



**THE
SACRED
AND
THE
PROFANE**

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

by Mircea Eliade

*Translated from the French
by Willard R. Trask*

*A Harvest/HBJ Book
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers
San Diego New York London*

*Sacred Space
and Making
the World Sacred*

HOMOGENEITY OF SPACE AND HIEROPHANY

For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. "Draw not nigh hither," says the Lord to Moses; "put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Exodus, 3, 5). There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous. Nor is this all. For religious man, this spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred—the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space—and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it.

It must be said at once that the religious experience of the nonhomogeneity of space is a primordial experience,

homologizable to a founding of the world. It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center.

So it is clear to what a degree the discovery—that is, the revelation—of a sacred space possesses existential value for religious man; for nothing can begin, nothing can be *done*, without a previous orientation—and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point. It is for this reason that religious man has always sought to fix his abode at the “center of the world.” *If the world is to be lived in*, it must be *founded*—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point—the center—is equivalent to the creation of the world; and we shall soon give some examples that will unmistakably show the cosmogonic value of the ritual orientation and construction of sacred space.

For profane experience, on the contrary, space is homogeneous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass. Geometrical space can be cut and delimited in any direction; but no qualitative differentiation and, hence, no orientation are given by virtue of its inherent structure. We need only remember how a classical geometrician defines space. Naturally, we must not confuse the *concept* of homogeneous and neutral geometrical space with the *experience* of profane space, which is in direct contrast to the experience of sacred space and which alone concerns our investigation. The *concept* of homogeneous space and the history of the concept (for it has been part of the common stock of philosophical and scientific thought since

antiquity) are a wholly different problem, upon which we shall not enter here. What matters for our purpose is the *experience* of space known to nonreligious man—that is, to a man who rejects the sacrality of the world, who accepts only a profane existence, divested of all religious presuppositions.

It must be added at once that such a profane existence is never found in the pure state. To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior. This will become clearer as we proceed; it will appear that even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world.

But for the moment we will set aside this aspect of the problem and confine ourselves to comparing the two experiences in question—that of sacred space and that of profane space. The implications of the former experience have already been pointed out. Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to “found the world” and to live in a real sense. The profane experience, on the contrary, maintains the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space. No *true* orientation is now possible, for the fixed point no longer enjoys a unique ontological status; it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day. Properly speaking, there is no longer any world, there are

only fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves, governed and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society.

Yet this experience of profane space still includes values that to some extent recall the nonhomogeneity peculiar to the religious experience of space. There are, for example, privileged places, qualitatively different from all others—a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth. Even for the most frankly nonreligious man, all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the "holy places" of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality *other* than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life.

This example of crypto-religious behavior on profane man's part is worth noting. In the course of this book we shall encounter other examples of this sort of degradation and desacralization of religious values and forms of behavior. Their deeper significance will become apparent later.

THEOPHANIES AND SIGNS

To exemplify the nonhomogeneity of space as experienced by nonreligious man, we may turn to any religion. We will choose an example that is accessible to

everyone—a church in a modern city. For a believer, the church shares in a different space from the street in which it stands. The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.

A similar ritual function falls to the threshold of the human habitation, and it is for this reason that the threshold is an object of great importance. Numerous rites accompany passing the domestic threshold—a bow, a prostration, a pious touch of the hand, and so on. The threshold has its guardians—gods and spirits who forbid entrance both to human enemies and to demons and the powers of pestilence. It is on the threshold that sacrifices to the guardian divinities are offered. Here too certain palaeo-oriental cultures (Babylon, Egypt, Israel) situated the judgment place. The threshold, the door *show* the solution of continuity in space immediately and concretely; hence their great religious importance, for they are symbols and at the same time vehicles of passage from the one space to the other.

What has been said will make it clear why the church shares in an entirely different space from the buildings that surround it. Within the sacred precincts the profane

world is transcended. On the most archaic levels of culture this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various *images of an opening*; here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven. We shall soon see that this was the case in many religions; properly speaking, the temple constitutes an opening in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods.

Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different. When Jacob in his dream at Haran saw a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it, and heard the Lord speaking from above it, saying: "I am the Lord God of Abraham," he awoke and was afraid and cried out: "How dreadful is this place: this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." And he took the stone that had been his pillow, and set it up as a monument, and poured oil on the top of it. He called the place Beth-el, that is, house of God (Genesis, 28, 12-19). The symbolism implicit in the expression "gate of heaven" is rich and complex; the theophany that occurs in a place consecrates it by the very fact that it makes it open above—that is, in communication with heaven, the paradoxical point of passage from one mode of being to another. We

shall soon see even clearer examples—sanctuaries that are "doors of the gods" and hence places of passage between heaven and earth.

Often there is no need for a theophany or hierophany properly speaking; some *sign* suffices to indicate the sacredness of a place. "According to the legend, the *marabout* who founded El-Hamel at the end of the sixteenth century stopped to spend the night near a spring and planted his stick in the ground. The next morning, when he went for it to resume his journey, he found that it had taken root and that buds had sprouted on it. He considered this a sign of God's will and settled in that place."¹ In such cases the *sign*, fraught with religious meaning, introduces an absolute element and puts an end to relativity and confusion. *Something* that does not belong to this world has manifested itself apodictically and in so doing has indicated an orientation or determined a course of conduct.

When no sign manifests itself, it is *provoked*. For example, a sort of *evocation* is performed with the help of animals; it is they who *show* what place is fit to receive the sanctuary or the village. This amounts to an evocation of sacred forms or figures for the immediate purpose of establishing an *orientation* in the homogeneity of space. A *sign* is asked, to put an end to the tension and anxiety caused by relativity and disorienta-

¹ René Basset, in *Revue des Traditions Populaires*, XXII, 1907, p. 287.

tion—in short, to reveal an absolute point of support. For example, a wild animal is hunted, and the sanctuary is built at the place where it is killed. Or a domestic animal—such as a bull—is turned loose; some days later it is searched for and sacrificed at the place where it is found. Later the altar will be raised there and the village will be built around the altar. In all these cases, the sacrality of a place is revealed by animals. This is as much as to say that men are not free to *choose* the sacred site, that they only seek for it and find it by the help of mysterious signs.

These few examples have shown the different means by which religious man receives the revelation of a sacred place. In each case the hierophany has annulled the homogeneity of space and revealed a fixed point. But since religious man cannot live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred, we must expect to find a large number of techniques for consecrating space. As we saw, the sacred is pre-eminently the *real*, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity. Religious man's desire to live *in the sacred* is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion. This behavior is documented on every plane of religious man's existence, but it is particularly evident in his desire to move about only in a sanctified world, that is,

in a sacred space. This is the reason for the elaboration of techniques of *orientation* which, properly speaking, are techniques for the *construction* of sacred space. But we must not suppose that *human* work is in question here, that it is through his own efforts that man can consecrate a space. In reality the ritual by which he constructs a sacred space is efficacious in the measure in which it *reproduces the work of the gods*. But the better to understand the need for ritual construction of a sacred space, we must dwell a little on the traditional concept of the "world"; it will then be apparent that for religious man every world is a sacred world.

CHAOS AND COSMOS

One of the outstanding characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. The former is the world (more precisely, our world), the cosmos; everything outside it is no longer a cosmos but a sort of "other world," a foreign, chaotic space, peopled by ghosts, demons, "foreigners" (who are assimilated to demons and the souls of the dead). At first sight this cleavage in space appears to be due to the opposition between an inhabited and organized—hence cosmicized—territory and the unknown space that extends beyond its frontiers; on one side there is a cosmos, on the other

a chaos. But we shall see that if every inhabited territory is a cosmos, this is precisely because it was first consecrated, because, in one way or another, it is the work of the gods or is in communication with the world of the gods. The world (that is, our world) is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself, in which, consequently, the break-through from plane to plane has become possible and repeatable. It is not difficult to see why the religious moment implies the cosmogonic moment. The sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world.

All this appears very clearly from the Vedic ritual for taking possession of a territory; possession becomes legally valid through the erection of a fire altar consecrated to Agni. "One says that one is installed when one has built a fire altar [*gārhapatya*] and all those who build the fire altar are legally established" (*Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 1, 1, 1-4). By the erection of a fire altar Agni is made present, and communication with the world of the gods is ensured; the space of the altar becomes a sacred space. But the meaning of the ritual is far more complex, and if we consider all of its ramifications we shall understand why consecrating a territory is equivalent to making it a cosmos, to *cosmicizing* it. For, in fact, the erection of an altar to Agni is nothing but the reproduction—on the microcosmic scale—of the Creation. The water in which the clay is mixed is assimilated

to the primordial water; the clay that forms the base of the altar symbolizes the earth; the lateral walls represent the atmosphere, and so on. And the building of the altar is accompanied by songs that proclaim which cosmic region has just been created (*Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa* I, 9, 2, 29, etc.). Hence the erection of a fire altar—which alone validates taking possession of a new territory—is equivalent to a cosmogony.

An unknown, foreign, and unoccupied territory (which often means, "unoccupied by our people") still shares in the fluid and larval modality of chaos. By occupying it and, above all, by settling in it, man symbolically transforms it into a cosmos through a ritual repetition of the cosmogony. What is to become "our world" must first be "created," and every creation has a paradigmatic model—the creation of the universe by the gods. When the Scandinavian colonists took possession of Iceland (*land-náma*) and cleared it, they regarded the enterprise neither as an original undertaking nor as human and profane work. For them, their labor was only repetition of a primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation. When they tilled the desert soil, they were in fact repeating the act of the gods who had organized chaos by giving it a structure, forms, and norms.²

Whether it is a case of clearing uncultivated ground

² Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York, Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series XLVI, 1954, pp. 11 ff. Cited hereafter as *Myth*.

or of conquering and occupying a territory already inhabited by "other" human beings, ritual taking possession must always repeat the cosmogony. For in the view of archaic societies everything that is not "our world" is not yet a world. A territory can be made ours only by creating it anew, that is, by consecrating it. This religious behavior in respect to unknown lands continued, even in the West, down to the dawn of modern times. The Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores, discovering and conquering territories, took possession of them in the name of Jesus Christ. The raising of the Cross was equivalent to consecrating the country, hence in some sort to a "new birth." For through Christ "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Corinthians, 5, 17). The newly discovered country was "renewed," "re-created" by the Cross.

CONSECRATION OF A PLACE= REPETITION OF THE COSMOGONY

It must be understood that the cosmicization of unknown territories is always a consecration; to organize a space is to repeat the paradigmatic work of the gods. The close connection between cosmicization and consecration is already documented on the elementary levels of culture—for example, among the nomadic Australians whose economy is still at the stage of gathering and small-game hunting. According to the traditions of an

Arunta tribe, the Achilpa, in mythical times the divine being Numbakula cosmicized their future territory, created their Ancestor, and established their institutions. From the trunk of a gum tree Numbakula fashioned the sacred pole (*kauwa-auwa*) and, after anointing it with blood, climbed it and disappeared into the sky. This pole represents a cosmic axis, for it is around the sacred pole that territory becomes habitable, hence is transformed into a world. The sacred pole consequently plays an important role ritually. During their wanderings the Achilpa always carry it with them and choose the direction they are to take by the direction toward which it bends. This allows them, while being continually on the move, to be always in "their world" and, at the same time, in communication with the sky into which Numbakula vanished.

For the pole to be broken denotes catastrophe; it is like "the end of the world," reversion to chaos. Spencer and Gillen report that once, when the pole was broken, the entire clan were in consternation; they wandered about aimlessly for a time, and finally lay down on the ground together and waited for death to overtake them.³

This example admirably illustrates both the cosmological function of the sacred pole and its soteriological role. For on the one hand the *kauwa-auwa* reproduces the pole that Numbakula used to cosmicize the world,

³ B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Arunta*, London, 1926, I, p. 338.

and on the other the Achilpa believe it to be the means by which they can communicate with the sky realm. Now, human existence is possible only by virtue of this permanent communication with the sky. The world of the Achilpa really becomes *their* world only in proportion as it reproduces the cosmos organized and sanctified by Numbakula. Life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, human beings cannot live in chaos. Once contact with the transcendent is lost, existence in the world ceases to be possible—and the Achilpa let themselves die.

To settle in a territory is, in the last analysis, equivalent to consecrating it. When settlement is not temporary, as among the nomads, but permanent, as among sedentary peoples, it implies a vital decision that involves the existence of the entire community. Establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice—the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by “creating” it. Now, this universe is always the replica of the paradigmatic universe created and inhabited by the gods; hence it shares in the sanctity of the gods’ work.

The sacred pole of the Achilpa supports *their* world and ensures communication with the sky. Here we have the prototype of a cosmological image that has been very widely disseminated—the cosmic pillars that support heaven and at the same time open the road to the world

of the gods. Until their conversion to Christianity, the Celts and Germans still maintained their worship of such sacred pillars. The *Chronicon Lawrissense breve*, written about 800, reports that in the course of one of his wars against the Saxons (772), Charlemagne destroyed the temple and the sacred wood of their “famous Irminsul” in the town of Eresburg. Rudolf of Fulda (c. 860) adds that this famous pillar is the “pillar of the universe which, as it were, supports all things” (*universalis columna quasi sustinens omnia*). The same cosmological image is found not only among the Romans (Horace, *Odes*, III, 3) and in ancient India, where we hear of the *skambha*, the cosmic pillar (*Rig Veda*, I, 105; X, 89, 4; etc.), but also among the Canary Islanders and in such distant cultures as those of the Kwakiutl (British Columbia) and of the Nad’a of Flores Island (Indonesia). The Kwakiutl believe that a copper pole passes through the three cosmic levels (underworld, earth, sky); the point at which it enters the sky is the “door to the world above.” The visible image of this cosmic pillar in the sky is the Milky Way. But the work of the gods, the universe, is repeated and imitated by men on their own scale. The *axis mundi*, seen in the sky in the form of the Milky Way, appears in the ceremonial house in the form of a sacred pole. It is the trunk of a cedar tree, thirty to thirty-five feet high, over half of which projects through the roof. This pillar plays a

primary part in the ceremonies; it confers a cosmic structure on the house. In the ritual songs the house is called "our world" and the candidates for initiation, who live in it, proclaim: "I am at the Center of the World. . . . I am at the Post of the World," and so on.⁴ The same assimilation of the cosmic pillar to the sacred pole and of the ceremonial house to the universe is found among the Nad'a of Flores Island. The sacrificial pole is called the "Pole of Heaven" and is believed to support the sky.⁵

THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

The cry of the Kwakiutl neophyte, "I am at the Center of the World!" at once reveals one of the deepest meanings of sacred space. Where the break-through from plane to plane has been effected by a hierophany, there too an opening has been made, either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three cosmic levels—earth, heaven, underworld—have been put in communication. As we just saw, this communication is sometimes expressed through the image of a universal pillar, *axis mundi*, which at once connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below (the infernal

⁴ Werner Müller, *Weltbild und Kult der Kwakiutl-Indianer*, Wiesbaden, 1955, pp. 17-20.

⁵ P. Arndt, "Die Megalithenkultur des Nad'a" (*Anthropos* 27, 1932), pp. 61-62.

regions). Such a cosmic pillar can be only at the very center of the universe, for the whole of the habitable world extends around it. Here, then, we have a sequence of religious conceptions and cosmological images that are inseparably connected and form a system that may be called the "system of the world" prevalent in traditional societies: (a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); (c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar (cf. the *universalis columna*), ladder (cf. Jacob's ladder), mountain, tree, vine, etc.; (d) around this cosmic axis lies the world (= our world), hence the axis is located "in the middle," at the "navel of the earth"; it is the Center of the World.

Many different myths, rites, and beliefs are derived from this traditional "system of the world." They cannot all be mentioned here. Rather, we shall confine ourselves to a few examples, taken from various civilizations and particularly suited to demonstrate the role of sacred space in the life of traditional societies. Whether that space appears in the form of a sacred precinct, a ceremonial house, a city, a world, we everywhere find the symbolism of the Center of the World; and it is this symbolism which, in the majority of cases, explains re-

ligious behavior in respect to the space in which one lives.

We shall begin with an example that has the advantage of immediately showing not only the consistency but also the complexity of this type of symbolism—the cosmic mountain. We have just seen that the mountain occurs among the images that express the connection between heaven and earth; hence it is believed to be at the center of the world. And in a number of cultures we do in fact hear of such mountains, real or mythical, situated at the center of the world; examples are Meru in India, Harabrezaiti in Iran, the mythical "Mount of the Lands" in Mesopotamia, Gerizim in Palestine—which, moreover, was called the "navel of the earth."⁶ Since the sacred mountain is an *axis mundi* connecting earth with heaven, it in a sense touches heaven and hence marks the highest point in the world; consequently the territory that surrounds it, and that constitutes "our world," is held to be the highest among countries. This is stated in Hebrew tradition: Palestine, being the highest land, was not submerged by the Flood.⁷ According to Islamic tradition, the highest place on earth is the *kā'aba*, because "the Pole Star bears witness that it faces the center of Heaven."⁸ For Christians, it is Golgotha that is on the summit of the cosmic mountain. All these beliefs express

⁶ See the bibliographical references in Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 10 ff.

⁷ A. E. Wenainck and E. Burrows, cited in *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸ Wenainck, cited in *ibid.*, p. 15.

the same feeling, which is profoundly religious: "our world" is holy ground *because it is the place nearest to heaven*, because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven; hence our world is a high place. In cosmological terms, this religious conception is expressed by the projection of the favored territory which is "ours" onto the summit of the cosmic mountain. Later speculation drew all sorts of conclusions—for example, the one just cited for Palestine, that the Holy Land was not submerged by the Flood.

This same symbolism of the center explains other series of cosmological images and religious beliefs. Among these the most important are: (a) holy sites and sanctuaries are believed to be situated at the center of the world; (b) temples are replicas of the cosmic mountain and hence constitute the pre-eminent "link" between earth and heaven; (c) the foundations of temples descend deep into the lower regions. A few examples will suffice. After citing them, we shall attempt to integrate all these various aspects of the same symbolism; the remarkable consistency of these traditional conceptions of the world will then appear with greater clarity.

The capital of the perfect Chinese sovereign is located at the center of the world; there, on the day of the summer solstice, the gnomon must cast no shadow.⁹ It is striking that the same symbolism is found in regard to

⁹ M. Granet, in Eliade, *Patterns*, p. 376.

the Temple of Jerusalem; the rock on which it was built was the navel of the earth. The Icelandic pilgrim, Nicholas of Thverva, who visited Jerusalem in the twelfth century, wrote of the Holy Sepulcher: "The Center of the World is there; there, on the day of the summer solstice, the light of the Sun falls perpendicularly from Heaven."¹⁰ The same conception occurs in Iran; the Iranian land (*Airyanam Vaejah*) is the center and heart of the world. Just as the heart lies at the center of the body, "the land of Iran is more precious than all other countries because it is set at the middle of the world."¹¹ This is why Shiz, the "Jerusalem" of the Iranians (for it lay at the center of the world) was held to be the original site of the royal power and, at the same time, the birthplace of Zarathustra.¹²

As for the assimilation of temples to cosmic mountains and their function as links between earth and heaven, the names given to Babylonian sanctuaries themselves bear witness; they are called "Mountain of the House," "House of the Mountain of all Lands," "Mountain of Storms," "Link between Heaven and Earth," and the like. The ziggurat was literally a cosmic mountain; the seven stories represented the seven planetary heavens; by ascending them, the priest reached the summit of the

¹⁰ L. I. Ringbom, *Gratempel und Paradies*, Stockholm, 1951, p. 255.

¹¹ *Sad-dar*, 84, 4-5, cited in Ringbom, p. 327.

¹² See the material assembled and discussed in Ringbom, pp. 294 ff. and *passim*.

universe. A like symbolism explains the immense temple of Borobudur, in Java; it is built as an artificial mountain. Ascending it is equivalent to an ecstatic journey to the center of the world; reaching the highest terrace, the pilgrim experiences a break-through from plane to plane; he enters a "pure region" transcending the profane world.

Dur-an-ki, "Link between Heaven and Earth," was a name applied to a number of Babylonian sanctuaries (it occurs at Nippur, Larsa, Sippara, and elsewhere). Babylon had many names, among them "House of the Base of Heaven and Earth," "Link between Heaven and Earth." But it was also in Babylon that the connection between earth and the lower regions was made, for the city had been built on *bāb apsū*, "the Gate of Apsū," *apsū* being the name for the waters of chaos before Creation. The same tradition is found among the Hebrews; the rock of the Temple in Jerusalem reached deep into the *tehōm*, the Hebrew equivalent of *apsū*. And, just as Babylon had its Gate of Apsū, the rock of the temple in Jerusalem contained the "mouth of the *tehōm*."¹³

The *apsū*, the *tehōm* symbolize the chaos of waters, the preformal modality of cosmic matter, and, at the same time, the world of death, of all that precedes and follows life. The Gate of Apsū and the rock containing the "mouth of the *tehōm*" designate not only the point of

¹³ Cf. the references in Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 15 ff.

intersection—and hence of communication—between the lower world and earth, but also *the difference in ontological status between these two cosmic planes*. There is a break of plane between the *tehôm* and the rock of the Temple that blocks its mouth, passage from the virtual to the formal, from death to life. The watery chaos that preceded Creation at the same time symbolizes the retrogression to the formless that follows on death, return to the larval modality of existence. From one point of view, the lower regions can be homologized to the unknown and desert regions that surround the inhabited territory; the underworld, over which our cosmos is firmly established, corresponds to the chaos that extends to its frontiers.

"OUR WORLD" IS ALWAYS SITUATED AT THE CENTER

From all that has been said, it follows that the true world is always in the middle, at the Center, for it is here that there is a break in plane and hence communication among the three cosmic zones. Whatever the extent of the territory involved, the cosmos that it represents is always perfect. An entire country (e.g., Palestine), a city (Jerusalem), a sanctuary (the Temple in Jerusalem), all equally well present an *imago mundi*. Treating of the symbolism of the Temple, Flavius Josephus wrote that the court represented the sea (i.e., the

lower regions), the Holy Place represented earth, and the Holy of Holies heaven (*Ant. Jud.*, III, 7, 7). It is clear, then, that both the *imago mundi* and the Center are repeated in the inhabited world. Palestine, Jerusalem, and the Temple severally and concurrently represent the image of the universe and the Center of the World. This multiplicity of centers and this reiteration of the image of the world on smaller and smaller scales constitute one of the specific characteristics of traditional societies.

To us, it seems an inescapable conclusion that *the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World*. He knew that his country lay at the midpoint of the earth; he knew too that his city constituted the navel of the universe, and, above all, that the temple or the palace were veritably Centers of the World. But he also wanted his own house to be at the Center and to be an *imago mundi*. And, in fact, as we shall see, houses are held to be at the Center of the World and, on the microcosmic scale, to reproduce the universe. In other words, the man of traditional societies could only live in a space opening upward, where the break in plane was symbolically assured and hence communication with the *other world*, the transcendental world, was ritually possible. Of course the sanctuary—the Center par excellence—was there, close to him, in the city, and he could be sure of communicating with the world of the gods simply by entering the temple. But he felt the need to live at the Center *always*—like the Achilpa, who, as we

saw, always carried the sacred pole, the *axis mundi*, with them, so that they should never be far from the Center and should remain in communication with the supraterrrestrial world. In short, whatever the dimensions of the space with which he is familiar and in which he regards himself as situated—his country, his city, his village, his house—religious man feels the need always to exist in a total and organized world, in a cosmos.

A universe comes to birth from its center; it spreads out from a central point that is, as it were, its navel. It is in this way that, according to the *Rig Veda* (X, 149), the universe was born and developed—from a core, a central point. Hebrew tradition is still more explicit: "The Most Holy One created the world like an embryo. As the embryo grows from the navel, so God began to create the world by the navel and from there it spread out in all directions." And since the "navel of the earth," the Center of the World, is the Holy Land, the *Yoma* affirms that "the world was created beginning with Zion."¹⁴ Rabbi ben Gorion said of the rock of Jerusalem: "it is called the Foundation Stone of the Earth, that is, the navel of the Earth, because it is from there that the whole Earth unfolded."¹⁵ Then too, because the creation of man is a replica of the cosmogony, it follows that the first man was fashioned at the "navel of the earth" or in

¹⁴ References in *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Cited in W. W. Roemer, "Neue Omphalosstudien" (*Abh. der Königl. Sachs. Ges. d. Wiss., Phil.-hist. Klasse*, 31, 1, 1915), p. 16.

Jerusalem (Judaean-Christian traditions). It could not be otherwise, if we remember that the Center is precisely the place where a break in plane occurs, where space becomes sacred, hence pre-eminently *real*. A creation implies a superabundance of reality, in other words an irruption of the sacred into the world.

It follows that *every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model*. The creation of the world becomes the archetype of every creative human gesture, whatever its plane of reference may be. We have already seen that settling in a territory reiterates the cosmogony. Now that the cosmogonic value of the Center has become clear, we can still better understand why every human establishment repeats the creation of the world from a central point (the navel). Just as the universe unfolds from a center and stretches out toward the four cardinal points, the village comes into existence around an intersection. In Bali, as in some parts of Asia, when a new village is to be built the people look for a natural intersection, where two roads cross at right angles. A square constructed from a central point is an *imago mundi*. The division of the village into four sections—which incidentally implies a similar division of the community—corresponds to the division of the universe into four horizons. A space is often left empty in the middle of the village; there the ceremonial house will later be built, with its roof symbolically representing heaven (in some cases, heaven is indicated by the

top of a tree or by the image of a mountain). At the other end of the same perpendicular axis lies the world of the dead, symbolized by certain animals (snake, crocodile, etc.) or by ideograms expressing darkness.¹⁶

The cosmic symbolism of the village is repeated in the structure of the sanctuary or the ceremonial house. At Waropen, in New Guinea, the "men's house" stands at the center of the village; its roof represents the celestial vault, the four walls correspond to the four directions of space. In Ceram, the sacred stone of the village symbolizes heaven and the four stone columns that support it incarnate the four pillars that support heaven.¹⁷ Similar conceptions are found among the Algonquins and the Sioux. Their sacred lodge, where initiations are performed, represents the universe. The roof symbolizes the dome of the sky, the floor represents earth, the four walls the four directions of cosmic space. The ritual construction of the space is emphasized by a threefold symbolism: the four doors, the four windows, and the four colors signify the four cardinal points. The construction of the sacred lodge thus repeats the cosmogony, for the lodge represents the world.¹⁸

We are not surprised to find a similar concept in an-

¹⁶ Cf. C. T. Bertling, *Vierzahl, Kreuz und Mandala in Asien*, Amsterdam, 1954, pp. 8 ff.

¹⁷ See the references in Bertling, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ See the material and interpretations in Werner Müller, *Die blaue Hütte*, Wiesbaden, 1954, pp. 60 ff.

cient Italy and among the ancient Germans. In short, the underlying idea is both archaic and widely disseminated: from a center, the four horizons are projected in the four cardinal directions. The Roman *mundus* was a circular trench divided into four parts; it was at once the image of the cosmos and the paradigmatic model for the human habitation. It has been rightly proposed that *Roma quadrata* is to be understood not as being square in shape but as being divided into four parts.¹⁹ The *mundus* was clearly assimilated to the *omphalos*, to the navel of the earth; the city (*urbs*) was situated in the middle of the *orbis terrarum*. Similar ideas have been shown to explain the structure of Germanic villages and towns.²⁰ In extremely varied cultural contexts, we constantly find the same cosmological schema and the same ritual scenario: *settling in a territory is equivalent to founding a world*.

CITY-COSMOS

Since "our world" is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos. And as "our world" was founded by imitating the paradigmatic work of the gods, the cosmogony, so the enemies who attack it are assimilated to the enemies of the gods, the demons, and especially to the archdemon, the primordial dragon

¹⁹ F. Altheim, in Werner Müller, *Kreis und Kreuz*, Berlin, 1938, pp. 60 ff.

²⁰ W. Müller, *op. cit.*, pp. 65 ff.

conquered by the gods at the beginning of time. An attack on "our world" is equivalent to an act of revenge by the mythical dragon, who rebels against the work of the gods, the cosmos, and struggles to annihilate it. "Our" enemies belong to the powers of chaos. *Any destruction of a city is equivalent to a retrogression to chaos. Any victory over the attackers reiterates the paradigmatic victory of the gods over the dragon (that is, over chaos).*

This is the reason the Pharaoh was assimilated to the God Rē, conqueror of the dragon Apophis, while his enemies were assimilated to the mythical dragon. Darius regarded himself as a new Thraetaona, the mythical Iranian hero who was said to have slain a three-headed dragon. In Judaic tradition the pagan kings were represented in the likeness of the dragon; such is the Nebuchadnezzar described by Jeremiah (51, 34) and the Pompey presented in the Psalms of Solomon (9, 29).

As we shall see later, the dragon is the paradigmatic figure of the marine monster, of the primordial snake, symbol of the cosmic waters, of darkness, night, and death—in short, of the amorphous and virtual, of everything that has not yet acquired a "form." The dragon must be conquered and cut to pieces by the gods so that the cosmos may come to birth. It was from the body of the marine monster Tiamat that Marduk fashioned the world. Yahweh created the universe after his victory over the primordial monster Rahab. But, as we shall see, this

victory of the gods over the dragon must be symbolically repeated each year, for each year the world must be created anew. Similarly the victory of the gods over the forces of darkness, death, and chaos is repeated with every victory of the city over its invaders.

It is highly probable that the fortifications of inhabited places and cities began by being magical defenses; for fortifications—trenches, labyrinths, ramparts, etc.—were designed rather to repel invasion by demons and the souls of the dead than attacks by human beings. In North India, during epidemics, a circle is drawn around the village to keep the demons of sickness from entering the enclosure.²¹ In Europe, during the Middle Ages, the walls of cities were ritually consecrated as a defense against the devil, sickness, and death. Then, too, symbolic thinking finds no difficulty in assimilating the human enemy to the devil and death. In the last analysis the result of attacks, whether demonic or military, is always the same—ruin, disintegration, death.

It is worth observing that the same images are still used in our own day to formulate the dangers that threaten a certain type of civilization; we speak of the chaos, the disorder, the darkness that will overwhelm "our world." All these terms express the abolition of an order, a cosmos, an organic structure, and reimmersion in the state of fluidity, of formlessness—in short, of

²¹ Eliade, *Patterns*, p. 371.

chaos. This, in our opinion, shows that the paradigmatic images live on in the language and clichés of nonreligious man. Something of the religious conception of the world still persists in the behavior of profane man, although he is not always conscious of this immemorial heritage.

UNDERTAKING THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Let us consider the basic difference observable between these two types of behavior—traditional religious and profane—in respect to the human habitation. There is no need to dwell on the value and function of the habitation in industrial societies; they are well known. According to the formula of a famous contemporary architect, Le Corbusier, the house is "a machine to live in." Hence it takes its place among the countless machines mass-produced in industrial societies. The ideal house of the modern world must first of all be functional; that is, it must allow men to work and to rest in order that they may work. You can change your "machine to live in" as often as you change your bicycle, your refrigerator, your automobile. You can also change cities or provinces, without encountering any difficulties aside from those that arise from a difference in climate.

It does not lie within our province to write the history of the gradual desacralization of the human dwelling.

The process is an integral part of the gigantic transformation of the world undertaken by the industrial societies, a transformation made possible by the desacralization of the cosmos accomplished by scientific thought and above all by the sensational discoveries of physics and chemistry. We shall later have occasion to inquire whether this secularization of nature is really final, if no possibility remains for nonreligious man to rediscover the sacred dimension of existence in the world. As we just saw, and as we shall see still more clearly later, certain traditional images, certain vestiges of the behavior of archaic man still persist, in the condition of "survivals," even in the most highly industrialized societies. But for the moment our concern is to describe, in its pure state, religious behavior in respect to the habitation, and to discover the *Weltanschauung* that it implies.

As we saw, to settle in a territory, to build a dwelling, demand a vital decision for both the whole community and the individual. For what is involved is *undertaking the creation of the world that one has chosen to inhabit*. Hence it is necessary to imitate the work of the gods, the cosmogony. But this is not always easy, for there are also tragic, blood-drenched cosmogonies; as imitator of the divine gestures, man must reiterate them. Since the gods had to slay and dismember a marine monster or a primordial being in order to create the world from it, man in his turn must imitate them when he builds his own world, his city or his house. Hence the necessity for

bloody or symbolic sacrifices on the occasion of constructions, the countless forms of the *Baupfer* (building sacrifice), concerning which we shall have to say a few words further on.

Whatever the structure of a traditional society—be it a society of hunters, herdsmen, or cultivators, or already at the stage of urban civilization—the habitation always undergoes a process of sanctification, because it constitutes an *imago mundi* and the world is a divine creation. But there are various ways of homologizing the dwelling place to the cosmos, because there are various types of cosmogonies. For our purpose, it will suffice to distinguish two methods of ritually transforming the dwelling place (whether the territory or the house) into cosmos, that is, of giving it the value of an *imago mundi*: (a) assimilating it to the cosmos by the projection of the four horizons from a central point (in the case of a village) or by the symbolic installation of the *axis mundi* (in the case of a house); (b) repeating, through a ritual of construction, the paradigmatic acts of the gods by virtue of which the world came to birth from the body of a marine dragon or of a primordial giant. We need not here dwell on the basic differences in *Welkanschauung* underlying these two methods of sanctifying the dwelling place, nor on their historical and cultural presuppositions. Suffice it to say that the first method—cosmicizing a space by projection of the horizons or by installation of the *axis mundi*—is already documented

in the most archaic stages of culture (cf. the *kauwa-auwa* pole of the Australian Achilpa), while the second method seems to have been developed in the culture of the earliest cultivators. What is important for our investigation is the fact that, in all traditional cultures, the habitation possesses a sacred aspect by the simple fact that it reflects the world.

Thus, in the habitation of the primitive peoples of the North American and North Asian Arcics we find a central post that is assimilated to the *axis mundi*, i.e., to the cosmic pillar or the world tree, which, as we saw, connect earth with heaven. In other words, *cosmic symbolism is found in the very structure of the habitation*. The house is an *imago mundi*. The sky is conceived as a vast tent supported by a central pillar; the tent pole or the central post of the house is assimilated to the Pillars of the World and is so named. This central pole or post has an important ritual role; the sacrifices in honor of the celestial Supreme Being are performed at the foot of it. The same symbolism has been preserved among the herdsmen-breeders of Central Asia, but since here the conical-roofed habitation with central pillar is replaced by the yurt, the mythico-ritual function of the pillar is transferred to the upper opening for the escape of smoke. Like the pole (= *axis mundi*), the stripped tree trunk whose top emerges through the upper opening of the yurt (and which symbolizes the cosmic tree) is conceived as a ladder leading to heaven; the shamans climb

it on their celestial journeys. And it is through the upper opening that the shamans set out on their flights.²² The sacred pillar, set in the middle of the habitation, is found again in Africa among the Hamitic and Hamitoid pastoral peoples.²³

COSMOGONY AND BUILDING SACRIFICE

A similar conception is found in such a highly evolved culture as that of India; but here there is also an exemplification of the other method of homologizing the house to the cosmos, to which we referred briefly above. Before the masons lay the first stone the astronomer shows them the spot where it is to be placed, and this spot is supposed to lie above the snake that supports the world. The master mason sharpens a stake and drives it into the ground, exactly at the indicated spot, in order to fix the snake's head. A foundation stone is then laid above the stake. *Thus the cornerstone is at the exact center of the world.*²⁴ But, in addition, the act of foundation repeats the cosmogonic act; for to drive the stake into the snake's head to "fix" it is to imitate the primordial gesture of Soma or Indra, when the latter, as the *Rig Veda* expresses it, "struck the Snake in his lair" (IV, 17,

²² M. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Paris, 1951, pp. 238 ff. Cited hereafter as *Le Chamanisme*.

²³ Wilhelm Schmidt, "Der heilige Mittelpfahl des Hauses," *Anthropos*, 35-36, 1940-1941, p. 967.

²⁴ S. Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-Born*, Oxford, 1920, p. 354.

9), when his lightning bolt "cut off its head" (I, 52, 10). As we said, the snake symbolizes chaos, the formless, the unmanifested. To behead it is equivalent to an act of creation, passage from the virtual and the amorphous to that which has form. Again, it was from the body of a primordial marine monster, Tiamat, that the god Marduk fashioned the world. This victory was symbolically repeated each year, since each year the cosmos was renewed. But the paradigmatic act of the divine victory was likewise repeated on the occasion of every construction, for every new construction reproduced the creation of the world.

This second type of cosmogony is much more complex, and it will only be outlined here. But it was necessary to cite it, for, in the last analysis, it is with such a cosmogony that the countless forms of the building sacrifice are bound up; the latter, in short, is only an imitation, often a symbolic imitation, of the primordial sacrifice that gave birth to the world. For, beginning with a certain stage of culture, the cosmogonic myth explains the Creation through the slaying of a giant (Ymir in Germanic mythology, Purusha in Indian mythology, P'an-ku in China); his organs give birth to the various cosmic regions. According to other groups of myths, it is not only the cosmos that comes to birth in consequence of the immolation of a primordial being and from his own substance, but also food plants, the races of man, or different social classes. It is on this type of cosmogonic myth that

building sacrifices depend. If a "construction" is to endure (be it house, temple, tool, etc.), it must be animated, that is, it must receive life and a soul. The transfer of the soul is possible only through a blood sacrifice. The history of religions, ethnology, folklore record countless forms of building sacrifices—that is, of symbolic or blood sacrifices for the benefit of a structure.²⁸ In southeastern Europe, these beliefs have inspired admirable popular ballads describing the sacrifice of the wife of the master mason in order that a structure may be completed (cf. the ballads on the Arta Bridge in Greece, on the Monastery of Argesh in Rumania, on the city of Scutari in Yugoslavia, etc.).

We have said enough about the religious significance of the human dwelling place for certain conclusions to have become self-evident. Exactly like the city or the sanctuary, the house is sanctified, in whole or part, by a cosmological symbolism or ritual. This is why settling somewhere—building a village or merely a house—represents a serious decision, for the very existence of man is involved; he must, in short, create his own world and assume the responsibility of maintaining and renewing it. Habitations are not lightly changed, for it is not easy to abandon one's world. The house is not an object, a "machine to live in"; it is the universe that man constructs for himself by imitating the paradigmatic crea-

²⁸ Cf. Paul Sartori, "Über das Baupfer," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 30, 1938, pp. 154.

tion of the gods, the cosmogony. Every construction and every inauguration of a new dwelling are in some measure equivalent to a new beginning, a new life. And every beginning repeats the primordial beginning, when the universe first saw the light of day. Even in modern societies, with their high degree of desacralization, the festivity and rejoicing that accompany settling in a new house still preserve the memory of the festival exuberance that, long ago, marked the *incipit vita nova*.

Since the habitation constitutes an *imago mundi*, it is symbolically situated at the Center of the World. The multiplicity, or even the infinity, of centers of the world raises no difficulty for religious thought. For it is not a matter of geometrical space, but of an existential and sacred space that has an entirely different structure, that admits of an infinite number of breaks and hence is capable of an infinite number of communications with the transcendent. We have seen the cosmological meaning and the ritual role of the upper opening in various forms of habitations. In other cultures these cosmological meanings and ritual functions are transferred to the chimney (= smoke hole) and to the part of the roof that lies above the "sacred area" and that is removed or even broken in cases of prolonged death-agony. When we come to the homologation cosmos-house-human body, we shall have occasion to show the deeper meaning of "breaking the roof." For the moment, we will mention that the most ancient sanctuaries were hypaethral or

built with an aperture in the roof—the “eye of the dome,” symbolizing break-through from plane to plane, communication with the transcendent.

Thus religious architecture simply took over and developed the cosmological symbolism already present in the structure of primitive habitations. In its turn, the human habitation had been chronologically preceded by the provisional “holy place,” by a space provisionally consecrated and cosmicized (cf. the Australian Achilpa). This is as much as to say that all symbols and rituals having to do with temples, cities, and houses are *finally derived from the primary experience of sacred space.*

TEMPLE, BASILICA, CATHEDRAL

In the great oriental civilizations—from Mesopotamia and Egypt to China and India—the temple received a new and important valorization. It is not only an *imago mundi*; it is also interpreted as the earthly reproduction of a transcendent model. Judaism inherited this ancient oriental conception of the temple as the copy of a celestial work of architecture. In this idea we probably have one of the last interpretations that religious man has given to the primary experience of sacred space in contrast to profane space. Hence we must dwell a little on the perspectives opened by this new religious conception.

To summarize the essential data of the problem: If

the temple constitutes an *imago mundi*, this is because the world, as the work of the gods, is sacred. But the cosmological structure of the temple gives room for a new religious valorization; as house of the gods, hence holy place above all others, the temple continually re-sanctifies the world, because it at once represents and contains it. In the last analysis, it is *by virtue of the temple that the world is resanctified in every part*. However impure it may have become, the world is continually purified by the sanctity of sanctuaries.

Another idea derives from this increasingly accepted ontological difference between the *cosmos* and its *sanctified image*, the temple. This is the idea that the sanctity of the temple is proof against all earthly corruption, by virtue of the fact that the architectural plan of the temple is the work of the gods and hence exists in heaven, near to the gods. The transcendent models of temples enjoy a spiritual, incorruptible celestial existence. Through the grace of the gods, man attains to the dazzling vision of these models, which he then attempts to reproduce on earth. The Babylonian king Gudea saw in a dream the goddess Nidaba showing him a tablet on which were written the names of the beneficent stars, and a god revealed the plan of the temple to him.²⁸ Sennacherib built Nineveh according to “the plan established from most distant times in the configuration of the Heavens.” This

²⁸ Cf. Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 7-8.

means not only that celestial geometry made the first constructions possible, but above all that since the architectonic models were in heaven, they shared in the sacrality of the sky.

For the people of Israel, the models of the tabernacle, of all the sacred utensils, and of the temple itself had been created by Yahweh who revealed them to his chosen, to be reproduced on earth. Thus Yahweh says to Moses: "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it" (Exodus, 25, 8-9). "And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount" (*ibid.*, 25, 40). When David gives his son Solomon the plans for the Temple buildings, the tabernacle, and all the utensils, he assures him that "all this . . . the Lord made me understand in writing by his hand upon me" (II Chronicles, 28, 19). He must, then, have seen the celestial model created by Yahweh from the beginning of time. This is what Solomon affirms: "Thou hast commanded me to build a temple upon thy holy mount, and an altar in the city wherein thou dwellest, a resemblance of the holy tabernacle which thou hast prepared from the beginning" (Wisdom of Solomon, 9, 8).

The Heavenly Jerusalem was created by God at the same time as Paradise, hence in *aeternum*. The city of Jerusalem was only an approximate reproduction of the

transcendent model; it could be polluted by man, but the model was incorruptible, for it was not involved in time. "This building now built in your midst is not that which is revealed with Me, that which was prepared beforehand here from the time when I took counsel to make Paradise, and showed it to Adam before he sinned" (II Baruch, 4, 3-7; trans. R. H. Charles²⁷).

The Christian basilica and, later, the cathedral take over and continue all these symbolisms. On the one hand, the church is conceived as imitating the Heavenly Jerusalem, even from patristic times; on the other, it also reproduces Paradise or the celestial world. But the cosmological structure of the sacred edifice still persists in the thought of Christendom; for example, it is obvious in the Byzantine church. "The four parts of the interior of the church symbolize the four cardinal directions. The interior of the church is the universe. The altar is paradise, which lay in the East. The imperial door to the altar was also called the Door of Paradise. During Easter week, the great door to the altar remains open during the entire service; the meaning of this custom is clearly expressed in the Easter Canon: 'Christ rose from the grave and opened the doors of Paradise unto us.' The West, on the contrary, is the realm of darkness, of grief, of death, the realm of the eternal mansions of the dead, who await the resurrection of the flesh and the

²⁷ R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, Oxford, 1913, Vol. II, p. 482.

Last Judgment. The middle of the building is the earth. According to the views of Kosmas Indikopleustes, the earth is rectangular and is bounded by four walls, which are surmounted by a dome. The four parts of the interior of the church symbolize the four cardinal directions.²⁸ As "copy of the cosmos," the Byzantine church incarnates and at the same time sanctifies the world.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

From the thousands of examples available to the historian of religions, we have cited only a small number but enough to show the varieties of the religious experience of space. We have taken our examples from different cultures and periods, in order to present at least the most important mythological constructions and ritual scenarios that are based on the experience of sacred space. For in the course of history, religious man has given differing valorizations to the same fundamental experience. We need only compare the conception of the sacred space (and hence of the cosmos) discernible among the Australian Achilpa with the corresponding conceptions of the Kwakiutl, the Altaic peoples, or the Mesopotamians, to realize the differences among them. There is no need to dwell on the truism that, since the religious life of humanity is realized in history, its expressions are inevitably conditioned by the variety of

²⁸ Hans Sedlmayr, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Zurich, 1950, p. 119.

historical moments and cultural styles. But for our purpose it is not the infinite variety of the religious experiences of space that concerns us but, on the contrary, their elements of unity. Pointing out the contrast between the behavior of nonreligious man with respect to the space in which he lives and the behavior of religious man in respect to sacred space is enough to make the difference in structure between the two attitudes clearly apparent.

If we should attempt to summarize the result of the descriptions that have been presented in this chapter, we could say that the experience of sacred space makes possible the "founding of the world": where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the real unveils itself*, the world comes into existence. But the irruption of the sacred does not only project a fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space, a center into chaos; it also effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes (between earth and heaven) and makes possible ontological passage from one mode of being to another. It is such a break in the heterogeneity of profane space that creates the center through which communication with the transmundane is established, that, consequently, founds the world, for the center renders *orientation* possible. Hence the manifestation of the sacred in space has a cosmological valence; every spatial hierophany or consecration of a space is equivalent to a cosmogony. The first conclusion we might draw

would be: *the world becomes apprehensible as world, as cosmos, in the measure in which it reveals itself as a sacred world.*

Every world is the work of the gods, for it was either created directly by the gods or was consecrated, hence cosmicized, by men ritually reactualizing the paradigmatic act of Creation. This is as much as to say 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 uncosmicized 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. If, by some evil chance, he strays into it, he feels emptied of his ontic substance, as if he were dissolving in Chaos, and he finally dies.

This ontological thirst is manifested in many ways. In the realm of sacred space which we are now considering, its most striking manifestation is religious man's will to take his stand at the very heart of the real, at the Center of the World—that is, exactly where the cosmos came into existence and began to spread out toward the four horizons, and where, too, there is the possibility of communication with the gods; in short, precisely where

he is *closest to the gods*. We have seen that the symbolism of the center is the formative principle not only of countries, cities, temples, and palaces but also of the humblest human dwelling, be it the tent of a nomad hunter, the shepherd's yurt, or the house of the sedentary cultivator. This is as much as to say that every religious man places himself at the Center of the World and by the same token at the very source of absolute reality, as close as possible to the opening that ensures him communication with the gods.

But since to settle somewhere, to inhabit a space, is equivalent to repeating the cosmogony and hence to imitating the work of the gods, it follows that, for religious man, every existential decision to situate himself in space in fact constitutes a religious decision. By assuming the responsibility of creating the world that he has chosen to inhabit, he not only cosmicizes chaos but also sanctifies his little cosmos by making it like the world of the gods. Religious man's profound nostalgia is to inhabit a "divine world," is his desire that his house shall be like the house of the gods, as it was later represented in temples and sanctuaries. In short, this religious nostalgia expresses *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.*

The experience of sacred time will make it possible for religious man periodically to experience the cosmos as it was *in principio*, that is, at the mythical moment of Creation.