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MIRCEA ELIADE ON SPIRITUALITY, SECULARITY AND RELIGION. SOME THOUGHTS OF HIS JOURNAL

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Abstract: *If one takes 'spirituality' in the main sense: of something belonging to the human spirit, i.e. human culture, one can easily realize that probably any of Eliade's works is, more or less, about human spirituality. This paper will try to find Eliade's inner thoughts about human spirit, spiritual life, religion and secularity; this can be done better by analyzing the book Eliade expresses his opinion more freely than anywhere else: his 'Journal'. Additionally, in order to understand Eliade's viewpoint about deus otiosus - i.e. a god, once central in a religion, is no longer important, but forgotten - this article will get an unexpected help from Dexter, a character of the TV series with the same name.*[2]

Key words: *Mircea Eliade, spirituality, religion, secularity, deus otiosus, Dexter.*

1. Introduction

If one takes 'spirituality' in the main sense: of something belonging to the human spirit, one can easily realize that probably any of Eliade's works contains, more or less, some aspects about the human spirituality. Eliade's writings were dedicated to humanity, and human spiritual improvement. His articles (one of his early stages series is called: *Itinerariu spiritual*), his literature, even his scholarly oeuvre: no matter the latter were written from an academic position, Eliade addresses large public, and targets human spirit. In summary one can say without fear of mistake: Eliade's entire life, and especially: work, stayed under the sign of *spiritual*. If and when scholars of the academic study of religion will find nothing interesting for their discipline in Eliade's books, if and when literary critics will have nothing more to say about his literature, and finally if and when his articles will not interest any researcher, even then the work of Eliade will interest non-specialists, i.e. human beings, for what they are and what they hope, dream, and love. As long as humans will live as humans, and not as machines, Eliade will be read if not for his scientific value or his literary talent, at least for his unique, optimistic way he talks with human's spirit, and about human spirituality. Anything can be said (and a lot was indeed said) about Eliade, but no one can deny his confidence in human spirit. Having said this, the present paper will try to find out

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Eliade's inner thoughts about human spirit, about spiritual life, and related concepts; this can be done better by analyzing the book Eliade expresses his opinion more freely than anywhere else: his *Journal*.

2. Eliade on religion, spirituality, and secularity

As many of his analysts observed, even they did not agree if he succeeded or not, Eliade tried to find a "sense of religion" (Rennie 1996); but he always mentioned that "religion" does not "necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred…" (Eliade 1969, *Preface*). Moreover, he tried to find a meaning of life, not only 'archaic' life, but also modern life. His creed was that something sacred exists; and he sustained it until his end, however he did not imply that we all – especially in this secular time – have to believe in sacred; not that this is possible, even. But he didn't give up in front of secularity; he didn't accept pure and simply the idea that if the world is secular now, it means that the religious experience is gone. He said no, the sacred is still there, but is hiding. I can imagine him saying: if you cannot see it, that doesn't mean is not there (and his fantastic prose has to do exactly with that). It is only occulted in *profane*. So much that it became one with it.

Actually, sustains Eliade, nowadays we don't have to (or could) be religious any more, in the main sense of the term, i.e. acting accordingly: doing what *homo religiosus* did: respect rituals, listen myth, pray, and so on. Eliade said: it is enough for us to read a novel; or to see a movie; or to dream. Because the sacred is in us: "The 'Sacred' is an element of the *structure* of consciousness, and not a moment in the *history* of consciousness" (24 June 1968; italics original). The same remark can be found almost unmodified in *The Quest*, in his conversation with Claude-Henri Rocquet, or in his *Foreword* for *A History of Religious Ideas*. Of course, his view on Sacred is a long theory, and is beyond the possibilities of this essay to deal with. But, can one equate this sacred inside consciousness as divine? In many religions, even in most pessimistic one as Gnosticism, it has been said that humans have seeds of divinity inside them (no matter what name 'divinity' has). Is that what Eliade means, in larger terms than particular religions; or is it only about the human spirit, with nothing "divine" in it? So, if one said that the spiritual activities do not have to be religious, Eliade said: they *are* religious; or at least "quasi-religious" (he called that even the hippie phenomenon: see 3 March 1968).

Eliade's concepts, like the dialectic of Sacred and Profane, made history. But Eliade is so ambiguous in many of his works, than one could hardly figure out when he presents the beliefs of *homo religiosus*, and when he expresses his own. In *Journal* he talks more freely, so if one wants to find out what Eliade's thoughts were, one must go to the Journal first. For this paper's theme one of Eliade's statements of his Journal is for sure a good starting point: (22 January 1946) "The more I learn about the history of religions, the more convinced I become that man is not made for *religion* (in the full and noble sense of the term)… [N]owhere has the belief [in Supreme Beings, n. D.D.] borne fruit, nowhere has it transformed man. On the contrary… there appear inferior forms of religious experience… "Primitive" man – and civilized man as well – hankers after demonic, orgiastic powers, spectacular divine figures, extravagantly "moving" deities. He does not remember "God" until after he has become convinced that none of these sacred powers can help him."

We'll be back to the first part of this intriguing statement shortly. For now let's

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see what it is about. In this paragraph Eliade obviously talks about *deus otiosus*. Eliade understands by this concept that a god, once central in a religion, is no longer important, but forgotten. To figure out more about his viewpoint we'll get an unexpected help: from Dexter, a character of the TV series with the same name (see: www.sho.com/sho/dexter/home). Probably it is a very popular one, since it has 12,362,952 likes on Facebook (August 2012).



Fig. 1. Dexter (August 2012) © Showtime; www.sho.com/sho/dexter/home

Season 6 is more or less about religion, too (among other stuff, like killings…); and religious belief. For Dexter, God is not only a *deus otiosus* (as is for many people): he didn't exist at all for him, at least until a specific moment. His question is intriguing: "Why people still believe?" Of course, he does not have an answer, but he has a solution when his kid will be so sick that he could die: to pray. Well, it's more like a talk, because Dexter recognized he doesn't know how to pray, more like a deal with God. When in need, requiring a "miracle", even the emotionless justice serial killer Dexter turns to God.

Of course, one can say: in real life there is no enough proof that people necessarily turn to God when they are in big troubles, so big that nobody else could help them anymore. But Dexter is only an invented character; this is just a TV show. I cannot agree with this more: indeed, *Dexter* is a "movie". Being that, and having so many viewers, it is but only an extra proof that another Eliade's assumption could not be contested: people don't have to believe...

So, is watching a movie a religious experience? Of course not, in normal sense of 'religious'; but it transports the viewer in another time, 'outside' the historical time, so it is, *in Eliade's terms*. Because for the modern human "the unconscious alone is still 'religious", the need for "abolirea Timpului" ("abolishing Time") can be made only in *imagination*: "prin vise, fantezii, literatură" ("by dreams, fantasies, literature"), which is „modul nostru [=moderns] de a fi în lume" ("our mode of being in the world") (2 and 5 February, 1962). *In other terms*: even if it is not a religious experience per se (as, for example, is going to Church and pray), it is a spiritual one. And for Eliade: "*concrete spiritual life*… takes place in culture" [se împlineşte în cultură; 21 August 1964]. By culture Eliade does not understand only

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literature, but also when one goes to the Theater, or when one sees a movie; and so on. All these activities which do not require the belief in God, nor in Sacred, which are totally secular, are no less spiritual activities. This statement is completely in accord with Eliade: despite it is not implied a Sacred time (or space), is involved a (qualitative) different kind of time (and space); however one will take it, conform to Eliade, this is a spiritual experience, and likewise a religious one, camouflaged in a profane activity.

Let's get back to the first statement ("man is not made for *religion*"), and complete it with another statement, as much intriguing as the previous one: "myths and religions, in all their variety, are the result of the vacuum left in the world by the retreat of God… – or, more precisely, the Supreme Being – [who] no longer played an active role in the religious experience… [the] 'true' religion begins only after God has withdrawn from the world…" (November 8, 1959). Eliade's conception can be explained in this way: humans are not able to keep their faith in a Supreme Being, but only in inferior beings, things, places, and so on; which leads to "inferior forms of religious experiences". This situation was the same for all 'primitive' religions since the discovery of agriculture; and this is happening with the modern world now. "Now" starts already with Giordano Bruno. "He was already urging the mystery of God's abandonment of the world, the transformation of God into *deus otiosus*" (2 September 1959).

3. Conclusions

In a small number of words, Eliade's interpretation (personal view) on religion can be summarized in this scheme of 'evolution' (or maybe, more appropriate, 'involution'):

1. *In illo tempore*, at first, it was the 'Paradisiac epoch' (the time when gods were walking on Earth, when Earth and Sky were not yet separated, etc.). It followed: the sin, "the fall", or "the forgetting", "the loss of the state of primordial perfection". Biblical example: "In paradise, Adam knew nothing of religious experience, nor of theology, that is, the doctrine of God. Before "sin", *there was no religion*" (9 October 1959, italics original).

2. Only afterward "religion" appears; i.e. religions. These also had an evolution:

2.a. The belief in Supreme Being vanished in time; it became *deus otiosus*;

2.b. Appeared "inferior forms of religious experience: totemism, manaism, animism, etc." (22 January 1946 & 8 November 1959)

As a result, similarly with Marx's realizations („social unconscious") and Freud's („personal unconscious"): which are "to pierce through 'superstructures' to arrive at the true causes and motives", the study of religions' aims "*to identify the presence of the transcendent in human experience*" (5 December 1959; italics Eliade); Eliade has understood "that the "historico-religious forms" are only the infinitely varied expressions of some fundamental religious experiences" (6 February 1960).

3. Culture is religion inheritor for non-believers; for example, Greek religion and its gods did not disappear, but it was integrated in "European *culture*" (25 February 1960). Within culture, the literature occupies one of the most important places, "for the literary imagination is the continuation of mythological creativity and oneiric experience." (19 November 1977).

So, "man is not made for *religion*" means that humans are not able to keep their faith in a Supreme Being, but also that humans cannot go back in a paradisiac

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time, the Time *before* religions. Maybe "primitives", could re-live in this time, *in illo tempore*, through myths and rites. Eliade affirms that firmly, but I said "maybe" because I don't know about that… What is sure, as the song says, "moderns" are losing their "religion". So what are the possibilities for modern beings? Eliade's conclusions are very optimistically:

1. The 'modern' *homo profanum* "has not yet succeeded in abolishing the *homo religiosus* that is in him… an areligious society does not yet exist (personally, I believe that it *cannot exist*…)" (13 April 1962, italics Eliade)

2. Technological results could be seen as 'lower' divinities, but "desacralized"; but industrialization could lead to a new political "terror of History". Eliade is sure "that new religious creations of considerable importance will be born" of this new 'terror' (October 1973).

3. Probably the most important declaration: "although I see man crushed, asphyxiated, diminished by industrial civilization, I can't believe that he will degenerate, decline morally, and finally perish, completely sterile. *I have a limitless confidence in the creative power of the mind*" [italics D.D.; in Romanian original, Eliade used "creative power of the spirit".].

Therefore, today there is no end of 'religion' (as 'religious experience'); maybe there will be an end of some religions, as it happens in the history of humanity. And even if Eliade is wrong in points 1 (and "an areligious society" would exist); and 2 (and no "important and new religious creations" will appear), at least the creativity of human spirit will exist as long as humans will.

It is not important if "religion" will come to an end, or not: *if not*, important is to follow Eliade's invitation for a [cultural] dialogue, in order to acquire a "spiritual planetarization", which differs completely from the 'economical globalization'; *if yes*, important is for people to continue to use their imagination, think free, and never forget that probably the most important purpose of their life on this Earth is to be happy.

Religion didn't stop wars, the main cause of unhappiness. Of course, religion didn't start wars, either. Humans did. Religion did not bring the poverty on Earth, the other cause of sorrow, but neither stopped it. Humans maintain it. Religious, spiritual, or totally profane, we are all human beings, and we have at least this duty: to stop the hatred, and work together with the aim of secure happiness for us all. I think that, maybe, this can be a good interpretation of the "the new, planetary humanism" Mircea Eliade told us about (13 October 1984).

And his credo could be of help for the academic study of religion as well as for cultural studies, and human culture as a whole: "… history of religions… is a discipline… that will contribute decisively to 'globalizing' culture" [instead of the more economical, and nowadays with negative connotations term 'globalizing' it should be used the translation of the Romanian original: *planetarizare*. In other text, Mac Linscott Ricketts translate it more accurate with 'planetarizing']; (9 April 1976).

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