FOREWORD TO THE 2004 EDITION
by Wendy Doniger

I do my work under the name of Mircea Eliade, much as Winnie the Pooh lived under the name of Sanders; the word “Sanders” was on a sign above Pooh’s door, and Mircea Eliade is the title of my chair. (Though a comma separates my name from his in my title, I sometimes get letters from abroad with the comma misplaced, addressed to “Wendy Doniger Mircea Eliade, Professor of the History of Religions.”) And in fact I do work under his bright shadow in many ways, as do most of the people in the field of the history of religions, whether or not they acknowledge their debt. I am personally indebted to him for creating my career, transforming me from an ugly duckling of a Sanskritist into a swan-like historian of religions; he read my Harvard (Sanskrit) Ph.D. dissertation in 1968, published two chapters of it in his Chicago journal (History of Religions) in 1969, brought me to Chicago as a full professor in 1978, and the rest is, if not history, at least history of religions. I was at his side when he died in 1986; unable to watch his face, I watched the screen by his hospital bed, watched the wavy lines straighten out one by one and then vanish one by one until nothing remained on the screen but the words “Mircea Eliade,” and then the words disappeared too.

In some quarters, the words of his name have also disappeared from the academic study of the history of religions. Eliade is no longer politically correct; his close friendship with several members of the notorious Iron Guard (which he himself never joined) during his early life in Romania is held, by some, to corrupt his work. Even for those who, like myself, knew the man and know that he was neither a Fascist nor an anti-
Semite, there remains the more relevant problem of assumptions in much of his work, as in the work of most but not all of his contemporaries, about primitives and primitivism, assumptions that hung over far too long from nineteenth-century anthropology, dominated as it was by social Darwinism. True, Eliade was moving in the right direction: unlike the social Darwinists, he did not scorn the people he called “primitive” (who included both contemporary aboriginals and prehistoric or, as Eliade referred to them, “archaic” peoples), nor did he regard them as children or neurotics or people too stupid to have invented the internal combustion engine; he admired them, and felt that they had had insights and wisdom that we in the modern world would do well to learn from. (As he himself remarks in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, “Such an evolutionist hypothesis might have been conceivable a few generations ago, but is now completely impossible.”) Nevertheless, the very category of “primitive” encoded assumptions about unchanging human attributes that we no longer find true or useful and led critics such as Guilford Dudley to accuse Eliade of being the anti-historian of religions.

Yet Eliade’s books still appear regularly on the reading lists of courses on world religions, as well as in the libraries of educated people throughout the world, and with good reason. E. P. Thompson’s generous insight applies equally well to Eliade’s life and work (as it does to the lives and work of James George Frazer and even Friedrich Max Müller, who were, like Eliade, advancing the knowledge of their time within a body of assumptions that we no longer accept): “We must not look at the past with the enormous condescension of posterity.” Like Freud and Jung and Rudolf Otto, all of whom contributed deep strands to his work, Eliade argued boldly for universals where he might more safely have argued for widely prevalent patterns. Yet many of the patterns that he identified in religions that spanned the entire globe and the whole of human history—a span that no one has ever known as well as he did—inspired an entire gener-
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ation of both scholars and amateurs of the study of religion, and they still prove useful as starting points for the comparative study of religion and still hold water even after the challenges posed by new data to which Eliade did not have access. His concept of hierophany, the sudden irruption of the sacred in the profane world, sacred time opening to the transcendent, resulting in radical discontinuities, has proved a far more widely applicable and heuristic term than the older, narrower term “theophany,” denoting the manifestation of a god. And his argument that religious forms, particularly myths, are usefully studied in popular culture as well as in the great scriptures is a postmodern idea that he formulated long before postmodernism. He taught us that myths (and, to a great extent, rituals) retold and reenacted in the present transport the worshipper back to the world of origins, the world of events that took place in *illo tempore*, “in that time”; this basic idea of what he called (after Nietzsche) “the eternal return” has become a truism in the study of religion and does, I think, apply to many mythologies, though not, as Eliade claimed, to all. His ideas about the alternation and interaction of cosmos and chaos, and cyclical/mythical time and linear/historical time, the sacred and the profane, are similarly fruitful starting points for many, if not all, cultures. Above all, his insistence that it is possible to find meaningful synchronic patterns of symbolism in addition to the phenomena that are unique to each time and place—this is the foundation on which the entire field of comparative religion still stands, and Eliade laid the cornerstone.

Several of his grand cross-cultural themes—the sky god, the quest, the sacred center—as well as the tension between historical specificity and synchronic themes, loom large in *Shamanism*, which remains one of his most interesting, important, and influential books. He demonstrated that the shaman was neither a madman nor a charlatan, as other scholars had regarded him, but a gifted (if, indeed, often unwell or mentally unstable) individual who entered into a trance in which he climbed up to the
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world of the gods and the animals, and brought back knowledge that was useful to his whole tribe. Some would restrict shamanism to Siberia, where it was first and most dramatically documented, and where indeed it includes certain regional characteristics (such as the use of reindeer) that are not exactly replicated anywhere else. But Eliade argued that many of the great themes of Siberian shamanism are not unique to Siberia but appear in other cultures as well, from India and Tibet through Japan across the Bering Strait to the western coasts of North and South America. These cultures, which also hold in common other religious expressions, such as the myth of the Earth-Diver (the bird that brings up a bit of mud from the bottom of the primeval ocean to form the earth), are all linked together geographically along the Pacific Rim, a fact that opens up a mediating position between historical uniqueness and the Jungian collective unconscious: these people could have spoken to one another, learned from one another. But, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, even when we can know for certain that one culture borrowed a theme from another, we must explain why the receiving culture accepted that one trait as meaningful and rejected so many others, and this throws us back to some idea of sympathy or taste or shared meaning, which again implies a cross-cultural, if not universal, human need or structure.

Why did Eliade assume that these phenomena were universal? Eliade rejects the idea of an inherited collective unconscious (he insists that his archetypes are not Jungian archetypes) but argues that every human is basically religious, whether he or she knows it or not; humankind is homo religiosus, and therefore every human has a need to find meaning, to discern patterns, though each culture, indeed each individual, may fill in the broad outlines differently. Eliade is not really arguing (as many theologians of his generation did) that what they regarded as the fact that everyone believes in god(s), or the sacred, means that god(s), or the sacred, exist, but, rather, that
what Eliade regarded as the fact that everyone (as he thought) believes in gods shows that everyone needs to believe in gods, and that those of us who don’t make time for such needs are impoverishing ourselves. At this point he is accused of being a crypto-theologian, which is, I think, patently unfair; he is, if anything, an open hierogian. And though it is surely evident by now that not every homo is religiosus, it is equally, and painfully, evident at last, even to the positivists who for years scorned religion and looked forward to replacing it with science, that a great deal of the human race finds a deep, and often violent, need to ground their lives in religious beliefs. Eliade was right about a lot of things.