

MIRCEA ELIADE - THE PROFESSOR WITH THE VOCATION OF UNIVERSALITY, A "CITIZEN OF THE WORLD"

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Abstract: *From a cultural and academic standpoint, Mircea Eliade is a founder and a pioneer. He wrote and taught the History of Religions, thus proving his propensity to universality, both as a teacher and as a thinker. Today, this subject is associated with his name in all universities across the world.*

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Born in the early 20th century - in Bucharest on March 9, 1907 - a century marked by nihilistic philosophies and positivist theories, Mircea Eliade is particularly surprising because of his interest in literature, philosophy, Oriental studies, alchemy and the history of religions that had been obvious even starting with his high school years. As an apprentice of Nae Ionescu, he learned to appreciate the historical importance of the phenomenological method, the importance of living, engagement, intuition, spiritual and psychological realities and also the mental world. He started drawing up much of the structure of thought and some paradoxes of life in his days as a student.

However, the main interest of these years was the realization of Romanian culture and art; his great hope was to decipher the message of the cosmos. After his experiences in India, he started to see a great storehouse of hidden meanings in the cosmos. As shown in the works of his youth, Mircea Eliade had a strong sense of destiny and that sense would accompany him to the last day of his life (Chicago, April 22, 1986).

We cannot make a clear distinction between the different periods of his life, since one could see in him a true Romanian patriot and a *citizen of the world* from the very first articles published in the magazines of that time. His interest in Renaissance philosophy, awakened by Nae Ionescu,

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was a sign of willingness to find that *uomo universale* model, a concept that was also present in the works of Romanian thinkers of the time. From here arise some themes such as *freedom, authenticity of human existence, the new humanism*, that are the subject of articles written in his youth but which have yet to be translated to other languages.

When he had to explain the great decision of his life, leaving for India, to himself in journals or to others in interviews, Mircea Eliade invoked *his aspiration to universality and freedom*. It is known that the aspiration to universality had previously led him to the Italian Renaissance, the Renaissance thirsty for a primordial universal doctrine and which he had hoped to find in *Corpus Hermeticorum*, mistakenly thought to have come before the Hellenic and Indeo-Christian tradition¹. The interest for Renaissance would result in his undergraduate thesis; but the thirst for the universal had still remained unsatisfied by the Renaissance humanism, which was "too dependent on the Mediterranean classicism". This would lead him to seek "a wider, more daring new humanism" in India, and to discover the model of a «universal man».

"I left for India - Mircea Eliade confesses - so as not to have that feeling of provinciality that the exclusive reading of Western philosophy gave me. I did not believe that thinking started with the Pre-Socratics. I wanted to explore the deepest roots of thought"².

Universality, which remained a cardinal value of his entire research work of exotic cultures and history of religions, is strictly simplified in the idea of authenticity.

Universality, as a guarantee of major authenticity, was postulated in opposition to originality, which was only an expression of individualism: "above originality - Mircea Eliade said - I suggest authenticity, which actually means the same, except for the ceremonial, the technique and phonetics inherent in any "originality". This means you yourself living, knowing through you, express yourself. There is no <<individualism>> in this[...] The more authentic and the more yourself it is, the more you express a universal experience or a universal knowledge³.

Universality stems from authenticity as the latter is equivalent to leaving the temporal and historical boundaries and limitations of the

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Fragments d'journal*, p. 408, apud. Sergiu Al. George, *Arhaic și universal*, București, Eminescu Publishing, 1981, p. 132.

² Ibidem, p. 247.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Oceanography*, Publishing Culture of the people, 1934 (About the fate of understanding), reprinted Humanitas, 2008, p. 176-177.

conscience, exiting what constitutes individuality or the individual. This set universality develops a soteriological and cultural significance at the same time. By striving towards the transpersonal, authenticity also institutes freedom at the same time as universality. Freedom had an identical soteriological and cultural significance at the same time.

The stay in India opened his eyes to the meaning of freedom that can be gained by abolishing the usual conditions of human existence. The lessons learned in India had a very important role in the future career of the specialist in the history of religions; one might say that the Indian studies part of his work is the most robust one.

While in India, starting with the insights of Nae Ionescu and Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu⁴, Eliade discovers the existence of common features present in all peasant cultures, from parts of which the concept of cosmic religion would later arise⁵.

Eliade believed that the essence of the patriarchal cultures in South-Eastern Europe has been preserved until today and formulated the hypothesis that the Romanian roots could become the basis of a genuine universalism and a fruitful dialogue between East and West⁶.

Eliade and his generation strived to accomplish a synthesis marked by a purely prophetic spirit – in other words, with its face turned towards the future, but a future that does not also mean the realization of a political ideal (the unification of the principalities, achievement of a national state for all Romanians), but rather he proposed that the Romanian spirit enter universality, dreamt of a Romanian "imperialism" of a strictly spiritual nature, and wanted Romanian culture to play a major role in world culture.

The theory of creativity which dominated the Romanian interwar period was developed by Nae Ionescu - who was Eliade's mentor - and also by C.R. Motru, N. Iorga, and especially Lucian Blaga. Mircea Eliade departs from these thinkers by proposing his own vision at the same time.

Creation is for him primarily of a spiritual nature: the aim is to develop one's abilities to the maximum, whether it is building an inner

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *On Eminescu and Hașdeu*, Iași, Junimea Publishing, 1987, pp. 54-110.

⁵ Mircea Vulcănescu, *Nae Ionescu. As We Knew Him*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1992, pp.49-50. Speaking about Nae Ionescu's origenism, Vulcănescu states that *The Professor* sent his pupil, Mircea Eliade, to the very roots of this preplatonism of nothingness, of gymnosophists, to remote India. Vulcănescu stresses that *The Professor* did not confuse Christianity with Hinduism, but saw in India the spiritual prototype of a metaphysical attitude originating in Eastern Christianity.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Memoirs. The Promise of the Equinox*, vol. I, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1991, pp. 173-278.

balance (a lifestyle of one's own), or of works that one is defined by (a house, a field, a theory, a volume of poetry and so on).

Creativity is what distinguishes man from animals, it is the hallmark and defining feature of humanity in the universe.

In a social-political order, the state should have the goal of helping each individual create. It must meet the human desire for construction. **The theory of the cultural state** (developed by Iorga and Mihail Dragomirescu even since before World War I) becomes, through Nae Ionescu and his disciples, a dominant one. With this "amendment", culture comes to be included in creation, similar to an all-encompassing of the manifestation of humanity in humanness.

From this perspective, only the genuine intellectual creates. For Mircea Eliade the Intellectual is the clairvoyant man who knows how to "read in the dark".

The Romanian thinker believes that intellectuals have always been those that create internal links between things. They are to thanks for the progress in history, they foresee what tomorrow will bring and are already making plans for the day after tomorrow. They are the creative elite of a nation, the doers of history in time. It is obvious that Mircea Eliade will be called upon when it comes to freedom of action of the intellectuals, their involvement as mentors and writers.

The intellectual should not be engaged in politics - he has the historical responsibility of his thought and deed, he makes history, not politics.

Mircea Eliade goes even further by saying that genuine intellectuals are more difficult to come by than geniuses⁷. A genius absorbs his world and gives it its vital breath back: an intellectual on the other hand is able to make connections between all areas of his era. The genius somehow destroys in order to re-create; **the intellectual captures the meaning of creation, explains and develops on it.**

Mircea Eliade is part of a generation of genuine intellectuals who stem from the school of philosophy led by Nae Ionescu, Eliade's professor of logic and metaphysics at the University of Bucharest, whose assistant Eliade would become at a later date. His best friends were important philosophers in interwar Romania.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Romanian Prophetic, Romania in Eternity*, Roza vânturilor Publishing, Bucharest 1990, p. 12.

Without a doubt, Mircea Eliade did not intend to create a philosophical system, but this does not mean that he despised philosophy.

From a philosophical standpoint, Mircea Eliade's work is not carried out to the end. A possible explanation would be the following: Mircea Eliade's interest was mainly in methodology and placed philosophical issues aside for the sake of method. Afterwards, he probably felt that he could not justify his new approach to the history of religions from a philosophical point of view. In fact, whenever the need arose, he would borrow from the explanations and concepts of his philosopher friends. From the memoir notes we learn that, in addition to Nae Ionescu, three other Romanian philosophers helped clarify the meaning of terms he used. Obviously, these remarks are related to the studies Eliade did in his youth.

The first one is Mircea Vulcanescu, a friend of Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica and Petre Țuțea - important philosophers in Romanian culture.

Lucian Blaga also influenced Mircea Eliade in certain aspects, through his studies on the features of Romanian spirituality.

Eliade noted from the philosophical views of Nae Ionescu, Lucian Blaga, Mircea Vulcanescu and Constantin Noica that *the metaphysics of archaic spirituality has a platonic structure* – this statement, found in all of Eliade's works, is expressed through the conviction that the essential precedes the essence in the case of *homo religiosus*⁸.

Therefore, Ionescu's philosophical standpoint inspired by Plato, and shared by Mircea Eliade, has a dual character: historical and metaphysical. Just like his mentor, Eliade values the role of experience in knowledge, making the distinction between thought and reality: *existence, not thought, is real.*

Mircea Eliade began his teaching career as an assistant professor to Nae Ionescu, who had offered him the chance to teach the course in history of metaphysics and a seminar in the history of logic, with a recommendation to preface the course in history of metaphysics with one in the history of religions. Thus, he held classes on the problem of evil and salvation in Eastern religions, the ontological problem in India, Orphism,

⁸ The fact that these four philosophers have had a certain importance in the formation of Mircea Eliade is indirectly confirmed by the following memoir note: *Almost all the ideas that I have developed in the books published in French, after 1946, were already in the studies written between 1933 -1939. But apart from a handful of readers - the caliber of Nae Ionescu, Lucian Blaga, Mircea Vulcanescu or Noica, no one understood that those books extravagant erudition developed a new interpretation of myths, symbols and ancient and Eastern religions,* in Mircea Eliade, *Memoirs. The Promise of the Equinox*, p. 340.

Hinduism and Buddhism. In regard to the seminar in logic, his debut was with a demanding topic, as the author confesses⁹: "[It was] on the dissolution of the concept of causality in medieval Buddhist logic". It was quite a difficult seminar, attended by only a small group. He then opted for Nicholas of Cusa's *Docta ignorantia*, and Book IX of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

It is known that Mircea Eliade did intense scientific research, as well as cultural activities. He encouraged the scientific study of the history of religions in Romania. This subject did not yet exist independently in academic circles. Mircea Eliade taught the history of religions in the department of history of metaphysics. In order to convince the academic circles of the importance of this subject, Mircea Eliade published *Zalmoxis*, an international journal published in French, English and German, with the collaboration of several Romanian scientists. It appeared in volumes and it was Romania's first contribution to the history of religions on a European level.

Certainly it was in Bucharest that Mircea Eliade made his debut as a professor of history of religions. But for the most part, Mircea Eliade taught in the U.S. beginning with 1957, as a tenured professor at University of Chicago's Department of history of religions - a Department that bears his name today. As a matter of fact, the history of religions and his name are one and the same in the United States.

In the past 50 years, I.M. Culianu wrote¹⁰, no other scholar in his field had such a resonance on the global level like Romania Mircea Eliade, a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1966, holder of the Sewel L. Avery chair at the University of Chicago beginning with 1962 and honored with the *Distinguished Service Professor* title.

The most suggestive portrait of professor Mircea Eliade is made by the Romanian thinkers himself in the talks with Claude-Henri in "Ordeal by Labyrinth"¹¹.

In spite of his initiation in India, Eliade did claimed to be guru, even if the students searched for him after to provide them with the solution to their inner life. That is why he said to them: "Do not make confusions, here

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Aspects of Myth*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing, 1978, pp. 102-105.

¹⁰ I. P. Culianu, Mircea Eliade, in „Romanians in Western Science and Culture”, Romanian-American Academy of science and art, 1992, 139-142.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, „Ordeal by Labyrinth”, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2006, p. 109.

are I am teacher, not a guru. I can help you, but only as a teacher. Here I want to present things as I think they are."¹²

He was never a systematic teacher. He did not begin in a didactic manner, because he not preparing or write his courses.

I had some notes, I would watch the reactions of the students - Eliade confessed.

But what is very important to know is that *his style of teaching lent itself very well to the American system: it was open, flexible and creative.*

He had a plan, he would meditate for a few hours before the lesson, chose quotes, but did not write anything. After fifty minutes of lecture, he always reserved about ten minutes for discussion and questions.

As a matter of fact, Eliade witness something extraordinary for a teacher: the desire to know his students, to talk to them, to identify their problems, interests and so on.

Mircea Eliade was a professor for forty years. We believe it is necessary to point out that what he liked the most was **the seminar**, where he worked together with the students. In this respect we bring into question the last seminar of **1976**, which had the topic of alchemy and hermetic Renaissance: *It was exciting, Mircea Eliade said, that is exactly what I like: to explore some details in depth with a small group of well-prepared students, to look further into certain issues that are dear to me. That is how the student starts to work and learn the method.*

Mircea Eliade is a prototype for the teacher who knows how to combine teaching, writing and research in a unique manner. He authored more than thirty scientific books translated into eighteen languages and has 1,200 articles and book reviews on a variety of topics. Eliade began his career as a successful novelist in Romania and continued to write novels in Romanian until the late 70s. Most of his books have been translated into English.

Mircea Eliade's fiction and scientific seem to have a common denominator, namely establishing a repertoire of behaviors that would make up a "philosophical anthropology".

As a historian of religions, Mircea Eliade wrote fundamental monographs on yoga, shamanism, initiation, alchemy, while also creating theoretical and general works on the meaning and structure of religion and myth.

¹² Ibidem, p. 111.

Eliade used his own method against the historical approach, namely the "total hermeneutics" of religious beliefs, designed and based on the philosophical vision reflected in a deep anthropology, based on penetrating the depths of the unconscious and psychology.

His propensity to universality is evident in developing anthropology¹³ from the point of view of a planetary humanism. "The history of the present become for the first time today truly universal, culture is about to become global". "The history of religions¹⁴ can play a key role in this effect of the globalizing culture; it can contribute to the development of a universal type of culture".

Mircea Eliade was aware of this fact, and that is why he was confident in the viability of his project. The motivation is simple, Eliade says: "Because the history of religions penetrates what is essentially human: man's rapport with the sacred. The history of religions can play a major role in the crisis that we have come to know. The crises of modern man are largely religious, the extent to which they are an awareness of an absence of meaning ... In this crisis, this unbalance, the history of religions is at least as a Noah's ark of mythical and religious traditions. I believe that this 'total discipline' can have a royal function¹⁵."

It is no wonder that Mircea Eliade is being studied in American universities nowadays, because the history of religions is associated and identified with the name of the great Romanian thinker, both in the United States and in other countries across the world.

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