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NUCLEAR MADNESS

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The Meaning of the End of the World

Few historians of religion have been as influential or as controversial as Mircea Eliade. The controversy centers principally on the question of method in studying the history of religions. For Eliade, the history of religions as an academic discipline entailed not only recounting specific religious developments, but also uncovering universal and unvarying patterns of religious experience, which he believed hold the key to the essential structures of all human experience. This emphasis on universal patterns has often been criticized. Other historians of religion have little difficulty finding errors in Eliade's treatment of their own special areas. Some suggest that Eliade molded (or perhaps even distorted) the data to fit his schema—a schema that did not arise inductively from the data, these critics contend. So there is some doubt whether his studies lead us to the historical, objectively verifiable truth about the world's religions.

There is little doubt, though, that Eliade created an imaginative and thought-provoking model of what he called *homo religiosus*—humanity in its unvarying religious dimension. As a model, it can be neither verified nor falsified by empirical research. It may be best understood as a mythical being sprung from a great scholar's imaginative encounter with the world's religions. But *homo religiosus* is equally a product of Eliade's encounter with modern Western culture. In Eliade's work there is always a sharp distinction between *homo religiosus* and modern man—so sharp that the image of *homo religiosus* often seems drawn largely in the service of a cultural critique. This is not surprising, since Eliade's early career was dominated by his passionate quest for the "new man" who would live a spiritually richer and more genuinely human life than Western modernity would allow.

So the terms *homo religiosus* and *modern man* may both be taken as ideal types. Eliade's depiction of modern man sums up the shortcomings he found in the urban bourgeois society of his youth. *Homo religiosus* is essentially his vision of an alternative to that society. Illustrated by but not necessarily derived from his study of the history of religions. Understood as hypothetical constructs rather than objective realities, both these concepts can be useful tools for delving further into nuclear madness, and especially for understanding nuclear madness as an initiatory journey.

The Human Situation

Eliade's images of *homo religiosus* and modern man are grounded in a philosophical and psychological analysis of the foundations of human existence. For Eliade, as for Tillich and Laing, the critical issue of life is the problem of limited personal reality. This problem is articulated, he contends, in the ubiquitous myths that speak of humanity's fall from a primordial state of perfect reality in which all opposites were harmoniously united. Mortal, sexed, and condemned to work, humanity now recognizes its condition as a limited existence bound within a network of opposites: body and spirit, life and death, time and eternity, up and down, near and far, order and confusion. Realizing that we are limited by—and condemned to choose between—dualities, we recognize that our own reality, like every specific reality, is less than the sum total of all possible reality. To counter this sense of limited reality, we identify ourselves with the sum total of the given reality that we can comprehend; i.e., we see ourselves as part of a cosmos. As long as that cosmos maintains its reality, our own reality feels secure.

But the reality of the cosmos itself is never perfectly secure. We always sense that there is something more, something not included in our present cosmos. So we experience life as a tension of what is now real—the cosmos—against what might possibly be real but is now unreal. The unreal is by definition unknown and uncosmized; it is formless chaos. The tension between reality and unreality is manifest in society as a conflict between "our world" and "their world." "Our world" is always the familiar cosmos in which we can orient ourselves and find meaning and value. "Their world" and its inhabitants always embody the universal threat of absolute formlessness. No threat

is more fearsome, for it is not only one's own existence but reality itself that is at stake. Every human being, whether consciously or unconsciously, "thirsts for being. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness. . . . If by some evil chance, he strays into it, he feels emptied of his ontic sustenance, as if he were dissolving in Chaos."¹⁸

The cosmos/chaos polarity is the root cause of the one mark of the human condition that Eliade stresses above all others: our awareness of temporality. If there were either perfectly static order or perfectly complete disorder, there would be no change, and thus no awareness of time. As long as there is both cosmos and chaos, however, "our world" is constantly (though usually quite slowly) being undermined by, and slipping into, unreality, which transforms it into a new reality. So it is the cosmos/chaos dynamic, not time itself, that wears away all realities, causing suffering and anxiety. Beneath a human being's existential concern about temporality and the contingency of the self lies a deeper concern about unreality and the contingency of the cosmos.

The threat of chaos is generally manageable as long as the cosmos has relatively stable structures to defend against chaos. There are times, however, when these structures, and the viability of the cosmos itself, are called radically into question. According to Eliade, such an "existential crisis . . . puts in question both the reality of the world and man's presence in the world."¹⁹ Although acute existential crises may be rare, an existential crisis is always latent in human existence, simply because we are temporal beings who always face the threat of incipient chaos. Eliade also invokes Freud to affirm that every individual unconsciously remembers an ideal state of perfect reality as a personal experience—"the 'human primordial,' earliest childhood. The child lives in a mythical, paradise time."²⁰ Compared to this primordial perfect reality, every moment of present existence, marked by the conflict between cosmos and chaos, can only appear relatively unreal. Thus some sense of unreality is with us all the time. When the structures of our cosmos, our buffers against unreality, are seriously threatened, this latent crisis breaks out into the open.

What every human being desires, naturally, is some guarantee of a permanent reality that is immune to all change; i.e., a reality that transcends time. The cosmos itself cannot of-

fer such a guarantee because there is always chaos beyond its border portending the possibility (and usually the actuality) of conflict, change, and time. A permanent reality must therefore encompass both cosmos and chaos and reconcile the conflict between them; it must embrace both the existing reality and the unreality of pure possibility. And it must reconcile these polarities on a universal scale. Any image of reality that excludes chaos, or includes only a limited part of the chaotic realm, leaves reality polarized between cosmos and chaos and allows the threat of greater chaos to continue. Thus it leaves the door open to change and temporality. Only in the universal harmonizing of cosmos and chaos can time be transcended and one's personal reality assured.

Cosmos versus Chaos: The World of Modern Man

The essence of modernity, Eliade believes, is that it lacks any effective means to satisfy this fundamental human desire for permanent reality. Modern man asserts that only those events taking place within the flow of historical time are real. Indeed he knows no other time. So he remains unaware of any eternal, "really real" reality that might offer a secure grounding for his own evanescent reality. His ignorance of his existential plight makes that plight all the more desperate.

The crux of the problem is that modern man cannot find any positive meaning in experiences of chaos because he does not accept the possibility of a coincidence of opposites. Therefore when his reality is threatened he can only seek to defend his world by fighting against chaos. The possibility of a coincidence of opposites can only appear to him as a further threat to his world, since the order of that world seems to depend on radical resistance to chaos. This radical resistance is evident not only in overtly military wars against foreign nations, but in all the wars that modern man fights: the war against nature, the war against disease, the war against drugs, the war against poverty, and all the other wars, all modelled on the traditional image of war against a foreign nation. Whenever he is faced with the possibility of disorder, modern man raises the wall higher and wider between his cosmos and everything outside it. In this unending state of conflict the gap between cosmos and chaos grows ever wider, the coincidence of opposites becomes ever more unthinkable, and the possibility of any transcendence of time vanishes.

Modern man's problem is compounded because he confronts the question of the meaning of chaos, if he confronts it at all, in purely private terms. He apprehends his imaginings only as individual attempts to correlate order and disorder in his own inner life. Upon entering the public realm of work, education, politics, and the like, he must leave all questions of ultimate meaning behind. Because he always understands his crises as crises of the individual self, he cannot apprehend his inner images as implicating all of reality. He lives without consciously affirmed images to reconcile cosmos and chaos on a universal scale. So his attempts to stave off the unreality of chaos leave him unable to secure his own sense of reality. Feeling increasingly drained of personal reality and vulnerable to chaos, he evokes the existential crisis that he fears.

Modern man values his secular life, nevertheless, because it seems to guarantee him individual freedom and collective progress as he "makes history." But Eliade questions both of these apparent values. History today, he asserts, "tends to be made by an increasingly smaller number of men" who impose their will upon the masses. The protagonist of Eliade's novel *The Forbidden Forest* (living through the same historical crises as the author himself) says: "All Europe's behaving like a monstrous robot set in motion by the news . . . We're slaves of history . . . In the long run it's sterile. . . . It enriches no one; we discover nothing really worth being discovered. . . . History is invigorating and fertile only for those who make it, not for those who endure it."⁶

Ultimately, though, Eliade questions whether anyone today is really free to make genuine changes in the world. Genuine changes require a willingness to accept the death of the status quo. But modern man's fear of chaos means a refusal of all death: "In the modern world, Death is emptied of its religious meaning; that is why it is assimilated to Nothingness; and before Nothingness modern man is paralyzed."⁷ For modern man the disappearance of any structure threatens the dissolution of all structure. Consequently he clings to every structure that now exists in his world. He rigidly opposes truly transformative change—i.e., total change—even as he seems to embrace constant change. His passion for tiny incremental changes, which he calls progress, is part of his defense against total transformation. Movement in any direction seems more dangerous than stasis. The status quo, no matter how dangerous, is affirmed simply because it is the status quo.

For Eliade, Mephistopheles, not Faust, is the paradigmatic modern man. Mephistopheles stands for the numbing which is death in life: "In place of movement and Life he tries to impose rest, immobility, death. For whatever ceases to change and transform itself decays and perishes. This 'death in life' can be translated as spiritual sterility; it is, taken all in all, damnation."⁸ Since modern man lives constantly in the face of nothingness, he is condemned to be constantly paralyzed. So his belief in both freedom and progress are illusory. In his paralysis, he can do no more than fulfill his biological needs and material desires, like a robot endlessly repeating rote actions. He can do no more than live like an ant. "I see man crushed, asphyxiated, diminished by industrial civilization. . . . After a long mythological period, and a short historical period, we are on the threshold of a biological (economic) period. Man will be reduced to the condition of a termite, an ant. . . . For several generations, or, perhaps, several thousand years, men will live like ants."⁹

For Eliade, the tragedy may extend beyond human life. One of his fictional characters speculates that "all of cosmic life suffers and withers because of the indifference of man toward the essential problem. By forgetting to ask the right question, by wasting our time on futilities or frivolous questions, we not only kill ourselves, we also sterilize a portion of the Cosmos and cause it to die a slow death."¹⁰ And the "right question" for our time would seem to be: What is the meaning of the end of the world? Because we fail to ask this question, we and our world remain inert: "We are paralyzed because we are missing the meaning of the end of the world. Like Seneca, the men of today believe that 'after death there is nothing'—that death itself is nothing"¹¹—nothing but our own private and utter extinction.

As moderns, we cannot ask the right question because we have forgotten how to ask any questions of universal meaning. The paralysis of our death in life is a compound of our failure to find meaning in chaos and our failure of imagination; much of the richness of Eliade's critique of modernity lies in the connection between these two failures. Our questions now reduce the world to literal material reality, he contends, because we are at war with uncertainty and instability: "The explanation of the world by a series of reductions has this aim in view: to rid the world of extra-mundane values. It is a systematic banalization of the World undertaken for the purpose of conquering and

mastering it. . . . It is an idiosyncrasy of Western man."¹² Imagination reveals our innermost images as ambiguous, nonrational, and uncontrollable. It reveals the unreality we fear welling up inside ourselves. For those who do not understand its structures, it appears to be a confusing chaos; a religious image especially "seems absurd when one takes it in the literal sense."¹³

Since our commitment to controllable structure is so extreme, we can see no positive value in imaginative, multivalent representations of a multidimensional reality. We can only experience them as the threatening not-yet-real of pure possibility. So we literalize. We demand a single, conscious, rationally consistent meaning for each image, a meaning that is partial and incomplete and therefore, Eliade contends, necessarily false. The symbol cannot reveal its true meaning in modernity because the whole person—body, feelings, and imagination as well as conscious thought—is debarred from grasping it as a whole. Confining us to limited realities, this literalism confines us to a world of inert materiality, pure temporality, and irreconcilable conflict between opposites. It rules out the harmonization of cosmos and chaos that could allow us to imagine perfectly secure reality. Our literalism is thus an intrinsic part of our rigid stance toward reality, our war against disorder, which may be at root a war against the pure possibility of imagination. But this war only compounds our dread of chaos as an omnipresent threat and makes existential crisis our daily norm. All our attempts at coping turn out to be self-defeating attempts that exacerbate the problem, because we do not consciously know what the problem really is.

Cosmos and Chaos: The World of Homo Religiosus

What alternative is there to the dilemma of modernity? Eliade's studies in the history of religions can all be understood as a response to this question. All invite the reader to imagine a radically alternative way of life, which Eliade ascribes to homo religiosus. For Eliade, to be sure, homo religiosus is premodern man—a historical reality confirmed by empirical data. But his own critique of literalism should warn his readers not to take this picture on its own literal terms. It should be accepted as a hypothetical construct, a creative image of a possible way of life rather than a depiction of the historical past.

The existential situation of homo religiosus is defined by the same threat of chaotic unreality that faces modern man. But homo religiosus, as Eliade imagines him, can consciously acknowledge, confront, and withstand the existential crisis, in both its latent and acute forms, because his way of life is based on the exercise of religious imagination.

"Most of the products of imagination have a 'religious' significance. That is to say, they have related to primordial excellence a religious dimension."¹⁴ Imagination always tends to have religious meaning, Eliade points out, because imaginative acts, like religious images, create an ideal realm (an "excellence") that transcends the givens of empirical reality. Imagination can comprehend logical opposites in a paradoxical unity and thereby make the impossible appear possible. Their sense of unlimited possibility resembles a primordial chaos, but the very fact that imagination shapes possibility and gives structure to the chaos of mental flux endows imagination with cosmogonic powers. An imaginative act, in short, founds a new world, which is why imagination opens up a "primordial excellence." In this new world, the formlessness of pure possibility is harmonized with the emergence of an enduring structure.

Not all imaginative acts have a fully religious dimension, however, in Eliade's view. An image of primordial excellence becomes a religious symbol only when it "imitates the exemplary models—the Images—reproduces, reactualises and repeats them without end. To have [religious] imagination is to be able to see the world in its totality."¹⁵ "Religion is the exemplary solution of every existential crisis. Religion 'begins' when and where there is a total revelation of reality. . . . The sacred is the exemplary in the sense that it establishes patterns to be followed: by being transcendent and exemplary it compels the religious man to come out of personal situations, to surpass the contingent and the particular and to comply with general values, with the universal."¹⁶ For homo religiosus every reality that does not imitate a paradigmatic pattern is precarious and evanescent. Only the eternal patterns, repeating the creative events of the "timeless time" before profane historical time began, are genuinely real. These sacred events are narrated in myths. Repeating the myths, homo religiosus reenters the enduring era of origins. He reaffirms the reality of his cosmos as sacred and eternal because it is founded on the paradigmatic and universal.

If this affirmation is to endure existential crises, however, it must give a meaningful place to chaos in paradigmatic and

universal terms as well. A "total revelation of reality" must transcend all time and change. Therefore it must embrace both total cosmos and total chaos simultaneously. Of course religious imagination can not simply wish away the radical difference between cosmos and chaos. Homo religiosus knows that their conflict, and the change it brings, are inescapable—that every reality must come to an end because it is worn down by time. And he believes that "life cannot be repaired, it can only be re-created by a return to its sources."¹⁷ But those sources always involve some form of chaos. So chaotic formlessness can take on positive meaning as the prelude to totally new life.

Any form whatever, by the mere fact that it exists as such and endures, necessarily loses vigor and becomes worn: to recover vigor, it must be reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant; it must be restored to the primordial unity from which it issued; in other words, it must return to "chaos."¹⁸

We can talk of the positive value of periods of shadow, of times of large-scale decadence and disintegration. . . . Just as death represents a positive value in itself, so do they; it is the same symbolism as that of larvae in the dark, of hibernation, of seeds bursting apart in the earth so that a new form can appear.¹⁹

The Water of Death is preeminently killing: it dissolves, it abolishes all forms. That is just why it is rich in creative "seeds."²⁰

As all forms dissolve into chaos they pass their "energy" into the chaotic state, which embodies the limitless possibility that existed in the beginning, offering an infusion of novelty, growth, and regeneration. So every creative, renewing, or healing act must begin by returning to the unreality of chaos. But this dissolution of forms can only be religiously meaningful if it is imagined on a universal scale: the reality of the cosmos can be guaranteed only by the end of the world.

The Meaning of the End of the World

The possibility of the world's end is neither new nor shocking to homo religiosus, for he acts it out periodically in his rituals. At the New Year festival and other critical times, he annuls the effects of time and history by symbolically returning to

the primordial chaos and then reenacting the birth of a new world—a paradise where perfect order is guaranteed yet all things are possible.

These myths of the End of the World implying, as they do in clearer or darker fashion, the re-creation of a new Universe, express the same archaic and extremely widespread idea of the progressive "degradation" of a cosmos, necessitating its periodical destruction and re-creation. . . . The essential thing is not the fact of the *End*, but the certainty of a *new beginning*. Now, this rebeginning is, properly speaking, the counterpart to the absolute beginning, the cosmogony. . . . It was possible to accept the idea of the apocalyptic destruction of the World because the cosmogony—that is, the "secret" of the origin of the World—was known.²¹

In religious terms the expectation of the end of the world is, above all, an affirmation that things need not remain the way they are—that the sins, sufferings, and weariness brought by time can always be abolished because time itself can be transcended and thereby regenerated. Since the origin of the world is a timeless reality enshrined in timeless myth, the birth of a new world is an eternally available possibility. So, in describing a myth about the periodic world-destroying fire, Eliade speaks of the "optimistic character of these ideas. In fact, this optimism can be reduced to a consciousness of the normality of the cyclical catastrophe, to the certainty that it has a meaning, and, above all, that it is never final."²² Homo religiosus knows that universal chaos is a necessary part of a cosmic or historical pattern and that his myths and rituals are essential to the pattern. "In the final instance, the religious man comes to *feel himself responsible for the renewal of the World.*"²³

For homo religiosus "the terror of the end of the world has never . . . succeeded in paralyzing either Life or culture."²⁴ nor is the threat of death paralyzing. Since death is homologous with the end of the world, it implies an opening onto the pure possibility that enables the birth of a new world of perfect reality. So death represents the freedom for total transformation—the freedom to transcend time, death, and the human condition and experience the possibility of a paradisaal mode of existence. For homo religiosus this is the only true freedom. As

Anisic, the old sage who represents the outlook of homo religiosus in *The Forbladden Forest*, puts it: "All the other rights that history struggles to gain definitively—liberty, for instance or respect for the individual—are just a preamble to the only right that is truly inviolable, the right to immortality. . . . We have to hope that someday, here, we shall recover the primordial Adamic condition, that we shall live not only in Time but also in Eternity."²⁵

The price of recovering eternity is to endure—and evoke, if necessary—the end of the world. This is never an easy price to pay. Chaos remains for homo religiosus the daunting realm of absolute unreality, the nothingness where one would lose one's ontic substance and die if not rescued by the ordering powers of cosmos. Cosmos and chaos thus have a complex dialectic relationship in Eliade's system: they oppose each other yet each is the prerequisite for the other and so they generate each other, in a never-ending cycle. Homo religiosus is understandably ambivalent to both cosmos and chaos. But his ultimate ideal is always the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the harmonizing of opposites that would allow him to transcend temporality altogether.

A sacred symbol offers a resolution to existential crisis precisely because it embodies all the contradictions of cosmos and chaos, and the resolution of those contradictions, on a universal scale. Ontologically, a sacred symbol must express a vision of absolute formlessness as a universal possibility. Psychologically, it depends on an exercise of religious imagination: an experience of one's most genuine psychic reality, which simultaneously demands an experience of the not-yet-real of pure possibility. Only such an immersion in unreality can dissolve all existing structures and enable the emergence of a new world. Only the risk of psychic chaos, experienced in universal ontological terms and understood as the means of transformation to new cosmos, can harmonize cosmos and chaos on a universal scale.

This is the basic paradox of religious imagination: the existential crisis must be intensified to its utmost if it is to be resolved; the feeling of relative unreality must be made absolute before it can be transcended; to transcend one's innate sense of unreality means not to escape it but to accept it and give it meaning. Thus homo religiosus is at one with modern man in having to face the perpetual threat of existential crisis. ■