CHAPTER 1

Hierophany

The major themes in Eliade's thought are symbol, myth, and ritual,[1] hierophanies, the sacred and the profane, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the repetition of archetypal structures,[2] *illud tempus*, and *homo religiosus*. Although by no means an exhaustive index, these concepts provide headings under which the whole of Eliade's thought can be comprehensively arrayed.

As I have suggested the various taxonomic elements of Eliade's thought are mutually dependent. Each one can only be finally understood when the others are grasped. It makes little difference, therefore, in what order I attempt to explicate each concept; the explanation of one of these categories will always partially involve the explanation of all of the others. With this in mind, however, I have attempted to construct an exposition in which the earlier explanations involve the later ones as little as possible, and the later ones increasingly presuppose the earlier. I have found it quite impossible, for example, to discuss the sacred and the *coincidentia oppositorum* without reference to Eliade's concept of "hierophany," and so it is with my attempt to clarify this word that I will begin.

Although it may be strange on first exposure this neologism of Eliade's is deceptively simple. It is compounded, we can easily explain to a freshman student, of the Greek *hiero*, the holy, the sacred, and *phainein*, to show. Thus a "hierophany"

1. Throughout this work I have largely ignored the question of ritual as a separate issue. I am assuming ritual to be a dramatic, rather than a narrative, reactualization of mythic structures and symbolic themes. This is mainly because of limitations of space, and I freely admit that it does not do full justice to the issue.

2. These are *not* Jungian archetypes; see 1958 preface to *Cosmos and History*; *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet, 122; Ricketts, "The Nature and Extent of Eliade's 'Jungianism'," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 25, no. 2 (1970): 211–234. The question of the relationship of Eliade's thought to that of C. G. Jung is a complex one requiring further consideration.

is a perception of the sacred. Eliade himself says "the term in its widest sense [means] anything which manifests the sacred" (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xiii), and the entry from the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (credited to Eliade and Lawrence Sullivan) insists that "the term involves no further specification" (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6, 313). Even so, the matter is far from simple. Completely ignoring for the moment the difficulties raised by the loaded term "sacred" and thus the aporia caused by defining one unknown in terms of another, let me first point out an inherent difficulty. Despite the clear, simple definitions quoted above, the passive form of the verb, *phainesthai*, means "to appear," allowing an interpretation of hierophany as an intransitive action by that which is made manifest—*the sacred manifests itself.* So the ambiguity begins: does the sacred manifest itself, or does some thing manifest the sacred? Of course, this ambiguity is a commonplace in English—it appears to me.

Then there are the difficulties raised by Eliade's actual usage of his term. His first introduction of the word into his text[3] is problematic. "Some hierophanies are not at all clear, are indeed almost cryptic," he states, "in that they only reveal the sacred meanings . . . in part, or, as it were, in code" (*Patterns*, 8). Furthermore,

> we must get used to the idea of recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere . . . we cannot be sure that there is anything . . . that has not at some time in human history been somewhere transformed into a hierophany. (11)

So, not only are *things* "transformed" into hierophanies, but *anything* can be so transformed, and yet, having been so transformed the hierophany may remain "cryptic." Furthermore, "every hierophany makes manifest the coincidence of contrary essences" (*Patterns*, 29). This is a far cry from the notion of an irresistible and unmistakable self-revelatory, lightning-like manifestation of the divine normally associated with the concept of revelation.

As the *Encyclopedia* goes on to explain, "the appearance of the sacred in a hierophany, however, does not eliminate its profane existence." The implication of this is that

> whenever the sacred is manifest, it limits itself. Its appearance forms part of a dialectic that occults other possibilities. By appearing in the concrete form of a rock, plant, or incarnate being, the sacred ceases to be absolute, for the object in which it appears remains part of the worldly environment. In some respect, each hierophany expresses an incomprehensible paradox arising from the great mystery upon which every hierophany is centered: the very fact that the sacred is made manifest at all. . . . The

3. See Ricketts, *Romanian Roots*, 877f. on Eliade's earliest use of the word.

> same paradox underlies every hierophany: in making itself manifest the sacred limits itself. (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, 314)

Although the term is of crucial importance throughout *Patterns* and makes a considerable contribution to the argument of *The Sacred and the Profane*, it is used only five times in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and does not occur in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries, Rites and Symbols of Initiation, Myth and Reality, Zalmoxis, Australian Religions*, nor, most notably, in *A History of Religious Ideas*. Perhaps this indicates a growing dissatisfaction on Eliade's part with either the complexities of the term itself or the reaction which it provoked. Nonetheless, its inclusion in the early works and in the *Encyclopedia* would encourage an attempt to scrutinize it more closely. The light which it casts on the whole structure of Eliade's thought finally makes such an attempt indispensable. To this end I want to consider the history of the usage of the term by Eliade.

As I said, it is not used in his earliest writings but seems to spring fully formed into his vocabulary in *Patterns* in 1949. Mac Ricketts (*Romanian Roots*, 798ff.) points out a pivotal period in Eliade's life toward the end of 1936. Before this date his analysis of religions utilizes a relatively simple structure of polarities. In the published version of his thesis on Yoga, *Essai sur l'origin de la mystique indienne* (1936), for example, he "sought to interpret Yoga in terms of a few basic categories, chiefly two pairs of opposites: 'magical/mystical' and 'abstract/concrete' (*Romanian Roots*, 803). It is only after 1936 that Eliade starts to utilize the terminology and categories of analysis familiar to his Western readers from 1949 onward. His first article published in the English language, "Cosmical Homology and Yoga" (1937, see *Romanian Roots*, 819–25) marks most strongly this development of thought. As Eliade had said in his thesis on yoga, yogic techniques express a tendency toward the concrete, they are empirical in the sense that they emphasize practical, personal experience. The particular empirical experiences which are emphasized are identified as being absolutely "real" in their nature, as experiences of true "Being." Ricketts points out that "this equation of 'concrete experience' with a quest for the metaphysical 'real' is made only once, and without emphasis, in the Yoga thesis" (820), it is tacked on to the last page (311) almost like an afterthought. However, in the 1937 article it is immediately and emphatically stated that

> this tendency toward the concrete, the effort toward the "real," means a way out from daily, profane, insignificant, "illusory" experience in which man lives. ("Cosmical Homology," 188. It is in this same article that Eliade first makes explicit his equation of the real and the sacred, the importance of which will be discussed later in my chapter on the sacred.)

The experience of the real is now further identified as a soteriology, a means of salvation from the profane. Yogins seek to replace their experience of the illusory,

the unreal, with experience of the real. Finally their effort "makes Being coincide with Non-being, 'sat' with 'asat'" (202). Evidently this is a prefiguration of what Eliade will later call the *coincidentia oppositorum.*

Previously, in his literature and personal philosophy, Eliade had subscribed to Nae Ionescu's philosophy, often referred to as "*trăirism*" (although not by Ionescu and his followers), the search for and valorization of the "authentic" in and through lived experience (Romanian, *trăire*). In prefiguration of the French existentialists, the Romanian intellectual movement represented by the Criterion group (*Romanian Roots*, 551–65) had stressed actual personal lived-experience or *Erlebnis* as the only source of "authenticity" (*Romanian Roots*, 96f., 98–126; on *trăire* in the thought of Ionescu, see also Sergiu Al-George and Günter Spaltmann). Eliade had militated for "authenticity" in 1932–33 in *Fragmentarium* and in *Oceanografie.* However, in 1936 he published two "notes" on authenticity in the Bucharest journal *Vremea.* In the first note he graduates magic, idealism, and authenticity by the power they ascribe to humanity (magic the most and authenticity the least), and identifies authenticity as "a vulgar popularization of idealism, and both authenticity and idealism are failures of the magical consciousness." In the second, Ricketts describes Eliade as arguing authenticity to be "a reaction against the abstractions of both romanticism and positivism; it is part of a general trend toward the concrete . . . and is the expression of a powerful metaphysical thirst" (982 nn. 55, 56). The implications of the "Cosmical Homology" article are clearly that now Eliade considers normal lived experience to be fundamentally unreal, illusory, and inauthentic. This does not, as it might at first seem, constitute a complete schism from Ionescu's thought. As Eliade made plain in an article assessing Ionescu in 1937, he still considered his philosophy tutor to be the foremost thinker in contemporary Romania. On the contrary, Eliade still subscribes to the concept of *trăire* as the source of authentic experience even though it is paradoxically regarded as simultaneously the source of illusion and the unreal. It would appear that this paradox was made clear to Eliade by the fact that the yogin who has attained to the experience of true Being, the *jīvanmukta*, nevertheless "goes on remaining in 'life,'" even though he "does not partake anymore in the human condition." The whole exercise of the yogin's efforts Eliade sees as an attempt to nullify or escape from the human condition, from the "character *sine qua non* of 'life'" ("Cosmical Homology," 202).

Thus normal, everyday experience is seen as illusory, unreal, profane. Eliade supports this perspective with copious textual examples, but to speak to the general student of religions, he is referring to the fact that the Christian tradition sees the phenomenal world as essentially "fallen," reduced by original sin from its original, divinely intended condition to a vitiated, lesser state; the Buddhist tradition sees the world as *anitya*, impermanent and perishable, and even the human self as negated in the doctrine of *anātman*; to the Hindu the temporal world is produced by *māyā*, the magical power of illusion; for the Moslem "all that dwells upon the earth is

perishing, yet still abides the face of thy Lord" (Qu'ran 55:26–27); and so on. Yet that same experience, *when apprehended in a specific way*, when *interpreted* in a certain manner, becomes authentic, real, sacred: it becomes an hierophany. This bears obvious similarities with Nagarjuna's *śūnyatāvāda* in which *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are equated, a philosophy to which Eliade later referred as "one of the most original ontological creations known to the history of thought" (*History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 2, 225). It also presupposes Eliade's attitude to the *coincidentia oppositorum* as the most profoundly meaningful symbol of the nature of absolute, unconditioned reality.

Precisely what influences or processes made Eliade shift in the late 1930s from the basic notion of lived experience as the source of authenticity to this more subtle, paradoxical conception of the coincidence of the real and the unreal in the experience of human life is not clear. Ricketts' consideration of Eliade's publications from this period are of invaluable assistance, revealing, for example, that "authenticity is no longer a 'cause,' but a 'subject' to be pondered and debated" (983). However, the personal insights of Eliade's journals are unfortunately lacking—the journals which he kept for that period were lost during the war and the autobiography is not helpful on that specific point. His published journals, dating from 1945 onward, make one possibly valuable contribution to this problem. In October 1949 Eliade wrote, "I must divest myself of this remnant of immaturity, this superstition of 'authenticity' at all costs" (*Journal*, I, 99, October 1949). Specifically, he was writing here of his difficulty in speaking from a prepared text. Only the initial confrontation of ideas seemed "inspired" to him, the considered and rehearsed seeming "artificial." Yet, by implication one can detect here the dilution, the doubt, of *trăire* as the only mediator of the authentic. As Eliade began to consider the value of the rehearsed (the artificial in the sense that it had been worked on), to consider that immediate, unmediated experience was not the sole vehicle of the authentic, he was becoming more receptive to the concept of the reworked, mediated meanings of *poesis* as communicative of the real, the authentic; and of the actual lived experience as not *inherently* meaningful at all. Furthermore, he had recognized the thirst to transform ordinary, run-of-the-mill experience into "authentic" experience of the "truly real" as common to both his Criterion friends and the Indian yogins.

This recognition opens out into his doctrine of hierophany: lived experience as simultaneously revealing and concealing the sacred. "Anything man has ever handled, felt, come in contact with or loved can become a hierophany" (*Patterns* 11). Its inherent meaning is quite neutral until it is considered and interpreted. This is simultaneously Kantian and Platonic in structure. The content of sensory experience participates in the sacred which is the source of all meaning, like the Platonic world of Forms, but, like the Kantian noumenal, experience is itself devoid of meaning until it has been "processed" by the interpretative psyche to become the phenomenal world. Lived experience, then, takes the place of the Kantian

noumenal. It is not *beyond* all access; it is, on the contrary, immediately present to our senses, and yet its meaning, its significance, is not accessible prior to the perceptual processes of interpretation which identify experience as either sacred or profane. Such an apprehension of the processes of perception and interpretation immediately begins to separate the concept of external actuality from the concept of truth and this inherent reassessment of the constitutive characteristics of truth will be considered further.

This understanding of Eliade's hierophany does not spring immediately from the data but must be finally inferred from the interrelations of the totality of his statements. A more direct and immediate interpretation is given by Jay J. Kim, in his 1972 article "Hierophany and History." Kim's description of what he calls the "ontological locus of hierophany" is so clear and represents the more common understanding so well that I can do no better than to reproduce it *in extenso*.

> According to Eliade's analysis, each locus by its given constitutional nature provides specific meanings to hierophany and circumscribes the range of the possible modal variations of a given hierophany. Let us examine a few examples from Eliade's analysis.
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> The sky *is* even before man is. The sky is *there* before man, but the sky is not just there. The sky is high, transcendent, infinite, immovable for no other reason than that the sky *is*. As Eliade says,
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> > let me repeat: even before any religious values have been set upon it the sky reveals its transcendence. The sky "symbolizes" transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful. (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 39—I follow Kim's original footnotes)
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> The essential point is that man does not project or attribute these "qualities" to the sky as a way of apprehending the sky, religiously, mythically, symbolically or otherwise.
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> > The sky shows itself as it really is: infinite, transcendent. The value of heaven is, more than anything else, "something quite apart" from the tiny thing that is man and his span of life. The symbolism of its transcendence derives from the simple realization of its infinite height. (38f.)
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> We are aware of and can conceive of infinitude and transcendence only because the sky is there as it is. Our primordial experience of it cannot be otherwise than it is.
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> Like any other ontological locus of the elementary or central hierophanies, the sky is an inexhaustible source of modal variations and

> permutations of the ouranic hierophany. Consequently, anything that happens among the stars or in the upper areas of the atmosphere—the rhythmic revolution of the stars, chasing clouds, thunderbolts, meteors, rainbows—is a moment in that hierophany (40).
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> Another example is water. Water simply is without modal qualifications, for water has no intrinsic shape of its own. Water cannot be created—given a constitutive form—because "it can never get beyond its own mode of existence—can never express itself *in forms*" (212). Since water cannot be created it always exists. This means that water always and necessarily precedes all creation. And because it precedes all it is not alone. "Water is always germinative, containing the potentiality of all forms in their unbroken unity" (188). It is the necessary matrix of all forms, the necessary basis which upholds all creation. To be created means then to be separated from water. Water can never pass beyond the condition of the potential, of seeds and hidden powers. Everything that has form is manifest above the waters, is separate from them (212).
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> This primordial nature of water underlies all the innumerable variations on water symbolism. As Eliade emphatically states, "in whatever religious framework it appears the function of water is shown to be the same" (212). The ontological locus of the aquatic hierophany is as inexhaustible as the ouranic but there can be no confusion between them. ("Hierophany and History," 345–46).

What must be considered carefully here is my contention that the hierophany *is dependent* on perception and interpretation as opposed to the insistence that "man does not project or attribute these 'qualities' to the sky as a way of apprehending the sky, religiously, mythically, symbolically or otherwise."

Clearly Eliade's position is that it is the true and accurate nature of the sky, for example, which is apprehended in the "ouranic" hierophany. However, it is equally clear that this nature *need not* be so apprehended. From the totally desacralized point of view the sky is not particularly high, about three miles; it is not particularly transcendent, being a relatively thin blanket of atmospheric gas on the surface of the terrestrial globe; it is not particularly powerful, since modern technology can adequately protect us from the weather, and anyway the human race could (nowadays) blow the atmosphere clean off the planet. Likewise water does not *necessarily* possess, for example, the characteristic of pre-existence attributed to it. Its "formlessness" is merely a characteristic of its normally fluid state and is shared by all fluids, heating or cooling will endow it with other properties; and as a fairly simple compound of hydrogen and oxygen it can be "created" by a number of chemical reactions.

It is not a case of simply apprehending the characteristics manifested by natural phenomena to appreciate the nature of an hierophany, and it is certainly not

the case that "we are aware of and can conceive of infinitude and transcendence *only* because the sky is there as it is." If this were the case there would be no possible *new* hierophanies, nor would there be any disagreement as to the nature, meaning, or very existence of hierophanies. Eliade has sought to present his readers with those hierophanies most fundamental to known religious history, those hierophanies most accessible to contemporary humanity, and those hierophanies least likely to cause disagreement. But this has led Kim to oversimplify the relationship of humanity to the hierophany.[4]

While it is true that we do not simply "project" the qualities of infinitude and transcendence onto the sky it is misleading to assume then that we are simply *given* these concepts by our experience of the sky. Rather our experience of the world is a reciprocal affair. Without some pre-existent conception of infinitude we could never recognize the infinitude manifested to us by the sky.[5] Also the specific apprehensions of these sacred qualities, while not simply "projections," are dependent upon our specific embodied condition. Were we not *sighted* beings, would the sky manifest infinitude none the less? Perhaps this is not so compelling an argument in reference to the ouranic hierophany, but consider it in relation to the lunar hierophany, one of Eliade's most frequently cited and extensively elaborated loci of hierophany. Simply stated, the periodic waxing and waning of the moon acquaints humanity with a whole complex of manifestations of the nature of the cosmos: periodicity, cyclicality, the harmony of things celestial with things terrestrial (tides and menstrual cycles). But, of course, the moon does not grow and diminish as countless generations have perceived it to. This is an illusion brought about by the orbital arrangement of the solar system. Were we not sighted beings on the surface of this particular planet with such a satellite body, we would have been vouchsafed no such revelation of the nature of the sacred. The point is that our perceptions are the results of both the external state of affairs *and* our conditioned predispositions and abilities. As Coleridge has said "the world is half created, half perceived." (rendered into poetry in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, II, 258–60.) It is rather typical of Eliade's debt to his Romantic precursors that he should propose a schema anticipated by Coleridge, a Romantic and longtime student of Kant.

One thing finally makes it clear that it *must* be perception which makes the event a hierophany. If all existence is capable of becoming a hierophany, a

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4. It should also be noted that Kim's analysis seems to be based almost entirely on one book, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. It is an unfortunate aspect of Eliade's thought that it is rather difficult to grasp without extensive reading.

5. It is by reference to earlier experience that later experiences are classified, hence the attraction of the concept of *anamnesis* for Eliade. Recognition of the hierophany is always a matter of *reacquaintance* with prior revelations of the sacred, hence also his emphasis on eternal return. However, these are elements of Eliade's thought to which I will have to return later.

"manifestation of the sacred," then the difference which separates a profane from a sacred event is—must be—the *perception* of the event as such.

Remarkably, Eliade's understanding here resembles Karl Barth's doctrine of the *post facto* interpretations of the partial traces left by the actual event of revelation. That is to say, the actual event being beyond our *trăire*, we can only interpret the interpretations. The reality of the event becomes totally dependent on later interpretation, the sacrality of the event is dependent on belief. To that extent Eliade's ideas are remarkably consistent with Protestant Christian thought. However, insofar as Barthians would seek to *restrict* revelation to echoes of the Christ event, to deny the actual manifestation of the sacred in other worldly occurrences, Eliade cannot agree. It is fundamental to his whole vision of the world that *all* mundane manifestations are manifestations of the sacred—potential hierophanies—capable of being perceived as sacred and of revealing absolute Being if perceived and interpreted ("deciphered") in a certain way. It is a particular feature of Eliade's thought that even the most horrifying of events (for him as for most of his generation, the concentration camps of the Second World War) is capable of revealing the sacred. He insists that

> the strangest, the most aberrant behavior must be considered as a human fact; if considered as a zoological phenomenon or monstrosity it is not understood. (*The Two and the One*, 12)

He evidently considers that *everything* people do and everything we have done in the past is valid, if not indispensable, evidence of the meaning of our existential situation. One manifestation of this feature of his thought has been pointed out by Mac Ricketts; evil as such is entirely absent from Eliade's fictional work. Even the inspectors of the secret police who appear in *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats* and in *Les Trois Grâces* are not characterized as evil people. In keeping with this Eliade is insistent that even the most aberrant phenomena of religious history must be recognized as genuine manifestations of the religious life of mankind. The resultant *amoral* nature of Eliade's writings has caused some concern. Surely a commentator on the religions of the world cannot simply *ignore* the entire question of ethics? My comments on this question must await a fuller exposition of other aspects of Eliade's thought.

Finally, a definition of hierophany may be established as "any element of the experiential world of humanity which is perceived in such a way as to constitute a revelation of the sacred."[6] However, by virtue of the fact that it is an element of human experience, the hierophany is simultaneously mundane, which is to say profane. Having delineated the experiential and the paradoxical nature of the

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6. As such it is comparable with R. M. Hare's notorious "blik." However, it is a "blik" with a specific external and given form. (See "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.)

concept of hierophany, it is obviously necessary to pass immediately on to a consideration of precisely what the hierophany reveals, that is to say, on to a consideration of the sacred.