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HOMO RELIGIOSUS IN THE SCIENTIFIC WORK AND FANTASTIC PROSE OF MIRCEA ELIADE

Dorin DAVID[1]

Abstract: *'Homo religiosus' is an important concept of Mircea Eliade. This paper will try to delineate its characteristics as they appear in Eliade's scientific work, i.e. Religious Studies, and in his fantastic prose. Eliade expresses his viewpoint on homo religiosus sometimes in parallel, sometimes in opposition with the modern, non-religious man. The latter will be named here 'homo otiosus'. Identifying the features of those two terms could be of interest not only for Religious Studies, but for Cultural Studies as well.*

Keywords: *Mircea Eliade, homo religiosus, homo profanum, homo otiosus, Religious Studies, fantastic prose.*

1. Introduction

John Saliba asserts that "one of Eliade's main contributions to the study of religious man is [...] that religion constitutes a philosophical system" (Saliba 164). It can be also said that Eliade's viewpoint is philosophical in itself. It forms not a philosophical system, but a pseudo-system in which *sacred* is the central *concept*. *Homo religiosus* is not only an important concept of Eliade, it is also the main *character*. *Homo religiosus* is always present either directly or tacitly in Eliade's oeuvre.

The religious facts analyzed by Eliade refer to the "sacred experience" of *homo religiosus*. Eliade often declares that there is no manifestation of the sacred in pure state, outside the history, in other words, outside human society. Whether he painted, wrote or talked about these, religious facts belong to *homo religiosus*.

Regardless of the fact that Eliade wrote his books for a large public, he addressed less the religious modern man than the non-religious one. The modern man is not, does not know or does not want to be religious any longer. Possibly he is only a cultural being; a *homo profanum*. In order to be consistent with the theory of Eliade and paraphrasing his concept of *deus otiosus* we named it: a *homo otiosus*. If *deus otiosus* is a forgotten god (see David 2012), then *homo otiosus* is the man auto-alienated, who fail to remember his inner self. Eliade wrote about *homo religiosus* sometimes in parallel, sometimes in opposition with this modern, *non-religious* man.

Eliade affirms in *The Quest*: "It is unfortunate that we do not have at our disposal a more precise word than «religion» to denote the experience of the sacred" (Eliade, 1969, i). We have to accept the term "religion", which is too

[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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vague and confusing. This can be used since we do not have a better one, with one condition: to keep always in mind that "it does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred" (Eliade, 1969, i).

Homo religiosus exists also in modernity. Eliade uses the expression *homo religiosus* regarding the traditional religious man, but it includes the modern religious man as well. For the man who wants, thinks or knows he is non-religious, in this paper is also used the opposite of *homo religiosus*, i.e. *homo profanum*, which means the secular man.

As Ulrich Berner states, it is wrong to expect from Eliade's theory "to explain everything or nothing in the study of religion" (Berner 38). It is more useful to understand the role of Eliade's concepts in his pseudo-system. It is also important to discover how he uses them in his literature, i.e. fantastic prose.

2. Scientific work

Homo religiosus can be defined as religious in Eliade's sense since the beginning, "from the moment he realized his position in Cosmos". This place in the World, in the Universe, the acknowledgment of this fact, it is a leitmotif of Eliade's writings. By it Eliade tries to explain, on one hand, how religious facts are created, and, on the other hand, to avoid the error of the "origin" of religious facts no matter what. This experience belongs to the man on the inside, answering to "a fundamental need of man", with no intermediaries. The human being felt "weak and lonely" in the world, "separated" from something. And this "something" is the sacred. *Homo religiosus* has "only one goal: to stop this breaking up situation, to remake the primordial unity, to reintegrate himself in the «wholeness» [...]. Any religious act, no matter how «primitive» (ritual, worship, liturgy and so on) is an attempt to remake the cosmic unity and to reintegrate the man."[1] (Eliade, 1991a, 361). It is an eternal return to sacred, made by "primitives" and "moderns" alike, for example, Christians. "For the moment, ending [this volume] we will say only that almost all religious attitudes of man had been given to him since the primitive times. From a particular point of view, there is no discontinuity between "primitives" and Christianity. [...] [T]he main religious stances of human had been given once and for all, since the moment the man became conscious of his existential situation inside the Universe."[2] (Eliade, 1992a, 422-423).

From the beginning of time until today, *homo religiosus* "assists to the metamorphosis of the Cosmos through hierophanies. The paradox of hierophany is that it manifests the sacred and incorporates the transcendent [...]; in other words, it creates a rupture of level."[3] (Eliade, 1996, 169). *Homo religiosus* nourishes his existence with hierophanies, with such "level's breaks", in a usual ritual from immemorial times and in the same matter in a liturgy in one of the greatest cathedrals in the world.

Homo religiosus is the man who participates in the sacred, and this participation presumes a "choice". This term is a very slippery one, because Eliade states that the sacred/profane dialectics "supposes a choice" (Eliade, 1992a, 31), but on the other hand, the man does not choose the sacred, but "the sacred manifests according to its own dialectics and this manifestation impose to the man *from outside*"[4] (Eliade, 1992a, 339). Anyhow, Eliade insists that the sacred is accessible only to those who believe in it. For example, referring to a particular case, the Spirit and the Light, Eliade affirms: „The Universe [the sacred one, *D.D.*] we discover through meeting with the Light

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opposes the profane Universe [...] because it is of spiritual essence; [...] it is accessible only to those for whom the Spirit exists."[5] (Eliade, 1995b, 69). One page later he says: "The paradox is that the meaning of the light is, after all, a personal discovery – and, on the other hand, everyone discovers what he or she is spiritually and culturally prepared to discover."[6] (Eliade, 1995b, 69).

Homo religiosus is a historical being and culturally determined, but he lives the hierophanies in a concrete way. He gets out of the profane time, because "«to live» the myths implies an experience truly «religious» because it is completely different from the quotidian one. The «religiosity» of this experience exists thanks to the fact that we remember fabulous, exciting, and significant events, we assist the creations of the supernatural beings; we stop existing in the everyday world and we enter into a transfigured aurorally world, full of the presence of the supernatural beings."[7] (Eliade, 1978, 19)

It is very clear that *homo religiosus* is the one who 'remembers', 'assists', 'stops' and 'enters', but the used of the first person plural ("we") is intentional, Eliade wishes to "take" the reader there, together with *homo religiosus*. In particular because, as the author adds, "it is not a commemoration of mythic events, it is to revive them. The characters of the myth become present again, and we become contemporaneous with them."[8] (Eliade, 1978, 19).

Homo profanum, on the other hand, is the man who lives only in the history, in a time usually linear. This linearity is interrupted only in the moments when he dreams, loves, reads, listens to music, and so forth. Anyhow, the non-religious man lives also this different time knowing "that it is always about a human experience in which no divine presence can be inserted"[9] (Eliade, 1992b, 66-67), in other words from which the sacred is missing. This detail marks the difference between *homo religiosus* and *homo profanum*. This should be ineradicable, but Eliade has a solution. This is effective only for those in searching and needing. On one hand, the sacred is completely camouflaged in the profane, but especially it exists in the "structure of the consciousness"; on the other hand, the non-religious man is the inheritor of *homo religiosus*, "he is the result of a desacralization process. [...] In other words, whether he wants or not, the profane man still has the paths of the behavior of the religious man, but cleaned of any religious meanings. Anything he would do, he is an offspring. [...] As I said, a *pure* non-religious man is a very rare phenomenon [...; *homo profanum*] still acts in a religious way (without knowing)."[10] (Eliade, 1992b, 188) He is the beneficiary of a 'camouflaged' mythology and 'degraded' myths. They are not visible only in the modern 'superstitions' or 'taboos', but also in completely secular holydays, like New Year's Eve, or when moving in a new house, even getting a new job. It is true that the degradation of religious behavior, of myths and symbols, ended in a "magical-religious chaos, [...] degraded to the caricature and consequently unrecognizable. The process of desacralization of human existence finished today in many hybrid forms of trivial magic and monkey tricks religiosity."[11] There are today not only countless 'small religions", sects, and pseudo-gnosis, but also political and social movements "with a mythological structure and zealotry easy to notice"[12] (Eliade, 1992b, 188-190).

The examples could continue, although it is not their number that is important but Eliade's confidence that the religiosity 'fall' so much into the "deep of the human unconscious" that it was 'forgotten' (Eliade, 1992b, 199). That's why the man becomes *homo otiosus*. "A psychologist

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would have many interesting things to say", affirms Eliade, because "the religious sentiment of existence was pushed – or it retreated – into the unconscious zones of psyche."[13] (Eliade, 1995b, 13). Religion, said Eliade in one of his Haskell Lectures (1956), in the contemporary desacralized society "became «unconscious»; it is buried into the deepest layer of being"[14] (Eliade, 1995a, 166). To get to it required a maieutics of a particular kind: in other words, there is a need for the *anamnesis*, as Eliade will exemplify, this time in his prose.

3. Fantastic prose

Homo religiosus is the main character not only in the scientific work of Mircea Eliade, but also in his literature. *Homo profanum* also has a role nearly as important, because he is the opposite of *homo religiosus*, the mirror he reflects in. By putting them face to face, we can better discern their characteristic features. Naturally, things are not always as simple as they seem at first glance, because it is not always clear who belongs to the species of *homo religiosus*, e.g. *Nopți la Serampore* [Nights at Serampore] and *Secretul doctorului Honigberger* [The Secret of Dr. Honigberger] (both from 1940), and who does not. In *Şarpele* [The Serpent] (1937), for example, initially it is more suspected than proven that Andronic has something that makes him different. He is different, but it is comprehensible only later that he can do "spells"; or even performs a ritual of taming the serpent. But he is doing it – of course – in another time:

"It only lasted three minutes, maybe even less..."

- It was more, said the captain thoughtfully, forcing himself to remember.

- You just imagine that, said Andronic. That always happens; time passes slowly in such circumstances..."[15] (Eliade, 1991b, 203)

And in another time:

"Suddenly, it seemed that something was changing in the room. [...] The shadow seemed to split itself into two strips, separated by a rug of silver in the middle."[16] (Eliade, 1991b, 196).

Slightly different is the case of Dumitru from *O fotografie veche de 14 ani* [A 14-years-old photo] (1959), who is a Christian, a real Christian, that is – as the story implies – one of the last true believers remaining in the world, a living fossil, a foreigner emigrated from another world (Romania), where faith was still alive. Dugay is the surprised one, who used to pose as "preacher and thaumaturge" but who knew that in reality he is a charlatan. In fact, he went to jail after he was uncovered. He did not expect any of his miracles to succeed, so he was taken by surprise by the appearance of Dumitru, who stopped on to thank him several years after. However, after Dugay found out about the miraculous events, he realized something that the others were missing: "Dumitru, with his naive, idolatrous and vane faith, is closer to the real God than any of us. He will be the first who will see Him, when the authentic God will show his face again: not in the church, or universities, but here among us, suddenly, unexpectedly; maybe on the street, maybe in a pub, but we will not recognize him, and we will not be witnesses for Him..."[17] (Eliade, 1991c, 170).

In Eliade's literature the profane world and the religious one coexist, sometimes mixed, occasionally coinciding until one disappears into the other. However, in some of his prose, Eliade opposes the two worlds, one of *homo religiosus*, with the other one, which is desired to be completely secular. The latter is represented many times by the most anti-religious system, the communist totalitarian system, for example in *Pe strada Mîntuleasa...* [The Old Man and the

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Bureaucrats] (1967), *Pelerina* [The Cape] (1975), *Les Trois Grâces* (1976), *19 trandafiri* [19 Roses] (1979) or *Dayan* (1980). The results are different: in *Pe strada Mîntuleasa...* (1967), Fărîmă survives even the most powerful ones, because he lives in (and every time he can, he talks about) a mythical world, or a magical one, which is in other terms, a religious one. The main character from *Pelerina* (1975), Pantelimon, does not oppose the system; he actually helps to decode messages from *Scînteia*. What opposes the system are the messages themselves, coming essentially from the Bible. In *Les Trois Grâces* (1976), there is an "official" religious man, the priest Calinic from the Antim Monastery, but Dr. Tătaru is stopped by the a-religious and "with no imagination" profane world, from finishing his medical experiments. He understood the necessity of theology, in this case Christian, in the process of finding a cure for cancer. *19 trandafiri* (1979) contains several approaching of religious experience. Anyway, it is clear who represents the political system, and who has experiences that could be considered religious.

Eusebiu Damian, who does not belong to the other side, but he is not a *homo religious* either, is left outside – i.e. still in this profane space – after the disappearance of Pandele and the two actors, Niculina and Laurian. The "competent organs" of the state question him regarding the three's vanishing, but he is discharged because the case cannot be solved. In *Dayan* (1980), the "hero" is interrogated, but the end is different for example than Fărîmă's (*Pe strada Mîntuleasa...*), because Dayan will not survive. His end is tragic, as will be of another character, the young military Darie, from *Ivan* (1977). This last story could be summarized in few words, probably well known: near death experience is always a religious experience.

În curte la Dionis [In Dionysus' Court] (1977) is one of the most "provocative" stories because of Adrian's affirmations. Adrian is a poet, amnesic after a car accident. This incident almost got him out of the profane world. His experiences can be considered, in Eliade's terms, to belong to *homo religiosus*. The poetry is seen more than a "knowledge instrument": it is the only one capable of changing the humans. There is also an unsolved problem: the poetry is "incomprehensible for all other people" (Eliade, 1991d, 202). So, then, can it accomplish its goal?

Maybe yes, says another character, important because Eliade uses him in many stories: the actor (and director) Ieronim Thanase. With one condition: it must be a in a special theater play (an *anamnesis* one), an absolute show which includes "mime, choreography, choir". Ieronim declares: "I re-discover the meaning and the function of spectacle. But I didn't tell you what it means to me. To not be afraid of anything is to see everything in the world as *spectacle*. This means that we can intervene anytime through imagination, and we can change the *spectacle* as we want..."[18] (Eliade, 1991e, 48). The man, by way of such anamnesis, can ascend to the sacred of *illo tempore*, and can regain the freedom: "the spectacle wants to show not only the supreme purpose – conquest of interior freedom – but also the ways that the liberty can be achieved"[19] (Eliade, 1991e, 66-68).

Ieronim will insist in another story, *19 trandafiri*, that "it is not about an *instant* and *political* freedom", but about "the *real spiritual liberty*"[20]. This absolute liberty "belongs to our human condition, of free yet incarnate beings"[21] (Eliade, 1991f, 117-119).

If the spectacle will fail than the last chance, says Eliade in *Dayan* (1980) and *La umbra unui crin* [In the Shadow of a

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Lily] (1982) is given by science. One possibility is, in *Dayan*, when humans would discover the result of the "final equation" and could destroy everything: the only solution is "to prepare an elite group, not only mathematicians or physicists, but also poets, and mystics, who could know how to start anamnesis, that is to rebuild the civilization"[22] (Eliade, 1991f, 158); the other option is, like in *La umbra unui crin*, to build a new Ark with the same goal. These days when "the camouflage changes according with the era we live in"[23], the technology permits this possibility (Eliade, 1991f, 205).

Eliade's vision is optimistic, regardless of which way humans will choose. Even for the a-religious man, there is *something else*, which cannot disappear as long the human will love, dream, i.e. live. Human beings are spiritual beings, even if they are not (or they do not know or they do not want to be) *homo religiosus*. Eliade's statement is edificatory: "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 spirit*"[24] (Eliade, 1993a, 346; *italics D.D.*).

And for the sacred that is so camouflaged in profane than anything could be a hierophany, it can be said that at limit the sacred coincides with the profane, it is the absolute *coincidentia oppositorum*. Paraphrasing one of Eliade's characters, who repeats the famous maxim "we are condemned to the liberty", it can be said: even if the human does not know, not want, or not admit, he/she is "condemned" to the sacred.

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Notes

[1] *Homo religiosus* are „un singur ţel: suprimarea acestei «despărţiri», refacerea unităţii primordiale, reintegrarea lui în «tot» [...]. Orice act religios cît ar fi de «primitiv» (ritual, adorare, liturghie etc.) este o încercare de refacere a unităţii cosmice şi de reintegrare a omului."

[2] „Pentru moment, la încheierea [volumului] de faţă, ne vom mărgini să afirmăm că aproape toate atitudinile religioase ale omului îi sunt date acestuia încă din timpurile primitive. Dintr-un anumit punct de vedere, nu există soluţie de continuitate între «primitivi» şi creştininism. [...] [P]rincipalele poziţii religioase au fost date o dată pentru totdeauna, din chiar clipa în care omul a dobîndit conştiinţa situaţiei lui existenţiale în sînul Universului."

[3] „asistă la transmutarea Cosmosului prin hierofanii. Paradoxul hierofaniei constă în faptul că manifestă sacrul şi încorporează transcendentul [...]; cu alte cuvinte, efectuează o ruptură de nivel."

[4] „sacrul se manifestă conform legilor propriei sale dialectici, iar această manifestare se impune omului *din afara* lui".

[5] „Universul [sacru; *D.D.*] pe care îl descoperim prin întîlnirea cu Lumina se opune Universului profan [...] fiindcă este de esenţă spirituală, [...] este accesibil numai celor pentru care Spiritul există."

[6] „Paradoxul este că semnificaţia luminii e, în definitiv, o descoperire personală – şi că, pe de altă parte, fiecare descoperă ceea ce era pregătit spiritual şi cultural să descopere."

[7] „«a trăi» miturile implică aşadar o experienţă cu adevărat «religioasă» de vreme ce ea se deosebeşte de experienţa obişnuită a vieţii cotidiene. «Religiozitatea» acestei experienţe se datorează faptului că reactualizăm evenimente fabuloase, exaltante, semnificative, asistăm la operele creatoare ale fiinţelor supranaturale; încetăm de a mai exista în lumea de toate zilele şi pătrundem într-o lume

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transfigurată, auroralã, impregnată de prezența ființelor supranaturale"

[8] „Nu e vorba de o comemorare a evenimentelor mitice, ci de reiterarea lor. Personajele mitului redevin prezente, devenim contemporanii lor."

[9] „este vorba mereu de o experiență umană în care nu se poate insera nici o prezență divină"

[10] „el este rezultatul unui proces de desacralizare [...]. Cu alte cuvinte, fie că vrea, fie că nu, omul profan încă mai păstrează urmele comportamentului omului religios, curățate însă de semnificațiile religioase. Orice ar face, el este un moștenitor. [...] Așa cum am mai spus, omul areligios *în stare pură* este un fenomen destul de rar [...; *homo profanum*] încă se mai comportă în mod religios (fără să-și dea seama)."

[11] „talmeş-balmeş magico-religios, [...] degradat pînă la caricatură şi, din acest motiv, dificil de recunoscut. Procesul desacralizării existenței umane a ajuns de mai multe ori la forme hibride de magie măruntă şi de religiozitate maimuțărită."

[12] „a căror structură mitologică şi al căror fanatism religios pot fi observate cu uşurință."

[13] „Un psiholog ar avea multe lucruri interesante de spus", pentru că „sentimentul religios al existenței a fost împins – ori s-a retras în – zonele inconştiente ale vieții psihice."

[14] „a devenit «inconştientă»; ea se află îngropată în stratul cel mai profund al ființei"

[15] „Totul n-a durat decît trei minute, poate nici atît... // - A fost mai mult, spuse gînditor căpitanul, silindu-se să-şi lege firul amintirilor, să le afle capătul.// - Vi s-a părut, lămuri Andronic. Asta se întîmplă întotdeauna; timpul trece mai încet în asemenea împrejurări..."

[16] „Brusc, i se păru că se schimbă ceva în odaie. [...] Semiîntunerecul părea că se desparte în două mari fîşii, lăsînd la mijloc un covor argintiu."

[17] „Dumitru, cu credința lui naivă, idolatră şi vană e mai aproape de Dumnezeul adevărat decît noi toți. Şi tot el are să-l vadă cel dîntîi, cînd Dumnezeul adevărat îşi va arăta din nou fața nu în biserică, nici în universități ci se va arăta pe neaşteptate, deodată, aici între noi, poate pe stradă, poate într-un bar, dar noi nu-l vom recunoaşte şi nu vom mărturisi pentru El..."

[18] „am redescoperit sensul şi funcția spectacolului. Dar nu ți-am spus ce înseamnă asta pentru mine. A nu-ți fi frică de nimic înseamnă a privi tot ce se petrece în lume ca *spectacol*. Asta înseamnă că putem interveni oricînd, prin imaginație, şi putem modifica *spectacolul* aşa cum vrem noi..."

[19] „spectacolul îşi propune să reveleze spectatorilor nu numai scopul suprem – cucerirea libertății interioare – dar şi mijloacele prin care această libertate poate fi cucerită."

[20] nu „e vorba de o libertate *politică şi imediată*", ci de „*adevărata libertate spirituală*"

[21] „ne este *dată* în însăşi structura condiției noastre, de ființe libere deşi încarnate"

[22] „să pregătiți un grup ales, o elită, nu numai de matematicieni şi fizicieni, ci şi de poeți, şi de mistici, care să ştie cum să declanşeze procesul de anamneză, adică să refacă civilizația"

[23] „camuflajul se schimbă, în conformitate cu epoca în care trăim."

[24] „cu toate că văd omul zdrobit, asfixiat, strivit de «civilizația industrială», nu pot să cred că el va degenera, că se va ofili moral, pentru ca, în final, să piară, complet secătuit. *Am o încredere fără margini în puterea cre creatoare a spiritului*."

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