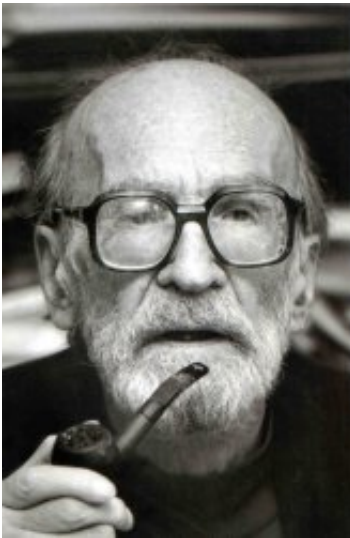


Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

Eliade was educated as a philosopher. He published extensively in the history of religions and acted as editor-in-chief of Macmillan's *Encyclopedia of Religion*. The influence of his thought, through these works and through thirty years as director of History of Religions department at the University of Chicago, is considerable.



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Eliade's analysis of religion assumes the existence of "the sacred" as the object of worship of religious humanity. It appears as the source of power, significance, and value. Humanity apprehends "hierophanies" -- physical manifestations or revelations of the sacred--often, but not only, in the form of symbols, myths, and ritual. Any phenomenal entity is a potential hierophany and can give access to non-historical time: what Eliade calls *illud tempus* (Latin for 'that time,' I tend to think of it as 'yon time'). The apprehension of this sacred time is a constitutive feature of the religious aspect of humanity.

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Adapted from "Mircea Eliade" by Bryan Rennie in the 1998
Routledge *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Mircea Eliade was born in Bucharest, Romania on 13 March 1907. Although Romanian records give his date of birth as 28 February, this is according to the Julian calendar, since the Gregorian calendar was not adopted in Romania until 1924. Eliade's Orthodox Christian family celebrated his birthday on the Day of the Forty Martyrs, which is 9 March by the Julian calendar, and Eliade himself gave that date as his birthday. Despite a childhood interest in entomology and botany (which doubtless first attracted his attention to Goethe, a lifelong role model and inspiration), he developed an interest in world literature and was led from there to philology, philosophy, and comparative religion. As a youth he read extensively in Romanian, French, and German, and around 1924-25 he learned Italian and English to read Raffaele Pettazzoni and James George Frazer in the original.

In 1925 Eliade enrolled at the University of Bucharest where he studied in the department of philosophy. The influence of Nae Ionescu (b.1890), then an assistant professor of logic and metaphysics and an active journalist, was keenly felt by the young Eliade and the shadow which fell on the older scholar because of his involvement with the extreme right in inter-war Romania has darkened Eliade's reputation.

Eliade's Master's thesis examined Italian Renaissance Philosophers from Marcilio Ficino to Giordano Bruno, and Renaissance Humanism was one of his major influences when he turned to India in order to "universalize" the "provincial" philosophy he had inherited from his European education. Finding that the Maharaja of Kassimbazar sponsored European scholars to study in India Eliade applied and was granted an allowance for four years. In 1928 he sailed for Calcutta to study Sanskrit and philosophy under Surendranath Dasgupta (1885-1952), a Cambridge educated Bengali, professor at the University of Calcutta, and author of a 5 volume, *History of Indian Philosophy* (Motilal Banarsidass 1922-55).

He returned to Bucharest in 1932 and successfully submitted his analysis of Yoga as his doctoral thesis at the Philosophy department in 1933. Published in French as *Yoga: Essai sur les origines de la mystique Indienne* this was extensively revised and republished as *Yoga, Immortality, and Freedom*. As Ionescu's assistant Eliade lectured on, among other things, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Nicholas of Cusa's *Docta Ignorantia*. From 1933 to 1939 he was active with the Criterion group who gave public seminars on wide-ranging topics. They were strongly influenced by the philosophy of "trairism," the search for the "authentic" in and through lived experience (Romanian, *traire*) seen as the only source of "authenticity."

After the Second World War, during which he served with the Romanian Legation in the UK and Portugal, Eliade was unable to return to the newly communist Romania because of his connection with the right-wing Ionescu. In 1945 he moved to Paris where his acquaintance with George Dumézil, an important scholar of comparative mythology, secured a part-time post for him at the École des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne teaching comparative religion. From this time on almost all of Eliade's scholarly works were written in French.

At the prompting of Joachim Wach, Eliade's predecessor at the University of Chicago, a comparativist and hermeneuticist, Eliade was invited to give the 1956 Haskell Lectures on "Patterns of Initiation" at the University of Chicago. These were later published as *Birth and Rebirth*. In 1958 he was invited to assume the chair of the History of Religions department in Chicago. There he stayed until his death on 22 April 1986, publishing extensively and writing largely unpublished fiction. He also launched the journals *History of Religions* and *The Journal of Religion* and acted as editor-in-chief for Macmillan's *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

2 Thought

Despite his focus on the history of religions, Eliade never relinquished his philosophical agenda. That said, he never fully clarified his philosophy. There has been radical disagreement over his thought, some seeing it as a crucial contribution to the study of religion, and some seeing him as an obscurantist whose normative assumptions are unacceptable.

In *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), a book which he was tempted to subtitle *Introduction to a Philosophy of History*, Eliade distinguishes between religious and non-religious humanity on the basis of the perception of time as heterogenous and homogenous respectively. This distinction will be immediately familiar to students of Henri Bergson as an element of that philosopher's analysis of time and space. Eliade contends that the perception of time as an homogenous, linear, and unrepeatable medium is a peculiarity of modern and non-religious humanity. Archaic or religious humanity (*homo religiosus*), in comparison, perceives time as heterogenous; that is, as divided between profane time (linear), and sacred time (cyclical and reactualizable). By means of myths and rituals which give access to this sacred time religious humanity protects itself against the 'terror of history', a condition of helplessness before the absolute *data* of historical time, a form of existential anxiety.

In the very process of establishing this distinction, however, Eliade undermines it, insisting that non-religious humanity in any pure sense is a very rare phenomenon. Myth and *illud tempus* are still operative, albeit concealed, in the world of modern humanity and Eliade clearly regards the attempt to restrict real time to linear historical time as finally self-contradictory. He squarely sets himself against the historicism of Hegel.

"The sacred" has also been the subject of considerable contention.

Some have seen Eliade's "sacred" as simply corresponding to a conventional concept of deity, or to Rudolf Otto's *ganz andere* (the "wholly other"), whereas others have seen a closer resemblance to Emile Durkheim's socially influenced sacred. Eliade himself repeatedly identifies the sacred as the real, yet he states clearly that "the sacred is a structure of human consciousness" (1969 i; 1978, xiii). This would argue more for the latter interpretation: a social construction of both the sacred and of reality. Yet the sacred is identified as the *source* of significance, meaning, power and being, and its manifestations as hierophanies, cratophanies, or ontophanies accordingly (appearances of the holy, of power, or of being). Corresponding to the suggested ambiguity of the sacred itself is the ambiguity of its manifestations.

Eliade does state that believers for whom the hierophany is a revelation of the sacred must be prepared by their experience, including their traditional religious background, before they can apprehend it. To others the sacred tree, for example, remains simply a tree. It is an indispensable element of Eliade's analysis that any phenomenal entity could be apprehended as an hierophany with the appropriate preparation. The conclusion must be that all beings reveal, and at the same time conceal, the nature of Being. A reprise of Nicholas of Cusa's *Coincidentia Oppositorum* is evident here, as is a possible explanation of the systematic ambiguity of Eliade's writings.

Finally religion, systematically understood as the apprehension of relative worth conferred through non-historical realities (including all abstract and imaginary entities) but revealed and confirmed through historical phenomena is seen as a unifying human universal. It is characteristic of Eliade's style of writing, both in his fictional and in his academic work, that this conclusion is nowhere clearly stated. Leading assertions are scattered throughout his publications on the history of religions, alchemy, symbolism, initiation, myth, etc. inviting his readers either to make an

immediate interpretation or to pursue the question further into the thicket of his oeuvre.

3 List of Works

This is a necessarily brief and incomplete list of Eliade's work. For a fuller bibliography, see Bryan Rennie, [Reconstructing Eliade](#). See the following link for a partial listing of [Eliade's fictional works](#).

Eliade, M. (1954) *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. W. Trask, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Probably Eliade's most crucial and approachable short work. Contains his analysis of time as heterogenous for the religious and homogenous for the non-religious and his conception of the 'terror of history' and the ability to 'reactualize' religious time.)

----- (1958a) *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, trans. W. Trask. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (First published in French as *Yoga: Essai sur l'origine de la mystique Indienne* in 1933, this informative and scholarly work analyses yoga as a concrete search for freedom from human limitations)

----- (1958b) *Rites and Symbols of Initiation (Birth and Rebirth)*, trans. W. Trask, London: Harvill Press. (The publication of Eliade's 1956 Haskell Lectures at the University of Chicago, 'Patterns of Initiation'. His analysis of initiatory themes implies their ubiquity and structure as a symbolic death and rebirth.)

----- (1958c) *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed, London: Sheed and Ward. (An attempt to delineate the morphology of the sacred. Frequently criticized for its cross-cultural, and ahistorical approach, *Patterns* organizes religious phenomena by structural similarities regardless of time or place of origin. A valuable source of data despite this.)

----- (1959) *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. Trask, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (Picking up where Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (Das Heilige) left off, the sacred is explicated through its relation to its binary counterpart, the profane. The complex dialectic of the sacred and the profane is outlined.)

----- (1960) *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: the Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. P. Mairet, London: Harvill Press. (Eliade's understanding of myth in the modern world, the mythic prestige of origins, and his analysis of the symbolism of ascension, flight, the labyrinth, and swallowing by a monster, among others.)

----- (1961) *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. P. Mairet, London: Harvill Press. (More on symbolism, particularly the symbolism of the center, knots, shells, and pearls. Symbolism and history and some remarks on method.)

----- (1963) *Myth and Reality*, trans. W. Trask, New York: Harper and Row. (The structure of myths. More on the prestige of origins and on the survival of myths and mythic themes in modern thought.)

----- (1964) *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. W. Trask, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (Long a standard work in the study of Shamanism, a detailed and valuable source of information on the phenomenon.)

----- (1965) *The Two and the One*, trans. J.M. Cohen, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (An important work for the analysis of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites, or binary oppositions in the history of religious ideas. Androgyny is explored as are cosmogony and eschatology, the birth and death of the cosmos or worldview.)

----- (1969) *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, London: University of Chicago Press. (An attempt at a more methodological work. *The Quest* pulls together articles previously published on Eliade's methodological and theoretical presuppositions, including his 'new humanism', his response to the quest for the 'origins' of religion.)

----- (1978) *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. I, *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, trans. W. Trask, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Originally projected as a complete history of religion in one volume. This was an attempt to give Eliade's understanding of the entire history of religion from a unified perspective. A useful reference work, potentially readable in its entirety. Many of Eliade's categories survive in this mature work: the terror of history, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the symbolism of the center, the *hieros gamos* or symbolic heavenly marriage.)

----- (1982) *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. II, *From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, trans. W. Trask, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

----- (1985) *The History of Religious Ideas*, vol. III, *From Muhammad to the Age of the Reforms*, trans. A. Hiltebeitel and D. Apostolos-Cappadona, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

----- (1987) *Encyclopedia of Religion* (editor-in-chief), New York: Macmillan. (Seventeen volumes of articles on every aspect of religion by leading scholars in the field. Currently the standard reference encyclopedia on religion.)

4 References and further reading

This is a necessarily brief and incomplete list of works on Eliade. For a fuller bibliography, see Bryan Rennie, [*Reconstructing Eliade*](#).

Allen, D. (1978) *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics*

in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions, The Hague, Mouton, . (An interesting philosophical study of Eliade's thought that perhaps over-emphasizes Eliade's methodology as phenomenology.)

----- and Denis Doeing. (1980) *Mircea Eliade. An Annotated Bibliography*. New York and London: Garland. (An excellent polyglot bibliography, although a definitive posthumous bibliography is in preparation by M.L. Ricketts and M. Handoca.)

Baird, R.D. (1971) "Phenomenological Understanding: Mircea Eliade," in *Category Formation and the History of Religion*. The Hague: Mouton, 74-91. (A critique of Eliade as making unwarranted ontological assumptions and normative judgments that should, however, be verified against a thorough reading of the primary sources.)

Cave, J.D. (1992) *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. (An accessible interpretation of Eliade's work in terms of humanism, which was one of Eliade's major foci.)

Dudley, G., III (1977) *Religion on Trial; Mircea Eliade and his Critics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University. (This readable and broadly favorable work reconceives Eliade's thought in terms of a research program for the history of religion.)

Idinopulos, T.A. and Yonan, E. (eds.) (1994) *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*. Leiden: E. J. Brill. (A variety of challenging articles on Eliade's status and implications for the study of religion. Of particular interest is William Paden's 'Before "The Sacred" became Theological: Rereading the Durkheimian Legacy.')

Olson, C. (1992) *The Theology and Philosophy of Eliade*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. (A general and readable consideration of Eliade's thought.)

Rennie, B. (1996) [*Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion*](#). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (A thorough explication Eliade's work which assumes that it has an internal coherence for the critic to uncover; includes an extensive bibliography.)

Ricketts, M.L. (1988) *Mircea Eliade: the Romanian Roots*. vols. I & II. New York: Columbia University Press, . (A massive and thorough piece of research into Eliade's life, thought, and works up until 1945.)

Strenski, I. (1989) "Mircea Eliade." In *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History*. London: Macmillan. (One of the earliest critiques to raise Eliade's political background, and one which attempts to trace the influence of that background in his theoretical constructs.)

For more recent research see Bryan Rennie's [current research](#).



Comments?

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