Chapter V

Eliade And The Experience of “the Sacred” Through Merleau-Ponty

In the last chapter we have seen how Van der Leeuw’s description of man’s religious experience as basically an experience of “Power” could be viewed from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective of lived-through-world and bodily intentionality. As we have illustrated in it, Van der Leeuw suggests that man’s religious experience has its foundation in his empirical experience of power that is manifested in various forces of nature. Man experiences the power of these natural forces primarily not through his disembodied self or immaterial ego but as Merleau-Ponty shows, through his being-in-the-world. It is man as a body-subject who “interrogates” the world and he knows his way around it before engaging in any reflective process. Similarly, in Van der Leeuw’s scheme of things, man’s religious experience begins with his bodily encounter of the empirical phenomena in the world. This experience does not stop at that level, as it has an inherent tendency to transcend itself into other levels of experience which here in this case is the reflective level where man is able to decipher the depth dimensions of the empirical realities.

The depth dimensions that man brings to fore according to Van der Leeuw are the structural elements of the perceptual experience of the power of natural forces. And these structural elements latent in the natural phenomena are the religious significations that man ‘discovers.’ And they, the religious significance, have a tendency to transcend to other external
forms of expression leading to the formation of myths and rituals. Myths and rituals are, therefore, *sedimented* forms of man's religious experience which in turn become habits in him. By recounting these myths and reenacting rituals man is able to recapture his sedimented meaning and also to develop new significations. As we have applied Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological conceptual framework to illustrate the dynamics involved in man's religious experience as elucidated by Van der Leeuw, we can also gainfully employ the same to comprehend Mircea Eliade's description of man's encounter with the *Sacred*. However, before we actually begin that we shall elucidate in a concise form his conception of phenomenology of religion, its aims and the methodology in the study of religion.

5.1. Mircea Eliade - a Historian or a Phenomenologist of Religion

At the outset, it must be said that the first genuine difficulty any reader comes across in Mircea Eliade's writings is to classify them into a specific branch of scholarship in the study of religion. For, they (Eliade's works) can at once be classified as a history of religions, phenomenology of religion, theology of religion or an instance of the wider and more encompassing *religionswissenschaft*. This difficulty stems from the lack of methodological rigor on the one hand, and his sheer voluminous scholarly and literary output, on the other. Whether or not one agrees with Eliade's methodology and content of his works, the fact remains that he has made audacious forays into almost all areas of man's religious and cultural life. Such an all encompassing interest in everything that concerns man's life is
noticeable very early in his career, starting with his eventful life as a member of the *Criterion* group in Romania. Eliade then sought not only merely to disseminate knowledge to his fellow Romanians but also wanted to change positively the quality of their lives. As Eliade puts it, "The goal we were pursuing was not only to inform people; above all, we were seeking to 'awaken' the audience, to confront them with ideas, and ultimately to modify their mode of being in the world." Such an undying enthusiasm is brought even more pointedly into his religious scholarship.

This relentless effort to "awaken" man in all segments of his life, took Eliade through a myriad of aspects that constitute man's life in the world. However, among the many aspects of life what captured his imagination most was religious in which myths and symbols play a central role. Eliade makes it clear that his interest is not to disentangle the genesis and evolution of these myths and symbols but rather to understand their meaning, and to endeavor to see what they show us. How does he proceed to realize this goal? Does he resort to the methodology of the history of religions or phenomenology of religion, or both together having complementary roles in the study of religious phenomena?

It is a fact that Eliade is a historian of religions in the sense it is understood by thinkers such as Joachim Wach, Joseph Kitagawa, Raffaele Pettazoni, etc. who held that the discipline of history of religions (*Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*) consists of two elements: historical and systematic. Eliade does make allusions to historical data regarding religions as found in ethnological, philological, anthropological and sociological studies.
However, he differs from these studies in the sense that these disciplines have treated religion in a reductionistic manner which we shall discuss later in the chapter. Besides referring to the findings of other disciplines, Eliade also had his first hand experience of other religious traditions. A commentator has said of Eliade that among the Romanian scholars, he was "... the first to have a direct experience of it (India) while knowing enough not to be dissolved in it. India did not overwhelm his work and his thoughts: it only nourished them..."\(^7\)

Eliade's conception of history of religions, however, is not exactly synonymous with the history of religions understood in a strict sense. History of religions in the strict sense characterizes itself as an empirical discipline devoted to the enumeration of religious beliefs, practices, rituals, institutions, and so on, as they are found in historical contexts. Here the emphasis, therefore, is on history because of the underlying presumption of the history of religions that only those religious data are authentic which are empirically verifiable. For Eliade, however, the emphasis is not on history but on religion in so far as the latter possesses invariable elements or structures which are "transhistorical," manifesting themselves primarily in myths and symbols; and it is these myths and symbols that he set out to investigate. Eliade therefore conceives of history in a manner which is quite distinct from it being taken as history of religions strictly. Antonio Barbosa da Silva distinguishes the two ways in which Eliade understands history of religions: (1) "historiography" and (2) "what has happened in the world" or the historical reality in the sense of past events of different kinds. And by
historical reality, Eliade means first of all "what happened within certain spatial or temporal boundaries," and secondly, "history in the general sense." The distinction between historiography and historical reality may be better expressed, by two German words: Historie and Geschichte. The term "Historie" stands for "historiography" while "Geschichte" for historical reality.

What Eliade considers as proper history of religions is not Historie but Geschichte which encompasses the historical reality. And, Eliade describes the historical reality with a singular purpose, viz. to understand its meaning as understood by those living in and through it; and in the case of religion by the believers themselves. In other words, Eliade considers that reality historical which has existential connotation and instrumental value, in other words "religious significance" for believers. The emphasis of Eliade becomes quite clear that his conception of history of religions is not just an enumeration of historical facts of religion but rather deciphering their latent or underlying meaning for the believers. Eliade writes,

I have not tried to study religious phenomena in their historical framework, but merely as hierophanies. That is why, in order to throw light on the nature of water hierophanies, I did not scruple to place Christian baptism side by side with the myths and rites of Oceania, America or Graeco-Oriental antiquity, ignoring the differences between them - or in other words, history. In so far as our attention was turned directly upon the religious
significance to the believer, our ignoring of historical perspective was completely justified.  

History of religions for Eliade, therefore, is not just a descriptive history, but it is an interpretative one in which the researcher attempts to bring into relief the meaning or significance of the religious phenomena - objects, myths or symbols - for the believers themselves. And in order to delineate the latent meaning of the religious phenomena, Eliade employs the phenomenological method of systematic comparison between religious phenomena belonging to diverse religions and cultures. In so far as Eliade is committed to phenomenological method with a view to decipher the meaning or significance of religious phenomena for believers, it may be said that his history of religions is synonymous with phenomenology of religion.

Eliade’s conception of phenomenology of religion, however, is similar to as well as different from that of Van der Leeuw or Kristensen. It is similar in the sense that Eliade shares in the view of both Van der Leeuw and Kristensen that phenomenology of religion is one of the branches of the broader discipline called Religionswissenschaft, science of religions. However, it is dissimilar in the sense that, while Kristensen does not speak of phenomenology having a role other than making the meaning of the religious phenomena clear and Van der Leeuw in attaining the verstehen of the phenomena for the believers themselves, Eliade goes further and claims that it (phenomenology) should also interpret the phenomena under investigation. In other words, phenomenology of religion should lead itself
into hermeneutics. Accordingly, Eliade's use of the term history of religions actually points to hermeneutic phenomenology of religion or "the creative hermeneutics" as he calls it. In his essay, "The Sacred in the Secular World," Eliade describes himself as a historian and a phenomenologist because his primary concern is with the meaning that is given in intentionality -structures. As such a historian of religion has therefore necessarily to become a phenomenologist at some point of time because in the final analysis he seeks meaning of the historical data in which the divine manifestations or "hierophanies" occur. Eliade, therefore, keeps reiterating that a historian of religion(s) should also be a hermeneutist in so far as he is committed to explicate the latent meaning of the religious data under investigation.

For the ultimate goal of the historian of religion is not to point out that there exists a certain number of types of patterns of religious behavior, with their specific symbologies and theologies, but rather to understand their meaning... It means that for Eliade phenomenology of religion studies the internal structures which aim at the dynamics of religious phenomena. In other words, it studies the basic factors of religious phenomena or to put it in the words of Ninian Smart, it describes the "fundamental intention" or "intentionality" of religious phenomena. It becomes then clear that Eliade understands history of religion not in its narrow sense of being just another history with bare facts and special classifications, but rather in a broad
manner which encompasses both history of religion and phenomenology of
religion.

5.2. Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Religion or “Creative Hermeneutics”

Eliade, while conceding to the importance of history of religions, argues
emphatically for the decisive role of phenomenology in studying religious
phenomena. And the phenomenology that Eliade refers to here is
hermeneutic phenomenology. He understands hermeneutics as the science of
interpretation. And here in the case of religion, it is the interpretation of
the religious phenomena. Using the term hermeneutics in Dilthey’s sense
Eliade considers hermeneutics as essentially dealing with “meaning.” What
Eliade, therefore, does in his hermeneutic phenomenology of religion
is to bring to fore the meaning of the religious phenomena.

Although Eliade uses other terms such as “creative hermeneutics,” “total
hermeneutics” and the like in his writings, they should not be construed as
instances of confusion or inconsistency but rather as basically pointing to
the aims and methodology of the history of religion in the sense of Eliade as
phenomenology of religion. That is to say “creative hermeneutics” is both
the methodology a scholar should follow in doing the history of religion,
and the effect of this process upon the scholar in particular and man in
general.

By “total hermeneutics,” what Eliade means is the attempt of the researcher
to decipher and explicate the encounter of man with the sacred. By
proposing such a method he wants to go beyond the limited scope of
phenomenology of religion as developed by Rudolf Otto who focused
mostly on the irrational aspects of religious experience. Eliade, in fact, writes, "We propose to present the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity, and not only in so far as it is irrational. What will concern us is ... the sacred in its entirety."

In other words it can be said that in total hermeneutics Eliade wants to incorporate both the external and internal aspects of religious phenomena. Eliade makes his intention clear in the following passage. "Like it or not, the scholar has not finished his work when he has constructed the history of a religious form or brought out its sociological, economic, or political contexts. In addition he must understand its meaning."

Eliade, therefore, makes a clarion call to the researchers in religious phenomena to broaden their horizons of search so as to embrace and assimilate all specialists' findings from which emerges a specific perspective of the hermeneutic phenomenology of religion. He holds that his principal concern "... is to integrate the researches of the orientalists, ethnologists, depth psychologists and historian of religions in order to arrive at a total knowledge of man."

Eliade's call for creative hermeneutics is intended for the researcher to go beyond the simple enumeration the religious facts to thinking about them. Creative hermeneutics therefore involves first of all an attempt from the part of the researcher to "relive" the experience of the believers as a part of verstehen or understanding. Secondly he also demands "sympathy" as a necessary condition for understanding religions other than one's own. With the above requirements what Eliade wants to emphasize is the fact that understanding of religious phenomena should positively affect the
researcher himself and his being. It is therefore a dynamic process which is aimed at bringing about positive effects not only in the researchers' existence but also in the existence of man in general.

A creative hermeneutics unveils significances that one did not grasp before, or puts them in relief with such vigor that after having assimilated this new interpretation consciousness is no longer the same. Creative hermeneutics changes man; it is more than instruction, it is also a spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself.\(^{25}\)

The purpose of such a creative hermeneutics, Eliade makes amply clear, is, therefore, not just an enumeration of some religious phenomena, as in the usual history of religion, but rather through its dynamic process of verstehen an awakening in man's consciousness is achieved and a change in his being in the cosmos is effected.

5.3. Distinction between Modern and Primitive Man

The purpose of the creative hermeneutics, as Eliade visualizes it, is to bring about a qualitative change in man's being in the world. In other words he wants to establish a new humanism by universalizing the wisdom of primitive societies. This is so urgent, feels Eliade, especially in the case of modern western man who lives in a desacralized world.\(^{26}\) The modern man views neither the reality around him nor his physical activities, such as eating, sex, work sacramentally as the primitives did; they are just material and mundane realities regulated by natural laws. Such a loss of the sense of the sacred, opines Eliade, has brought the modern man into his current experience of meaninglessness and emptiness. Eliade wishes to bring about
a regeneration of the desacralized world and provide a new orientation to modern man with the aid of those elements that constitute an integral vision of reality to the archaic man.27

The study of the primitive man28 occupies a central place in Eliade’s writings. The self-image of the archaic man is a theme that recurs in most of his works and he sees it as an essential pursuit for a historian of religions.29 This is so because Eliade truly believes that knowledge of traditional societies will enhance the Western consciousness; it will also lead to an in-depth self-knowledge of the Western man, and he will be able to view himself from the perspective of other cultures.30 The history of the Western philosophy, says Eliade, has been overly relying on the history of the West which inevitably led into a ‘dangerously close to “provincialising” itself.’31 Similar is the danger for the European cultures which have hitherto kept themselves insulated from the vast majority of other cultures around the world. Under such circumstances Eliade sees clearly the need for studying the primitive cultures and their religions which will, in turn, help to broaden the vision of the modern man.

Eliade highlights some of the characteristics of the primitive man that might serve to be beneficial to the modern man to gain a different orientation towards his being in the world. The primitive man views the material world as a reality where the sacred manifests itself; the reality reflects the sacred, it is saturated with the divine power. The visible world is the medium through which the divine manifests itself, and so, all that happens in it is divinely ordained. That is why even the simple physical activities become
sacraments, a communion with the sacred. Eliade, therefore, calls the primitive man *homo religiosus*. The primitive man seems to be interested only in origins. He attaches much importance to the knowledge of origins, and all renewals imply a return to the original events at creation by gods in *illo tempore*. Anything that has meaning for the primitive man has to confirm to the primordial prototype. Cosmology, therefore, is of utmost importance to the archaic man. He views his own life and that of the world as inseparably interrelated thus forming an organic unity. The archaic man expresses his thoughts primarily in symbols, and this is because he does not make a distinction between myths and history. His religious behavior, however, is definitely existential, that is to say, his religious beliefs and practices are centered on the fundamental problems of human life. All these characteristics of the primitive man are in direct contrast with the modern man who assumes a different approach to the world which is historical, scientific and rationalistic. The modern man does not align himself with the rhythm of the universe rather he seeks to subject it to his needs. Consequently, the world is no longer viewed as an arena where the sacred manifests itself, rather it is a mere material reality subject to the universal laws of nature.

5.4. Eliade, the Anti-reductionist

Eliade recognized the danger of reductionism in history of religion. He holds that since the historian of religions has not done his task of hermeneutics, it has been performed inferiorly by reductionist theorists. Eliade condemns the reductionist positions such as the psychological, the
social diffusionist and the functionalist which do not take into consideration that which is central to the religious phenomena, *viz.* the sacred. Their attempts have been to explain religion from domains other than its own thus reducing religion into something which can easily be explained away. It is therefore the task of the historian of religion to grasp the religious phenomena "on their own plane of reference, as something religious." In other words, it is for the historian of religion to see what the religious data reveal about themselves to the believer and not to superimpose his own norms on them.³⁸

Eliade's insistence on the irreducibility of the religious phenomena is an instance of his phenomenological concerns. By suspending any reductionistic interpretations, the phenomenologist of religion must sympathetically attempt to understand the meaning of the experience of the other, the *homo religious* like himself. The *homo religiosus* experiences the sacred as *sui generis*, an authentic category of religious cognition which cannot be reduced to anything else. To illustrate this *sui generis* nature of the religious phenomena, Eliade refers to the medicine man of Australia. The medicine man alone knows that he can surpass human conditions and assume the mode of a spiritual being. Because of his 'singular existential condition' he is able to cure the sick, makes rain, defend his tribe against magical aggression. His social prestige, cultural role and political supremacy are derived ultimately from his magico-religious "power."³⁹

From the above it becomes clear that in order to understand the irreducibility of the sacred the researcher needs to participate
sympathetically in the life-world of *homo religiosus*. It is only in this sympathetic understanding of the experience of the believer, can the researcher gauge the intensity with which the former holds his religious experience. In this connection Stephan Strausser notes: "In this authentically phenomenological attitude, the world no longer appears to us as a whole of objective data, but as an 'intentional configuration' [*Sinngebilde*] which is born and becomes meaningful in the course of an existential movement of orientation."  

It is in this intentionally configured world of the believer that the sacred manifests itself and it becomes the focus of attention for the researcher. As religious experience is *sui generis*, it cannot be reduced to anything else; it is autonomous in its own right. In other words, it can be said that religious experience is ontologically and methodologically irreducible to anything else. What is so irreducible then requires a method of inquiry uniquely meant for that. Eliade argues, after the manner of Rudolf Otto, that there is in man a special faculty to "know" the Divine Being, the faculty of divinization according to Otto, and that is, according to Eliade, the "transconscious" or "religious aura" located in the collective unconscious of mankind.  

And, this transconscious is a constitutive dimension of the collective unconscious. "We are therefore ... quite justified in speaking of ... the symbolism expressed in the subconscious and transconscious activity of man."  

The transconscious is the realm in which all religious experiences of archaic man are "stored up." Hence Eliade sees it (the
transcendental) as the *sensus numinous* which contains in itself the potential for religious experience.  

5.5. The Structure of Religious Experience

Having thus seen that Eliade gives a new thrust to the history of religions in the sense that it is not just a descriptive history but hermeneutical where the emphasis lies in understanding that which is invariable and essential in religion. The purpose in embarking on such a creative hermeneutics or hermeneutical phenomenology of religion, says Eliade, is to provide the modern man a new way of being in the world. In his quest for a paradigmatic model for modern man to emulate, Eliade takes recourse to the archaic man's religious and cosmic approaches to existence. To put it differently, Eliade accepted the archaic man's ontology, shaped by his religious and cosmic views, as normative in regenerating the modern man's religious ontology and cosmic views. Religion for the archaic man is something absolute, it is irreducible to anything else, and Eliade endorses this fact emphatically in his writings. What is irreducible in religion are its structures that are transhistorical and universal. And, in order to comprehend these invariable structures in religion, Eliade, following Otto's notion of the faculty of divinization, postulates a special faculty - the transconscious - in man. It is through this faculty which is a constitutive element of the collective unconscious, man gains intuitive knowledge of the invariable structures of religion. *Archetype* is a key concept in Eliade's writings. This is so mainly for two reasons. First, the primordial or archaic images are basic to man because of
which his mind is predisposed to view the world in a religious way; and second, they serve as "exemplary models" or "paradigms" of typical human behavior. How are these archetypes formed? Are they innate in man? Or are they acquired through various experiences of man?

Carl Jung suggests that the formation of the mnemonic deposits or engrams has occurred during the process of evolution of man. He compares it with man's habit formation. Habits are formed from repetition of experiences which in turn become a form of predisposition to produce similar experiences. Similarly, archetypes are formed from some primordial experiences of man which have left their indelible marks on his unconscious, and this has now become a form of predisposition in him for similar experiences to occur.

Eliade seems to accept the Jungian elucidation regarding the 'origin' of the archetypes in man's experience of the cosmos and its powers. However he finds no rationale in offering any historical proof to suggest that they (archetypes) 'began' in certain cultures at a particular period of time. This stand of Eliade corroborates with his view that religious forms are a-historical, they are not necessarily bound by time. This does not however mean that Eliade disregards all historical facts altogether; on the contrary, he does take them as important factors in any serious religious studies. There are no pure religious phenomena as such; they always come along with a socio-historical context.

Eliade then goes on to study the primitive man's religious disposition by studying the contemporary pre-literate societies. We do not intend here to
go into all the merits and demerits of his line of approach. Rather what we are concerned with is how his elucidation of the process of religious experience among the primitive man coincides with Merleau-Ponty’s perspective of lived-through-world and bodily intentionality. Or to put it another way, can we possibly elucidate Eliade’s understanding of the process of primitive man’s religious experience and being in the world from the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty? Are there some meetings points that will corroborate and complement the claims of both thinkers?

As we have already noted before Merleau-Ponty gives primacy to man’s perceptual experience of the phenomenal world. And man in his embodied state interrogates this world; it is the lived-through-world, and the body knows its way around it. However, Merleau-Ponty also points out that the phenomenal world has not only an external dimension but also an internal or invisible significance to it. In other words, there is an implicit structure present in the lived-through-world as Merleau-Ponty understands it. It includes a the pre-reflective or the perceptual level, a reflective level and a third level where reflection transcends itself into sedimented forms of words and gestures which in turn “flow back” to the world through man’s bodily habits. This structure of the lived-through-world can also be found in Eliade’s elucidation of process of the primitive man’s religious experience.

While Van der Leeuw considers the irreducible a priori category of religious experience as “Power,” Eliade holds that it is the experience of the “sacred” manifested everywhere. However, Eliade specifies the expression
"everywhere" by using the term hierophany which means the manifestation of the sacred in and through concrete objects, places and events. While Van der Leeuw equates the experience of Power with man’s encounter with forces of nature that are "highly exceptional and extremely impressive," Eliade sees the sacred manifesting itself in all sorts of objects and events: in fact the whole cosmos is the domain of its revelation. Eliade writes:

We are faced with rites, myths, divine forms, sacred and venerated objects, symbols, cosmologies, theologoumena, consecrated men, animals and plants, sacred places, and more. ... Each must be considered as a hierophany in as much as it expresses some way a modality of the sacred and some moments in its history; ... some one of the many kinds of experience of the sacred man has had.

It is significant to note here that although Eliade includes every object and event as possible medium for the hierophany, he distinguishes them as different modalities of hierophanies. In other words not all objects and events share in the same degree or in a homogeneous manner the manifestation of the sacred. To revere a sacred place is one thing, but it is quite another to participate in a sacred ritual, though both are means of hierophanies. In the case of a sacred place its being is determined by the sacred acting upon it, but in the case of ritual, it is a reenactment of the divine act in *illo tempore*. These divine acts are the contents of religious myths. By this Eliade seems to indicate that there is an implicit progressional view of primitive man’s religious experience. That is to say we can decipher from Eliade’s writings a progressional view of religious
experience that begins with man’s perceptual knowledge of the empirical reality which is the manifest level of hierophany. However, the religious man does not remain at the empirical level alone but goes further to see a depth level to it which according to Eliade is symbolic in its being. A historian of religions, says Eliade, should be concerned with explicating the meaning of this symbolic reality for the religious believers themselves. And, the significance of this symbolic reality is best expressed in religious myths, gestures and rituals.

5.5.1. The Manifest Level of Hierophany

The primitive man according to Eliade is homo religiosus. His being in the world is determined by the sacred manifesting itself (hierophany) in various objects and events. Although the sacred is totally the Other (ganz andere), the transcendent, it “reveals” itself in something other than itself, “in objects that are integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”53 It means that the sacred manifests itself through objects and events that belong to the natural world around us. However, it is to be noted that the sacred never reveals itself fully in objects nor do the objects ever get fully transformed into the sacred. All that the objects do is to point to the sacred.54 Although the objects in nature are chosen as means for the sacred to reveal itself, they continue to participate in their surrounding perceptible world. It is this concrete world that man first encounters or as Merleau-Ponty says, “interrogates,” with his senses. For example, a sacred stone still remains a stone, nothing really distinguishes it from another stone in its natural order.55 What really impresses the primitive man first is not the stone’s
sacredness but rather its power, hardness, ruggedness and unchanging nature. He finds it as an obstacle to his gaze and movement because of its hardness and roughness.\textsuperscript{56} It is this empirical experience that he first confronts in his embodied condition. Anything that has power (\textit{mana}) exists on the ontological level and is for that reason efficacious.\textsuperscript{57} Eliade goes on to examine several examples of similar kind drawn from a variety of religious and cultural sources where the primitive man’s perceptual experience comes to the fore. Eliade goes on to other examples of the primitive man’s empirical experience of the earth, water, vegetation, agriculture, fertility, etc. that have made a decisive difference in his attitude toward and relation with them.

It is to be noted that in the perceptual level of man’s experience there does not happen a reflective process though there certainly emerges a knowledge which in Merleau-Ponty’s terms is pre-reflective or pre-thematic. This pre-reflective knowledge however is the basis without which no valid knowledge is possible. The pre-reflective knowledge is primarily a bodily knowledge, that is, the body interrogates the concrete world through its senses. In Eliade’s explication of the religious experience of the primitive man also we have found this pre-reflective level of knowing operative, though in a tacit manner. It is tacit because Eliade’s focus is not on the primitive man’s experience of the concrete world as such, rather it is on the symbolic value of what is thus experienced.
5.5.2. The Symbolic Level of Hierophany

The primitive man, as we have seen above, has his perceptual experience of the concrete world. But Eliade argues that the he goes beyond the level of concreteness to one of significance or meaning. And this significance or meaning is apprehended and described in terms of symbols and myths. For the moment however, we shall deal with symbols as it forms the pivotal point around which Eliade’s thinking develops. Besides, we also hold that myth is the narrative form, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the “sedimented” form of the experience of significance or meaning which we shall treat later on in this chapter.

5.5.3. The Dialectic of the Sacred

The primitive man’s experience of meaning or significance is homologous with what Eliade calls the experience of “the sacred.” The sacred is totally the other (ganz andere), the transcendent, the infinite; and it is beyond man’s natural experience. Nevertheless, the sacred manifests itself, in various ways, and this act of manifestation is what Eliade calls hierophany. “To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany.”

Eliade does not provide any precise definition of a religious phenomenon or hierophany. He, rather, examines various hierophanies - understood in the widest sense of the term - where the sacred manifests itself. The homo religiosus shows interest in hierophanies as they determine the quality of his being in the world. What is to be noted here is that the manifestation of the sacred is never unmediated. The sacred always reveals itself through
something natural, historical and ordinary mundane phenomenon. The earthly objects, according to the primitive man, possess significance or depth dimension insofar as they reveal the sacred. To put it in Merleau-Ponty’s language the concrete objects have a depth dimension which for the archaic man is religious. As the visible world is a landscape for Merleau-Ponty, a topography which is to be explored in its various dimensions, so also for the primitive man the ordinary objects are to be explored in their various dimensions, especially the religious ones. In other words, we can say that for the primitive man the sacred is a dimension of being, an amplitude of depth, a level on which life is experienced.62

Eliade’s explication of the various hierophanies shows that there exists a paradoxical relationship between the sacred and the mundane. And this paradoxical relationship forms the very intent and foundation of hierophany, thinks Eliade. “One must remember the dialectic of the sacred: any object whatever may paradoxically become hierophany, a receptacle of the sacred, while still participating in the environment.”63 The dialectic of the sacred demands that it expresses itself through something other than itself.

In fact, this paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming, is what every hierophany, even the most elementary, reveals... It is implied in every hierophany whatever, for every hierophany shows, makes manifest, the coexistence of contradictory essences: sacred and profane, spirit and matter, eternal and non-eternal, and so on.64
We thus notice in the dialectics of the sacred a coexistence of the ordinary, the mundane, the secular with the sacred. What is paradoxical is this: on the one hand that which is ordinary, secular, finite, historical thing, while remaining what it is, can at the same time manifest that which is not finite, not historical, not secular and not natural. On the other hand, what is transcendent, wholly other, infinite, trans-historical, limits itself by manifesting itself in something relative, finite and historical. The transcendent, the historical, in fact, requires the mundane, the historical to reveal itself. This paradoxical co-existence of the sacred with the secular creates an "existential crisis" for man in which he is called upon to evaluate the two levels of being and to make a decisive choice. The archaic man, because of his religious disposition, chooses that dimension of being which is significant, the "wholly other" and "ultimate."

Eliade makes this orientation of the archaic man very clear when he declares, "The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are hierophanies, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the sacred, the ganz andere." The religious man is capable of apprehending that surplus of meaning in an otherwise secular object. When a mundane object is viewed and experienced as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. This transformation is possible, argues Eliade, not only at the microcosmic but at the macrocosmic level as well: the whole cosmos can become a hierophany.
5.5.4. Symbolism of Reality

A hierophany is to be apprehended, says Eliade, not through rational concepts or their analysis, but primarily through symbols. And Eliade thinks that hermeneutics is, first of all, the interpretation of hierophanies as religious symbols in order to find their "deep meaning." Reality for the archaic man is sacred. To put it differently, only that is real for him which manifests the sacred. But man has no access to this sacred reality except through symbols. Merleau-Ponty also understands that reality is symbolic though not in the same way as Eliade does. For the former the reality is ontologically symbolic in the sense that the bodily intentionality requires symbolic representation supervenient upon the pre-reflective facts about the body-as-physical-entity in the environment. In other words, Merleau-Ponty tacitly assumes that a reflective phase follows the pre-reflective aspect of the bodily intentionality. "... we are saying that the body, in so far as it has 'behavior patterns,' is that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world, and through which we can consequently 'be at home in' that world, 'understand' it and find significance in it."\(^{67}\) Eliade, however, moves beyond Merleau-Ponty's conception of the symbolic value of reality by highlighting the religious dimension of it for the archaic man.

The archaic man, according to Eliade, is a *homo symbolicus* in as much as he considers symbols to be his chief religious mode of cognition.\(^{68}\) Since man is embodied and finite, he cannot have direct access to the knowledge of the sacred which is transcendent. Man's knowledge of the sacred,
therefore, is not the result of his rational analysis; he receives it from the manifestation of the sacred. And, all these revelations are given to man in the idiom of symbols. The sky for example, is a symbol through the sacred reveals itself to man. As Eliade says, "The transcendence of God is directly revealed in the inaccessibility, infinity, eternity and creative power (rain) of the sky. The whole nature of the sky is an inexhaustible hierophany."69 Symbols and images are means of expressing more than what can be conveyed by man's words; they impart information which is often difficult to communicate in words. They point to a reality which is transcendent and totally other. Eliade remarks, "Since man is homo symbolicus, and all his activities involve symbolism, it follows that religious facts have a symbolic character. This is certainly true if we realize that every religious act and every cult object aims at a meta-empirical reality."70 In his explication of the symbolism of religious phenomena or hierophanies, Eliade distinguishes between "local hierophanies" and "universal hierophanies." The local hierophanies are those which "evoke" the numinous experience in a religious person. But as the universal hierophanies are the archetypal symbols which "express" the sacred conceived as ultimate reality.71 Symbols according to Eliade in the strict sense of the term, therefore, refer to those universal hierophanies.

Symbolic thinking, says Eliade, is a coherent system, and symbols have their own logic and metaphysics. By the term "logic of the symbol" what Eliade means is that certain groups of symbols reveal their coherence, intimately connected with one another; in a word, they can be
systematically formulated and translated into rational terms. Such coherent symbols form themselves into universal archetypes. Eliade also holds the view that the archaic man possesses a coherent system of metaphysics. However, such “metaphysics” is not explicated in written language, but found mainly in symbols, myths, and rites. Through these means the archaic man intends to express his affirmations about the ultimate reality of things, which in turn constitutes metaphysics. What distinguishes this symbolic metaphysics from every other kind of metaphysics is that it “speaks” to the whole man and not only to the intelligence. All religious phenomena involve man in his fullness, that is, his intellect, emotions, conscious and the unconscious, diurnal and the nocturnal, the good and the shadow side. In fact, Eliade contends that emotion and intuition play a vital role in apprehending the symbolic meaning of reality. Just as consciousness is closely related to rationalization and conceptualization, the unconscious is associated with the process of symbolization.

We have so far seen how Eliade attempts to explicate the archaic man’s conception of reality which is primarily symbolic. It is symbolic because there is no other way of knowing the transcendent that manifests (hierophanies) itself dialectically. Symbols are always multivalent or polyvalent insofar as they disclose several meanings, some of which may even be very ambiguous. The function of symbolism therefore is one of unification or as Eliade puts it, the coincidentia oppositorum. These symbolic meanings are the common property of society which preserves and promotes them in mythical and ritualistic forms.
5.5.5. Formalization of Symbols

The archaic man's recognition of the symbolic meaning of reality is an inner experience. However this inner experience of significance or meaning seeks to express itself in forms that are intersubjectively shared and transmitted. In other words, it can be said along with Merleau-Ponty that immanent experience of symbolic meaning seeks to transcend itself to dimensions of experience that are more external and expressive. This tendency to move from one dimension of experience to another in man is what Merleau-Ponty calls as transcendence.

Religious myths and rituals are two important forms that come into being from out of the archaic man's inner experience of symbolic meaning. To put it in Merleau-Ponty's terms, myths and rituals are forms into which the symbolic meanings of reality gets sedimented. They (myths and rituals) are externalized forms of religious man's inner experience of the meaning of reality, and they are socially shared and transmitted.

Religious myth is the narrative form of man's experience of the manifestation of the sacred or hierophanies. "Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings.'" The archaic man always looked up to gods' or culture heroes' creative actions in *illo tempore* which are narrated in religious myths. In other words it can be said that myths are the archaic man's attempt to describe the intrusion or irruption of the supernatural into the world. The man of traditional societies distinguishes between myths and fables. For him only myths are *true* because they deal with the sacred
realities or gods’ intervention in the world. Since the persons involved in myths are not human but gods or cultural heroes, their *gesta* constitute mysteries. And the archaic man apprehends these mysteries through symbols which when transcended into words and myths; their meaning gets sedimented or formalized.

Myths that describe the *gesta* of gods constitute paradigmatic models for all human activities. To the extent man is able to imitate the gods’ (*imitatio Dei*) activities, he lives in the time of *origin*, the time of myths. That is to say he able to move out of the everyday, ordinary time and recover an unending time, eternity. It is through the narration of myths, the archaic man “attempts to approach the gods and participate in *being*; the imitation of paradigmatic divine models expresses at once his desire for sanctity and his ontological nostalgia.”

Eliade surveys a wide range of religious myths, particularly in his work, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, with an intent to elucidate the archaic man’s ontological nostalgia and desire for sanctity. As for example, the Polynesian cosmogonic myth serves as a model for “creations” at all levels - biological, psychological and spiritual. All activities of man are, therefore, determined by this paradigmatic model found in the myth of creation by gods in *illo tempore*. “The cosmogony thus provides a model, whenever there is a question of *doing something*; often it is something “living”, something “animated” ... but it is also sometimes a question of making something apparently quite inanimate...” In other words, the archaic man always conforms his activities with that of gods’ as described in myths. No
action of man will be considered valid and efficacious until it re-actualizes gods' own action in *illo tempore*.

This process of re-enactment of gods' actions through man's activities is best illustrated in the practice of religious rituals. Myths provide man with models for reenacting religious rituals and tools for deciphering the divine messages. By re-enacting rituals the religious man aims to project himself out of history and escape from the trappings of everyday or chronological time.  

In Eliade's opinion, man is afraid of his own human predicament and he is constantly seeking to find means of escaping it. Man is faced with what Eliade calls the "terror of history" and it is through the means of rituals that he surmounts it.

Religious ritual according to Eliade is a repetition or re-enactment of the sacred action at the primordial time as described in myths. These sacred actions of gods are the prototype for man's actions. What is sacred is the only *real* for archaic man; the sacred action is the only action worthy of emulation. Through such religious rituals the archaic man wants to transcend the chronological time and return to the sacred beginnings. It means that performing religious rituals is aimed at bringing about a qualitative change in man's existential condition in the world. The religious man then is no longer subjected to the vicissitudes of history, rather, through the power of rituals he actualizes the sacred history.

Eliade lists several ritualistic practices where the primitive man attempts to imitate the actions of gods in primordial times. In the performance of any ritual man uses gestures that have meanings sedimented in them. It is to be
noted that in a religious ritual not all gestures are acceptable, only those that convey religious meanings are made. By performing rituals the archaic man exhibits his remarkable ability for experiencing and expressing the depth dimension of the nature. Among the many examples of rituals that Eliade gives in his writings, the agricultural and vegetation rites are very important. To the primitive man agriculture, like all other basic activities, is not merely a skill. Rather agriculture, before all else, is a ritual since it involves life and its object is the marvelous growth of that life dwelling in seed, furrow, rain and the spirits of vegetation.  

A religious ritual is performed at a sacred place during the sacred time. Conversely, a place and time assume sacredness at the performance of religious rituals. A sacred space is either discovered with the help of a sign or consecrated by the designated authority. Once a space is recognized as sacred it is no longer homogeneous and neutral but effects a break from its surrounding. The sacred space is qualitatively different from its surrounding spaces in the sense that it becomes the “central spot,” and provides an orientation to man in his engagement in the world. It is at sacred space that man performs his religious rituals, re-enacting of the sacred actions of gods in primordial times. The archaic man apprehends the sacred actions of gods from his own experiences of the natural rhythm of events. By such re-enactment man is able to recapture his sedimented experience of significance of the nature and also to bring out new significations. Once man experiences the power of the sacred through the religious rituals he orients his life in the world in accordance with it. That is to say the
religious man, while engaged in the everyday mundane world, always orients himself to the sacred space as a means to transcend the everydayness of existence.

We have so far examined Eliade's phenomenology of religion in the light of Merleau-Ponty's perspective of lived-through-world and bodily intentionality. Religious experience according to Eliade is a lived reality in a particular context. And his phenomenology of religion is an attempt to elucidate this lived reality in all its complexities. As a lived reality, Eliade 'begins' with man's perceptual encounter with the nature around. This perceptual experience of the archaic man however is not to be construed as merely aesthetic in character but pre-eminently religious in orientation.

That the archaic man is able to decipher the depth dimension of the natural world is evident from his attitude of reverence towards it. Nature for primitive man, therefore, is not just an aggregate of material objects as the modern man thinks, but it is the medium for hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred. And, the primitive man understands this depth significance of reality in terms of symbols. Symbols communicate better than the rational concepts and sometimes rational concepts are inadequate or even fail in communicating that which is spiritual and transcendent. The symbolic meaning that the archaic man experiences is captured in religious myths and rituals. To put it in the language of Merleau-Ponty, myths and rituals are the sedimented forms of the archaic man's experience of significance of reality.

By recounting the myths and re-enacting the rituals, the primitive man re-actualizes this sedimented significance in order to orient himself in a world
that is mediocre and ordinary and amorphous. In a word, the religious man, through myths and rituals creates his own cosmos - his dwelling place.

END NOTES - Chapter V


In common parlance, the history of religions, a sub-discipline of the science of religion, is understood as an empirical science engaged in the description of religion in its historical expression.


Although, in general, Eliade is consistent in his view of history of religions as phenomenology of religion or hermeneutical phenomenology of religion, there are some references that seem to be incoherent with his general perspective. As for instance, when he writes, "[the phenomenologist] in principle, rejects any works of comparison; confronted with one religious phenomenon or another, he confines himself to "approaching" it and dividing its meaning. Whereas the
historian of religions does not reach a comprehension of a phenomenon until
after he has compared it with thousands of similar or dissimilar phenomena,
until he has situated it among them," he seems to be deviating from his

12 Mircea Eliade, "The Sacred in the Secular World," in *Cultural Hermeneutics* 1,


14 Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, London and Oxford: Mowbrays,
1978, p. 56.

11.

16 Antonio Barbosa da Silva, *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical
Problem with Particular Reference to Mircea Eliade's Phenomenological
Approach*, op.cit. p. 127. The author here speaks of four different ways Eliade
uses the term hermeneutics: as "intention" like Dilthey, as "structure" in the
sense of Van der Leeuw, as "intentionality" of Husserl and as psychoanalytic
sense of Freud and Jung.

17 Ibid. p. 126. The author, however, makes a remark regarding lack of clarity in
Eliade's thinking about these concepts that he liberally uses. But we think that


24 There are many thinkers who are critical of the use of *Verstehen* in the study of religion. They claim among other things that *Verstehen* as an interpretative process through “sympathy,” “reliving,” etc. have only a heuristic value; and it should not not be prescribed to the scholar as a necessary method for studying religious phenomena. Cf. Antonio Barbosa da Silva, *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem with Particular Reference to Mircea Eliade’s Phenomenological Approach*, op.cit. p. 132.


Eliade uses words like "archaic," and "prIMITIVE" inter-changeably in his writings, and the same usage has been retained here.

When Eliade speaks of the "prIMITIVE" man, he is referring to the non-literate societies of today studied mainly by anthropologists. This understanding has, however, been contested by some anthropologists as well as by historians of religions. Cf. John A. Saliba, "Eliade's View of Primitive Man: Some Anthropological Reflections," in Religion, Vol.6, 1976, pp. 159-62.


Ibid. p. 153.


Ibid. p. 15.


45 Antonio Barbosa da Silva, *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem with Particular Reference to Mircea Eliade's Phenomenological Approach*, *op.cit.* pp.153-54. The author makes a detailed analysis of Eliade's use of terms such as collective unconscious, archetypes, and their possible allusion to Carl Jung's theories of personality. He also refers to the conflicting views of authors regarding the accuracy of correspondence between the two thinkers. cf. p.150.


There are several mutually opposing views expressed by scholars (especially the cultural and social anthropologists) in regard to Eliade’s assumption that there is a continuum between contemporary pre-literate societies and the primitive societies. Vide. John A. Saliba, ‘Homo Religiosus’ in Mircea Eliade, op.cit. pp. 99-141. Also his article, “Eliade’s View of Primitive Man: Some Anthropological Reflections,” in Religion, Vol.6, 1976, pp. 150-75.

Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op.cit. p.11.

Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op.cit. p.2.

Stephen J. Reno, “Eliade’s Progressional View of Hierophanies,” in Religious Studies, Vol. 8, 1972, pp. 153-60. The author here understands Eliade’s progressional view of hierophany as that which begins with material objects leading up to its full expression in the person of Jesus in Christianity. While this view is commensurate with that of Eliade’s, we want to suggest another progressional flow in his views on religious experience as such. That is to say Eliade implicitly accepts that man’s religious experience ‘begins’ with an empirical encounter with objects and events in nature that points to the transcendent, the sacred or the divine. This pointing to the sacred is symbolic in its being and it is reflected in religious myths and rituals.

Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op.cit. p.11.


Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. p. 12.

Ibid. p. 216.

Ibid. p. 23.


60 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, *op.cit.* p. 11. See also *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, p. 124

61 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *op.cit.* p. xii.


64 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *op.cit.* p. 29.


74 Mircea Eliade and Kitagawa, The History of Religions -Essays in Methodology, op.cit. p. 102.

75 Mircea Eliade, Australian Religion: An Introduction, op.cit. p.100.

76 Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op.cit. p.95.

77 Ibid. p.106.

78 Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op.cit. p.411.


80 Ibid. p.52.


82 Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op.cit. p.331.