INTRODUCTION TO THE 2005 EDITION

by Jonathan Z. Smith

In 1954, Mircea Eliade’s first important book to be published in English appeared: The Myth of the Eternal Return. Translated by Willard R. Trask, it was the forty-sixth volume in the distinguished Bollingen Series, originally published by Kurt Wolff’s Pantheon Press and, after 1967, continued by Princeton University Press. Eliade was forty-seven, the author of some fifty books (chiefly in Romanian), then living in Paris in desperately straitened circumstances. Eliade had met John (Jack) Barrett, the editor of the series, on August 25, 1950, during Eliade’s first appearance at the Jungian circle’s annual Eranos conference in Ascona, Switzerland. Barrett made possible both the subsequent publication of the translation, and, more immediately, Eliade’s grant of a Bollingen Foundation Fellowship for three years, which would enable him to continue his research at a stipend of two hundred dollars per month. The 1954 translation sold more than 100,000 copies by 1982 and established Eliade’s North American reputation, which was made secure by his appointment to the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1956–57, his first regular academic position.

Eliade appears to have begun thinking about this book in 1944 while stationed at the Romanian embassy in Lisbon, Portugal. He notes in his journal toward the end of January of that year, “I should like to write about the ‘terror of history.’” The actual writing of the Romanian manuscript, as well as its translation into French by Jean
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Gouillard and Jacques Soucasse, took place during 1945–47, often interspersed with other projects, most especially the drafting of the large volume later published in English translation under the title *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958). *Myth* was originally entitled *Cosmos and History*; changed first to *Archetypes and Repetition* (now the title of the first chapter), and then, in its initial French edition, to *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Archetypes and Repetition* (1949). The English translation now before you is a revised version of this French original. The majority of these revisions were subsequently incorporated into the 1969 second French edition.

None of these titles, with the possible exception of *Archetypes and Repetition*, quite captures Eliade's own sense of the double agendum of his work as described in a journal entry from October 3, 1949: "More than any other critic, [Eugenio] d'Ors is enthusiastic because I have brought out the Platonic structure of archaic and traditional ('folk') ontologies. But I am still waiting for the other side of my interpretation to be understood, that concerning the ritual abolition of time and, hence, the necessity of 'repetition.'" Neither the titles nor this self-description give voice to perhaps the most startling element of the book in its later chapters, a development of the consequences of this "abolition of time," namely Eliade's fierce polemics against a modernist faith in history as a progressive process through which, in V. Gordon Childe's well-known phrase, "man makes himself" (p. xxiii). While the English vernacular expression "killing time" signals recreation as opposed to work, in Eliade's account, killing time becomes an ethical imperative, the truly human vocation that leads to re-creation.

*The Myth of the Eternal Return* exhibits, throughout, Eliade's extension of the category of "archaic" or "traditional"

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religion beyond the ancient Eurasian and Mesoamerican agricultural civilizations to include those peoples “usually known as ‘primitive’” (p. 3), and, for that matter, contemporary “peasant masses” (p. 147) that had become a distinctive feature of his work since the mid-1930s. In the main, the Eliadian vocabulary for describing religion as an “archaic ontology” was first developed with respect to these ancient civilizations, responsive to important contemporary currents of scholarship on their texts and artifacts, and then transported to “primitive” cultures. Whether this transposition is justified remains an enduring question in evaluating Eliade’s project—I think not, and Eliade occasionally distinguishes “archaic” from “primitive” in the course of this work (for example, pp. 74–75). Already in its opening chapter, The Myth of the Eternal Return provided most of its English-speaking readers with their initial introduction to this vocabulary, crucial to the understanding of Eliade’s work, including “hierophany” (p. 4), “mythical/ideal prototypes” (pp. 4, 6), in illo tempore (p. 4), ab origine (p. 4), “repetition” (p. 5), “paradigmatic” (p. 5), “archETYPE” (p. 5), “the Center” (p. 5), “correspondence” (p. 6), “transformation of chaos into cosmos” (p. 10), “imitation of the Creation” (p. 11), “the sacred” (p. 11), “the real” (p. 11), axis mundi (p. 12), imago mundi (p. 17), “consecration” (p. 18), “initiation” (p. 18, cf. “the ordeal,” p. 41), “cosmic regeneration” (p. 25), “desacralization” (p. 28), “profane” (pp. 27–28), “abolition of profane time, of duration, of history” (p. 35), “the regeneration of time” (p. 37). Many of these terms, ranging from “hierophany” to “sacred” (as a noun rather than an adjective), although widely used by other authors since Eliade, have yet to find a place in English-language dictionaries. The attentive reader will need to make her own lexicon as she makes her way through the book.
A second characteristic of Eliade’s endeavor becomes apparent by the time the reader has progressed through the first chapter: the astonishing number of cultures passed under review (more than twenty in the first fifteen pages), represented by short quotations (the longest one, on p. 30, is eighty-eight words) drawn from works of scholarship in any one of half a dozen European languages, and largely presented without contextual details. Yet each cluster of quotations is treated as thematically related, often translated into an ontological language of “being,” “reality,” and the like, the result of what Eliade terms, in a paragraph added to this English translation, a process of “penetrating the authentic meaning of an archaic myth or symbol,” of hearing what is being “revealed in a coherent fashion” (p. 3), without, unfortunately, in this work, clarifying how this interpretative process is undertaken and these results achieved. That is to say, it is one thing to note that, in a variety of cultures, possession of new territory is often accompanied by ritual; it may even be persuasive that these rites, if taken as a set, have as their model some imitation of divine acts of creation; but it is surely another thing to assert that these rituals of consecration “reveal the primitive’s obsession with the real, his thirst for being” (p. 11).

This said, nothing should be allowed to interfere with the reader’s excitement in the audacity and industry of Eliade’s project, in his exercise of a synthetic imagination which forges a coherent whole out of apparently disparate items. Whether accepted as a work of science or of art, The Myth of the Eternal Return is a classic and founding work of what became, in the 1960s through the 1980s, a dominant mode of understanding religion, named by Eliade and others as the History of Religions.

There can be no doubt that Eliade, in chapters 1 and 2
of *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, has persuasively documented in a number of ancient civilizations the presence of one sort of “archaic ontology”—one that conceives of the terrestrial realm as a copy of the celestial; one that claims that proper human praxis in all its modalities repeats the models provided by divine activities as displayed in myths; and that, therefore, values human creativity to the degree that it is imitative, rather than freely original. One simply cannot understand the great imperial cosmologies of Eurasia and Mesoamerica, which narrate complex histories of order, without understanding this sort of “ontology” that takes as its imperative the Hermetic maxim “as above, so below.” The vast systems of correspondences developed by these literate civilizations in their texts as well as exhibited in their large urban constructions insistently testify to this ideology, which, above all, centers on the cosmic responsibilities of the sacred king for maintaining this order, for rectifying discrepancy, for subduing disorder. I cannot imagine any other way of interpreting a text such as the ancient Sumerian *Creation of the Pick-axe*, which tells of the king-god’s construction of the prototypical pick-axe by means of which he separates sky from earth and plants the seeds of humanity. The king-god uses this tool both to enforce the distinction between heaven and earth and to maintain the separation of the sides of the furrow into which humankind is sown—both actions insuring room for terrestrial growth. The text continues with an account of human times: the Sumerian king now uses the same sort of tool as a weapon to weed out (destroy) rebellious cities and protect loyal cities; the slave now uses the same sort of tool as an agricultural implement to chop out weeds (understood as rebellious plants) and to cultivate useful vegetation. All three sets of ordering acts are viewed as equivalent in their maintenance of
distinction, in their rejection of mixture. In principle, it would be as negligent, and, therefore, as cosmically disastrous for the slave to permit weeds to mingle with desirable plants, or for the king to tolerate rebellion, as it would be for the king-god to allow earth to reunite with sky.

Eliade, I repeat, has effectively described the sort of cosmopolitical worldview implicit in such a text and has given us grounds for comparing it with other texts of a similar character. In so doing, he has made both intelligible and compelling a vast assembly of religious expressions and activities. So many texts really do appear to operate by the logic he has limned out. He has been equally insistent as to their explanation. Eliade has made a dramatic wager that these texts may be read without suspicion, that one needs only to paraphrase them into Platonic terminology (pp. 34–35) for their “truth” to be apparent. The mundane world, the human world, takes on reality only to the degree that it participates in that which is “beyond,” in that which is transmundane and transhuman. “[A]n object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is ‘meaningless,’ i.e., it lacks reality” (p. 34). In religious terms, this “reality” is equivalent to the sacred; “meaninglessness,” to the profane.

[The desire felt by the man of traditional societies to refuse history, and to confine himself to an indefinite repetition of archetypes, testifies to his thirst for the real and his terror of ‘losing’ himself by letting himself be overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence. . . . [His] behavior is governed by the belief in an absolute reality opposed to the profane world of ‘unrealities’; in the last analysis, the latter
does not constitute a ‘world,’ properly speaking; it is the ‘unreal’ *par excellence*, the uncreated, the nonexistent: the void. (pp. 91–92)

Other explanations are possible, which may prove equally compelling. While granting the cogency of Eliade’s description, these would require a measure of suspicion toward these ancient texts, as well as a willingness to translate them into a less synonymous language. One might, for example, reverse the polarities of the maxim “as above, so below,” yielding the formula “as below, so above,” thereby suggesting some theory of projection in the service of legitimating human institutions and practices. One might re-contextualize the chiefly Eurasian texts and traditions on which Eliade has focused by noting that they are largely documents from urban, agricultural, hierarchical civilizations, the products of well-organized scribal elites who had a deeply vested interest in structures of conformity, and in celebrating the status of the king as well as the temples on which their livelihood depended. But to do so would be to value the anthropological over the ontological, a re-valuation that Eliade refuses as a matter of principle insofar as it gives aid and comfort to the view that “man makes himself,” thereby, for him, substituting a modernist view for that which is “archaic,” in which human beings do not make themselves but rather are made. “[T]he archaic man acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not a man. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others” (p. 5).

Chapter 2, which focuses more on ritual than on myth, has already laid the groundwork for what will become the theme of chapters 3 and 4: a cyclical understanding of
time that, by focusing on the repetition of beginnings and endings, testifies to the belief that time periodically is halted ("abolished"), then recommenced ("regenerated"). Whether such cycles are compressed into New Year rituals, extended through vast cosmic (often lunar) cycles of creation/chaos/re-creation, or anthropologized in initiatory scenarios of death (ordeals) and rebirth, this repetitive, cyclical view is "antihistorical \[\text{in}\] intent," resulting in a "primitive" who "lives in a continual present" (pp. 85, 86). "[I]nterest in the 'irreversible' and the 'new' in history is a recent discovery in the life of humanity. On the contrary, archaic humanity . . . defended itself, to the utmost of its powers, against all the novelty and irreversibility which history entails" (p. 48).

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to understanding the implications of this "recent discovery in the life of humanity," and are, therefore, as explicitly reflective as they are descriptive. For this reason, "modern man" begins to intrude on Eliade's exposition, just about midway through the work (pp. 76–77), with Hegel and post-Hegelian thought—most especially "Marxism, historicism, and existentialism" (pp. xxiii and 156n)—serving as emblems of modernity and its anxieties. These become objects of Eliade's sharp critique, genealogical constructions, and cautious efforts at rehabilitation.

Eliade persistently contrasts archaic cosmic sacrality as "reality," guaranteed by the repetition of archetypes, with the "terror" of being "overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence" (p. 92), whether this "meaninglessness" be experienced as nothingness, death (annihilation), suffering, or the absurd. Whether expressed on a cosmic level as the periodic return to chaos or on the anthropological plane in the ordeals of initiation, these apparent perturbations are "fitted into a system" that guarantees that they are neither accidental nor absurd. This insures
“that suffering is never final; that death is always followed by resurrection; that every defeat is annulled and transcended by the final victory” (p. 101). “[T]he important point for us is that nowhere—within the frame of the archaic civilizations—are suffering and pain regarded as ‘blind’ and without meaning” (p. 98). This same capacity to “fit” the vicissitudes of existence “into a system” is exhibited in the great cyclical theories of history, ranging from the Indic to the Roman, with their attendant myths of successive ages which degenerate until regenerated by a “return” (pp. 112–17).

The first important modulation of this archaic pattern occurs with the Hebrew Bible, especially with the prophets. In what, at first reading, may seem to be some of Eliade’s more eccentric writing (pp. 102–12), Eliade locates himself within a scholarly and theological tradition, beginning with the late nineteenth-century Panbabylonian school, that views the Israelitic religion as breaking with the mythic, cyclical view of the ancient Near Eastern religions and introducing, in its place, a historical, lineal view of God intervening in history, of “irreversible,” “one-way time” (p. 104).

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history as the epiphany of God, and this conception, as we should expect, was taken up and amplified by Christianity. (p. 104)

Likewise Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac reveals “a new religious experience, faith . . . a new religious position of man in the cosmos” (pp. 109–10, cf. pp. 160–61), no longer a collective ritual but an individual relation. Both the prophetic and the Abrahamic are new modalities of the sacred insofar as they originate in revelation (“theophanies”) and have as their end the “salvation” of time. Such a worldview is different from, yet parallel to, the archaic, especially when expressed in messianic or eschatological myths, which look forward to the ultimate abolition of history, not by means of the archaic repetition of archetypes, but through the imagination of a distant future. “[The] periodic regeneration of the Creation is replaced by a single regeneration that will take place in an *in illo tempore* to come. But the will to put a final and definitive end to history is itself still an antihistorical attitude, exactly as are the other [archaic] traditional conceptions” (p. 112). Such eschatologies would be further elaborated in later Christianities (pp. 143–45), as well as disguised in secular philosophies of history, such as Marxism (p. 149).

For Eliade, such a re-valuing of history as an “epiphany,” as an irreversible, linear process, carries with it a temptation, that rather than a recollection there will be a forgetfulness of the divine; that rather than a myth of the future abolition of time, there will be a myth of an extended future of unlimited progress undertaken by autonomous individuals; that “becoming” will be taken for “being” as the locus of meaning—a temptation he dates as beginning with seventeenth-century European thought (p. 145) and culminating in nineteenth- and early twentieth-
century “historicistic philosophies” (pp. 149–50)—which results in “modern man’s” anxiety and “despair” in the face of the “terror of history.” “The man who has left the horizon of archetypes and repetition can no longer defend himself against that terror except through the idea of God” (pp. 161–62). From the perspective of “the paradise of archetypes and repetition” (see already p. 74), the faith of “modern man” in history and progress constitutes a “fall” (p. 162). It is an aberration within the general history of human kind, rather than history’s culmination.

As will be clear to any reader, in this final chapter, Eliade steps forth as an odd sort of theologian, deeply ambivalent with respect to Christianity. On the one hand, “Christianity is the ‘religion’ of modern man and historical man, of the man who simultaneously discovered personal freedom and continuous time (in place of cyclical time). . . . Christianity incontestably proves to be the religion of ‘fallen man’” (pp. 161, 162). On the other hand, there is a demythologizing tendency in Christianity that enables replication on the individual plane of elements of the older collective and cosmic renewal:

Since what is involved is a religious experience wholly different from the traditional experience, since what is involved is faith, Christianity translates the periodic regeneration of the world into a regeneration of the human individual. But for him who shares in this eternal nunc of the reign of God, history ceases as totally as it does for the man of the archaic cultures, who abolishes it periodically. Consequently, for the Christian too, history can be regenerated, by and through each individual believer, even before the Saviour’s second coming, when it will utterly cease for all Creation. (pp. 129–30)
This paradox of an understanding of history as being, at one and the same time, a meaningful medium of revelation, and that which needs to be overcome, a paradox which is the source of Eliade's ambivalence, is destroyed, for Eliade, when the anthropological dimension alone is affirmed at the expense of the onto-theological. To fully understand Eliade at this point, it would be necessary to go beyond this book, to his further articulations of these themes, and to a fuller understanding of the Orthodox Christian tradition out of which he writes.

*The Myth of the Eternal Return* is not itself a timeless work. It is clearly located in a wider cultural milieu following immediately upon the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. One cannot miss the engagement with contemporary thinkers, "[o]nly the historicistic position, in all its varieties and shades—from Nietzsche's 'destiny' to Heidegger's 'temporality'—remains disarmed [b]efore the 'terror of history']" (p. 152), or his references to contemporary literature (p. 153). Even more, one cannot miss the concreteness of his references to contemporary "horrors of history":

[W]e are concerned with the problem of history as history, of the 'evil' that is bound up not with man's condition but with his behavior toward others. We should wish to know, for example, how it would be possible to tolerate, and to justify, the sufferings and annihilation of so many peoples who suffer and are annihilated for the simple reason that their geographical situation sets them in the pathway of history; that they are neighbors of empires in a state of permanent expansion. . . . And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from
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collective deportations and massacres to atomic bomb-ings? (p. 151)

Eliade, in this work, offers not so much a remedy as a di-
agnosis of the consequences of the modernist view that
limits the anthropological horizon to “‘historical man’ . . .
the man who is insofar as he makes himself, within history”
(p. xxiii). Unlike other traditionist thinkers, with whom he
is sometimes associated, Eliade knows that a “return” to
(let alone a conversion to) archaic religion is not possible
for modern man, even though elements of the former may
persist in modernity, often in “disguised” or “unconscious”
forms. In his foreword he sets forth a more modest goal,
“to draw the attention of the philosopher, and of the culti-
vated man in general, to certain spiritual positions that, al-
though they have been transcended in various regions of
the globe, are instructive” (p. xxv). While, in other writ-
ings contemporary with The Myth of the Eternal Return,
Eliade advocated the value of a “meeting,” an “encounter,”
a “confrontation,” between the archaic worldview and ours,
now that contemporary representatives of the archaic have
entered into our history, in this book, most especially in
the opening chapters, it is the descriptive endeavor that
prevails, with the reader tacitly invited to enter into a dia-
logue with the thought of others for too long placed at the
level of childish “primitives” or idolatrous “heathens” in
histories of progress. As I have suggested above, it is these
same descriptive chapters that have stood the test of time.