WHEN A NATURAL OBJECT IS PERCEIVED AS SACRED. STRUCTURE AND DIALECTIC OF HIEROPHANIES ACCORDING TO MIRCEA ELIADE

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Abstract: *For the people of traditional societies, the cultural behaviour and the existence in society were embedded in the cosmic environment and obeyed natural rhythms. That's why the meeting with the ultimate reality, the ravishing and tremendous experience of the sacred often happens in the form of some hierophanies detached from the natural environment and invested with spiritual and symbolic meanings. This study try to emphasize the way Eliade understands the transformation of natural elements into „sacred objects" and what means the cosmic experience for homo religious.*

Keywords: *natural object, hierophany, cosmic experience, homo religiosus*

It is well known that not only the way we think, but also the way we perceive things is influenced by the values we share. There is no consensus across time and places either regarding the things belonging to the natural world. Earth, trees, snowy peaks of the mountains, rain, sun, moon, stars are still part of our lives, though we no longer look at them with reverence and even veneration as people from other times used to do. We sometimes continue to ascribe aesthetic meaning to natural elements, but in most cases we give them only utilitarian significance. From the relation with natural environment we aim mainly to draw practical benefits. People of archaic and traditional societies used to have a better relationship with natural world, even in spiritual life practices. Within traditional life frameworks of different cultures the relationship between man and divinity was mediated by nature. Today, we use to oppose the natural world and the cultural world of man as we use to oppose, by object and method, natural sciences and sciences of man. This is the result of Faustian way of seeing the world initiated by modern rationalism and the intellectual attitude of Enlightenment. At the dawn of modernity, the imperative of disinterested knowledge was abandoned for the benefit of knowledge as an instrument of world domination, in this case, of the natural world.

However, the relativism is not absolute; we can through hermeneutic effort to infer the valorisations that people belonging to other frameworks of civilization ascribe to nature, to identify the presuppositions of other times and to recover the belief systems that founded their lives. Forms of religious life often integrated elements of natural world as cultic objects, as symbolic images playing a ritual role, as landmarks of devotion.

Researchers from the phenomenological camp argued that religiosity is a *structure of consciousness* that manifested itself better in the bygone ages, within the old cultures. But religiosity persists even in the world of modern man, although it sometimes takes original forms making it unrecognizable. Eliade speaks even about the disguising of the sacred in the profane; which abolishes the radical distinction between sacred and profane and also the

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definition of the sacred based on this distinction. „În timp ce ceva „sacru" se manifestă (hierofanie), în același timp ceva se „ocultează", devine criptic. Aici stă adevărata dialectică a sacrului. Prin simplul fapt că *se arată*, sacrul *se ascunde*"(Eliade, 1993c: 542).

Mircea Eliade combines the comparative study of religions with the phenomenological approach. This methodological approach made him receptive to common elements, to similarities between religions, but also to constant elements that do not entail significant changes over time. The researcher becomes thus receptive to the structures of meaning embedded in practices and religious institutions, to recurrent images and symbols, which express the fundamental assumption that religion is not a contingent cultural phenomenon threatened by extinction, but a structure of consciousness. This entails a deeper assumption, that there is a human nature, whose essential data remain unchanged beyond eras and cultures.

It would be a mistake to assume that systems of meanings refer only to social structures, in the manner in which Durkheim and Marx interpret religion. (Durkheim, 1995; Marx, 1960: 28). Symbols point beyond them, beyond the known world of the one who recognizes and interprets them, point to the horizon of Mystery. The term „Mystery" is preferred by phenomenologist of religions Francisco Vergara to refer to the transcendent and incomprehensible source of the sacred. (Vergara, 1997)

His interest for religion as autonomous system, irreducible to other social systems (economic, cultural, political) has led Eliade towards a definition and an interpretation of sacred as a founding value of this system and thus to understand this system by repertorying and analysing its main manifestations. Eliade uses the term hierophany to describe these manifestations, at least in the beginning of his scientific work. Eliade reassume the phenomenological interpretation of the sacred as consecrated by Rudolf Otto. (Otto, 1996) According to Otto, the sacred is the source of ambivalent overwhelming feelings (mysterium tremenndum / mysterium fascinans), accompanying in all cultural and historical circumstances of its emergence the religious experience, the attitude and the ritual practices derived from it.

In Eliade's interpretation, is not quite clear if sacred is the absolute, transcendent reality, usually associated with the supreme divinity or is just a quality (indeed strong, irreducible) which religious man identifies as defining note of its experiences, of religious objects, of worshiped images and symbols. Like Otto, Eliade believes that sacred (essentially incomprehensible) can be known only by its effects and mediations. Constitutive ambivalence of the sacred, as Otto pointed out phenomenologically, creates the opportunity to identify it in various and often contradictory arrangements of existence.

Nature is a first „preferred" realm of manifestation for sacred. Although hierophanies could also act at social, cultural or political level. Since primitive religions, symbolic imagination has associated divinity with the most various embodiments and figures, from atmospheric phenomena, geological processes, to vegetable or animal world. Eliade shows why they were privileged certain elements: for example, why certain natural elements are more susceptible to awaken an attitude of reverence and the sacred thrill. Sky, mountains or abysses - due to their inaccessibility; sea, desert, due to their vastness; rocks, stones - due to their lasting; seasons, whereas constitute natural processes of regeneration

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and cosmic periodical renewing; water and plant fertility - because of their effectiveness. (Eliade, 1933a: 30).

The basic and decisive experiences of archaic man of everywhere were related to natural environment. That's why it can be said that man of ancient cultures was more responsive, more sensitive to what was coming from natural world, therefore he experienced the sacred, the numinous in nature as well. Deepening the analysis of relations between the contemplative life and the natural world for traditional man, Eliade speaks also about a cosmic fulfilment of human experience.

Through hierophanies and symbols, the world, in particular the natural one speaks to us, mainly about its non-obvious dimensions and structure (at the level of experience or rational analysis). The world appears as a "cipher".

> În ultimă analiză el (simbolismul lunar) dezvăluie o corespondență de ordin "mistic" între diversele niveluri al realității cosmice și anumite modalități ale existenței umane. Să notăm că această corespondență nu se impune nici experienței imediate și spontane, nici reflecției critice. Ea rezultă dintr-un anume mod de a fi prezent în Lume (Eliade, 1995: 155).

Hierophanies can be considered a species of symbols because they have a structure and a symbolic behaviour. Religious symbols have not only an aesthetic function and are not just figures of speech of the metaphor type. In Lucian Blaga's words, metaphysical symbols can be compared with revelatory metaphors rather than plasticizing ones, i.e. those which seek only a style effect having poetic value. (Blaga, 1969: 276-281). In religious sense, symbols point to a transcendent reality. Only when are interpreted as having this function, hierophanies can transfigure the things of natural world, so that their common, profane perception add a symbolic apperception.

Eliade articulates a logic of religious symbols, which actually is a kind of hermeneutics, an „interpretation as recollection of meaning". (Ricoeur, 1970: 28-32) Namely, symbols engage horizontal connections, forming systems of symbols (there are no isolated symbols), but also a vertical relationship between symbolic image and transcendent reality. „The break at ontological level" is a sign of verticality, an element which distinguish between metaphysical symbolism and artistic symbolisms and codes

First, Eliade emphasizes the multi-valence of symbols, since this dimension favours one of the specific functions of religious experience, the function of reintegration. The multi-valence of symbols that make up the texture of myths and rituals in all religions and cults allow integrating the levels of reality or the levels of interpretations of each fragment of reality. Therefore, Eliade believes that any unilateral interpretation of a religious symbolism is false, partial and incomplete. In this regard, he criticizes the interpretation that Freudian psychoanalysis has given to sexuality and Oedipus complex, saying that Freud failed in understanding the polyvalence of sexual symbolism that emerges from the notorious „Image of Mother". (Eliade, 1994:18).

This image evokes not just the attraction that mother exerts upon the boy-child in its early childhood, but also the ontological and metaphysical connotations like the desire to reintegrate the bliss characteristic to Matter in its non-formal, primordial, pre-cosmogonic

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stage, the attraction that Matter exerts on Spirit, the aspiration of man religiously committed to overcome all the polarities involved by human condition, the nostalgia for primordial unity, for non-differentiation.

Similarly, the cave shouldn't be interpreted strictly naturalistic or functionally as underground dwelling place, as shelter or grave (dead's house), but as possibility of neophyte to access another realm, to pass in a different ontological range, which entails the radical change of its condition, the transfiguration or its apotheosis.

A correlative function for the multi-valence of the symbol is its ability to integrate into a coherent whole such elements (beings, things) that appear as heterogeneous in the profane experience. By symbol, become clear the unity of the world and the insertion of individual, unrepeatable human destiny in this complicated, but essentially unified (i.e. complex) world. This "tendency to equate different levels of reality is essential to any archaic or traditional spirituality". (Eliade, 1993 b: 111) In this process of homologation religious symbolism plays a key role. Eliade's phenomenological method favours the symbol function of unification and integration.

> Un astfel de procedeu nu implică reducerea semnificațiilor la un numitor comun. Deși lucrul acesta s-a mai spus, este bine să insistăm asupra faptului că cercetarea structurilor simbolice nu e un efort de reducere, ci unul de integrare. Comparăm și confruntăm două expresii ale unui simbol nu pentru a le reduce la una singură, preexistentă, ci pentru a descoperi procesul prin care o structură își poate adăuga noi semnificații (Eliade, 1995: 192-193).

Herein lies, I believe, the creative hermeneutics. Another function of symbols is that only through them the deepest and most mysterious aspects of reality could be known, and remain otherwise inaccessible, empirically or discursive. Often these occult dimensions of reality reveal themselves as paradoxical and contradictory. The symbol can unfold these aspects just because of its ambivalent or multivalent structure of meaning. Ambiguity and equivocation of symbolic images make them undesirable for the scientific, positive research (for which is much more appropriate the conceptual knowledge), but symbol remains the most appropriate tool not only for common knowledge, but also for preservation of richness and of paradox of the lived-world. Thus fulfil phenomenology this task. It doesn't reduce, but uncovers and makes accessible and evident for consciousness and preserve the meaning. By symbol, the man of archaic cultures discovers that the negative aspects of reality (sickness, suffering, destruction, death) can be integrated as a complement to the beneficial aspects. Symbol fulfils at the level of creative imagination and of intellectual intuition the role of a theodicy. Traditional man had the deep intuition of the completeness of the world where destructive, maleficent elements, deficiencies and defaults are integrated in its metabolism.

Symbols have also existential value, they not just restore the deep and mysterious unity of the world as a whole, but they speak to man, to its destiny, as religion does. For Eliade, symbols are always religious. The symbol reveals a structure of the real, but gives also significance to human existence. At the same time, it opens man to cosmic totality, translate human situation in cosmological terms and vice versa, namely reveals the

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solidarity of cosmic structures and of human existence. By cosmic dimension of human experience, through its symbolic redefinition, man no longer feels isolated in cosmos, in the world, but opens to it. Modern man who seeks to expand its positive knowledge in order to dominate nature by technology is no longer in a situation of ontological openness to the cosmic totality, it doesn't feel integrated anymore, but lonely and alienated, so in eternal struggle with the environment, which it perceives as meaningless, as an obstacle to its goals or at least as an instrument to achieve these goals.

The cosmological valence of symbolism allows its virtual interpreters not just to open to the objective world (a meaningful world), but also to overcome their particular condition, their emplacement and their concrete life situation, to open up to the universal dimension. The role accomplished by symbol for the man of archaic cultures will be taken over by discursive reason for the man of modern world. The symbolic signifying of the concrete situation through the correct interpretation of symbols which are associated to a particular frame of life reveals its exemplarity and spiritualizes it. For *homo religious* a symbol always binds the natural and profane condition with a transcendent mode of being, which is *completely different* from any familiar experience. Therein lays the effectiveness of symbols and their existential meaning. „Simbolismul, în general, realizează o „porozitate" universală, „deschizând" ființele și lucrurile unor semnificații „transobiective"". (Eliade, 1993 b: 216) But to enable the operational dimension of symbols is required an appropriate (non-reductionist) interpretation for them. Associated by the creative imagination with the symbolism of the moon, the snake doesn't lose the positive meaning of living creature pertaining to natural environment, but evoke images and meanings and the countless valuations which it gets in various mythical and ritual contexts: it symbolizes lunar rhythms and their impact on human condition.

Because of symbolic thinking, things and beings in the physical universe come out of their existential isolation and appear as interrelated through multiple correlations and analogies that symbolism brings to light. Not only they are no longer isolated fragments of reality, but each creature or thing comes, by a specific upheaval of semantic mechanisms of religious symbolism, to embrace the whole world. All these functions of religious symbols are integrated in the dialectic of sacred. In the history of religious experience of peoples can be identified stages and trends of occultation of the sacred alternating with situations of full expression, of flowering of hierophanies, guiding even the daily life of people, the way they valuate things and the importance they assign to facts and actual experiences. Due to the symbolic structure and behaviour of hierophanies, the profane and particular situations turn into spiritual experiences. What was experienced as a particular, subjective and "isolated" mode of existence is "open" to a unified and "familiar" world, to a system of meaningful structures, system recognizable as "objective" and universal. Archetypal symbol or the symbolic structure embodies and historicizes itself continuously, being incarnate in particular objects and revealing it through relative and limited forms; while the sacred always attempts to escape from the cultural and historical forms, relative and particular, and thus to approximate its symbolic form.

Let's talk about hierophanies as they are presented by Vergara. (Vergara, 1997: 88-94) First, Mystery, as Vergara calls the transcendent source of the sacred, of all sacred experience and the foundation of the world, of all that exist, is not a passive instance but is

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actively involved in reality influencing the deployment of things, having effect on the psyche and human consciousness. Mystery is the most appropriate formulation that can be given to a divinity, transcendent, ineffable and incomprehensible, but still active, acting unpredictably but deeply significant and thus present in people's lives. This active character is the one that differentiates the living God of religions from the God of philosophers.

The relationship of man from everywhere and from all ages with the Absolute revealed as unfathomable Mystery was accomplished primarily through a series of mediations and only in exceptional cases was done directly. As active instance, transcendence maintains a constant relationship with man, thus configuring the sacred sphere. Transcendence represents the defining feature of the sacred. Sacred sphere is made up of all mediations of man and Mystery. Hierophany is the manifestation of the transcendent reality in a mundane reality. Hierophanies can cause contradictory behavioural reactions: *idolatry*, when the exterior form, the expression is considered sacred; *iconoclasm*, when every sacred image and therefore any of its incarnation in an intelligible form is rejected. Idolatry transforms the way into destination by consecrating the mediations. Iconoclasm isolates Mystery in transcendent realm, by denying the validity of bridges toward it, the effectiveness and legitimacy of hierophanies, especially of the visual ones. Semitic religions reject the iconographic representation of the divine, but recognize the hearing signs and revelations, which means that they accept more subtle, less obvious and more elevated hierophanies. Vergara call Mystery the completely different reality that essentially opposes profane, mundane reality. In the words of Eliade, any hierophany realizes a „paradoxical coincidence between sacred and profane, between being and nothingness, between absolute and relative, between eternity and becoming". Thus it becomes possible the coincidence between sacred and profane. Paradoxical is not just the incorporation of the sacred in various elements of ordinary existence, in rocks or trees, for instance, but that manifesting in all of these elements, the Mystery „consents" to be limited and relativized.

> Se poate socoti că nu există nici un animal și nici o plantă importantă care să nu fi participat la sacralitate, în decursul istoriei. Se știe, de asemenea, că toate meseriile, artele industriile, tehnicile au o origine sacră ori au dobândit valori cultuale în decursul timpului (Eliade, 1993a: 30).

The same can be said about gestures and daily activities, about physiological acts (nutrition, sexuality), about words, etc. The „coincidence of opposites" entails the preservation of an ontological difference, of a „level's brake" between them. In spite of their bewildering diversity, hierophanies shares the function of making present for man at mundane level the transcendent reality, reality that belongs to a radically different ontological level and that could be designated as Mystery. Hierophanies do not represent, but make present the Mystery. Referring to man in general, not only to *homo religious*, the Romanian thinker Lucian Blaga said that it is the being that lives in the horizon of mystery and towards its revelation. (Blaga, 1969: 392) However the revelation of mystery does not mean its full translation in perceptive or conceptual terms, accessible to our intellectual grasp. The mystery should not be objectified in order to be handled intellectually by the

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discursive rationality. And Blaga distinguish between knowledge that preserves and augments the mystery and knowledge that strives to convert it into familiar intellectual formulas, but cancelling it in fact.

Natural realities (rocks, trees, animals, stars) that arise in horizon of consciousness as hierophanies, ie carrying an entirely different level of reality, don't cease to remain the same. The hierophany mode of presence of transcendence doesn't cancel the physical limits of earthly realities, but only invests them with resonance, opening them to the transcendent register; thus is made a violation of the identity principle underpinning the discursive rationality. This is the symbolic mode by which the finite expression (accessible, familiar, but exemplary), *brings into presence* the radical otherness, the metaphysical meaning, the archetype. Mediation that hierophanies operate for the man with symbolic ear transfigures things where transcendent Mystery become present, without destroying their mundane condition, their physical form and usual functions, but also without cancelling the radical otherness of the Mystery.

Therefore, natural objects in an enchanted world, full of glittering meanings of the other world, are carriers of a specific ecto-semantic energy, of a quality that divine beings and their works usually possess, it is the numinous energy. Hierophanies are signs, revelations, it means, messages for man; they interpellate man in a language it doesn't possess, so they require its ability of interpretation. Even it is not the man the one who set up the symbolic meanings of natural elements that it worship, but they present to its consciousness as sacred, as long as they don't take into account man, they are not able to make present and reveal nothing. There is also a specific autonomy of symbols that hierophanies share, but they require be recognized as such by man and appropriately interpreted in order to display their specific function. It is specific to the symbolic significance that an invisible reality to become present by means of a visible reality. In the case of hierophanies to, Eliade talks about an act of „choice" that impinge on individual condition of the objects of a particular class, but also about a distancing of the *object-hierophany* in relation to all other objects of its type.

Becoming hierophanies, they receive the sacred dimension of being able to present this way the divinity. The choice or identification of an object as hierophany it is not perceived as being the result of an arbitrary decision of man. Man doesn't creates hierophanies as it pleases or from utilitarian reasons. When man perceives its relationship with a natural element as symbolic, and the natural element as hierophany, it realizes that this relationship and this perception are imposed as such, are anterior and it has no power to decide over them; also it becomes aware that through a particular experience with a certain natural object it produces an opening felt as a „level's brake", as an interruption of experience's flow, and this fact compels it to make interpretations, to be a hermeneut. „Normal, everyday experience is seen as illusory, unreal, profane (...) Yet that same experience, when apprehended in a specific way, when interpreted in a certain manner, becomes authentic, real, sacred, it becomes a hierophany" (Rennie, 1996:10-11)

Intentionality specific to religious life or to religious way of looking at familiar elements displaces perceptual data of experience and gives them new meanings. Not only natural things but also social facts know this conversion of usual perception due to the symbolic significance and, therefore, are invested with sacredness. It is the reason why

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ethnic groups consider their communitary experience and their common past as being sacred. The cultural identity of ethnic groups, seen as the manifestation of a collective soul, a common destiny or a shared metaphysical fund causes an attitude of veneration characteristic to religious life and ideologically nourishes the nationalist movements and the symbolic construction of social representations.

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