

## Guide for *The Sacred and the Profane*

Eliade's phenomenological and comparative study of religions is an attempt to "understand, and to make understandable to others, religious man's behavior and mental universe." (S&P, p.162) Eliade's goal is to find something universal and unifying in religious experience in all its multiplicity, variation, and distinctiveness. Eliade says he finds the universal and unifying element of the religious in what he calls the *experience of the sacred*, as opposed to the *profane*. The sacred is an experience of the *ganz andere* (wholly other) that we are unable to express, but which can show itself in anything and in everything at once, the cosmos in its entirety, an experience of power and reality that can rupture the ordinary mundane or profane world. Such hierophanies are "saturated with being" and humans have a deep desire to participate in this, are taken by it, do not choose it. The sacred is MORE real than the mundane profane world, and evokes our sense of mystery, awe, and humility.

In its earliest and most basic manifestation among archaic and primitive cultures, the experience of the sacred is immediate and profound. But the mental universe of these cultures is now foreign to us. Eliade warns that Christianity conditions our religious sensibility in the modern western world. Our Christian tradition, though still religious, is nonetheless highly rationalized and doctrinal. It is oriented toward *what is written* and toward belief and faith built on scripture. In most cases, it is quite removed from the primordial *experience* of the sacred Eliade is concerned with. Doctrinal disputes, heresy, and getting it "right" do not inform the religious *experience* itself (as wise Christians, such as Augustine and Kierkegaard tell us). Eliade tells us there is no other way of understanding a foreign mental universe than to place oneself inside it, at its very center, in order to progress from there to all the values that it possesses." (p. 164-165) At this center we find that,

"religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a *real existence*. This religious need expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for being. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness. The unknown space that extends beyond his world—an uncosmized because unconsecrated space, a mere amorphous extent into which no orientation has yet been projected, and hence in which no structure has yet arisen—for religious man, this profane space represents absolute nonbeing...Religious man's profound nostalgia is to inhabit a "divine world,"... the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the creator's hands...at the moment of Creation" (p.64-65)

The world "is not an inert thing without purpose or significance. For religious man, the cosmos 'lives' and 'speaks.'" (p.165) It is a world of immediacy both in its concreteness, yet has equally immediate symbolic (deeply felt) significance that points beyond the cosmos. It is "not strictly confined to man's mode of being...The whole of life is capable of being sanctified... life is lived on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods." (p.166) Eliade gives countless examples of symbols that are nearly universal that orient the religious impulse to the sacred (see symbols below).

From this initial and, for Eliade, essential focus on first or early religions, Eliade then shows how the experiential, symbolic, mythical, and ritual reflections of this basic human experience of *the sacred* not only pervades more recent abstract and doctrinal religions, but still even shows itself, if only minimally, in the desacralized modern industrialized secular world we live in. If Eliade is right about this, and if the experience of the sacred is not only basic to us, but even *necessary* to live well and flourish, and if religion is losing its traditional hold on us along with its ability to orient us to a humanly habitable world, then what will take its place? Even our current futuristic science fiction literature and Hollywood versions of this, depicting our movement into the larger realm of "outer space," centers on ancient religious themes of good versus evil (Star Wars, Star Trek, etc) and the need for some fundamental orientation for humans to be able to live well, to live at all, regardless what space and time this may be. We are always confronted by our finitude, fallibility, and vulnerability and cannot outrun this. These are enabling limits without which experience and knowledge (which is the imposing of limits) would not be possible. A sense of the mystery of being, a sense of the sacred that shows itself traditionally in religions, may be basic to our spiritual health (wholeness) regardless how it is pursued and expressed. Religious myths as well as art were our earliest expressions of our confrontation with our vulnerability and finitude in our attempt to be at home in a world that can both sustain and destroy us, sustain or destroy our meaningfulness. We always need an orientation in terms of where we come from, where we are, where we are headed and what our relationship is to whatever underlies the very possibility of there being a world at all.

We can use Eliade's work to shift the central question from "what is religion?" to "what is the human *experience of the sacred*?" If *the religious* is characterized most centrally by this experience of *the sacred* and the attempt to stay connected to or reconnect (re-ligare) with the sacred is fundamental to our humanity in its experience of vulnerability and the need and attempt to reach beyond our finitude, then this may afford us a better understanding of the phenomenon of religion as well as guide us in what is more or less essential to or characteristic of religion. The "religious impulse" may not necessarily require religion as it has developed, if we

understand that impulse as a need to be oriented toward the sacred, rather than the true or the real. It will be argued elsewhere, that this impulse toward the sacred and the drive to truth (as a need for control and security) are antithetical and can be disentangled in a profoundly liberating way (See Pickard *The Sacred and the True*)

We can move in this direction based on what Eliade has at least implied, namely, that a sense of the sacred is fundamental to us, to our orientation and meaningfulness. More overtly, he tells us that religion is essentially a response to the sacred and that profane secular life is largely devoid of the sacred. He already indicates that though early man was theistic in his orientation toward the sacred, theism is not intrinsic to the sacred. Non theistic religions such as Taoism and Buddhism do powerfully evoke or participate in “the sacred?” From this point of departure however, we can ask such questions as: Is it possible to pursue the sacred without religion? What is the cost of living increasingly with no sense of the sacred? What difference would it make to live oriented toward the mystery and sacredness of life and the cosmos, freed from the conflicts of ideological and doctrinal truths, situated within the sophistication of modern society, and move toward a kind of liberated, “sophisticated innocence,” a healthy spirituality at the core of society instead of mere instrumental efficiency? Is this unrealistic utopianism that we might come closer to achieving what our greatest wisdom traditions revealed and attempted to express in the language and tradition available to them? How can we best approach an appropriate and adequate understanding of the sacred, through the sciences of religion, philosophy of religion? What is the role that these should play? They certainly can open doors and liberate us from certain habits and prejudices that either restrict or cut off experience of the sacred. What kind of life can this engender? It will certainly not eliminate struggle, conflict, and suffering, but it might provide an orientation from which this condition of vulnerability can become more enlightened and humane. (See the final comments at the end below that carry these questions further.)

**Key words and ideas** from *The Sacred and the Profane* are discussed below that may help in your reading:

**Numinous** (from Rudolf Otto: *The Holy*): revelation of divinity, divine power that is utterly other than the human or worldly natural order. In the experience of the presence of this power we sense our profound nothingness. This utterly mysterious power is inexpressible because nothing borrowed from the world of nature can express it. It cannot be rationally expressed, only experienced.

**Hierophany**: manifestation of the sacred in things but does not reduce to these things. Any phenomena may be experienced as a hierophany, a stone, a tree, a mountain, water, living things, the moon, the sun, etc.. The very appearance of Nature itself and its order can be and for religious man is a hierophany, a revelation of sacred power and the mystery that there is a world at all, the mystery of creation, life, growth, renewal. One must remember that even sophisticated scientific theories that account for **how** things come to be, do not and cannot tell us **why** they come to be, why the world is this way rather than some other way or why there is a world at all.

**Signs**: Signs are phenomena that can be understood as coming from outside the world as a guide to or indication of what something means or what action to take or not to take. At a time of need, such sign may appear. It introduces an absolute element, something that does not belong to this world but that orients us in this world. Such signs can be sought or provoked through some sacred rite.

**Religion**: Re-ligare: to reconnect to the sacred. Primitive and archaic religions provided a way of reconnecting with the transcendent reality and power of the sacred. This was done through rituals and the telling of mythic stories of primordial, sacred, or archetypal events.

**Ritual**: A re-enactment of primordial sacred orienting significance. An action that worlds and orients, reproduces the work of the gods. A lived world is a ritually consecrated world, made a world by such consecration, or sacred founding. A ritual is an acting out of the most holy or sacred events in which the space and time of such reenactment becomes one with the original archetypal event. A ritual IS the beginning of the world again, IS the coming into being of the power of life, IS the first birth, IS the first union of marriage, IS the event of primordial death and rebirth, IS the prototype of reality. It is NOT another distinct repetition of the same, but in its sacredness IS the same event. This child may not be the original child but the event of birth IS the original event of birth, is the SAME reality. A ritual transforms the profane into the sacred, takes the event into sacred time and space which is qualitatively completely other. For example, the sacrament of the Eucharist is not a mere representation via wafer and wine of the eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood of Jesus. The Eucharist is a sacred event of the transubstantiation of the wine and wafer into the literal same body and blood of the sacrificed God at THAT moment in history. This sacred event of sacrifice is the *re-ligare* with the sacred; the possibility for salvation from evil, suffering, and death and the preservation of one's being in the spiritual body of Christ through this ritual reenactment. Such rituals of sacrifice and symbolic eating of the flesh and drinking the blood of the most holy were common among ancient people and predate Christianity by many centuries. Rituals also generally facilitate passage from one stage of life to another in the overall process of staying in connection with the reality of the sacred.

**Myth:** Early myths are the revelation of a mystery: How the world came to be, how one is supposed to inhabit this world, and what lies beyond the immediacy of our limited vision of the world. Myths tell us how to properly imitate the gods and live a sacred life. More broadly, a myth is a recounting of the most significant and meaningful events or archetypes that give fundamental meaning to human life. Myths are the contexts in which the primary sacred symbols are understood. Myths typically give an account of origin (how the world was accomplished), provide an orientation to the sacred that guides action in the world and provides a soteriological (salvational) account of our destiny. Myths are invariably conveyed in a type of language called *mythopoeic*, language that conveys our deepest sense of what is most important, our connection to the sacred in the form of stories about the sacred, whether about gods or God, the Tao, Moksha (release), Nirvana (enlightenment), or stories about religious heroes, such as Krishna (incarnation of Vishnu), Jesus (incarnation of God), the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, high example of the possibility to achieve Nirvana), stories about various prophets, for example, in Judaism (prophets, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses) and Islam (five main prophets: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad the final or seal of the prophets). (For a good presentation of the importance and significance of world myths, see videos and books by and on Joseph Campbell at: <http://www.jcf.org/>)

**Archetype:** an original model of a person, ideal example, or a prototype upon which others are copied, patterned, or emulated; a symbol universally recognized by all members of a group as fundamental to their world. For example, Homer provided the archetype of warrior nobility in *The Iliad*. Jesus as depicted in the Bible is the archetype or model for humans in his love and humility. Similarly, the stories of Gautama Buddha provide an archetype of how suffering can be overcome by humans.

**Symbols:** Symbols speak to us through our feelings, not our rational capacities. A living symbol evokes a deep feeling. Symbols have a double meaning, the thing itself, such as water, or sky, or mountain, or tree, or gate, or bridge, and what it shows or reveals beyond this. It is through symbols that the world becomes transparent showing us something more or other than the thing itself. Symbols are able to reveal the transcendent and the sacred. Natural elements are ready symbols of the sacred. For example, earth is a symbol of nourishment and fecundity and is invariably female, Mother Earth. Sky symbolizes the transcendence of the “most high,” invariably male, sky father (Deus Pater: literally: sky father, also Zeus, Jupiter, etc..) Water symbolizes both manifestation/birth and dissolution/death. Baptism is a ritual that takes full advantage of this deeply symbolic status of water. Baptism is both immersion (death) and emersion (new life). Water is a symbol of the formlessness that precedes creation of cosmos and the dispersion by immersion when a cosmos undergoes a death before a new beginning, a new innocence. The myth of the flood was a widely repeated myth in ancient religions that uses the symbol of water for dissolution, the cosmos is washed away, cleansed so it can be reborn. In early religious societies, symbols such as the snake represented chaos, an unlivable non ordered condition that had to be overcome by the gods. Slaying of the snake of chaos would be an example of a symbolic part of a myth of origin. The snake also symbolizes the fall and the temptation of the divine knowledge of good and evil in the Old Testament.

More complex symbols indicate something more abstract but deeply felt about the connection of an individual or a people to a sacred tradition. Some examples: The Bodhi Tree is a symbol of enlightenment and liberation in Buddhism and a deep felt sense of HOPE. The Star of David represents the unbroken lineage and struggle of the Jewish people and their covenant with God. The Christian Cross symbolizes the dying rising redeemer God, but more deeply HOPE. The American flag represents all the collective commitment, effort, and sacrifice in the history of our country, but more deeply FREEDOM. (As we see from the last example of the American flag, not all symbols are religious symbols. Many symbols such as water, fire, the sun, etc., are nearly if not universal in religions. The symbol of a gate or bridge, for example, is found in a great many religions indicating a sacred passage from one world or one condition to another. (For a list of *religious* symbols see [http://www.religionfacts.com/symbols/big\\_gallery\\_of\\_symbols.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/symbols/big_gallery_of_symbols.htm). For one of the best investigations of religious and other symbols and their interpretation see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil, Freud and Philosophy*.)

**Imago Mundi:** Image of the world or cosmos, representation of the cosmos. Every habitation (home, house) is an image of the cosmos and thus must be consecrated or sanctified, ritually created, turned into a world, a living (existential) space, a sacred space. “All symbols and rituals having to do with temples, cities, and houses are finally derived from the primary experience of sacred space.” (p. 58) Earthly temples are corruptible models of the incorruptible celestial models.

**Profane:** Ordinary mundane experience of the natural world. The world as homogeneous *quantitative* space and time. Any place or any time is the same in character. The wholly desacralized, completely profane world is a recent discovery for humans: life as a purely organic, social, psychological phenomenon.

**Sacred:** opposite of the profane. Something of a wholly different order, profoundly *qualitatively* distinguished by the felt sense of its power. Not all power is experienced as sacred, but everything sacred is experienced as powerful. For primitive humans, any power, the power to do something important, the power of food to sustain, the power of fire, the power of language and words, all power in nature, all were manifestations of the sacred, of powerful gods or spirits. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet remains itself. The entire world can be experienced as sacred. The experience of the sacred is a possible dimension of human experience that was pervasive until recently. An analogy for understanding the difference between the sacred and the profane: poetic emotionally evocative imaginative language and strictly utilitarian language of everyday life is parallel in some ways to the difference between an experience of the sacred and profane or mundane experience. All sacred texts are written in poetic form and are referred to as *mythopoeic*. This is not a coincidence. Only poetic language, language of the heart that we use also for expression of our feelings, can begin to express the felt importance in our religions.

**Primordial:** Most basic, most real, primary, first.

**Mystical:** transcending the human condition toward an unconditioned mode of being, a paradoxical and even inconceivable mode of being that can only be experienced. Any attempt to express this experience in words ends in paradox. It can only be pointed to in symbols of liberation (this passing beyond the human condition can be depicted in images such as “shattering the roof” which can mean either freedom from the existential situation by transcendence to a higher plane of reality, a new existential situation (as in Hinduism and Abrahamic religions) OR by abolition of self and cosmos altogether (as in Buddhism and some forms of Taoism). From a secular point of view, such experience is included in the category of “altered states of consciousness.”

**Sacred Space:** Qualitatively profoundly felt difference in some space or places from others. In sacred space, the profane is transcended. Religious societies had images of such transcendence, constructed buildings and located sacred places that were felt to connect with the transcendent reality of the sacred. The world is not homogenous space, all the same, as in abstract conceptions of geometry, or abstract conceptions of stuff or matter as in physics or chemistry, or just the contemporary everyday sense of the homogenous materiality of the world. For a religious sensibility, a world is only a world in relation to the power that brought it forth and everything in the world has an orientation in relation to that understanding and felt sense of what is primordial. A world must be founded and oriented by its connectedness to the sacred. Such founding is the most basic of sacred rites, the consecration of a place, which is a repetition of the *cosmogony* (origin or creation of the universe).

**Cosmos:** An ordered meaningful world that recapitulates the work of the gods, as opposed to chaos, the condition of no consecrated order. Order must always be re-won from chaos and cannot be achieved merely by profane activity. Only a sacred world is a world at all to religious man.

**Axis Mundi:** Center of the world connecting heaven and earth. The creation or founding of a world center is by consecration, a sacred act. The axis by which we stay connected to the sacred. A sacred mountain, a cathedral or a temple are examples of an axis mundi a sacred place that has no mere geographical or geometrical significance, but is a point of contact with and orientation to and from the sacred. Also a place where God or the gods can dwell among men. The ancient temple in Jerusalem had a most sacred room that was not to be entered that was the place where God literally came into contact with the Jewish people. Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad is the axis mundi for all Muslims and five times a day all over the world Muslims bow down in the direction of Mecca, the sacred center of the world. A world comes to birth from its center. Such a center is always possible for a felt sense of connectedness to the sacred, to the most real, regardless of its manifestation. Sacred man does not move into a new territory, he founds a world, recapitulates the original sacred world that orients. The particularity of a place is not what is central, but the archetype of worlding. And literally every point on planet earth is its center even just geometrically.

**Sacred Time:** Neither homogenous nor continuous as distinguished from homogenous “duration.” Unlike irreversible duration, sacred time is reversible, recoverable, repeatable, because it is the reactualization of a primordial original mythic time made present. Sacred time just is. It is permanence in the midst of impermanence. Sacred time is the SAME time, not another successive time. Genuinely sacred New Year celebrations, do not celebrate another year, but the same primordial cycle of reality of the original beginning, the first year and the cycle of life. Profane time is strictly human time, historical time where there is no divine presence or mystery. The cosmos is reborn each year as an act of divine creation. Time is regenerated by being created anew, recovers its original sanctity when it came from the creator’s hands. Time starts over again.

Profane time is seen as a complete abstraction from any particular events, kind of temporal container in which things happen, events take place. Time precedes and makes possible happenings or events. *Sacred time* in contrast, is the time of primordial beginning or creation of original cosmos. Before a or kind of thing exists, its particular time could not exist. Before the cosmos (ordered world) there was no time. To make possible the starting over of the pure time of beginning, the profane human world must be made clean by ritual purification to wash or burn away the sins and faults of the individual and the community. Human or profane time of mere duration wears away and taints the pure time of primordial creation. Profane time is experienced as a movement away from the divine/sacred. This tainted worn time must be ritually abolished to re-enter sacred time. This tainted world comes to an end and is reborn in pure sacred time. These celebrations move through a retrogression of the cosmos into chaos in order for the cosmos to begin again. By annulling the world, it allows the gods to create it once again, literally once and only once. It is the same creation, not a different one. Time is purely singular and circular. The cosmogonic myths (myths of origin, of creation) serve generally in all situations to promote healing, wholeness, creativity, growth: Life cannot be repaired. It can only be recreated whole and new. This, of course, mirrors the condition of impermanence: birth, growth, decay, death, new birth. It is a cycle, a basic pattern that life repeats. The sacred time of creation makes possible the profane time of duration in which we live out our lives and from which we desire a return to that original perfection. That is what eventually becomes understood as historical time from which we feel the need to return to and open ourselves to sacred time. Such return to sacred time allows us to live in the presence of the divine source of all that is. Anything apparently new is an aspect of the process of creation.

**Cyclical versus Historical Time in Religion:** Early religions were oriented to an original archetypal moment or series of moments that were to be endlessly and timelessly recapitulated in order to maintain reality and a proper relationship to reality. **Judaism**, however, represents a change from this pattern. The Jewish people saw the encounter and commitment of Abraham with God and the covenant given to Moses as unique events on a time line of an ongoing relationship with successive generations of the people of Israel. God appears in history: **theophany**. **Christianity** made this even more pronounced with the influence of the Greek conception of historical time that was invented three or four centuries earlier. God does not just appear, but becomes incarnated, (in the flesh). The birth, death and resurrection of Jesus were the central moments that all prior history had led up to and would be followed by a second coming, resurrection of the saved, a thousand year reign on earth, then everlasting “life” in heaven.

**Pickard Comment:** All these are unique events, none to be recapitulated, but nonetheless, profoundly central orienting events of reality, thus still sacred, fundamental and not merely homogeneous duration. However, such linear time is seen to offer the possibility to overcome suffering, (i.e., vulnerability in the form of birth, growth, decay, loss) and fallibility, taintedness or sin, and finally death, by putting an end to time altogether. There is no new creation, no new life. There is only timeless permanence and perfection and no need for purification in order to be recreated. No new life emerges. Creation happens only once, salvation only once, then a timeless heaven. Sacred time no longer needs to be recapitulated. The difference between sacred and profane time is abolished in the final epoch of this linear conception. The linearity itself is finally extinguished. There is no time line at the end of time. It is, of course, challenging to understand “what” would be saved and what could “happen” when existence and time are abolished in this timelessness that no longer even needs to be created or recreated. This is a condition in which God is no longer needed to DO anything, such as create a cosmos or save souls. There is no longer a cosmos in which to live, no life in the sense of temporal existence, just permanent timeless perfection.

**Note:** This is a kind of unhappy logical outcome of attempting to historicize the sacred. It is not at all clear that the sacred can be logicized or historicized as the Abrahamic religion attempt to do. By making historical events the decisive sacred events, and through rationalized doctrines that offer faith the support of logical grounds, i.e., **theology** (rational study of God), Christianity, for example, introduces the seed of historicism and logicism by which, then, Christianity itself can be deconstructed historically and logically. The so-called *Jesus Movement* is a case in point that has demonstrated that almost everything that is taken as true historically by Christianity, has been found to be historically false or highly doubtful and the use of logic applied to scripture has found it to be full of logical contradiction and incoherence. This is one reason Augustine and Kierkegaard, two of the greatest Christians, eschewed any literal reading of the scripture and Kierkegaard in particular detested theology. For Augustine and Kierkegaard, God is completely unknowable, ungraspable, and is only approachable by giving up all pretence to historical or theological truth. This prepares the way to a leap of faith, the only way to approach the sacred.

**Question:** How can we embrace the sacred without attempting the impossible return to primitive or archaic religion and without following the historicized, logicized religions that lead to incoherence if we take them literally and lend themselves to ideological conflict due to their typical insistence on logical (A versus Not-A) Truth? Is the sacred possible in a modern and now post-modern world? (You are now ready to begin reading Miller’s *In the Throe of Wonder!* But first, take a look at Kingsley’s *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* to see what the journey to sacred wisdom might be)