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Long - Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter - JCRT 1.2

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Probably no work of Mircea Eliade frustrates, irritates, and leads anthropologists and other social scientists to fits of anger, more than his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (*Traité d'histoire des Religions*).¹ It reminds them too much of Frazer's *Golden Bough* or of lesser popular texts of exotic oddities that purport to describe the customs of primitive cultures. In a milder critical vein, it represents the kind of work that cannot, at least, should not be undertaken, for it appears to rest on a naiveté lacking in scholarly sophistication regarding the relationship of religion, behaviour, and social structure.

3. But given these kinds of criticisms and critics, I doubt if many of his most vociferous critics have ever read the work in its entirety or George Dumezil's introduction to the original French edition. From either of these readings one would learn that Eliade is presenting a systematic text, attempting to address the issue of religion as a specific mode of being. Now it may be that several modern disciplines have already decided that the religious life does not exist and this decision has lead them to fashion methodologies that reduce the forms of religion to those human dimensions more consonant with the ideologies and existential situations of a non-religious modernity. Much has and can be learned from such approaches, but they need not express an imperialism of method for it is equally the situation of modernity that has called forth the need for, and hermeneutical procedures that seek, an interpretation of the historical range of human expressions in their specificity and integrity, whether in art, linguistics, geography, etc.
4. Along with Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* is a most fruitful text for raising the issue of religious epistemology. In this text Eliade attempts to account for the inner structure of the consciousness of *homo religiosus* from an examination of the sacred symbols of archaic cultures. In this regard, the text begins from the other side of Otto, who attempted first to give us an account of consciousness and then to show how it expresses itself through religious forms. Eliade's work shows how the forms of matter, (nature) evoke modes of consciousness and experience (hierophanies).
5. Let us begin with a cursory examination of the Table of Contents of *Patterns*. The text consists of thirteen chapters. The first chapter is entitled "Approximations: the Structure and Morphology of the Sacred." In this chapter he sets forth the problematical nature of his undertaking and delineates the language for talking about religion; the language of the sacred and the profane are the most general linguistic categories, while the notion of hierophanies is the language of manifestation, of showing. Allusions are also made to those approaches to the religious which are predicated on the notion of *homo socius* as both a specific and general category and how his work differs from this position. The next three chapters are entitled, respectively, "The Sky and Sky Gods," "The Sun and Sun-Worship," and "The Moon and its Mystique." In these three chapters we are confronted with those religious experiences and expressions related to celestial phenomenon.

¹Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958. Translated from the French edition, *Traite d'histoire des Religions*, by Rosemary Sheed. Paris: Editions Payot.

6. Two chapters follow, one devoted to "The Water and Water Symbolism," and the other entitled "Sacred Stones: Ephiphanies, Signs and Forms." So now, after the celestial forms we are dealing with terrestrial forms. The next three chapters, "The Earth, Woman and Fertility," "Vegetation Rites and Symbols of Regeneration," "Agriculture and Fertility Rites," are all related to human intervention upon the order of nature as a specific form of sacrality. The next two chapters, chapters ten and eleven, bear the titles "Sacred Places: Temple, Palace, 'Centre of the World'," and "Sacred Time and the Myth of the Eternal Renewal." The last two chapters are given over to "The Morphology and Function of Myths" and "The Structure of Symbols."
7. I have given this outline of the Table of Contents in order to call attention to the systematic order of the text. The author is attempting to show the correlation between the experience, transformation and celebration of nature, and the linguistic and symbolic modes for expressing these actions and experiences. This procedure enables us to understand the archaic mode of consciousness, and in addition to this, we are presented with a "generative logic" of symbolic religious forms. Wherein do we find this logic?
8. Let me proceed by calling your attention to a series of statements that occur rather early in the chapters on the Sky, Moon, Water, and Stone. First the Sky:

The sky shows itself as it really is: infinite, transcendent. The vault 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. . . . All this derives from simply contemplating the sky; but it would be a mistake to see it as a logical, rational process. The transcendental quality of height or the supraterrrestrial, the infinite, is revealed to man all at once, to his intellect as to his soul as a whole. . . . Let me repeat: even before any religious values have been set upon the sky it reveals its transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful.²

9. The analagous statement for the moon is as follows:

The sun is always the same, always itself, never in any sense "becoming". The moon, on the other hand, is a body which waxes, wanes and disappears, a body whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death. The moon, like man, has a career, involving tragedy, for its failing, like man's, ends in death.³

10. Now for water:

To state the case in brief, water symbolizes the whole of potentiality: it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence. . . . Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return either by their own regression or in a cataclysm.⁴

11. And finally for stones:

²Eliade, *pp. clt.*, pp. 38, 39.

³Ibid., p. 154.

⁴Ibid., p. 188.

The hardness, ruggedness, and permanence of matter was in itself a hierophany in the religious consciousness of the primitive. And nothing was more direct and autonomous in the completeness of its strength, nothing more noble or more awe-inspiring, than a majestic rock, or a boldly-standing block of granite. Above all, stone *is*. It always remains itself, and exists of itself; and, more important still, it strikes. . . . Rock shows him something that transcends the precariousness of his humanity; an absolute mode of being. Its strength, its motionlessness, its size and its strange outlines are none of them human; they indicate the presence of something that fascinates, terrifies, attracts and threatens, all at once. In its grandeur, its hardness, its shape and its colour, man is faced with a reality and a force that belong to some world other than the profane world of which he is himself a part.⁵

12. In all of these statements Eliade is speaking of a primary and primordial intuition of matter. In other words, he is approaching the issue of religious experiences in a twofold manner. The specific intuition of human consciousness is always correlated with an *a priori* form of the world. It is the universality of matter itself in all of its several forms, rather than simply the inner working of the human consciousness epistemologically or psychologically which is the source of the religious consciousness. Mind and phenomena go together. The Kantian epistemology which has ruled out knowledge of "things-in-themselves," leaves us with the abstractions of consciousness proceeding from the vague intuitions and traces of the things-in-themselves, those things we can never know. For Eliade the very structure of the religious consciousness is predicated on a form of the world which is present as a concrete form of matter.
13. While it is the case that the religious consciousness is always capable of recognizing the distinction between the sacred and the profane, this is merely the most general formulation of the religious dialectic. Every religious person and community recognizes this distinction in a precise and specific manner, and the archaic source of these specificities is the *a priori concrete* forms of matter.
14. If we take note of it, we can see a logical or symbological relationship portrayed in the text. The chapter on the sky and sky-gods has a primary status for it is the correlation of the meaning of the sky with the very opening of consciousness. The sky itself as a religious intuition, before even gods are spoken of as inhabiting the sky, reveals transcendence. In this sense it is a symbol of orientation. Its height and its vault place the human within a proper realm—the situation of finitude in the face of the exaltation of the transcendent starry and shining vault of heaven. Consciousness itself is the most specific correlate of this grandeur of the sky; we are situated as humans in this manner.
15. If you will note, I did not include any of Eliade's statements regarding the imagination of matter from his chapter on the sun and sun-worship. There was a good reason for this. There is no such statement regarding the imaginary meaning of the sun. The sun is thus ambiguous within the structure of the text. Let me give some of the reasons for this ambiguity. First of all, it is Eliade's belief that sun hierophanies in their most developed forms are always tied up with "historical destinies," in cultures where history is on the march. Secondly, from the time of Aristotle onward the intellectual symbolism of the sun has, in Eliade's words, "blunted our receptiveness toward the *totality* of sun hierophanies."⁶ And then again in the chapter on

⁵Ibid., p. 216.

⁶Ibid., p. 125.

the moon and its mystique, he states that, "The sun is always the same, always itself, never in any sense 'becoming'."⁷ Thus, though the sun is celestial in its form, it does not allow for that mode of becoming which Eliade wishes to correlate with the symbology of the human consciousness. The sun has no rhythms, it has no becoming; it refers to the clear and the distinct, the rational and intellectual.

16. Now Eliade is willing to speculate that at one time or another there may have been another meaning to the sun and its symbolism, but from the data at hand the sun has been branded with those meanings which emphasize a break, critique and tension with the other primordial symbols. The sun, as some malevolent symbol, is accused of being the cause of a "fall" of consciousness into the rational and practical. "This passage," he says:

from "creator" to "fecundator", this slipping of the omnipotence, transcendence and impassiveness of the sky into the dynamism, intensity and drama of the atmospheric, fertilizing, vegetation figures, is not without significance. It makes quite clear that one of the main factors in the lowering of people's conceptions of God, most obvious in agricultural societies, is the more and more all-embracing importance of vital values and of "Life" in the outlook of economic man.⁸

17. Throughout this chapter the ambivalent nature of the sun comes into play. The sun thus symbolizes in religious form the very ambivalence of life and possibility of *homo religiosus*; the basic dialectic between the religious being and that form of rationalism that is brought into the religious arena through the symbolism of the sun.
18. It is appropriate at this point to mention another primary imaginative religious structure that is initially described in some of the same language he has used in relationship to the sun. I speak of the stone. Like the sun, the stone always remains itself; it is motionless and unchangeable. While the stone seems similar to the sun, it escapes the negative ambiguity of the sun because of its ability to enter into other symbolic relationships—relationships which keep alive a rhythmic dialectic that prevents a premature rationalization. Both in the chapter devoted to stones and in chapter thirteen on the structure of symbols, a great deal of attention is given to the relational character of stone symbolism. Stones are symbols of fertility, burial sites, omphalos; they are able to hold together paradoxical meanings. The infantilization of stone symbolism through degeneration or rationalism is even quite interesting.
19. It is strange that Eliade gives very little significance to stone tools. Here again we have a case in which the modification of the material form signifies the human presence. Again in the very act of making stone tools, the striking of one stone against another, an obdurate oppugnancy and internal dialectical rhythm and flexibility is established which allows the symbolism of stone to escape the tyranny of sheer practical activity on the one hand and simple rationalization on the other.
20. From our initial symbols, we have yet to speak of moon and water symbols. It is clear from the enthusiasm which is present in these chapters that along with the sky, these imaginary modes of matter hold exemplary places in Eliade's thought. The waxing and waning of the moon is the archetype of *real human* time. This time, he explains, should be distinguished from astronomical time (rationalized time) which comes later. Here we are dealing with time

⁷Ibid., p. 154.

⁸Ibid., p. 155 (*italic added*).

in the concrete sense. The rhythms of the moon measure and synthesize the various modes of *concrete* time.

Thus, for instance, from the earliest times, certainly since the Neolithic Age, with the discovery of agriculture, the same symbolism has linked together the moon, the sea waters, rain, the fertility of women and of animals, plant life, man's destiny after death and the ceremonies of initiation. The mental syntheses made possible by the realization of the moon's rhythms connect and unify very varied realities; their structural symmetries and the analogies in their workings could never have been seen had not "primitive" man intuitively perceived the moon's law of periodic change, as he did very early on.⁹

21. When we look at the chapter on the moon carefully we perceive that in many respects it is a recapitulation of much that has gone on before and a forward to much that will follow. There are sections on "the moon and water," "initiation," "women," "fertility," "death," etc.
22. It is clear for Eliade that as far as celestial symbolism is concerned, the moon is the symbol *par excellence* of the human condition.

"Becoming" is the lunar order of things. Whether it is taken as the playing-out of a drama (the birth, fullness and disappearance of the moon), or given the sense of a "division" or "enumeration", or intuitively seen as the "hempen rope" of which the threads of fate are woven, depends, of course, on the myth-making and theorizing powers of individual tribes. . . . But the formulae used to express that "becoming" are heterogeneous on the surface only. The moon "divides", "spins", and "measures"; or feeds, makes fruitful, and blesses. . . .¹⁰

23. The moon is equally the source of symbols of integration, the *coincidence oppositorum* of the paradox of the lunar and solar modalities into a unity.
24. Water, much as in the case of the moon, is a synthesizing symbol. It is the source of all things and the dissolution of all forms, but it has no form in itself, thus its adaptability to various modalities reveals its multivalent character.
25. The next section of chapters reveals how these primary symbols find rhythmic or liturgical meanings in existential modes. They show how the religious consciousness revalorizes meanings so that action and practical activity do not serve to demythologize the primary intuitions of matter (the hierophanies).
26. Allow me to summarize what I have tried to do in this analysis:
 1. Reveal the systematic nature of *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.
 2. Show how Eliade reveals the structure of archaic consciousness.
 3. Emphasize the meaning of matter as a constitutive ingredient in the formulation of the archaic consciousness in Eliade's thought.
27. Since I have emphasized the imagination of matter in Eliade's work I should like to proceed to a distinction between *homo faber* and *homo religiosus*. V. Gordon Childe coined the term "neolithic revolution" to refer to the radical change made possible for human cultures with the discovery

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 176.

of agriculture and the domestication of plants. This “revolution” formed the basis for cited traditions in various parts of the world, traditions with their notae of intensified demography, division of labor, surplus commodities, written language, historical destinies, etc., became the norm for the human condition. Childe’s researches were consonant with the evolutionary, progressivistic historical notions prevalent since the beginnings of the human sciences in the late nineteenth century. Investigations tended to assume that early human cultures were characterized by rudimentary intellectual and creative capacities or were overwhelmed by irrational and illogical modes of thought. “How natives think” or the evolutionary trajectory from primitive to scientific thought obsessed many investigators.

28. It is now, however, a commonplace to speak of the creativity of early human cultures. Marxists and neo-Marxist thinkers are increasingly concerned with the problem of origins, especially the origins of the human as *homo faber*. It is clear to the sophisticated Marxist that Marx inherited many of the current ideas of historical and economic processes *en vogue* during his time. The notion of the four stages of economic and political development in human history forms a common context for Adam Smith, the Scottish moralist, and Karl Marx. (See Ronald Meeks’ *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.)
29. In the works of Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of the Concrete* and Tran Duc Thao, “Due Geste de L’Index a L’Image Typique,”¹¹ the issue of the originary and imaginary gesture of *homo faber* as the human is raised. Thao begins with a statement describing Marx’s analysis of work. Three elements are present: 1) the specific activity of the human being; 2) the object on which the activity acts; and 3) the means by which it acts. He asserts that the activity of large anthropoids in using a stick to reach an object is not a genuine act of work, for only motion is inserted between the natural organs and the material acted upon. The object of need and the activity of motion are identical.
30. An authentic act of work occurs when, through some second instrument, the direct manipulation of matter is transformed into an act of work. The act of production implies that the worker is guided by an ideal image of a typical form and the presence of such a form on the object which enables the worker to realize that it is a product of the human hand. It is this ideal image that constitutes a common locus between *homo faber* and *homo religiosus*. The ideal image of nature for the Marxist is a concrete appearance of matter which can lead to a totalization of the authentic human community based upon the modes of production. This is the appearance of *homo aeconomicus* through the modality of *homo faber*.
31. It is at the level of the ideal image that the imaginary intermediate, the tension between *homo faber* and *homo religiosus* appears. The proper understanding of the totalization of the originary gesture is the issue at stake.
32. Karl Kosik delineates three modes of the totalization of the concrete:
 1. An empty totality that lacks reflection and determination of individual movements and analysis. Empty totality excludes reflection, i. e., the appropriation of reality as individual moments and the activity of analytical reason.
 2. An abstract totality which formalizes the whole as opposed to its parts and ascribes a higher reality to hypostasized tendencies. Totality thus concerned is without genesis and development. Devoid of process it is a closed whole.

¹¹La Pensee, no. 47, Oct., 1969.

3. A bad totality, in which the real subject has been replaced by a mythologized subject.
33. Surrounding all forms of totalization is care (*Sorge*). In Kosik's words, "The primary and elementary mode in which economics exists for man is care. . . . Care is the practical involvement of the individual in a tangle of social relations conceived from the position of his personal, individual, subjective involvement."¹² Or again, "Care is 1) the entanglement of the social individual in a system of social relations on the basis of his involvement and utilitarian praxis; 2) the activity of this individual which in the elementary form appears as caring and procuring; 3) the subject of activity (of procuring and caring) which appears as lack of differentiation and anonymity."¹³
34. Care enables the person to develop a meaning of nature that transcends its role and significance as a workshop that provides raw materials for human productivity. Such a reduction of nature would from Kosik's perspective constitute "the loss of nature as something created neither by man nor by anyone else, as something eternal and uncreated, and would be coupled with the loss of the awareness that man is a part of a greater whole: compared with it, man becomes aware both of its smallness and of his greatness."¹⁴
35. Kosik's use of care is similar to the meaning Victor Turner has described as the oretic meaning of the symbol or Martin Buber's meaning of the I-Thou relationship.¹⁵ Though care is necessary to save the uniqueness of the human and the proper relationship to an authentic meaning of nature, care itself, because it favors the future and lives in anticipation, may become the basis for a repudiation of concrete existence in the future in favor of a fetishized future and a fetishized temporality.¹⁶
36. The way out of this temptation to fetishism is through the recognition of the full meaning of *homo aeconomicus* as the full materialistic context for the human mode of being. Such a context establishes the locus for the totalization of the human as a concrete socio-historical being and allows for the full release of personal and social valuations.
37. The problematic of a history of matter as a totalization of religious and sacred meaning is undertaken by Mircea Eliade in a precise manner in his *The Forge and the Crucible* (originally published as *Forgerons et Alchimistes*).¹⁷ General themes related to this issue are found in almost all of his works, especially in *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*.¹⁸
38. Mircea Eliade's work is not conceived as a counter to or refutation of the Marxist tradition; while aware of the Marxist ideology as one of the elements of contemporary thought, Eliade's studies are a work of creative scholarship possessing their own integrity. However, precisely because his work is a hermeneutical endeavor, he confronts the same latent and manifest problems of the Marxist and he is well aware of the Marxist resolutions.
39. In *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, he alludes to the origins of *homo aeconomicus*, when he says,

¹²Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of the Concrete*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 52: Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1976. Translated from the Czech by Karel Kovanda with James Schmidt, p. 37.

¹³Kosik, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁴Kosik, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁵Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: Scribners, 2nd edition, 1958 (translated by Ronald Gregor).

¹⁶Kosik, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁷Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956.

¹⁸Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*. Paris: Payot. 3 volumes.

. . . the supreme divinities of the sky are constantly pushed to the periphery of the religious life where they are almost ignored; other sacred forces, nearer to man, more accessible to his daily experience, more useful to him, fill the leading role.¹⁹

. . . it is a popular expression of the idea of the transcendence and passivity of the Supreme Being, too far removed from man to satisfy his innumerable religious, economic vital needs.²⁰

40. The stylistic mood of *Patterns in Comparative Religion* is one of passivity, for Eliade is attempting to show how human existence is dominated by the archetypes, the initial perceptions of sacred forms. These archetypes may form a symbolological pattern within a particular culture or within the history of humankind itself. But even when the historical dimension is referred to in *Patterns*, it is a "history" of the archetypes or it is a history that is learned from the archetypal forms revealed in human activity with matter.

41. If we locate the beginnings of human history where it is conventionally understood to have begun, in the neolithic period with the domestication of plants and animals, this period of time, for Eliade, represents a change but not a clear and clean break with the archetypal patterning of human life. What is decidedly new here is the active intervention of human communities in the world of nature:

. . . agriculture displays the mystery of the rebirth of plant life in a more dramatic manner. In the rites and skills of farming man is *intervening actively*; plant life and the sacred forces of the plant world are no longer something outside him; he takes part by using and fostering them.²¹

42. In this intervention, a new structure of the sacred appears; first there is the identification of the former with the powers revealed in the life of the plant—a new space and time and a more abundant form of life. A more optimistic view of life comes into being, for death is established as no more than a provisional change in the human mode of being.

43. But this intervention is equally the temptation not only to abandon other archetypes, e. g., the sky and sky deities and the entire range of the "archetypes of passivity." The temptation for an autonomous existence beyond the world of archetypes comes into being at this moment. The new time and space revealed in the hierophanies of agriculture and the ability of the human community to make use of and control these processes establishes a new possibility for human relationships with matter and the meaning of totalization of a form of nature thus symbolizing a total form of human existence. Agriculture is the point at which *homo religiosus*, *homo faber*, and *homo aeconomicus* converge.

44. For those who see this amalgam of human dimensions integrated either by *homo faber* or *homo aeconomicus*, the subsequent history of humanity with its cited traditions, intensification of agriculture and the development of technologies that allow for progressive intervention of the human community into nature, this historical "ascent of man" leaves the horizon of archetypes and hierophanies far behind.

¹⁹Eliade, *op. cit.*, *Patterns...*, p. 43.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 46.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 331 (*italics added*).

45. Now a history of the human mode of being as *homo aeconomicus* might be contemplated on this basis, but a history as *homo religiosus* or *homo faber* cannot be understood from this point of view without extreme reductionism and selective distortion.
46. Eliade insists that human work and the imagination of the reality of matter has never totally obliterated the fact that the human is also a “technician of the sacred.” As Tran Duc Thao pointed out in his definition of work, the worker is guided by the ideal image of a typical (archetypal) form and it is the presence of this form on the object that enables the worker to realize that his production is the work of the human hand. For Eliade, this ideal image or typical form is the imagination of the sacred in matter, and because it is the imagination of the sacred, the gods (sacrality) and the humans are co-creators.
47. The basic human discoveries about matter were made by archaic societies. That is to say that the discovery of agriculture, the domestication of plants, the control of fire—all these techniques that form the basis of all cited traditions were accomplished by *homo faber* are in an archaic mode.
48. The magical experience of the world, or in Eliade’s terms, the experience of the world as cosmos, implied the sacredness of the world, and this in turn meant that knowledge of these techniques was a mystery and their transmission constituted an initiation.
49. In *The Forge and the Crucible*, Eliade undertakes an analysis of alchemy—a technique present in the traditional cited traditions, but forming a continuity with archaic metallurgy. Metallurgy is that technique that combines *homo faber* and *homo religiosus*.

Mineral substances shared in the sacredness attaching to the Earth-Mother. Very early on we are confronted with the notion that ores ‘grow’ in the belly of the earth after the manner of embryos. Metallurgy thus takes on the character of obstetrics. Miner and metal-worker intervene in the unfolding of subterranean embryology: they accelerate the rhythm of the growth of ores, they collaborate in the work of Nature and assist it to give birth more rapidly. In a word, man, with his various techniques, gradually takes the place of Time: his labours replace the work of Time.

50. To collaborate in the work of Nature, to help her to produce at an ever-increasing tempo, to change the modalities of matter—here, in our view, lies one of the key sources of alchemical ideology.²²
51. Alchemy as a specific technique is a practice of “historical cultures.” The appearance of this technique within these cultures points to the perenniality of *homo religiosus*. Alchemy is not simply a repetition of older archaic modes of metallurgy, nor is it an embryonic or proto-chemistry. It is rather the rediscovery of the religious imagination of matter on the historical plane. Eliade places this discovery within the same context as husbandry.

From a certain point of view, man, even the most primitive, has always been a ‘historic being’ by reason of the fact that he was conditioned by the ideology, sociology and economy peculiar to his tradition. But I do not wish to speak of this historicity of man as a man, or as a being conditioned by temporality and culture, but of a more recent and infinitely more complex phenomenon, namely, the enforced involvement of entire humanity in events taking place in a few restricted regions of the globe. This is what

²²Eliade, *op. cit.*, *The Forge...*, p. 8.

happened after the discovery of agriculture and especially after the crystalization of the earliest urban civilizations in the ancient Near East. From that moment all human culture, however strange and remote, was doomed to undergo the consequences of the historic events which were taking place at the 'centre'. These consequences sometimes became manifest thousands of years later, but they could not in any way be avoided; they were part of the historic fatality. With the discovery of husbandry it is possible to say that man was destined to become an agricultural being or at any rate to suffer the influences of all subsequent discoveries and innovations which agriculture made possible: domestication of animals, urban civilization, military organization, empire, imperialism, mass wars, etc. In other words, all mankind became involved in the activities of some of its members. Thus, from this time on—parallel with the rise of the first urban civilizations in the Near East—it is possible to speak of history in the full sense of the term, that is, of universal modifications effected by the creative will of certain societies (more precisely, of privileged elements in those societies).²³

52. The alchemists through magico-religious techniques attempted the transmutation of base metals into gold. One errs, in Eliade's view, if alchemists are seen as mere gold-seekers or counterfeiters. They had probably discovered and/or retained an older conception of the Earth-Mother, bearer of embryos. Above all it was the experimental discovery of the

living substance, such as it was felt by the artisans, which must have played the decisive role. Indeed it is the conception of a complex and dramatic Life of Matter which constitutes the originality of alchemy as opposed to classical Greek science. One is entitled to suppose that the experience of dramatic life was made possible by the knowledge of Graeco-oriental mysteries.²⁴

53. In alchemy the life of matter is manifested not as 'vital' hierophanies, as it was for archaic cultures, but it acquires a spiritual dimension; it takes on the initiatory significance of drama and suffering which can culminate in freedom, illumination, transmutation.
54. While Eliade admits the significance of technological creativity and the meaning of the historicity of the human community as an arena of religious significance, *homo religiosus* implies a structure of perception of the world. This structure is the religious experience. It does not mean a reversion to a past for it is always in the context of a present situation, and the temporal context of the present provides the modes of expression and meaning. At least since the Neolithic period the relationship of the human community to the material world has undergone dramatic transformations. The inner structure of matter as the basis for cosmic order changes with every technological praxis. Through these changes life and integrity of matter becomes obscured, infantilized, trivialized and disenchanted. There is nevertheless the possibility for the rediscovery of the life of matter as a religious phenomenon—an equal and sometimes alternate structure in the face of the dehumanizing and terroristic meaning of history.

Notes

²³Ibid., pp. 144-145.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 148-149.

Charles H. Long, prior to his retirement in September, 1996, held faculty positions as professor of history of religions at the University of Chicago, William Rand Kenan, Jr. professor of history of religions at the University of North Carolina, professor of history of religion at Duke University, Jeannette K. Watson professor of history of religions at Syracuse University. At the University of Chicago he studied with the pioneer of the development of the history of religions in the United States, Professor Joachim Wach. He eventually joined with Professors Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa in establishing the international scholarly journal, *History of Religions*. This journal and the discipline as formed at Chicago were major forces in the establishment of the study of religion in the United States. He has a unique perspective from which to speak of the general meaning of religion in history and culture, and specifically about African religions in the Atlantic world. He, along with a group of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, established the first curriculum for the study of religion in the College of the University of Chicago. He was a member and subsequently served as chair of the history of religions field and the Committee on African Studies, respectively, at the University of Chicago. He has been involved in the training of three generations of scholars in religion and African American studies. His books include *Alpha, The Myths of Creation, The History of Religions*, (ed. with Joseph Kitagawa, 1967), *Myth, and Symbols, Essays in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, (ed. with J. Kitagawa, 1969); and *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images, in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986). At present time his work is devoted to the meaning of religion in the formation of the Atlantic world. This is the world of the African slave trade and the basis for the formation of the "New World." Strangely enough, most interpretations of the Atlantic world are hermeneutically silent concerning the African diaspora. Long relocates the issue of religion within the structures of the Atlantic formation. This cultural geographical formation of the New World System and the Atlantic World enables us to understand religion and African American religions as distinctively new and creative meaning of the modern world.