Charles E. Vernoff
Cornell College, Iowa

Mircea Eliade and the Fundamental Structures of Religious Life

Within the past generation, the academic study of religion has begun to move toward crystallization of a differentiated and formalized academic discipline—a *religiologie* by any other name, although current practitioners would shrink from the boldness of the term. The study of religion has yet to progress to confident avowal of its *logos* such as Auguste Comte provided for *sociologie* in his 1837 christening of that modern discipline. Advance toward such a declaration of autonomy nonetheless gathers momentum, prodded especially by the emergence of departments of religious studies within secular American universities during the past two decades.[1] No scholar has been more instrumental in this advance than Mircea Eliade, just retired from a quarter century of service at the University of Chicago. Eliade, his colleagues and his students have sought to establish the "history of religions" as nothing less than an autonomous discipline endowed with its own methods and exhibiting its own integrity; and indeed, at least within the English-speaking world, the term now enjoys a certain indelible association with the Chicago school.

To be sure, critique of Eliade's approach to the study of religion has never been lacking and, with the proximity of his retirement, has waxed measurably stronger. Faulted on occasion for deficiency or misuse of ethnographic data, Eliade has been especially taken to task for the tendentious nature of his analytic schema."[2] His own Romanian Orthodox worldview has convincingly been cited as a source of his inclination to interpret all religion in terms of archaic paradigms. Yet, notwithstanding the aptness of this criticism, an alternate appraisal of

1. See my article "Naming the Game: A Question of the Field," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion*, 14/4 (October, 1983), 109-113.
2. See, for example, Ninian Smart's critique in *Numen* 25/2.

Eliade's contribution is possible and even necessary. On this view, his schema for the "history of religions is less history than morphology, less empirical determination than structural insight, less field practice than visionary theory. In this case, Eliade need not be construed as having foreclosed cognizance of developmental religious differences in favor of a bias toward the uniformities of the archaic religious experience. Rather, his project may be identified as a positive effort to disclose fundamental structures of religious life whose manifestations no doubt vary under diverse historical conditions. But Eliade might merely have stressed abiding foundations instead of historical diversifications, leaving closer study of the latter to his heirs.

The burden of this paper will be to demonstrate that Eliade's analysis does indeed yield a coherent and systematic theoretical schema which, although derived from the archaic religious situation, offers a basis for understanding emergent modalities of the "great traditions" as well. A preliminary example may suffice to indicate that categories for tracing the various developments out of archaic religious life must, however, be discovered independently of Eliade's schema. What Eliade actually provides, then, is a theoretical basis for interpreting the *statics* of religion; the *dynamics* of religion must be apprehended in other ways, despite Eliade's own willingness to treat such dynamics in his characteristic terms. If not inherently reductive, though, these terms at best allow for a less than complete depiction of developmental change and structural variation in religion. But this is hardly to detract from Eliade's achievement. It is quite enough for one career, however distinguished, to chart one major aspect of human religion. And through the very power of his theoretical vision, Eliade could even have laid the groundwork for a more ramified and elaborated *religiologie* for which his "history of religions" is a well-wrought, if necessarily unfinished, prototype. At present it may be enough to suggest that significant elements of an incipient religiological theory can in fact be adduced from the sources of Eliade's ideas.

1. Towards a Definition of Religion

Myth and religion have long been recognized as so closely intertwined that comprehending one requires insight into the nature of the other. The philosopher Michael Novak notes that *mythos* in its elementary Greek sense can simply mean "story." He suggests that

religion consists in the stories that human groups and individuals tell themselves in order to understand and define their relationship to the wider reality wherein they find themselves emplaced. Religion would thus express *the inherent function of human consciousness by which this consciousness becomes oriented to the universal and particular conditions of human existence that environ it.* In this general sense, at least, every person has some kind of "story." Everyone must establish some orientation to experience in order to function coherently, even if that orientation be solipsism, nihilism or an existential question mark. Reflective philosophers must arrive at their stories, however sophisticated, no less than preliterate tribesfolk. The need for *some* orientation to space and time, life and death, humanity and world, self and other, knowable and unknowable is fundamental and universal for self-conscious beings:

> Not to have any story to live out is to experience nothingness, the primal formlessness of human life below the threshold of narrative structuring.[3]

Mircea Eliade both concretizes and enlarges this notion of religion as orientation. For Eliade religion begins when some point in space becomes apprehended as standing out from all others. By defining the "center of the world," this point establishes the very possibility of orientation, i.e., of reference itself. Before that moment of apprehension—a developmental threshold in the history of consciousness—all was homogeneous. Thus nothing specific could be identified, and so identification as such did not yet exist. A being could not even exist for itself as fully self identified and self-aware: hence properly human. Then somehow the phylogenic breakthrough occurs in which a particular locus—a rock or mountain, a river, a tree struck by lightning — stands out as qualitatively different from everything else, extraordinary, manifestation of another order of being. This nonhomogeneous locus, perceived as essentially "other" and hence sacred, marks a fixed reference point around which a system of orientation, a human *Lebenswelt* a cosmos may extend itself. With a single reference point fixed, reference as such has entered into consciousness and may be propagated

3. Michael Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove: An Invitation to Religious Studies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 52.

so as to establish frames of reference for space, for time, for community, ultimately for the self as an individual locus shaped by internalization of reference. Understanding religion as the primordial source of reference, Eliade by implication discloses it as the very origin of self-consciousness. Although doubtless anticipated by some vague, incipient awareness of the distinction between "other" and self, the moment of *hierophany* (the appearance of the sacred) registers the decisive watershed between prehuman and human consciousness. Only the articulation of fixed reference, allowing genuine orientation to crystallize within a communally defined "world," enables the prehuman being eventually to internalize reference and thus enter into self-consciousness as a genuinely human being. For archaic man, still precariously near the brink of the prehuman, the fixity of reference umbilically secures the possibility of life itself:

> Religious man thirsts for *being*. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness. The unknown space that extends beyond his world—an uncosmicized because unconsecrated space, a mere amorphous extent into which no orientation has yet arisen—for religious man, this profane space represents absolute nonbeing. If, by some evil chance, he strays into it, he feels emptied of his ontic substance, as if he were dissolving in Chaos, and he finally dies.[4]

2. The System of General Orientation

The identity of the object which *religiologie* studies has now been adumbrated as "the orientational function", constitutive of self-conscious, that is, personal, existence. To study religion is to investigate both the workings and the resultant products of this function. The foregoing considerations, moreover, tentatively situate *religiologie* within the academy in the company of linguistics: between psychology, on the one hand, and anthropology, on the other. Some movement towards self-consciousness would necessarily initiate ascent towards the phylogenic threshold of *hierophany*. The human psyche proper originates in this first inarticulate stirring towards awareness of self as distinct from environment, including other selves. Yet true objecti-

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4. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* ("Harvest Books;" New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p. 64.

fication of the self for itself becomes possible only with objectification of a *Lebenswelt* within which a self may assume a fully oriented, ontologically self-comprehended existence. Self and world are mutually articulated, interdependent and correlative functional constructs.[5] Taking Eliade's historical phenomenology of consciousness seriously leads to the recognition that only with establishment of orientation may true human existence be realized. Orientation manifests through emergence of a *mythos*, an articulation of the structure of an environing reality which defines, accounts for and interprets the significance of all its aspects. This "story" is a dense referential matrix which may weave itself around a group's ontological reference point once that locus has become fixed. As it emerges, a *mythos* begins to function as determinative infrastructure that lends implicit intelligibility and coherence to all the manifold activities of human life. This complex of activities makes up a group's culture, the immediate object of study for anthropology as a social science.

A phylogenic perspective confirms the intimate association between *religiologie* and its cognate disciplines, as well as delineating their mutual boundaries. Eliade's phrase "Dissolving in Chaos" recalls the Freudian "oceanic" Id within which insanity and mysticism wholly or partly dissolve the ego. Psychosis is not inaccurately described as loss of the fixed reference point around which conscious psychic existence organizes itself. Eliade's seminal *religiologie* implies that the intrapsychic fixed reference point, an ego, has its remote origin in an interpsychic fixed reference point, the "sacred center." As a paradigmatic collective reference point gradually becomes individually appropriated and internalized through the course of phylogenic events, individual beings become fully self-conscious and thus "humanized." As the same collective reference point allows crystallization of a *mythos* that commences its function as organizing infrastructure for corporate life, all the activities of life become coherent through relation with it. Psychology therefore investigates the *internalization* of reference. Anthropology investigates the *externalization* of reference. And *religiologie* studies the elaboration of reference itself into a *system*

5. Various theorists have treated the problem of relation between self and world. A notable example is Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), especially Chapters 1 and 2.

of general orientation—basis of any mythos, world view or "story". These three disciplinary domains, coeval at the primal nexus of human emergence, remain intimately related, often entwined, yet finally distinguishable.

3. Elements of the System

The basic structure of a system of general orientation exhibits four paradigmatic elements, implicit in Eliade's analysis of archaic religion. Each element constitutes an essential dimension of self-conscious existence. First among these is the *hierophany*, which establishes the possibility of knowing and thus allows the epistemological constitution of self-conscious existence:

> It must be said at once that the religious experience of the nonhomogeneity of space is a primordial experience. . . . It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation . . . .The manifestation of the sacred . . . founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center.[6]

Without the existence of reference, the world cannot be known in any human sense. To establish reference within space precipitates conscious emergence of what Kant called the outer and inner forms of apperception, namely spatial and temporal cognition. With this the frontier between prehuman and human epistemological structure has been traversed.

The establishment of epistemological reference in turn induces the ontological constitution of self-conscious existence:

> Where the break-through from plane to plane has been effected by a hierophany, there too an opening has been made either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the

6. Eliade, pp. 20-21.

> dead). The three cosmic levels—earth, heaven, underworld—have been put in communication. . . this communication is sometimes expressed through the image of a universal pillar, *axis mundi*.[7]

The onset of knowing demands apprehension of being, initially through the structuring of space. A reference point extended, as it were, in both vertical directions articulates space into the three domains of above, here, and below. The realm above is regularly identified with the abode of "real" being which confers form, meaning, authenticity and legitimation upon "this" realm. Dwelling above, the gods furnish the *archetypes* that render human existence real. Just as epistemological reference was required in order that humans might "know", so ontological reference is required in order that humans might "be". Once cognizant of his existence, it seems, man intuits that he cannot truly "be" without reference to something beyond himself which sets forth the conditions of his being. Lacking such reference, he would feel ontologically disoriented. The archetypic patterns defined by the gods give form to human existence, provide ideal modalities with which persons may strive to make their lives substantively conform. In the absence of such divine models, traditional man would feel his life to be formless and dissolving into Chaos. Only existence in alignment with the ways of the gods possesses real "being."

Once articulation of being occurs, a realm within which actual human existence can be pursued may extend itself. Traditional man experiences the basic structure of his lived existence in terms of the opposition between *sacred* space, the cosmicized realm around the sacred center, and *profane* space, the uncosmicized chaos beyond:

> This behavior is documented on every plane of religious man's existence, but it is particularly evident in his desire to move about only in a sanctified world, that is, in a sacred space. . . . One of the outstanding characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. The former is the world (more precisely, our world), the cosmos; everything outside it is no longer a cosmos but a sort of "other world", a

7. *Ibid.*

foreign, chaotic space, people by ghost, demons, "foreigners" (who are assimilated to demons and the souls of the dead).[8]

Generation of a sacred space thus effects the axiological constitution of self-conscious being by establishing reference for valuing. Proximity to the sacred establishes the paradigm for positive value, as alienation from the sacred sets the paradigm for negative value. Internalization of these paradigms fosters primal apprehension of "good" and "evil".

The constitution of knowing, being and valuing enables apprehension of "the world" and the possibility of becoming situated within it through reference to space and time, form and substance, good and evil—epistemologically, ontologically, valuationally. A final element must be specified, however, in order for self-conscious existence to unfold within the world thus constituted. That element is behavior itself, human doing, which is constituted through myth. Actual events in progress, concrete human experiences, become coherently related to the structure of the world by means of myth. For traditional man, experience finds its rationale through connection with the activities of the gods at the time of origins, *illud tempus* in Eliade's technical usage. Myths provide an account of these activities. The supreme myth in any tradition is the story of the founding of the world, the cosmogonic myth. Myths, in explaining origins of activities, invest actions with reality and meaning by causing them to resonate with the ultimate cosmogonic time of origins when the true being of everything was manifested. Myths constitute the paradigms which authenticate, mandate and make intelligible all programs of action. They thus establish reference for human behaviour, providing a standard for interpreting the significance of anything a person does. In bespeaking the human need to apprehend antecedent conditions of experience, myth anticipates the understanding of events as effects arising from logically determinable causes.

Taken together, hierophany, archetypes, sacrality and myth constitute the basic functional dimensions of self-conscious existence as *knowing*, *being*, *valuing* and *doing*. Each of these functions becomes

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

constituted through the establishment of "fixed reference points" which together lend form to self-conscious existence—which, indeed, *are* the form in virtue of which existence can *become* self-conscious. As the basic structure of a system of general orientation, these elements constitute the infrastructure of self-consciousness itself. The elemental status of these functions in defining humanness may be attested by their parallel in the traditional branches of Western philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, logic. Philosophy is the vehicle for human progress in reflective self-consciousness, for man's "knowing that he knows." It is not unreasonable, therefore, that philosophy should have discovered and ultimately constituted itself as abstract reflection upon the four elemental functions of self-conscious existence.

4. The Major Religions

Mircea Eliade directs his attention chiefly to general structures of religion evident in the life of traditional societies. His emphasis on preliterate tribes aligns his work closely with cultural anthropology, to which he stands in debt together with other pioneers of *religiologie*. Cultural anthropologists, by and large, decline to contrast the worldviews of preliterate peoples qualitatively with those of ostensibly "advanced" civilizations; and it is certainly incontestable that any separate treatment of the latter must trace their development from the basic structure of the system of general orientation. Eliade himself admirably follows such principles. On this point, however, the tradition of historical sociology rooted in Hegel and Max Weber joins in fundamental dispute with cultural anthropology. Sociology stresses the centrality of acknowledging *bona fide* developmental difference for any understanding of religion. Theoreticians such as Talcott Parsons insist that the qualitative character of a society's religious worldview bears the indelible imprint of its social and technological evolution.[9] Religion and social change are intimately bound together. Parsons even speaks conversely of "breakthroughs" in worldview that allow for upward leaps in development and the expediting of social rationalization. From the debate within the social sciences it is evident, in any case, that no scholar may simply neglect the imperative of coming to terms with the distinctiveness of the so-called "major religions,"

9. See Talcott Parsons, *Societies: An Evolutionary Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

that elect group of no more than a dozen "advanced" traditions spawned by the Semitic, Aryan and Sinitic peoples. The pressing issue for any incipient *religiologie* is whether the major traditions differ from others in terms of any essential *religious* characteristics.

The phenomenon of religious conversion suggests that essential differences may indeed exist between the major religions and others. In religious conversion, a person voluntarily adopts a worldview originating in a culture not his own because he feels it directly addresses his own spiritual needs, conforming to his deepest intuitions about the nature of reality. Such a worldview thereby displays a capacity to appeal to human beings across cultural boundaries. How is such authentic transcultural appeal possible? Real conversion may not be compared with the formal deference shown by ancient polytheists to local alien gods. Nor does it resemble mere fascination with the alien, exotic or mysterious of the sort that fosters occultisms of all kinds. Most significantly, conversion is not attested and may scarcely be imagined within the community of preliterate traditions. A Pueblo Indian would not "convert" conscientiously to the Apache religion, although he might possibly adopt it as an acculturating resident captive. Preliterate religion appears to be essentially culture-specific. Indeed, religious conversion would seem conceivable only when the adopted tradition has its roots *not* only in a specific culture but planted more deeply in universal human nature; for that alone might function as common currency among otherwise alien cultures. The capacity of the major traditions to endure through many epochs of cultural change and upheaval likewise suggests a depth of rootage beyond the fragility of preliterate cultural forms. This capacity for both synchronic and diachronic prominence has earned such traditions the title of "world historical" in the lexicon of nineteenth century German philosophy. Do these traditions, then, share any traits that point to their grounding in the universal substratum of "human nature" itself?

5. First-Order and Second-Order Traditions

The fact is that the world historical traditions not only exert appeal across cultural boundaries: they were likewise *born* from the encounter and clash of cultures. Three variant patterns of such encounter have respectively engendered the three major families of world

historical traditions. Israelitic religion grew from a cultural experience of *paradigmatic mobility*. Sinitic religion developed within a culture of *paradigmatic fixity*. Aryan religion, epitomized in the Indian traditions, embodies the *paradigmatic mediation of mobility and fixity*. The ancient Israelites moved among and interacted with all the great civilizations of the ancient Near East: Babylonia, Egypt, Canaan, Persia. Their tradition incorporated aspects of each into a novel religious perspective. The ancient Chinese, in radical contrast, were so sempiternally planted in their native landscape that man and nature grew mutually transparent. So vast and invulnerable was China, implacably absorbing all aliens, that its religion acquired world historical character through internal variegation and interaction among segments of Sinitic culture itself. Aryan religion, finally, grew from the imposition of developed conquering traditions upon vanquished lands as mobile culture penetrated the fixed domains of others. Hinduism, for example, reflects changes within an Indo-Aryan Vedic antiquity transplanted to alien soil, while Buddhism represents in part a corresponding aboriginal reaction against the conquerors.

World historical traditions evidently share the common trait of cosmopolitan origins. Does this trait in any way support the thesis of a common grounding in universal human nature? The question requires additional reflection upon the effects of confrontation between cultures. When cultures encounter one another profoundly, naive and unreflective acceptance of either original worldview tends to be undermined through the challenge each poses to the other. Only a self-conscious leap of abstraction and generalization which transcends the clash may restore a solid foundation of coherence for human life. Sometimes the abstraction may take such milder forms as the syncretism of the Hellenistic Age, producing artificially contrived composite deities such as the Egyptian Serapis. One might normally expect that the deeper the clash, the greater the leap required to transcend it. When a truly profound confrontation occurs between prephilosophical cultures, the leap of abstraction must effect the dawn of metaphysical reflection itself, implicitly or explicitly seeking a new internally coherent integration for the whole of experience. A religious tradition so conceived, though sprung from two or more *first-order* traditions, might itself be called a *second-order* tradition. Although any concrete religious myth displays a primary inner logical rationality, according to the findings of Ernst Cassirer, Levi-Strauss and others, a firstorder tradi-

tion remains consciously prereflective. Only the trauma of cultural clash may suffice to induce the secondary rationaltiy which seeks a more conscious and abstract overall rational coherence.

If this is the case, achieving the threshold of conscious synthetic reason becomes the very condition for emergence of a world historical tradition. That in turn could explain the power of rational mastery which augurs success for a rising world historical civilization in its millennial competition with other cultures. Qualitative distinctness in the transcultural appeal of world historical religions, in other words might *correlate* with the technical superiority and consequent survival capacity often evident in their associated civilizations. Both would originate in a cosmopolitan encounter of cultures whose tension can be resolved only through a quantum leap in rationality and thus in universality. Here lies a response to that breed of positivist historicism which would entirely divorce technical superiority from quality of worldview and claim that accidents of conquest alone sufficiently explain how major religious traditions come to predominate within human spiritual life.[10]

6 The Nexus of Second-Order Traditions

Religions which arise from the clash of cultures must achieve a certain level of abstract rational synthesis in order to overcome the concrete tensions that instigate their development. What they initially have in common, then, is their convergent approach towards a universal domain of "reason." Each in its own fashion seeks rational integration in accordance with an explicit unifying principle, whether it be the transcendent One of ancient Israel, the immanent One of ancient India or the One reality process of ancient China. Each of these second-order traditions essentially focuses on a principle which explains the integration of all reality at the highest level of abstraction. In contrast first-order traditions focus on symbolizing particular concrete realities

10. The positivist viewpoint may be reinterpreted in the light of the present discussion. It is not at all improbable to consider conquest as a traumatic clash of cultures which would alienate the vanquished from their first-order tradition, hitherto unquestioningly and naively accepted. Such alienation would present a natural opportunity for the second-order tradition of the victors, which might spontaneously appeal at least to the more reflective of the subject people. See also Berger, Ch. 3, on "The Problem of Theodicy."

such as the powers of nature and animal species frequenting the immediate locale. When two such traditions call the wind power or the sea power by different divine names, their encounter may itself suffice to cast doubt on the absolute validity of either name. Such uncertainty would mark a "crisis of faith" for the traditions in confrontation, for the first time supplanting naive acceptance with metaphysical unrest.[11] The Indian experience offers a cardinal historical example of this sort of crisis, through which first-order traditions are eventually impelled toward the engendering of second-order worldviews.

From the foregoing analysis it is evident that Mircea Eliade directed his scholarly attention chiefly toward first-order religious structures. This focus was both inevitable and appropriate, since human religious experience originally consolidates itself within archaic first-order traditions. Any indictment of Eliade's approach must largely stem not from his ruling interest in archaic religious modalities *per se*, but rather from his lack of adequate discrimination between first-order and second-order traditions. In consequence, he regularly reduces the phenomena of second-order traditions to first-order categories. Even here, however, Eliade may be vindicated insofar as second-order traditions materially arise from first-order antecedents whose basic elements they must retain in modified form. Eliade's treatment of second-order traditions therefore merits justification as a methodologically essential preliminary exposure of the archaic roots of *all* "great traditions." Still, there can be little doubt that Eliade fails to develop religiological categories within which to analyze the unique properties of second-order religious structures themselves, even though their distinctiveness is apparent to a variety of sociologists and others interested in the study of religion.

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11. The foregoing sections 1-6 adapts pp. 4-16 of my unpublished monograph, "Religion and the Structure of Personal Existence: A Prolegomenon," which was prepared for an invitational Conference on Conceptual Structure and Process organized by the Cognitive Science Group at the University of California, San Diego, in December, 1979. The theory of religion partially outlined in the monograph has been under development over a number of years. Another application of this theory, based on the above monograph, may be found in my article "After the Holocaust: History and Being as Sources of Method within the Emerging Interreligious Hermeneutic," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 21/4 (Fall, 1984), 639-663.

The true measure of Eliade's achievement, however, is that his analysis nevertheless does *not* run aground in a limited and self-enclosed perspective on archaic religion, as might well have been the case for a lesser scholar, but, on the contrary, thrusts open the religiological horizon precisely for subsequent investigation of second-order religious structures. For the system of general orientation which Eliade's categories readily yield is not a mere parochial instrument for the analysis of first-order traditions exclusively. Rather, as has been demonstrated, its elements may constitute the infrastructure of self-consciousness as such. In this sense it is truly *general*, and in a profound rather than a trivial sense. Self-consciousness, after all, remains the abiding mark of human existence in all its configurations and permutations. Then second-order religious structures must arise precisely from transformation of the system of general orientation as it is subjected to differing empirical circumstances. Accordingly, one major task which Eliade's project implicitly defines and bequeaths to the future can be specified with considerable exactitude. It is simply to retrace the modifications to which the system of general orientation is structurally susceptible as they have disclosed themselves under concrete historical conditions. This must ultimately generate nothing less than a systamatic understanding of the world historical religious traditions themselves in all their variant modalities and structural interrelations. In the need to delineate the nexus of second-order traditions must therefore lie an undeniably central agenda for the emergent *religiologie* of which Mircea Eliade is after all, perhaps, the most indispensable precursor.