

DOUGLAS ALLEN,

MYTH AND RELIGION IN  
MIRCEA ELIADE

(NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE,  
2002)

## CHAPTER 7

# The Structure of Myth

Earlier chapters have referred continually to myth, with many formulations analyzing Eliade's theory of myth and with numerous examples of myth illustrating Eliade's analysis of reductionism, religion, and symbolism. Most of what has been presented has not been unique to myth. For example, one cannot grasp Eliade's theory of myth without appreciating his antireductionist approach. It is necessary to be cognizant of the fact that whenever Eliade writes about myth, he is assuming the irreducibility of the sacred, thus focusing on certain religious dimensions of his data while ignoring, devaluing, and sometimes attacking and dismissing other aspects emphasized by reductionist theorists of myth. But Eliade's antireductionism is not restricted to myth. He assumes the irreducibility of the sacred and claims to be giving antireductionistic interpretations of nonmythic religious, as well as mythic, phenomena.

To understand Eliade's theory of myth, it is necessary to understand his general theory of religion. For Eliade, myth is religious myth. Nonreligious narratives may at times resemble myth, but without any evidence of structures of the sacred, they are not fully mythic. One cannot grasp Eliade's theory of myth without appreciating his concept of hierophany and especially his formulation of a universal process of sacralization. In their essential structure and function, myths disclose, often in complex and hidden ways, the universal structures of the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. But Eliade's general theory of religion is not restricted to the mythic. Although he places a primary emphasis on myth, the dialectic of the sacred refers to all religious phenomena, nonmythic as well as mythic.

Similarly, one cannot understand Eliade's theory of myth without understanding his general theory of symbolism. For Eliade, myth is symbolic, and symbols are the language of myth. Myths are specific ways that symbols are put together to form sacred narratives. One cannot grasp the structure and function of myth without appreciating how myths are multivalent, unify heterogeneous phenomena on different levels of experience, express contradictory and paradoxical aspects of reality, and are specific valorizations of complex, coherent, structural systems of religious symbols. But Eliade's theory of symbolism is not restricted to myth. Although he is especially attracted to symbolic expressions that appear in myth, Eliade's general formulation of symbolism applies to all religious phenomena, nonmythic as well as mythic.

Eliade was always attracted to narrative. In his *Journals* and *Autobiography* and other personal writings, he often discusses his "dual vocation" as fiction writer and scholar. Long before his recognition as an internationally renowned scholar of myth and symbolism, Eliade had emerged as an influential literary figure in his native Romania in the 1930s, especially after the publication of his hugely successful and controversial novel *Maitreyi* in 1933. Throughout his career, Eliade identified himself not only as an interpreter of myths—the sacred narratives of religious persons—but also as the creator of his own narratives.

At times Eliade emphasizes that the literary creation of narrative and the scholarly interpretation of narrative are autonomous and separate activities; at other times, he emphasizes that these concerns are complementary, necessary for his "spiritual equilibrium," separate but interdependent parts of the same universal cultural creativity.<sup>1</sup> Many of the assumptions, methods, and concerns already seen to define his scholarly work on myth also define his attitude toward the creation and interpretation of literary narrative: an autonomous creation of the literary imagination, interpreted on its own plane of reference, with its own irreducible structures and meanings, revealing but at the same time concealing hidden, transhistorical meanings. Indeed, Eliade views both oral and written literature as the offspring of mythology and as fulfilling the same mythic functions.

### The Structure of Myth

181

In appreciating why Eliade is so drawn to myth, one recognizes not only the primary importance he grants the sacred and the symbolic but also the remarkable status he accords narrative. "I must write a long article, which could be entitled 'On the Necessity of the "Novel-Novel,"' showing the autonomous, glorious, irreducible dimension of *narration*, the formula of myth and mythology readapted to the modern consciousness. Showing that modern man, like the man of archaic societies, cannot exist without myths, without exemplary stories."<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-five years later, Eliade writes in his *Journal* that he would have liked to have commented in more depth in his preface to the English translation of *The Forbidden Forest* on the "necessity of narration." "In my journal, but also in lectures, I've already made numerous allusions to this *existential need* to listen to or to read a 'tale,' whether it is a myth, a fairy tale, a history, a short story, or a novel." Several months later, Eliade discusses the fashionable proclamation of the "death of the novel" as at most pointing to the death of outdated models or kinds of novels. "But true epic literature—that is, the novel, the story, the tale—cannot disappear as such, for the literary imagination is the continuation of mythological creativity and oniric experience."<sup>3</sup>

In his "Preface" to *The Forbidden Forest*, Eliade mentions experiments on the phase of sleep called REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and concludes that there is an "organic need" for dreaming, mythology, and narration. "A closer analysis of this organic need for narration would bring to light a dimension peculiar to the human condition": that the human is *par excellence* "a historic being," not in the sense of the modern, historicist philosophies but more in the sense of mythic, sacred histories that are revealed through the structure and function of the mythic narratives.<sup>4</sup>

When one recognizes Eliade's primary concern with the sacred, the symbolic, and the narrative, it is not surprising that he devoted so many books and articles to the interpretation of myth. Since Eliade placed such a central priority on the meaning and significance of these sacred symbolic narratives, it will not be possible to consider all of the mythic themes and variations found throughout his writings. Instead, we shall

focus on the essential mythic structures, functions, and general characteristics, together with a few illustrations.

In his insistence on the irreducibility of the sacred, Eliade often cites the principle that "the scale creates the phenomenon." In describing and interpreting myth, Eliade asserts that the historian of religious must be "too conscious of the axiological difference of his documents to marshal them on the same level. Aware of nuances and distinctions, he cannot ignore the fact that there exist great myths and myths of less importance; myths which dominate and characterize a religion, and secondary myths, repetitious and parasitical. *Enuma elish*, for example, cannot figure on the same plane with the mythology of the female demon Lamashu; the Polynesian cosmogonic myth has not the same weight as the myth of the origin of a plant, for it precedes it and serves as a model for it." In terms of such an axiological scale, he reproaches Western scholars "for their indifference to the scale of values *indigenous* to" mythic, traditional societies. "I do not think that we can grasp the structure and function of mythical thought in a society which has myth as its foundation if we do not take into account the *mythology in its totality* and, at the same time, the *scale of values* which such mythology implicitly or explicitly proclaims."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in defining myth and analyzing its structure and function by examining "mythology in its totality," Eliade not only assumes the irreducibility of the religious and the mythic but also is guided by the principle that within the mythic, there is a hierarchical scale of values. Most significantly, this allows him to account for the essential structure and function of myth in terms of the primary ontological status of the cosmogonic myth and the key importance of origin myths.

### THE DEFINITION OF MYTH

In attempting to define myth, Mircea Eliade departs from a common Western tradition of privileging documents of Greek mythology:

From Plato and Fontenelle to Schelling and Bultmann, philosophers and theologians have proposed innumerable definitions of myth. But all of these have one thing in common: they are based on the analysis of Greek mythology. Now, for a historian of religions this choice is

not a very happy one. It is true that only in Greece did myth inspire and guide epic poetry, tragedy, and comedy, as well as the plastic arts; but it is no less true that it is especially in Greek culture that myth was submitted to a long and penetrating analysis, from which it emerged radically "demythified." If in every European language the word "myth" denotes a "fiction," it is because the Greeks proclaimed it to be such twenty-five centuries ago. What is even more serious for an historian of religion: we do not know a single Greek myth within its ritual context. Of course this is not the case with the paleo-oriental and Asiatic religions; it is especially not the case with the so-called primitive religions.<sup>6</sup>

Eliade concludes that "our best chance of understanding the structure of mythical thought is to study cultures where myth is a 'living thing', where it constitutes the very ground of the religious life; in other words, where myth, far from indicating a *fiction*, is considered to reveal the *truth par excellence*."<sup>7</sup>

Already introduced in Eliade's attempt to define myth is the key distinction between a true and a false story. In societies where myth is still alive, mythic people distinguish myths, or "true stories," from fables, tales, and legends, called "false stories." Because myths are true stories, they can be related only under certain circumstances, such as only to those who are initiated or only during periods of sacred time. For mythic people, both the true and the false stories are narratives that present "histories" and contain actors not of the everyday, profane world. But myths are evaluated differently from other stories by the mythic believers. "For everything that the myths relate *concerns them directly* . . . Myths, that is, narrate not only the origin of the World, of animals, of plants, and of man, but also all the primordial events in consequence of which man became what he is today." For the archaic person, "myth is a matter of primary importance, while tales and fables are not. Myth teaches him the primordial 'stories' that have constituted him existentially; and everything connected with his existence and his legitimate mode of existence in the Cosmos concerns him directly."<sup>8</sup>

Before presenting Eliade's general definition of myth, it is important to note that there is no scholarly agreement as to the defini-

tion, nature, structure, function, meaning, or significance of myth and its relation to nonmythic phenomena. This is evident when examining any of the anthologies of scholarly writings on myth, such as *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, in which twenty-two scholars, including Eliade, present radically different, often conflicting, approaches and interpretations of myth.<sup>9</sup> William Bascom, for example, attempts to formulate many formal features for distinguishing prose narratives: myth, legend, and folktale. Lauri Honko, in analyzing "The Problem of Defining Myth," provides a brief classification distinguishing twelve modern approaches to myth. G. S. Kirk, in his study "On Defining Myth," rejects all universalistic theories of myth, arguing that each theoretical approach and definition, including Eliade's, receives support from certain mythic data but that each universalistic formulation can easily be negated by citing other instances of myth that do not accord with the assigned origins, functions, explanations, or definitions.<sup>10</sup>

Eliade's most developed definition of myth appears in *Myth and Reality*. After indicating that myth is an extremely complex cultural reality and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to formulate one generally acceptable definition, he attempts the following definition:

Speaking for myself, the definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the "beginnings." Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the "supernaturalness") of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the

"supernatural") into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being.<sup>11</sup>

In this definition and its elaboration, there are characteristics of myth that were either analyzed at great length or suggested in earlier chapters: the central focus on the sacred (transcendent structure, Supernatural Beings, etc.); the dynamic, creative process of sacralization (by which the sacred establishes and is manifested in the world); the narration of a sacred history that takes place in sacred time; a sacred account of how things were created, whether the entire Cosmos, human beings, or specific phenomena; true stories revealing the deepest realities; and the disclosure of paradigmatic models explaining and justifying the nature of the Cosmos and the world of the mythic believers, including the specific nature of human existence.

Although critics and some defenders emphasize Eliade's personal assumptions and beliefs about reality as central to his description and interpretation of myth and religion, at this stage it seems best to accept the above definition and elaboration as intended to be descriptive and phenomenological. Eliade is claiming that *for the believers in myth*, myths are sacred narratives that reveal ultimate truths and realities. *nb*

### THE SACRED AND THE SYMBOLIC

As has been repeatedly emphasized, for Eliade myth is irreducibly religious. His interpretations of myth consist of identifying and analyzing the deep structures and meanings, often hidden and camouflaged, of the mythic disclosures of the sacred. As will be seen in chapter 10, Eliade does devote considerable time to modern, "secular myths," but these are invariably analyzed as responding to deeper religious nostalgias and desires for the sacred, as revealing hidden or repressed religious structures and meanings, as inadequate substitutes for the fully mythic sacred, or as superficial, transitory, pseudoreligious creations. *nb*

Since so many illustrations of Eliade's focus on the sacred have already been provided and will be provided, one typical, brief mythic reference to the sacred should suffice. In his study on "Greatness and Decadence of Myths," Eliade writes that for the archaic person, religion maintains the "opening" toward a sacred world of absolute values; and myths convey these paradigmatic models of absolute, sacred values. "Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This 'other world' represents a superhuman, 'transcendent' plane, the plane of *absolute realities*."<sup>12</sup>

It has been evident in Eliade's conception of religion that he interprets *homo religiosus* as emphatically rejecting Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence."<sup>13</sup> Religious persons, whether of archaic, Asian, or Western traditions, believe that the essential sacred precedes and gives meaning, significance, and reality to their existence. Eliade's interpretation of how "the essential precedes existence" is seen in his analysis of how myth reveals the sacred in cultures where myth is a "living thing." "Man is what he is today because a series of events took place *ab origine*. The myths tell him these events and, in so doing, explain to him how and why he was constituted in this particular way. For *homo religiosus* real, authentic existence begins at the moment when this primordial history is communicated to him and he accepts its consequences. It is always sacred history, for the actors in it are Supernatural Beings and mythical Ancestors." Eliade goes on to mention that the content of the essential—which was determined in primordial time, precedes human existence, and is revealed through myths—varies according to different religious visions.<sup>14</sup>

As has also been repeatedly emphasized, for Eliade myth is irreducibly symbolic. Symbolism is the language of myth, and myth is necessarily symbolic. Symbolic structures provide the hermeneutical framework for Eliade's interpretation of myth and religion. All of the characteristics of symbolism elucidated in the previous chapter apply to Eliade's interpretation of myth: "the logic of symbols" that allows them to fit together to form coherent, structural systems; the symbolic as an autonomous mode of cognition; the capacity of symbols to reveal

structures and meanings not evident on the level of immediate experience; the multivalence of symbols, revealing a multitude of structurally coherent meanings on different levels of reality; the function of unification, allowing symbols to homologize the different levels of reality and integrate them within a coherent system or whole; the capacity of symbols to express paradoxical and contradictory aspects of reality; and the existential value of the symbolic that aims at a reality and discloses a meaning of human existence. Eliade is fully cognizant of these and other characteristics of religious symbolism whenever he is describing and analyzing the function, structure, meaning, and significance of myth.

Since Eliade's theory of symbolism is essential to all of his interpretations of myth, only one passage from his *Journal* will be cited in which he emphasizes the major significance of symbolism in interpreting myths:

Myths on the origin of man: he was made (by the Creator or by a Supernatural Being) from a *materia prima*: clay, stone, wood. This *materia prima* is obviously connected with the structures of the respective cultures: the megalithic peoples emphasized stone (but the myth is found elsewhere also), the agricultural ones, earth or dust (the fertility of the soil, etc.). But that is not where the significance lies—it lies in the symbolism implied by these substances. Rock, stone, is the plastic expression of perennality: when man was made (or extracted) from stone, he partook of the mode of being of rock. He endured; he did not know death. On the other hand, the perennality of life in a periodic, eternal regeneration is expressed by the fertile earth, the wood of trees.<sup>15</sup>

As polyvalent, symbols function on all levels of experience and reality: from undeveloped "ciphers" that key into immediate experience on prereflective levels of existence to very complex and sophisticated symbolic expressions found in elaborate forms of mysticism and highly developed systems of metaphysics and theology. Because of the logic, the multivalence, and the unification of symbols, Eliade maintains that there is a structural continuity from the foundational, prereflective,

symbolic manifestation to the elaboration of complex symbolic formulations in the major forms of religious mysticism. But it is important to recognize that the symbolic sacred is manifested and expressed on very different levels of reality. The symbolic formulation of an elaborate ontological system is many levels removed from the immediacy of the foundational experience of the sacred.

In this regard, myth is a rather complex and sophisticated symbolic expression. Religious symbols are put together in narrative form so that these true stories reveal a sacred history of events that took place in sacred time and provide exemplary models for allowing mythic beings to make sense of their mode of being in the world. Mythic symbols, while keying into the immediate experiences of believers, form sacred narratives that function on mythic levels of varying "distances" from the prereflective level of the symbolic cipher.

At the same time, one must guard against interpreting such observations as meaning that mythic people "put together" their religious symbols in narrative form in some arbitrary or completely deliberate and controlled manner; or through some highly rational and intellectual process. The most sophisticated, complex, highly elaborated, even "rational," symbolic myths function on prereflective and non-rational levels of experience. They involve the "total person," including unconscious, conscious, and transconscious levels of experience. They cannot be reduced completely to rational or conceptual analysis. They preserve their own irreducible symbolic "logic," even when not understood by mythic persons. And they express an irreducible symbolic mode of cognition, with the mythic functioning as an autonomous act of creation and revelation.<sup>16</sup> Myths not only are sacred narratives that express symbolically the experiences of the sacred; at times they are themselves hierophanic, founding and revealing sacred meanings and, through a process of mythicization, extending the symbolic process of hierophanization.

#### THE GENERAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF MYTH

Most of the major points in Eliade's formulations of the most general structure and function of myth have already been noted in his general

definition of myth. He proposes the following five characteristics of myth:

In general it can be said that myth, as experienced by archaic societies, (1) constitutes the History of the acts of the Supernaturals; (2) that this History is considered to be absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of the Supernaturals); (3) that myth is always related to a "creation," it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established; this is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts; (4) that by knowing the myth one knows the "origin" of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will; this is not an "external," "abstract" knowledge but a knowledge that one "experiences" ritually, either by ceremonially recounting the myth or by performing the ritual for which it is the justification; (5) that in one way or another one "lives" the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or re-enacted.<sup>17</sup>

This "living" a myth implies a genuinely "religious" experience: "The 'religiousness' of this experience is due to the fact that one re-enacts fabulous, exalting, significant events, once again witnesses the creative deeds of the Supernaturals; one ceases to exist in the everyday world and enters a transfigured, auroral world impregnated with the Supernaturals' presence." "In short, myths reveal that the World, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary."<sup>18</sup>

This last statement points to Eliade's formulation of the major function of myth: "The main function of myth is to determine the exemplar models of all ritual, and of all significant human acts."<sup>19</sup> "Its function is to reveal models and, in so doing, to give a meaning to the World and to human life. This is why its role in the constitution of man is immense. It is through myth . . . that the ideas of *reality*, *value*, *transcendence* slowly dawn. Through myth, the World can be apprehended as a perfectly articulated, intelligible, and significant Cosmos. In telling how things were made, myth reveals by whom and

why they were made and under what circumstances. All of these 'revelations' . . . make up a Sacred History."<sup>20</sup>

As was seen in Eliade's definition of myth and his formulation of the general structure and function of myth, as well as in numerous interpretations of myth presented in earlier chapters, time and history are central to his theory of myth. Mythic time is sacred time, mythic history is sacred history, and as was presented in the illustration of "the symbolism of the center," mythic space is sacred space. The following sections and chapters 8 and 9 will provide a more detailed consideration of Eliade's interpretation of myth, time, and history.

For now we may note a key feature of Eliade's interpretation of mythic time and history that many modern, Western persons, including religious believers, may have difficulty in fully appreciating. In Eliade's interpretation of the nature, structure, function, and meaning of myth, mythic believers actually become contemporaneous with the supernatural beings and other sacred realities described in their myths. We may contrast a typical, less controversial, non-Eliadean interpretation to Eliade's dramatic claim.

It is not difficult to grant that for believers in myth their myths "symbolize," "represent," and "commemorate" events believed to have taken place in mythic time, space, and history. Mythic believers establish complex and widely divergent relations with such represented mythic realities and relate such symbolically expressed events to "ordinary" time and history in various ways.

If we examine mythic traditions interpreted by Eliade as radically ahistorical and even antihistorical, it may be irrelevant or even completely meaningless to some archaic mythic culture for scholars to try to establish precisely when some Supernatural Being or mythical Ancestor performed some exemplary act. It seems a waste of time to try to establish precisely when and where the Polynesian Io uttered the cosmogonic words that brought the world into existence; or when or where New Guinean *dema* type divinities were murdered by mythical Ancestors leading to the creation of the human world and the human condition. Similarly, it may be irrelevant or completely meaningless to some antihistorical or nonhistorical, Hindu, mythic culture for historians and archaeologists to try to establish precisely when and

where Lord Śiva was born, when and where or if the famous battle in the *Bhagavad Gītā* actually took place, and whether there is historical evidence that Lord Kṛṣṇa really was Arjuna's charioteer, as represented in the *Gītā*.

This is not to deny the complexity of temporal and historical relations within such mythic cultures. Even within those mythic cultures that seem to devalue or dismiss the significance and reality of non-mythic time and history, there is often a dynamic, changing, contextual relation between the disclosure of mythical events and "ordinary," secular time and history. The relations not only vary between different religious, mythic cultures but may even change significantly within the same mythic culture in response to changing historical, economic, social, and other conditions.

For example, the usual scholarly approach to Hindu myth and religion, frequently presented by Eliade and other interpreters, has included the assumption that Hindus—unlike Jews, Christians, and Muslims—have little or no interest in empirical, historical, and scientific questions regarding the "factual" basis of the mythical disclosures represented in their sacred narratives. Such questions as to whether Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, or Śiva were "actually" born and engaged in activities at the "historical" times and geographical locations described in myths are usually seen as irrelevant to Hindu, mythic spirituality. But as became evident from the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya in December 1992 and from numerous other episodes of communal death and destruction, millions of contemporary Hindu "fundamentalists" are willing to kill and die over, say, historical claims that the Rāma of their myths was born at a certain place located in the present state of Uttar Pradesh on the same site where a mosque was later constructed.<sup>21</sup>

If we examine the dominant, Western religious traditions usually interpreted as more historical—not the ahistorical, archaic, cosmic structures within Western religions often emphasized by Eliade—chronological, irreversible history is sanctified and taken very seriously in the sacred narratives. It would not be irrelevant to the faith of Orthodox Jews if they learned that Moses was an ahistoric mythic creation or that scientific evidence made highly improbable the claim

that Moses had received the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai at a precise time in the unfolding of historical events, as represented in the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, when serious doubts have been cast on the historical veracity of events portrayed in the sacred narratives of the New Testament and the Koran, traditional Christians and Muslims have usually not ignored or dismissed such questioning as completely irrelevant to their religious beliefs. Indeed, this is evident from the many actions taken by religious authorities over the centuries against perceived dissidents and heretics. This concern continues to be evident from recent cases, such as the Ayatollah Khomeini's issuance of the death sentence on Salman Rushdie's life after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* or steps taken by the Vatican and conservative Protestant institutions to silence liberal clergy and theologians. Millions of people raising questions about some of the factual basis of the Christian and Islamic historical accounts as represented and commemorated in the sacred narratives have been persecuted, excommunicated, and even put to death.

Nevertheless, it is easy to grant that all mythic expressions, in both ahistorical and more historical mythic cultures, point to eternal, trans-historical, sacred truths and realities—regardless of how differently religious cultures view and evaluate time and history—and that myths symbolize, represent, and commemorate those mythic creations and events revealing the sacred.

What makes Eliade's interpretation more striking and controversial is his frequent, dramatic assertions that this approach does not really get at the mythic mode of being in the world and the mythic experience and view of time and history. Repeatedly, Eliade emphasizes that myths do not "represent" or simply "commemorate" the primordial time and the sacred history. In living myths, mythic persons break through and abolish the limits of profane time, space, and history. Mythic believers, through the "reiteration" and "reenactment" of myths, through their participation in rituals and other significant activities based on their superhuman, exemplary mythic models, *actually become contemporaneous* with the Supernatural Beings, Ancestors, and sacred events described in the myths. "What is involved is not a commemoration of mythical events but a reiteration of them." The mythical actors "are

made present, one becomes their contemporary. This also implies that one is no longer living in chronological time, but in the primordial Time, the Time when the event *first took place*." This is the "strong time" of myth, the sacred time "when something *new, strong, and significant* was manifested. To re-experience that time, to re-enact it as often as possible, to witness again the spectacle of the divine works, to meet with the Supernaturals and relearn their creative lesson is the desire that runs like a pattern through all the ritual reiterations of myths."<sup>22</sup>

In reciting the cosmogonic myth, the Polynesian, American Indian, or Southeastern European peasant "returns to the origin," is present at the moment of creation or at the primordial precosmic time before creation, and is renewed by "the perfection of beginnings." The medicinal herb has magico-religious efficaciousness in curing illness because one has knowledge of and participates in the mythic time when supernatural beings first created the sacred plant. The Hindu peasant, when participating in the sacred history narrated in the epic the *Rāmāyaṇa*, relives and becomes contemporaneous with the mythical events describing the dramatic rescue of Sītā by Lord Rāma from the demon Rāvaṇa on the island Lanka. The Jew doesn't simply symbolize and commemorate the Exodus from Egypt; the Jew is spiritually renewed by reenacting and becoming a participant in that sacred history of freedom from slavery. Periodic recurrence signifies that "mythical time is *made present* and then used indefinitely." The time of the mythical event, reenacted through the ritual, "is made *present*, 'represented' so to speak, however far back it may have been in ordinary reckoning. Christ's passion, death and resurrection are not simply *remembered* during the service of Holy Week; they really happen *then* before the eyes of the faithful. And a convinced Christian must feel that he is *contemporary* with these transhistoric events, for, by being reenacted, the time of the theophany becomes actual."<sup>23</sup>

These and similar formulations throughout Eliade's writings on myth raise a basic question: to what extent is Eliade presenting the view of the religious believer in myth and to what extent is he imposing his own value judgments? In the last citation, he clearly indicates that for "a convinced Christian" the mythic time is made present and the mythic

events are relived. Leaving aside the obvious objection that many, if not most, modern Christians will more easily accept an interpretation that they are recalling or commemorating rather than actually being present at Christ's death, many of Eliade's interpretations do not have the explicit qualification "from the mythic person's point of view." Therefore, it is not always clear precisely what Eliade intends when he frequently claims that the mythic person "actually" returns to the perfection of beginnings and is present at the act of primordial creation or "really" meets with the supernatural beings and participates in the original mythical events.

What complicates such questions is the fact that it is clear from his autobiographical and journalistic writings, his often autobiographical literary creations, and his personal observations in scholarly works that Eliade himself believes in not only the possibility but even the necessity of transcending the "ordinary" temporal and historical dimension of existence. Human beings have a desire, need, and capacity to live in the transhistorical, nontemporal, qualitatively different universe of myth, symbol, and the sacred. Eliade frequently makes negative judgments about modern attempts to identify fully with the temporal and the historical and to deny mythic exemplary models of transcendence. Such a mode of existence is evaluated as inhuman, antihuman, alienated, meaningless, and self-defeating.

Nevertheless, it seems best, at least initially, to examine Eliade's interpretations of myth on a descriptive, phenomenological level; to approach Eliade's interpretations as claiming that these are the essential assumptions, beliefs, rituals, significant activities, metaphysics, and ontologies of archaic and other mythic cultures. None of this is meant to deny that in his theory of the structure of myth Eliade presents interpretations that repeatedly go far beyond the perspectives of real, particular, historical, religious, mythic human beings.

### THE COSMOGONIC MYTH

Mircea Eliade places a primary significance on "creation," "origins," and "the perfection of beginnings." Focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on archaic myth and religion, he claims that mythic documents reveal a hierarchical scale of values granting primary

ontological status and central structural and functional role to cosmogonic myths. Eliade's selection, arrangement, description, and interpretation of myths are dependent on the paramount importance that he attributes to the cosmogonic myth, and the key importance he grants other creation and origin myths, usually interpreted as continuing, completing, and often imitating the cosmogony. Eliade claims that "in every case in which we have access to a still living tradition" of a tribal society, what immediately strikes us is not only that the mythology constitutes a "sacred history" but also that "it reveals a hierarchy in the series of fabulous events that it reports. In general, one can say that any myth tells how something came into being, the world, or man, or an animal species, or a social institution, and so on. But by the very fact that the creation of the world precedes everything else, the cosmogony enjoys a special prestige. In fact . . . the cosmogonic myth furnishes the model for all myths of origin. The creation of animals, plants, or man presupposes the existence of a world."<sup>24</sup> As he illustrates:

There is a great variety of cosmogonic myths. However, they can be classified as follows: 1. creation *ex nihilo* (a High Being creates the world by thought, by word, or by heating himself in a steam-hut, and so forth); 2. The Earth Diver Motif (a God sends aquatic birds or amphibious animals, or dives, himself, to the bottom of the primordial ocean to bring up a particle of earth from which the entire world grows); 3. creation by dividing in two a primordial unity (one can distinguish three variants: a separation of Heaven and Earth, that is to say of the World-Parents; b. separation of an original amorphous mass, the "Chaos"; c. the cutting in two of a cosmogonic egg); 4. creation by dememberment of a primordial Being, either a voluntary, anthropomorphic victim (Ymir of the Scandinavian mythology, the Vedic Indian Purusha, the Chinese P'an-ku) or an aquatic monster conquered after a terrific battle (the Babylonian Tiamat).<sup>25</sup>

In several of his books, Eliade uses the example of the Maori, Polynesian cosmogonic myth: "According to this myth, in the beginning there were only the Waters and Darkness. Io, the Supreme God, separated the Waters by the power of thought and of his words,

and created the Sky and the Earth. He said: 'Let the Waters be separated, let the Heavens be formed, let the earth be!' These cosmogonic words of Io's, by virtue of which the World came into existence, are creative words, charged with sacred power. Hence men utter them whenever there is something to *do*, to *create*." Io's cosmogonic words, by which he created the World and brought light from darkness, are repeated by Polynesians during all kinds of rites and activities requiring the creation of light from darkness: implanting a child in a barren womb, curing bodily and mental illness, and overcoming despair on the occasion of death or war.<sup>26</sup>

For Eliade, this "presents direct and incontrovertible testimony concerning the function of the cosmogonic myth in traditional society." This cosmogonic myth serves as the model for every kind of creation. As multivalent, the central myth can be applied on different planes of reference and has the capacity to transform diverse, fragmented experiences of despair into a meaningful, hopeful, creative, unified mythic mode of existence. "An unsuccessful war can be homologized with a sickness, with a dark, discouraged heart, with a sterile woman, with a poet's lack of inspiration, as with any other critical existential situation in which man is driven to despair. And all these negative, desperate, apparently irremediable situations are reversed by recitation of the cosmogonic myth, especially by the words by which Io brought forth the Universe and made light shine in the darkness. In other words, the cosmogony is the exemplary model for every creative situation: whatever man does is in some way a repetition of the preeminent 'deed', the archetypal gesture of the Creator God, the Creation of the World." Eliade adds that the Polynesian cosmogony is the exemplary model for every kind of "doing" not only because it is the ideal model for every creation "but also because the Cosmos is a divine work; hence it is sanctified even in its structure. By extension, whatever is perfect, 'full', harmonious, fertile—in short, whatever is 'cosmicized', whatever resembles a Cosmos—is sacred."<sup>27</sup>

Eliade writes of a lecture he gave at the Philosophers' Congress in Geneva in 1966, in which he presented two cosmogonic myths, the Indonesian and the Australian. He hopes that "the cosmogonic myth's role of exemplary model" was understood. Although he avoided trans-

lating "the lesson of archaic cosmogonic myths" into the language of the philosophers, he states that it is "a matter, naturally, of ontophany, for cosmogony means this: *Being which comes into being*. The birth, the creation of the world is, above all, the appearance of Being, onto-phany. This is why the cosmogonic myth is an exemplary model for all types of *creation*—from the construction of a village or of a house, to the celebration of a marriage or the conception of a child. It is always a matter of a new creation of the world, that is, of a new epiphany of Being." Eliade concludes that this is "a matter, obviously, of a 'primitive' ontology, of a rudimentary metaphysics, if you will—because it reveals the world as an exemplary model of all forms of reality."<sup>28</sup>

Not only is there a great variety of cosmogonic myths, some presented in the relative simplicity and clarity of the Polynesian myth and others highly complex and ambiguous, but mythic peoples evaluate the nature and significance of their own cosmogonic myths and their own sacred histories in radically different ways. An excellent illustration of the complexity and ambiguity of cosmogonic myths can be found in Eliade's lengthy investigation of "The Devil and God: Prehistory of the Romanian Folk Cosmogony."<sup>29</sup> Starting with a Romanian version, Eliade examines numerous variations of the myth of the cosmogonic dive which constitutes the only "folk" cosmogony of Southeastern Europe. The interpreter must attempt to make sense of dualistic versions in which God, deciding to create the Earth, sends his adversary, Satan, to the bottom of the primordial waters to bring back to the surface some of the seed of Earth. As cosmogonic diver, Satan subverts God's instructions, finally surfaces with a little mud under his fingernails, and even attempts to drown God. All of these events are essential for the creation of the Earth and the subsequent nature of the world and the human condition.

Different evaluations of the nature and significance of cosmogonic myths are illustrated by how the Ngaju Dayak of Borneo and other mythic peoples express their deepest nostalgia for reintegration with the primordial totality that existed *before* the creation of the world. Their cosmogonic myth is necessary for breaking up the primeval plenitude and unity and establishing the exemplary sacred history that gives meaning to life in this world. But their major long-

ing is to be reintegrated with the original perfection, the precosmic unhistorical primordiality.<sup>30</sup> Many of Eliade's favorite myths and symbolisms—as expressed in the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the Symplegades, certain contradictory and extremely paradoxical rites of passage and initiations, and certain forms of mysticism—have the goal of abolishing and transcending the dualisms and other manifestations of creation and becoming unified or one with precosmic or acosmic absolute reality.

Eliade admits that not all myths of the creation of the world look like a cosmogonic myth as found in the Polynesian example, the Viṣṇu and other Hindu creation myths, the Akkadian (Mesopotamian) *Enuma Elish*, and the Hebraic narrative in Genesis. But Eliade claims that even in traditions where there is not such a cosmogonic myth, there is always some central myth that describes a primordial history that has a beginning, always mythical events that account for how and why the world began and became what it is today.

There are relatively few cosmogonic myths compared with the huge number of mythical portrayals of the bringing into existence of other creations: the origins of human beings, different animal species, plants and trees and mountains, hunting and agriculture, birth and death, social relations and institutions, the prestige of religious specialists, rites of initiation and all kinds of other significant activities. Eliade often presents such myths of the origins as constituting sacred histories and providing paradigmatic models for anything viewed as significant and meaningful in the life world of mythic believers. Typically, in a hierarchical structural manner, Eliade relates the large number of origin myths to the primacy of the cosmogonic myth:

Every mythical account of the *origin* of anything presupposes and continues the cosmogony. From the structural point of view, origin myths can be homologized with the cosmogonic myth. The creation of the World being the pre-eminent instance of creation, the cosmogony becomes the exemplary model for "creation" of every kind. This does not mean that the origin myth imitates or copies the cosmogonic model, for no concerted and systematized reflection is involved. But every new appearance—an animal, a plant, an institution—implies the existence of a World. Even when it is a matter of explaining how, start-

ing from a different state of things, the present situation was reached (for example, how the Sky was separated from the Earth, or how man became mortal), the "World" was already there, even though its structure was different, though it was not yet *our* world. Every origin myth narrates and justifies a "new situation"—new in the sense that it did not exist *from the beginning of the World*. Origin myths continue and complete the cosmogonic myth; they tell how the world was changed, made richer or poorer.<sup>31</sup>

Eliade attempts to substantiate his interpretation by citing a variety of origin myths employed in healing rituals. In the healing ritual of the tribal Bhils of India, a *mandala*, which is primarily an *imago mundi* representing the Cosmos in miniature and the pantheon, is drawn by the religious specialist or "magician" by the bedside of the patient. The construction of the *mandala* is equivalent to a magical re-creation of the world. The therapeutic value of this ritual operation arises from the fact that the patient is made contemporary with the Creation of the World and "is immersed in the primordial fullness of life; he is penetrated by the gigantic forces that, *in illo tempore*, made the Creation possible." Eliade provides other illustrations of the close connection among the cosmogonic myth, myths of the origin of a sickness and its cure, and rituals of healing among the Navahos, the Tibetan Nakhi, the Assyrians, and other mythic peoples. "As the exemplary model for all 'creation', the cosmogonic myth can help the patient to make a 'new beginning' of his life. The *return to origins* gives the hope of rebirth. Now, all the medical rituals we have been examining aim at a return to origins. We get the impression that for archaic societies life cannot be *repaired*, it can only be *re-created* by a return to sources. And the 'source of sources' is the prodigious outpouring of energy, life, and fecundity that occurred at the Creation of the World."<sup>32</sup>

Eliade summarizes the relations between cosmogonic and origin myths: "First and most important is the fact that the origin myth frequently begins with a sketch of the cosmogony: the myth briefly summarizes the essential moments of the Creation of the World and then goes on to relate the genealogy of the royal family or the history of the tribe or the history of the origin of sicknesses and remedies, and so

on. In all these cases the origin myths continue and complete the cosmogonic myth." Origin myths are dependent on the cosmogonic myth because of the relation of "beginnings," with the absolute "beginning" being the Creation of the World. "It is not enough to *know* the 'origin', it is necessary to re-establish the moment when such-and-such a thing was created. This finds expression in 'going back' until the original, strong, sacred Time is recovered." And "recovering the primordial Time, which alone can ensure the complete renewal of the Cosmos, of life, and of society, is brought about primarily by re-establishing the 'absolute beginning', that is, the Creation of the World." In short, cosmogonies "serve as the model for all kinds of 'creations.'"<sup>33</sup>

### MYTHS OF ORIGINS

The relation of origin myths to the cosmogonic myth is usually not so simple as has just been presented. Eliade acknowledges that many mythic cultures, including some with clear cosmogonic myths, actually show little interest in the cosmogony. This is clear from his numerous studies of the phenomenon of the *deus otiosus* in which the Creator God withdraws, becomes passive, and is devalued and even forgotten by the mythic believers. For example, what interests the Aranda of Central Australia and many other mythic peoples is what occurred in mythic time and history *after* the "original" creation. The later creations by mythical ancestors, heroes, and other supernatural beings constitute sacred histories that have more of an existential primordality and relevance. Such sacred histories provide paradigmatic models that relate directly to the desires, needs, crises, rites, and activities of the lived world of *homo religiosus*. What the mythical ancestors did constitutes a cosmogony, although not a cosmogony properly speaking in the strict sense of the original creation of the world. Instead, one has the sense of later mythic creations that brought into existence worlds that look more like the worlds in which the mythic believers live. In such cases, believers are concerned with the recovery, through the exemplary models and their periodic reenactments, of what occurred in the sacred histories after creation.<sup>34</sup>

This same general mythic structure—in which the original cosmogonic myth becomes devalued or forgotten and more existentially

relevant myths focus on what occurred after the creation of the world—applies also to sacred histories that account for the origin of human beings. Eliade sums up his examination of the majority of primitive myths relative to the creation of the human being: "Everywhere, the myth presents the creation (or the appearance: in a subterranean region, in the sky, etc.) of a primordial man, more or less perfect (that is, at first, immortal). But the origin of man does not explain the current situation of humanity. Man becomes mortal, sexed, in conflict with the animal world, condemned to work, etc.—following an event or a series of events that took place in the mythical epoch. That means that for primitives, as for the Judeo-Christian tradition, man as he is now is not only the work of God, but also the result of certain events that constitute a history ('mythical', to be sure, but history all the same)."<sup>35</sup>

In this regard, Eliade emphasizes "distinctions made by the primitives between the two sorts of *primordality*: the *primordium* dominated by the Supreme Being (who is often transformed into *deus otiosus*) and the primordial in which the mythical ancestors or other inferior beings are manifested and created. Archaic man (not only he) is interested especially in this second *primordium*: what took place then marked him profoundly; he is the result of the events of this mythical period." Already in archaic mythic culture, the mythic believer thus feels "linked with a mythical history, and tends to forget, or neglect, the ontophanies, the creative manifestations of the supreme Gods which reveal being."<sup>36</sup>

Some of the most interesting mythic illustrations of the primary focus on what occurred after the cosmogony can be seen in Eliade's treatment of myths of "the murdered divinity," a genre especially characteristic of myths of the palaeo-cultivators of tubers. Eliade's most detailed illustration is from A. E. Jensen's interpretation of the famous New Guinean myth of Hainuwele and the *dema* type divinities. Without describing the specific myths of the murdered divinities, we may simply mention a few of their major features. Unlike the Creator Gods who become *dei otiosi*, disappear, and leave a gap to be filled by other mythical figures, the violent death of these divinities at the hands of mythical Ancestors is creative: "Murdered *in illo tempore*, the divinity survives in the rites by which the murder is periodically re-enacted; or,

in other cases, he survives primarily in the living forms (animals, plants) that sprang from his body." The murder of these divinities is not cosmogonic, since they appeared on earth after the creation of the world. These divinities were then murdered after a very limited existence in mythic time, and their violent tragic death became creative and was essential for constituting the human world and the human condition.<sup>37</sup>

These origin myths account for the human condition, plants and animals, death, puberty initiations, blood sacrifices, and other significant aspects of the mythic culture. What is "essential" is fixed not at the cosmogony but at a later moment in the sacred history: "A mythic Time is still involved, but it is no longer the 'first' Time, what we may call the 'cosmogonic' Time. The 'essential' is no longer bound up with an *ontology* (how the World—the real—came into being) but with a *History*. It is a History at once divine and human, for it is the result of a drama acted out by the Ancestors of men and by Supernatural Beings different in type from the all-powerful, immortal Creator Gods." These divinities "die," but they survive in their creations. Their "death at the hands of the mythical Ancestors changed not only *their* mode of being but the mode of being of *mankind*. From the time of the primordial murder an indissoluble relation arose between Divine Beings of the *dema* type and men."<sup>38</sup>

Stating that these are "the first pathetic and tragic myths," later followed by other pathetic and violent mythologies of the ancient Near East, Eliade makes the striking claim that "the celestial Supreme Being and Creator recovers his religious activity only in certain pastoral cultures (especially among the Turco-Mongols) and in the monotheism of Moses, in the reform of Zarathustra, and in Islam." "What must be stressed is the fact that the great mythologies of Euro-Asiatic polytheism, which correspond to the first historical civilizations, are increasingly concerned with what happened *after* the Creation of the Earth, and even after the creation (or the appearance) of man. The accent is now on what *happened to* the Gods and no longer on what they *created*."<sup>39</sup>

We have presented a few of the numerous passages from Eliade that emphasize the primary mythic focus on origins, but not on the primacy

of the creation of the world. This can easily lead to the criticisms raised by other theorists of myth that Eliade overemphasizes the paramount role of the cosmogonic myth as the exemplary model for all significant deeds and creations; that he has granted to the cosmogonic myth an ontological status, structure, and function not justified by the totality of the mythic data. One wonders, for example, about the fundamental, axiomatic teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, in the Pali Canon in which he shows little interest in cosmogonies. Indeed, he warns that such metaphysical and theological speculations about the origin of the world are a waste of time and "tend not toward edification." One may also question whether the Indian and Gnostic eschatologies or the Hebraic eschatology considered in the next section can be interpreted primarily as "moving" the cosmogony to the future.

### ESCHATOLOGICAL MYTHS

An obvious objection to Eliade's structural emphasis on the paramount, exemplary, mythic significance of the cosmogony and his focus on other myths of origins is that many religions seem to emphasize eschatological myths. Not only is there a shift from the cosmogonic myth to other myths of origins revealing what occurred in mythic time after the creation of the world. There are religious cultures in which the primary mythic emphasis is not so much on what occurred in the past as on what will occur in the future; not so much on the creation of the world as on the end of the world. Eliade devotes considerable time to interpreting these end-of-the-world myths and to establishing a relation between cosmological and eschatological myths so that he can maintain his theory of the structural and functional primacy of the cosmogony.

To put Eliade's position in somewhat oversimplified terms: the mythic focus on the cosmogony and origins, with the idea of the "perfection of beginnings," becomes "movable" and is shifted from the primordial past to the timeless future. Without denying that something radically new has occurred, he maintains that the same, essential mythic intuitions and constructions of exemplary meaningful worlds seen in the symbolic narrative reenactments of sacred cosmogonies, with renewal through the recovery of the primordial sacred, may be detected

in eschatological myths. Eschatologies, in their essential structures, can be understood as cosmogonies of the future.

In New Year and other cosmogonic and origin mythic-ritual scenarios, there is the idea that the sacred "beginning" can be recovered only through the destruction or end of the old, worn out, degenerate, corrupt world:

In proportion as the cosmic cycle became longer, the idea of the perfection of the beginnings tended to imply a complementary idea: that, *for something genuinely new to begin, the vestiges and ruins of the old cycle must be completely destroyed*. In other words, to obtain an *absolute* beginning, the end of a World must be total. Eschatology is only the prefiguration of a cosmogony to come. But every eschatology insists on this fact: the New Creation cannot take place before this world is abolished once and for all. There is no question of regenerating what has degenerated; nothing will serve but to destroy the old world so that it can be re-created *in toto*. The obsession with the bliss of the beginnings demands the destruction of all that has existed—and hence has degenerated—since the beginning of the World; there is no other way to restore the initial perfection.<sup>40</sup>

Eliade attempts to substantiate this thesis through his interpretation of many myths of the End of the World. The end occurred in the mythic past or will occur in the mythic future.<sup>41</sup> In his general interpretation of archaic myths, there is the repetitious, cyclical structure of mythical beginnings followed by ends that are then followed by the renewal of new beginnings. This is usually seen as homologized and integrated with the "natural," cosmic cycles of the seasons, the lunar rhythms, and vegetation. In addition, archaic cultures have myths of the End of the World—not of a "natural end" of the World but of a catastrophe brought on by divine beings. Such catastrophes are most prevalent in flood myths, but there are many other archaic myths portraying cosmic cataclysms destroying the world and almost all of humankind. In archaic cultures, myths describing the End of the World in the past are much more prevalent than those describing some future end. In all cases, the end of the old degraded world, the return to some primordial

chaos, is followed by the re-creation of a new world. In short, a new cosmogony recovers the perfection of the beginning.

After considering innovations in End of the World myths from India and other mythic cultures, Eliade turns to the obvious challenge of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic images in their eschatological visions. He readily grants that there is much that is radically different from the archaic mythic world. Just as the cosmogony occurred only once, so will the End of the World. No longer in the circular time of eternal return, sacred time has become linear and irreversible, and the eschatology will represent the final triumph of the sacred history. There will be a final divine judgment with the restoration of paradise and eternal bliss for those who have remained true to the sacred history. But for all of these radical innovations, Eliade reaffirms the same general structure: that the "Cosmos that will reappear after the catastrophe will be the same Cosmos that God created at the beginning of Time, but purified, regenerated, restored to its original glory." What is most essential is not the end of the world but the mythic certainty of a new beginning. Thus the primary mythic relation to the exemplary cosmogony is maintained.<sup>42</sup>

Many scholars have charged that here and elsewhere Eliade has partially acknowledged, but greatly underestimated, the radical changes and significance of the Hebraic views of myth, time, and history. His interpretations of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic visions of the End of the World are often seen by these critics as another example of privileging and generalizing an archaic mythic orientation.

### MYTHIC RENEWAL

Renewal is central to Eliade theory of the essential structure and function of myth.<sup>43</sup> He maintains that "the periodical renewal of the World has been the most frequent mythico-ritual scenario in the religious history of humanity."<sup>44</sup> Eliade emphasizes how mythic persons long for spiritual renewal through the abolition of meaningless profane time and the total regeneration of sacred time.<sup>45</sup> The cosmogonic myth has ontological and structural primacy because it allows for total renewal through the recovery of the absolute perfection of the sacred beginning. Myths of origin, say, of medicinal plants have a

special status among certain mythic cultures because returning to the strong time of the creation of the sacred plant is efficacious in allowing for the curing of disease and renewal of life. An end of the world myth has special prestige in a particular eschatology because such a complete destruction is necessary for the total renewal of a new cosmic creation including the spiritual renewal of human beings.

The theme of renewal is central to Eliade's critique of modernity. As will be seen in chapter 11, he claims that Western, secular life, in consciously denying the mythic and the sacred, is in a state of profound crisis, unable to cope with its experiences of meaninglessness, anxiety, death, and "the terror of history." At the same time, modern human beings have the possibility for dealing with their existential crises and for experiencing a cultural renewal if they open up to and revalorize the essential symbols and myths of the sacred that allow for the constitution of meaningful, significant, coherent life worlds.

In his analysis of hierophanies and the dialectic of the sacred, the structures of religious symbolism, the structure and function of myth, and the theme of mythical renewal, Eliade has presented some strong judgments involved in the mythic view of history. In Eliade's interpretation, the mythic person views homogeneous, irreversible, ordinary, profane time and history as without significant meaning. By contrast, the sacred time and history of myth and religion are significant and meaningful. What is ordinarily part of profane time and history can become part of a coherent, significant world of meaning only when it is experienced through superhuman, exemplary, transcendent, mythic and other sacred structures.

Such strong judgments have proven controversial. The next chapter will explore Eliade's attitudes toward and interpretations of time and history, especially in relation to his theory of myth, as well as criticisms of his treatment of the historical dimension of myth.

## NOTES

1. For example, Eliade writes in his preface to the English edition of *The Forbidden Forest*, "I said to myself that my spiritual equilibrium, the condition indispensable to any creativity, is assured by this oscillation between research of a scientific nature and literary imagination" (p. vi).

2. *Journal 1*, p. 150. Eliade continues with the observation that "psychologizers," "realists," and other commentators and analyzers have ignored the "metaphysical dignity" and theology "revealed by narration as such." Eliade writes: "I maintain, as on so many other occasions, the 'irreplaceability' of the narrative novel, the so-called novel-novel, which fills the place of myths for the modern world" (p. 145).

3. *Journal 3*, pp. 278, 283-84.

4. "Preface," *The Forbidden Forest*, pp. vii-viii.

5. "Cosmogonic Myth and 'Sacred History,'" *Quest*, pp. 74-75. This chapter in *Quest* was first published in *Religious Studies* 2 (1967): 171-83.

6. *Quest*, pp. 72-73.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

8. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 8-12.

9. *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

10. William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," in *Sacred Narratives*, pp. 5-29; Lauri Honko, "The Problem of Defining Myth," in *Sacred Narrative*, pp. 41-52; G. S. Kirk, "On Defining Myth," in *Sacred Narratives*, pp. 53-61.

11. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 5-6.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

13. Of course, Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists would fully agree with Eliade's interpretation that for traditional, religious, mythic persons "essence precedes existence." Their disagreement arises from diametrically opposed evaluations. For the secular existentialists, the traditional, essentialized metaphysical and religious views are illusory and express human self-alienation, inauthentic existence, and escapes from reality. Sartre's most famous formulation of existence precedes essence appeared in a 1945 lecture which was published the next year as *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* and *Existentialism and Humanism*. This lecture has been reproduced in numerous anthologies and edited texts. See, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947), pp. 14-38.

14. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 92-93. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade writes: "We must add that, for the traditional societies, all the important acts of life were revealed *ab origine* by the gods or heroes. Men only repeat these exemplary and paradigmatic gestures *ad infinitum*" (p. 32).

15. *No Souvenirs*, p. 208.

16. See, for example, *Patterns*, p. 426, for Eliade's analysis of myth as an autonomous act of creation and revelation.

17. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 18-19.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

19. *Patterns*, p. 410. In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade asserts that "the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities—diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom." (p. 8).

20. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 144-45. *The Myth of the Eternal Return* contains many illustrations of the claim that the primary function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all rituals and all significant human activities.

21. In a similar way, I was not prepared for major mythic responses I encountered in Sri Lanka in 1985-1986. Sinhala Buddhist myths such as stories of the Buddha coming to Sri Lanka as a conqueror and mythical incidents in the Sri Lankan Chronicles were presented as historical fact, were used to legitimate the killing of Tamil Hindus in the civil war, and often seemed to contradict what I had always accepted as the basic teachings of the Buddha. The Sinhala Buddhist mythic constructions, identifying language with race with nationality with religion, made historical claims but seemed insulated from historical, archaeological, and scientific counterevidence presented by modern scholars. In my chapter in *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia*, I analyzed the nature, meaning, and significance of such Buddhist mythic constructions and their complex and often contradictory relation to history. See Douglas Allen, "Religious-Political Conflict in Sri Lanka: Philosophical Considerations," in *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia: India Pakistan, and Sri Lanka*, ed. Douglas Allen (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishers, 1992; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 181-203. For an excellent study of complex mythic-historical relations, see Gananath Obeyesekere, "Dufthagamani and the Buddhist Conscience," in *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia*, pp. 135-60.

22. *Myth and Reality*, p. 19.

23. *Patterns*, pp. 392-93. "This contemporaneity with the great moments of myth is an indispensable condition for any form of magico-religious efficaciousness" (p. 393).

24. *Quest*, p. 75.

25. Mircea Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 83. (The one-volume paperback edition was published in 1977 as *From Primitives to Zen* and later as *Essential Sacred Writings From Around the World*.)

26. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 30-31. For this Polynesian cosmogonic account, Eliade cites E. S. C. Handy, *Polynesian Religion* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 34, 1927), pp. 10-11. A more complete version of Io and the Maori cosmogony appears in *From Primitives to Zen*, pp. 86-87, in which Eliade uses Hare Hongi, "A Maori Cosmogony," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 16 (1907): 113-14. See also *From Primitives to Zen*, pp. 14-15, *Eternal Return*, pp. 82-83, *Sacred and Profane*, p. 82, and *Patterns*, p. 410.

27. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 31-33.

28. *No Souvenirs*, pp. 290-91.

29. See Zalmoxis: *The Vanishing God*, pp. 76-130.

30. See *Quest*, pp. 77-81. Eliade's source is Hans Schäfer, *Ngaju Religion: The Conception of God among a South Borneo People*, trans. Rodney Needham (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963). See the selections on Ngaju Dayak religion in *From Primitives to Zen*, pp. 155-58, 165-70, 170-73. For Eliade's emphasis on the desire for reintegration with the primordial totality, see esp. pp. 169-70, 170-73.

31. *Myth and Reality*, p. 21.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-30.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

34. *Quest*, pp. 82-87. In providing this interpretation of the Aranda, Eliade primarily uses the writings of T. G. H. Strehlow, esp. "Personal Monototemism in a Polytemic Community," *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*, Vol. 2, ed. Elke Haberland (Munich: K. Renner, 1964), pp. 723-54, and *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947). Eliade's *Australian Religions: An Introduction* contains numerous illustrations of this primary focus on sacred histories describing later mythic creations. Key sections focusing on the Aranda illustration appear in *Australian Religions*, pp. 29-34, 39-41, 44-53, 57-59.

35. *No Souvenirs*, p. 207.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 287-88. Eliade writes: "Just as the 'primitives' considered themselves the result not of creation by the gods but of the activity of primordial heroes (the mythical Ancestors, the civilizing Heroes)," mythic persons of Greek culture situated themselves as dependent "on what had happened to certain heroes in the fabled times of the beginnings, Theseus, Oedipus, Creon, and the others" (pp. 284-85).

37. *Myth and Reality*, pp. 99-107. See Mircea Eliade and Ioan P. Couliano, *The Eliade Guide to World Religions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), pp. 53-54, 189-90.

38. *Myth and Reality*, p. 108.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-11.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

41. See chap. 4, "Eschatology and Cosmogony," in *Myth and Reality*, pp. 54-74.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-67.

43. See chap. 3, "Cosmic and Eschatological Renewal," in *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, pp. 125-59.

44. *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, p. 158. This theme of renewal appears in all of Eliade's writings on myth. See chap. 3, "Myths and Rites of Renewal," in *Myth and Reality*, pp. 39-53.

45. See chap. 2, "Sacred Time and Myths," in *Sacred and Profane*, pp. 68-113; chap. 9, "Sacred Time and the Myth of Eternal Renewal," in *Patterns*, pp. 388-409.

## CHAPTER 8

## Eliade's Antihistorical Attitudes

Central to Eliade's interpretation of myth is his interpretation of history. Mythic history is sacred history and is distinguished from profane, temporal, irreversible history. Chapters 8 and 9 on "myth and history" could just as easily be entitled "myth, time, and history." Eliade often uses "history," "time," "historicity," and "temporality," interchangeably. His interpretation of the sacred mythic view of profane history emphasizes its reaction to the view of humans as limited, conditioned, temporal beings.<sup>1</sup>

We have already seen many formulations of Eliade's interpretations of myth, time, and history. For example, Eliade analyzes the sacred-profane relation and the dialectic of the sacred as disclosing universal structures in terms of which a natural, temporal, historical phenomenon is transformed and burst open to reveal supernatural, eternal, trans-historical dimensions of reality. He analyzes the structure and function of myth, the primacy of the cosmogonic myth, and the importance of origins as ways that mythic peoples renew their lives and the world by abolishing limiting conditions of profane time and history.

Chapters 8 and 9 present different aspects of Eliade's approach to myth, time, and history. In the present chapter, I examine his personal attitudes toward history and historical time, dividing the presentation into two parts. First, Eliade's autobiographical reflections are presented: antihistorical expressions about his own life; his own experiences, fears, goals, and attitudes toward myth, history, and historical time. Second, Eliade's personal scholarly interpretations are considered: his interpretation of the antihistorical attitudes of mythic persons toward myth, time, and history. Finally, I examine interpretations