

## Mircea Eliade's Images and Symbols: An introduction to the themes

– Evert Mouw, 2018-05-10

### Introduction

Some images, themes and symbols keep popping up in artwork, dreams, and even religions. Take for example the hero that fights a beast. *Knight slays dragon*. Or look around for fertility goddess like Isis or Madonna. Symbols for the sun such as the Celtic cross, the swastika, sun disks, sun rays, and so on are known in nearly all cultures. Myths from all over the world often tell about the creation, a paradise lost, a deluge, heroes, and so on. Such basic themes or symbols are like templates or schemes and maybe they are encoded into our brains and stored in our genes.

The psychologist Carl Jung called these templates **archetypes**, and pointed to the Forms or Ideas of Plato as inspiration. Mircea Eliade uses the theory of Jung to explain the similarities in meaning and form of images and symbols in various religions. In 1952 he wrote “Images and Symbols”, the topic of this article. In that book he tried to understand the history of religions by comparing multiple religions, mainly Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity.

I'm a member of a Dutch association for the study of Jungian analytical psychology, the IVAP. Also I'm interested in mystery traditions and (neo)platonism. So I got interested in the works of Mircea Eliade and have read his book on *Images and Symbols* with pleasure. For my own development, I like to summarise some books I read, and I like to share such things on my blog for others in case they have some use for it.

I will give a short introduction of various topics in his book, similar to how I did it for Hannah Arend's *The Human Condition* (Dutch). Most of my blogposts are written in Dutch, but I didn't quickly find a good summary in English, and maybe a few people outside the Netherlands are also interested. I will introduce a few concepts and themes from the book. As such it is a selective and incomplete summary that reflects my own interpretation of the work of Eliade. Also I will share my personal reflections at the end of the article.

### Paradise

Outside our normal “historic” time, the gods dwelt on the earth, and man could talk to them. But man made a mistake, and was cast out of paradise.

This theme survives even when religion is rejected. The Earthly Paradise or Oceanian paradise was popular in European literature in the nineteenth century. In the imagination of many writers, such an idyllic island was inhabited by

free, young, beautiful, happy people, innocent, often nude. Most oceanic islands contained very different people, old, mean and fat, but the mythic Image prevailed and expressed itself in the imagination of the writers.

### **Historic time and mythical, sacred and condensed time**

Time as we normally experience it, in the here and now, is called “historic time” by Eliade. But there is also a world outside of this historic time. Before, there was Paradise, a mythic time that can still be experienced in dreams, giving access to a spiritual world.

This inner spiritual world is infinitely richer than the closed world of the historic moment. That spiritual world is formed by the archetypes or templates that rule our mind and can find expression in different ways. These archetypes live in the (collective) unconscious and their expression is often of a more poetic or mythic nature than our conscious mind.

We are often invaded by this unconscious part of ourselves, much oftener and completer than we normally imagine. We can experience this in “waking dreams” (lucid dreams) when our brains imagines “Images” of gods, goddesses, heroes, monsters and fairies. That can help us follow the structure of the myth, in order to find liberation and initiation.

But also our perception of time changes often when we listen to good music, fall in love, or pray. We then experience some detachment, a condensation of time, or eternity. (*Note:* Today this is often searched for using altered states, mindfulness, mind-altering substances and so on.) This experience or mode of consciousness feels like awakening to a reality that transcends “historic” time.

That sacred, mythical reality feels more *true* than the historic, temporal situation. This sacred time is also called Great Time. Rituals and storytelling continually reactualise this Great Time and keep the listener connected to another Reality. Sometimes this goes a step farther and normal, historic time is experienced as illusory, as *Maya*.

### **Images are multivalent**

Many of the Images are *multivalent*, have multiple meanings, often contradictory. This hints at the coincidentia oppositorum (Dutch). Not a single view on the image, but the whole bundle of contradictory meanings comprises the archetype. Restricting it to one single meaning is to destroy it. Analytical language is not able to describe the complex meaning of a Symbol. But such images are highly effective in bringing men together.

## Reawakening of the images

Modern man can reawaken the images that he bears within him using his imagination. This is so because the templates (archetypes) are abstract blueprints that need the creative imagination of an individual or a culture to become accessible to our consciousness.

A lack of imagination is not healthy. The richness of one's inner life is accessed using the imagination. Archetypes need a healthy expression so the mind can then see the totality in the world. Myth and mystery are part of our healthy lives and psychological well-being.

## The Centre

For primitive man all outside of their own inhabited land was danger, was *chaos*. There were dangerous deserts, wild animals, high mountains or other dangerous areas outside the own land. Demons and evil spirits lived there, giving rise to sickness. (*Note*: The evil spirit Lilith lives in the desert, according to the Bible.) To keep evil and sickness away, one had to use magical protections.

In the middle of each village or city or culture there was a centre that was the antithesis of chaos. A centre of order, where the gods were honoured, where culture was centred. Each such a centre would be a "centre of the world". There could be an unlimited number of such centres because they did not represent a geometric centre but a pillar of order and sacredness, a contact point with divinity.

The loss of Paradise also meant the loss of contact with the gods. The gods withdrew to heaven, and only special persons such as shamans and priests could climb the ladder upwards. Normal people no longer had access to the gods or to the world tree (driven out of paradise).

Each centre was also a *navel* of the earth, the point at which creation began. Many altars resemble this symbolically. For example, the Tantric *mandala* often depicts concentric circles, sometimes labyrinthine, that helps the neophyte to find his own centre and come in contact with the sacred.

## World Tree

Those centres of the world that were situated in sacred space were Heaven, Earth and Hell (Underworld) were connected to each other using a trunk, a pillar, a stairway, a (world) tree, a tower, a column, a ladder or something similar. It could also be a holy mountain.

Most of these trees and columns represented the Cosmic Tree as well. That Cosmic Tree is in the middle of the Universe, upholding everything along one axis. Its roots are in Hell and the leaves in Heaven.

Often it has seven or nine branches. That number also appears often in other trees or ladders that symbolise the path between the worlds. Seven is also the number of planets, often considered gods by many cultures. Climbing the ladder with seven rungs would enable one to ascend to Heaven. This symbolism played an important role for initiations, funerary rituals and even marriage festivities.

The exploration of seven chacras (wheels or circles; energetic points on the body; often seven but sometimes another number is used) is like climbing a ladder. The chacras are mapped to the body such that the body itself is a world tree or microcosmos.

The Christian Cross is another version of this world tree, also connecting Earth with Heaven and Hell.

### **Maya and Nirvana in Indian religion**

Hinduism tells about the eternal cycles of rebirth (reincarnation) and how the same lives are lived again and again and again. Also the gods and even complete universes die and are reborn, and have to experience the same suffering without end, more than billion of times. Our conception of the world is not real. What we see and feel is illusion, *Maya*. The great creator has created Maya out of the formless waters. You might one day be a god or an ant, but it has no use, as you will dwell in the illusion of time, an endless parade.

As such, historic time is not even *real*. It lacks reality because of its limited duration. The eternal return is a prison. If you want to become Real, then you have to escape this illusion of time and renounce this world of the senses. You can then reach Nirvana.

This looks like a total world-refusal, but Indian thought has compensated for that to allow people to live in this world of Maya. In the Indian myths, not only contemplative life is praised, but also action is praised. One must do his duty in historic time without being blinded by the illusion of it.

### **The Second Birth**

The Brahmanic initiation was regarded as a second birth. The initiate was called a *dvija*, a twice-born. The same word was used for serpents and birds because they are born from an egg. So, getting out of the egg (veil of illusion, Maya) and seeing Reality is what makes a Brahman (priest). Such an initiated person has more knowledge and vision and thus is socially superior.

### **Flux and Illumination in Buddhism**

Buddhism builds on the illusions of Time as understood by Hinduism. Time is in a continuous fluid flux, *samtana*. The forms, and even our ego's, are changing

all the time, are unreal, are destructed as they are the moment you see them. There is constant annihilation.

One has to stop moving, stop one's inner flux, to escape from time. But you have no control over your escape. The escape from time comes suddenly, like a flash of lightning. You must be prepared for the "favoured moment" so you have to work for it, but the illumination is during an instant, outside of time.

There is a paradox. You have to work hard, the passage is hard, but illumination comes like a flash of lightning. When you reach the ultimate Reality, you transcend polarity and time.

Rhythmic breath such as *pranayama* is being used to arrest the flow of time. Total control over the own body and mind, control over historic time, is the first step to later escape from it. Profane man is weak. One must become perfect, with a strong and controlled body and mind, to escape from the bounds of body and mind. The yogin frees himself from memory.

### **Binding, Knots and Labyrinths**

The highest, most terrible gods don't need weapons so much as they bind the world and people. Their snares and their knots create boundaries and shapes. They bind with magic. Such bondage can bring illness and death, as our lifespans are bound. But the bonds also can heal and protect us. The order of the universe is created using bonds and knots.

Such great is the power and importance of bonds, snares and knots, that even lesser gods and demons can use such methods to some degree.

These themes can be found in India, in the Bible, in Germanic myth, and elsewhere. One well-known variation is the "thread of life" spun by the goddesses of fate. Even the cosmos is made from threads woven by the gods (*Note*: *wyrd*).

Learning to undo the knot of the labyrinth is a way to get to grips with these snares and prepare the soul for the afterlife. The labyrinth is associated with threats and also with caves, which reminds us of Plato's cave, where men are bound by chains, so they could not see Reality. The allegory points to our present state in historic time.

### **Shells and Pearls**

The Waters, the Moon and the Woman are related. The waters, although deep and chaotic, give rise to life, as does the woman. Both the sea (waters) and the woman are ruled by the cycles of the moon. Furthermore, the form of marine shells resemble the genital organs of the woman. In China, all these phenomena are associated with *Yin*.

Inside oyster shells, pearls are given “birth”. This is a symbol of the creation of life. Aphrodite was also known as the “Lady of Pearls” and she was born from a shell.

Shells and pearls are often symbols associated with love, marriage and fertility. They were also used for funerals, magic, and medicine. Eliade gives examples from many cultures.

### **The Waters, the Deluge, and the Dragon**

Out of the waters everything emerges; all potentialities are in the primordial waters. It also sustains everything. All life also returns to that state, so the Waters are associated with death and re-birth. The water regenerates.

The submergence of people of, in myth, of whole civilizations, symbolises the second death of initiation. A baptism in the water is a return to the indistinct to allow a new birth. The nakedness during the baptism symbolizes a return to original innocence and a let-go of old corruptions and sins.

But there is also chaos and destruction in the deep waters, symbolized by the dragon that devours all. In Christianity, the dragon Behemoth is bound by Jezus. In many other myths the old serpent of monster is being controlled by gods or heroes. The struggle often is similar to an initiation and many initiation rituals reenact this struggle against a monster.

### **Christianity and time**

We saw in Indian thought that historic time and sacred time are divided and the normal time has little meaning or reality. The “innovation” of Christianity is that the divine is being revealed in our historic time. There is revelation and meaning in time. Times become irreversible because God manifests Himself in time, thereby reaching out to us. The coming of Christ ends History, so believers can gain Eternity.

### **Christianity revalorised the old beliefs**

In Europe, many local myths and symbols had lost their strength. Many local holy places had only meaning for the people living there. Christianity adopted and changed many local deities, stories and holy places. By doing to, it gave former myths a new value, new strength, and even universal meaning because the local myths were now recognized by a universal religion.

It therefore not destroyed the old myths, but saved them. It reintegrated them, gave them new meaning, made them ecumenical, and in that way unified Europe.

## Personal reflections

I know many people with fears, insecurities, and an uncertain future, as we are all humans. We search for meaning but cannot find it. Many of my friends have had a burn-out. Mental illness is an all-time high in our Western world. Old structures are disappearing; new technologies, competitors and cultural norms are appearing. There is more chaos and less sacred time and space. Our world becomes more artificial and more people live in cities. Managers, politicians, and government bodies have trouble to keep pace and trade knowledge and authenticity for show and marketing. Personal responsibility, expertise and hierarchy are replaced by anonymous bureaucracies and emotion-based opinions.

Many people are too “rational” to believe, so their inner world is no longer connected with mythic time. They never are in a sacred space where they can reflect on their situation in normal time. They are never inspired by higher suprarational realisations or deeply connecting irrational feelings. Those “rational” people are often also afraid to really use their rational part to escape Plato’s cave or to escape their fears and outdated cultural programming. They lack the inner experiences of former generations; it is like their minds have shrunk. They want to be unique because that is exactly what they are no more. Parts of their inner world have died; parts of their brain are shut off. I cannot communicate some ideas to them because they lack the inner images and language to understand my words.

It explains the popularity of mindfulness. It is an escape from the world of cyclic thoughts, fears and troubles, and at the same time a return to the real world as it presents itself right now. You pay attention again, using your senses, to the outer world, with a serene mind. That serenity is a bit empty though, as the eastern origins of mindfulness want to free us of Maya. According to Dion Fortune, the West is far more dense and material than the East, so we need stronger methods, like ritual, and need to fill our inner world so archetypes can find a balanced expression.

Some of the archetypal images I’ve experienced in dreams and guided meditations. I’ve seen a primordial island rising out of the sea. On other occasions, I became a raven, saw a dragon rising out of the sea, and some other things. Some of them were in a Western Mystery School. Many people and organisations are active in this field, from Jungian academics to Wiccans, from pastors to modern druids, from agnostic journalist to chaos magicians, from psychotherapists to marketers. But it is still a subject where empirical science has limited reach.

I’m still exploring the subconscious and in no hurry to do so. Slow integration of multiple archetypal images protects against being taken over by an archetype. Also I lack skills in this regard and have difficulty to visualise most imagery. I find it more rewarding to approach the subject with a good theoretical underpinning, and that’s where Mircea Eliade helped a lot.

Meaning is bigger than “I” for the social animal I am. I feel loyalty to friends

and family, and secondarily also for my nation and Europe, and even a little for the world I live in. I feel that our society needs to find a new expression and a new connection to the archetypes and such an undertaking can not be done solely by me with my personal experiences. My part is to destroy the thought constructs that limit people by engaging their logic and opinions. I also like that a lot because it is a really good ego-booster and because I'm a Ravenclaw, according to Pottermore ;-). Also I hope to stimulate worldviews that do not conflict with rational, scientific, economic and evolutionary understandings.

One of the most important lessons from Plato is that one cannot be rational and in contact with the higher Ideas when one submits to fear. Many of the modern spiritual movements are meant to escape from the hard, money-centred, drug-controlled world, to heal emotional wounds, or to create a safe space for people who are not socially accepted. A true priest-philosopher should not be affected by these weaknesses while still empathise with them. He should not preach equality where there is none, but instead he should strive for divine justice and real aristocracy. In Plato's view, he should be loyal to his politeia which is a local expression of cosmic order in this world. Some modern spiritual movements express support for local economies, local myths, local sacred spaces and so on, but also strive for universal values and equality. These often somewhat emotional people sometimes have trouble to find a balance between these absolutes.

Mircea Eliade is one of the best known academics in the fields of the history and comparison of religions, but he has got a bad reputation for supporting nationalistic movements in his country. I feel that, even if in hindsight he might have supported the wrong people, his intention was to be loyal to his nation, while at the same time he was in contact with people from many other countries. His inner world contained both the myths of his people and the eternal images. He was not perfect, but still we can learn a lot from him. I hope to have inspired you, the reader, to do more theoretical and meditative research on the archetypal images and symbols.

Images and Symbols, by Mircea Eliade.  
Original version (1952) written in French,  
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translated by Philip Mairet.