Escape from History I

Interpretive Review of and Commentary on Mircea Eliade

Editorial Note: This interpretive review and commentary is based on Mircea Eliade, “Archetypes and Repetition,” chapter 1 of *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*.¹ This book was translated from the French by Willard R. Trask and published by the Princeton University Press in 1954. However, it was first published in 1949 under the title, *Le Mythe de l’éternal retour; archétypes et répétition*.

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) was born in Bucharest, Rumania. He was educated at the University of Bucharest and also at the University of Calcutta, India. Upon returning to Rumania, he earned his Ph.D. and taught the history of religions and Indian philosophy at his alma mater. During World War II Eliade was attached to the diplomatic service in London, England, and Lisbon, Portugal. After the war he accepted a visiting professorship at the Sorbonne in Paris and then immigrated to the United States in 1948. In 1956 he was named Professor of the History of Religion at the University of Chicago. Eliade was a prolific writer and renowned scholar on the meaning of religious cultures. He considered his slender volume on *The Myth of the Eternal Return* to be “the most significant of my books.”²

A thoughtful consideration of Eliade’s material points to radical conclusions that will help to liberate the Christ event — and us — from the inhuman incarceration of antihistorical religion, culture and civilization. Then we may begin to see the Human One — the truly historical Jesus — at the center of human history.

“The word ‘history’ . . . means an actual sequence of events in time, which constitutes a process of irreversible change. This can be either change in the structure of the world or any part of nature, or change in human affairs, in society or civilization. . . . The great philosophies of history, [however,] . . . are primarily concerned with human civilization, not the physical world.”³
**Human History**

Yet, from the “human” perspective, “history” is more than a simple variation in events. If the history of civilization is to be truly human “history,” it must involve conscious awareness. There is no human history for events that are unknown, unrevealed or unobserved and therefore outside the consciousness of mankind. For example, with due respect to Orson Welles and his “War of the Worlds” (1938), there is no authentic history for the invasion of this world by Martian aliens.

Furthermore, historical human reality not only involves events of which man (male and female) is aware. It involves events which relate to mankind’s choice and decision. For example, if I choose to play on a golf course during a thunderstorm and lightning strikes me, that is history. If I decide not to play on a golf course during a thunderstorm, that too is history.

Finally, true human history must have ultimate meaning, purpose and value for mankind. Unless events have these vital attributes, mankind is unable to come to terms with its historicity. For example, a friend of mine had a brother who worked on a freight train. One day, as the train passed beneath a quarry conveyor, a stone was dislodged, plunged through the air, and fatally wounded the brother. My friend has long tried to come to terms with this tragedy. What meaning, what purpose, what value could this event have had? Did the brother commit some terrible wrong to deserve this tragedy? Did God “take” the brother to save him from some greater evil? Did the “devil” snatch the brother?

Authentic human history, then, is defined by changing events that involve the consciousness of mankind, that relate to the choice and decision of man, and that have fundamental meaning, purpose and value for man.

**Archaic Mankind**

For mankind living in archaic, primitive or ancient times (before 2000 BCE), the changing events of this world were considered “profane.” That is because these events were predatory — fraught with uncertainty, insecurity, chaos and catastrophe, and ultimately with death and annihilation. Such events were the source of fear and terror. This profane history was regarded as “fallen” because it occurred outside mankind’s choice and decision and took place without apparent meaning, purpose or value. Thus, for archaic man the only true “time” was the (nonhistorical) “serene moment” preceding Creation. The only true “place” was the (nonhistorical) paradise of heaven,

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believed to be at the center of the universe. True value, purpose and meaning could only be found in uncreated, heavenly, nonhistorical models, patterns or archetypes associated with God himself. Mankind believed that God alone possessed the primordial essences or substances, along with their uncreated model forms and functions — and that God held these “sacred” realities in heaven at the “beginning.” For example:

The [Hebrew] temple in particular — pre-eminently the sacred place — had a celestial prototype. On Mount Sinai, Jehovah shows Moses the “form” of the sanctuary that he is to build for him: “According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it. . . . And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount” (Exodus 25:9, 40). And when David gives his son Solomon the plan for the temple buildings, for the tabernacle, and for all their utensils, he assures him that “All this . . . the lord made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern” (1 Chronicles 28:19). Hence he had seen the celestial model.4

Again:

A celestial Jerusalem . . . [existed with] God before the city was built by the hand of man. . . . “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”5

The world that surrounds us then, the world in which the presence and the work of man are felt — the mountains that he climbs, populated and cultivated regions, navigable rivers, cities, sanctuaries — all these have an extraterrestrial archetype, be it conceived as a plan, as a form, or purely and simply as a “double” existing on a higher cosmic level. But everything in the world that surrounds us does not have a prototype of this kind. For example, desert regions inhabited by monsters, uncultivated lands, unknown seas on which no navigator has dared to venture, do not share . . . the privilege of a differentiated prototype. . . . [T]hese wild, uncultivated regions and the like participated in the undifferentiated, formless modality of pre-Creation.6

In the thinking of archaic mankind, life was not possible in the profane and fallen realm of world history. It was therefore essential to escape history and to live ritually or mystically in heaven, with its celestial models, at the “moment” preceding Creation. Thus, the entire purpose of archaic religion was to help mankind escape from profane history and find refuge in true (nonhistorical) reality in heaven.

In his “wisdom” mankind devised several methods of escaping history:

1. One means of escape was the use of religious rituals designed to acquire the sacred cosmic models. For example:

[T]he Judeo-Christian Sabbath is . . . an imitatio dei [image of God]. The Sabbath rest reproduces the primordial gesture of the Lord, for it was on the seventh day of
the Creation that God “... rested ... from all his work which he had made”
(Genesis 2:2).7

2. Another means of escape was the use of religious mysticism — that deep
meditation or trance-like contemplation designed to achieve union with God and
his archetypal realities.

3. Still another means of escape from history was the concept of “faithful
submission to law” that presumed to elevate man’s conscious behavior to the
divine realm of cosmic archetypes at the moment preceding Creation and at the
center of the universe. Thus:

Human justice ... is founded upon the idea of “law,” [which] has a celestial and
transcendent model in the cosmic norms (tao, artha, rta, tzedek, themis, etc.).8

**Contemporary Man**

These concepts, designed to deliver man from the reality of history and return
him to the heavenly bliss of cosmic norms or archetypes, are not confined to
archaic mankind. They pervade our contemporary world as well.

For example, religious ideologies
such as the New Age movement,
Gnosticism and even Fundamentalism
are based on man’s grasping heavenly
originals to avoid the reality of history.
Such ideologies attempt to avoid the
world of conscious awareness,
necessary choice and decision, and
historic meaning, purpose and value.
They thus rob man of his true, “human”
destiny.

An example of this escapism is the pervasive religious concept of an uncreated,
immortal “soul,” “mind” or “spirit,” originating in heaven, descending to earth to
be temporarily confined to human history, but finally liberated at death to return
to its cosmic origin.

Another example — which rejects the immortal soul but embodies many
traditional elements of historical escapism — is the religious movement known as
Seventh-day Adventism.9 This movement began in the United States in the 1840s
with the conviction that there is a heavenly temple or sanctuary which itself has
been defiled by the recorded sins of humanity. The risen Christ is seen as laboring
there since October 22, 1844 (earth time) to cleanse heaven of these sins. Once
heaven has been cleansed, probationary time will close, the tribulation will occur,
and God will return to claim the “faithful.” In the view of Seventh-day Adventism,
believers must lay hold of the atoning ministry of Christ in heaven through
ecclesiastical rituals on earth, through belief and adherence to the mystic trances
and visions of the founding prophetess, Ellen G. White, and through obedient
submission to the final heavenly mediation of Christ.
Many other, even more bizarre examples could be given of mankind’s propensity to seek and display nonhistorical, archetypal reality. Thus, there have been those determined to partake of the archetypal or Edenic diet, restricting themselves to apples and other fruit. There are those who have sought to exemplify angelic relationships, desperately trying to sustain marriage devoid of sexual intercourse. Others have sought to adorn themselves with archetypally radiant clothing and have adopted holy nudity — e.g., the “holy flesh” movement. Still others have limited themselves to the “tongues of angels” and have spoken in “charismatic” gibberish, barked like a dog, meowed like a kitten, or roared like a bull. And before we point the finger of judgment at these folks, may we have the courage to honestly confront the same mentality reflected in our own, more widely-accepted rituals, liturgies and ceremonies.

All such ancient and modern efforts to escape the “fallen” reality of history and avoid life in profane time are paradoxical. They are paradoxical in the sense that the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself . . . and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another. In other words, he sees himself as real, i.e., as “truly himself,” only, and precisely, insofar as he ceases to be so. Hence it could be said that this “primitive” [and modern] ontology has a Platonic structure; and in that case Plato could be regarded as the outstanding philosopher of “primitive mentality.”

Conclusion

Mankind’s age-long attempts to escape history have proved self-deceptive, ineffectual and self-defeating. If we are to be and to become ourselves, if we are to find ultimate meaning, purpose and value, then the time has come to cease these futile attempts. If we are to exercise our God-given powers of choice and decision, if “faith,” “hope” and “love” are to have concrete, historical content, if we are to perceive reality in the irreversible course of events in history, the time has come to finally abandon our historical escapism.

In order to do this, man is called to exercise human freedom and responsibility. He is called to consciously decide for a new and Becoming Reality which is in and of human history — a Reality which conveys ultimate meaning, purpose and value.

Endnotes

2. Ibid., p. xv.
5. Ibid., pp. 8, 9.
6. Ibid., pp. 9, 10.
7. Ibid., p. 23.
8. Ibid., pp. 31, 32.
10. Eliade, Myth of the Eternal Return, p. 34.