987, 88.

[3] Cf. Eliade's analyses and interpretations of sacred space and sacred center, among others, in *A szent és a profán*, 15-60; *Mitul eternei reîntoarceri* (The myth of eternal return), in *Eseuri* (Essays), Bucharest: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1991, 19-23; *Imagini şi simboluri. Eseu despre simbolismul magico-religios* (Images and symbols. An essay on magical-religious symbolism), Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994, 33-69; *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, 288-302.

[4] Cf. Eliade's analyses and interpretations of sacred time, among others, in *A szent és a profán*, 61-105; *Mitul eternei reîntoarceri*, 45-73; *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, 303-318.

[5] I am paraphrasing Gadamer's formulation applied to the analysis of the speculative structure of language. Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Igazság és módszer. Egy filozófiai hermeneutika vázlata.* (Truth and method: The outline of a philosophical hermeneutics), Budapest: Gondolat, 1984, 329. In my view, Eliade's conception of religious experience also highlights the universally ontologically significant speculative structure of human existence, just as Gadamer's hermeneutic concept of language, and thus the enlightening power of Gadamer's syntagm, is also valid for religious experience.

[6] „*A true man becomes only he who identifies with the lesson of the myths, that is, he who imitates the gods*." – writes Eliade. „Through myth *true history*, the history of the *condition humana* is bequeathed. Thus myth contains the examples and principles of all kinds of behaviors." Eliade, *The sacred and the profane*, 93. (Here and henceforth my translation, G. Cz. E.)

[7] „... the man, when imitating the gods, secures for himself a place in the sacred, and thus in reality; on the stăpânire din vreme a corporalităţii subiecţilor, era mascat bineînţeles de rolul de deprindere a populaţiei cu normele igienei, proces de „civilizare" în masă. În other hand the exemplary divine deeds sanctify the world by their repeated representations. Man's religious behavior has a role in keeping the world's sanctity." ibid, 92.

[8] "The symbol, as we have seen, does not only make the world "open", but makes man reach the universal. With its help man leaves his private position and "becomes open" to the general and the universal. Symbols revive individual experience and transform it into a spiritual act, a metaphysical perception of the world. [...] [By symbols] the man of pre-modern society finds his way to the most elevated spirit, because if he understands the symbol, he is *capable of living the universal.*" Ibid., 201-202.

[9] "... the *sacred* and the *profane* are two modes of existence in the world, two existential situations, that man formed in the course of his history." Ibid., 10.

[10] Cf. M. Eliade, *A szent és a profán*, 100.

[11] „... because on an ancient cultural level existence means the same thing as sacred. As we have seen, the experience of the sacred grounds the world, and even the most primitive of religions is primarily ontology." Ibid. 200.

[12] A. Marino also shares this opinion, when analysing in detail all the hermeneutic connections of Eliade's conception of experience. Cf. *Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade* (Mircea Eliade's Hermeneutics), Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1980.