It was with great interest that I read the manuscript of this work several years ago. I knew the author, a young philosophy professor, who was ardently pursuing both phenomenology and Indian thought but who was also showing a budding interest in problems concerning the history of religions. We discussed certain chapters at length and I personally profited a great deal from this dialogue. When I accepted Professor Douglas Allen's suggestion that I write this Foreword, I decided to return to and continue the discussion begun in our earlier meetings.

I now realize the brashness of this project. To be at all meaningful and to the point, the dialogue between an author and his critic must take into consideration all the problems posed by the author's work and all the objections raised by his critic — even at the risk of extending the author's commentaries to book length. For myself, I plan someday to dedicate an entire work to discussing the objections put forth by some of my critics, those who are responsible and acting in all good faith (for the others do not deserve the bother of a reply).

For the moment, I shall have to limit myself to a few observations of a rather general nature. In attempting to present what is essential in my methodology, Professor Allen has rightly stressed, firstly, the importance of the dialectic of the sacred and, secondly, the central role of religious symbolism.

As I have stated so many times, the sacred has shown itself to be an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of this consciousness. A meaningful world — for man cannot live in a state of 'chaos' — is the result of a dialectical process which phenomenologists and historians of religion call the manifestation of the sacred. Human existence takes on meaning through the imitation of the paradigmatic models revealed by Supernatural Beings (godheads, mythical ancestors, civilizing heroes, and so forth). The imitation of transhuman models, that is to say, the ritual repetition of
acts performed by these Supernatural Beings at the dawn of time, constitutes an essential feature of religious life. At the most primitive levels of culture, *to live as a human being is itself a religious act*; as eating, sexual activity and work are performed in accordance with models revealed by Supernatural Beings, they thus have a sacramental value. In other words, being — or rather becoming — a man means being ‘religious’.

The dialectic of the sacred, then, preceded all the other dialectical movements which were later discovered by the mind and served as their model. Through the experience of the sacred, man grasped the difference between that which was revealed as real, powerful and meaningful and that which lacks these qualities, namely the chaotic and perilous course of things, their fortuitous and senseless appearing and disappearing. In the final analysis, the experience of the sacred opened the way for systematic thought.

This in itself should be sufficient to stimulate the interest of philosophers in the work of religious historians and phenomenologists, but there are other aspects of religious experience which are no less compelling. Hierophanies — that is, manifestations of the sacred expressed in symbols, myths and Supernatural Beings, etc. — are apprehended as structures, and these form a prerereflective language calling for a particular hermeneutic. As a result of this hermeneutic labor, the materials at the disposal of the religious historian present a series of ‘messages’ awaiting decoding and comprehension. These ‘messages’ do not ‘speak’ to us only of a past long stilled but reveal existential situations of great moment to modern man.

Professor Allen has rightly stressed the importance I attach to symbols and to symbolic thought in the interpretation of the religious phenomenon. Indeed — to mention only a few of the most characteristic features — symbols are capable of revealing a mode of reality as a structure of the world not evident on the level of direct experience; their principal trait is their multivalence, the ability to express several things at once the connection of which is not evident on the level of direct experience; symbols are capable of revealing a perspective in which diverse realities are linked within a whole or even integrated in a ‘system’. Of equal importance is the capacity symbols possess for expressing paradoxical situations or certain structures of ultimate
reality which would otherwise be inexpressible (e.g. coincidentia oppositorum). Finally, the existential value of religious symbolism must be underscored, namely the fact that a symbol always aims at something real or at the very situation of human existence as such.

By way of conclusion, I must add that my understanding of religious symbolism was greatly enhanced by my stay in India. I feel I was extremely fortunate to have been able to go to India when I was scarcely twenty-one and to have stayed there for three years studying with Professor Surendranath Dasgupta at the University of Calcutta, especially fortunate to have had the chance to live in his Bhawanipore home, to visit most of the cities and the most important temples and, in particular, the chance to spend six months in a Hardwar ashram in the Himalayas. My encounter with this tradition-laden culture at an age when spiritual discoveries can still enrich and transform one’s personality has had important consequences over and beyond my work as an Indian scholar. Indeed, the understanding of religious symbolism as it is lived at the level of the people has helped me to better grasp the symbolism still alive in my own tradition, that of an Eastern European people.

It has been in pursuing these initial discoveries through the course of the years that my interest has focused more and more on folklore and popular traditions — whether European or Asiatic —, on archaic religions, on mystics and on the shaman techniques for attaining ecstasy.

Having himself personal experience of Indian culture, Professor Allen has firmly grasped the importance of India in my intellectual formation. One more reason to express my gratitude for his attentive and sympathetic reading and consideration of my work.

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Mircea Eliade