

THE DEATH OF THE SACRED KING: AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF THE SACRED IN COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES

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Abstract

The study of “Collective Imaginaries” connected to the birth of modern social myths pervades the literature of the Canadian sociologist, Gerard Bouchard. However, this research entails a specific notion of culture which introduces a multidisciplinary dimension, where several branches of the humanities can collaborate.

More specifically, the field of study of the history of religions, anthropology, and the history of ideas can interconnect themselves in showing how the genesis and possible interpretations of myth reveal storytelling linked to the essence of “power”. An episode of this story in particular, which represents the prehistory of this kratophonic tale, is the manifestation of the Sacred in premodern social contexts.

The paper aims, through a case study borrowed from the work of the Scottish anthropologist, James George Frazer (1854-1941), to show the crucial role of the Sacred, both in a premodern social context and in the birth of modern social myths, and thereby draw upon a critical review of the theories put forth by the historians of religion Bruce Lincoln and Mircea Eliade to provide a critical perspective on Bouchard’s conceptualization of culture and collective imaginaries.

Keywords: Sacred Kingship, History of Religion, Political Anthropology, Mircea Eliade, Bruce Lincoln.

1. A Methodological Comparative Approach to the Western Cultural Imagination

It would be reasonable to assert that this concept – the imaginary – offers access to the entire culture, as is the case with other approaches, such as structuralism, semiotics, and literary criticism [...] To take a convenient shortcut, I will simply say that culture refers to the more or less structured and coherent universe the symbols of which nurture.¹

This quote is borrowed from the latest translation (from French) of Gerard Bouchard's work, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*.² In this passage, the Canadian sociologist Gerard Bouchard proposes a means by which to begin to answer the question: "What is the place of myth in contemporary societies and in the relations between the cultural and the social?" More specifically, Bouchard's work focuses on defining the context where "the forces that drive collective representations, especially preconscious images and mental structures" manifest themselves. According to Bouchard, myths are part of this broader area and play a crucial role. Myths are conceived as 'sites of superconsciousness',³ which reveal, represent, and incarnate dispositions, profound feelings, and (hyper)sensitivities.⁴ Thus, mythological narratives and elements offer us clues to deciphering emotional states, as well as the rational dispositions of past and modern civilizations.

In order to investigate these contexts in which the primeval roots of symbols and myths find their expression, namely *collective imaginaries*, Bouchard adopts a specific approach to the notion of 'culture'. In addition to the above-mentioned definition, Bouchard describes culture as "an amalgam of segments that are sometimes coherent and sometimes contradictory, but always in interaction, and

¹ Gerard Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 4.

² The original French version was Bouchard, *Raison et déraison du mythe: Au cœur des imaginaires collectifs* (Montréal : Éditions du Boréal 2015).

³ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 7.

⁴ Ibid.

broad areas of indetermination.”⁵ This latter passage leads the author to a series of considerations: firstly, that it is not possible to understand past and modern myths without understanding their symbolical roots; secondly, the multifaceted nature of culture and the ‘superconscious’ dimension of myth grant access to and interconnect different fields of studies;⁶ and, lastly, but not least, the interaction of myth with social and cultural sphere entails a dichotomy in-between ‘so-called primitive’ and modern societies.⁷

This assessment, structured in three points, sets a preliminary field where different branches of the humanities can approach the study of the ‘imaginary’. To this end, a coordination of all the different perspectives involved is mandatory. Indeed, the superconscious aspect of collective imaginaries (which also characterizes myth) has drawn the attention and efforts of different and several disciplines.⁸ More specifically, among these it is possible to include philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, and the history of religions. Besides the superconscious dimension of myth, research into myth’s birth and symbolical roots has interested several scholars belonging to different realities. Although different interpretations have led to different outcomes in research (i.e., a psychoanalytic point of view inevitably differs from a historical-religious one), a genealogical approach⁹ might be fruitful to coordinate different efforts of research into social myths. Further theoretical precision for such has been already marked out: Bouchard states that there does indeed exist a dichotomy between the premodern and modern conceptions of the imaginary. The main difference lies in two factors:

- The conception of the myth (and ‘age’) of reason, veritably established during the advent of the Enlightenment.
- The perception of the sacred in archaic ‘primitive’ societies.

⁵ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 5.

⁶ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 9.

⁷ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 5.

⁸ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 9.

⁹ The adjective ‘genealogical’ has the same sense that Friedrich Nietzsche conferred to the term, ‘genealogy’ in *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift (On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic; Leipzig: Neumann 1887)*.

Religious myths and societies¹⁰ are essentially based on the manifestations of the supernatural and sacred in everyday life. In addition, the specialist on 17th century French literature (influenced by Jansenism), Philippe Sellier, defines ethno-religious myths as founding tales.¹¹ This kind of founding narrative, Sellier states, locates myth outside the cage of linear time, and frees it from any historical anchorage (indeed, this latter feature characterizes the narrative form of “*saga*”).¹² This also implies that the sense of sacred strongly influenced and characterised dimensions of time and space and any possible founding narrative linked to the origins of the Cosmos in archaic/premodern societies. This first conclusion entails and reveals a plurality of aspects located in the middle of a plurality of fields of study, namely, the history of religions, philosophy, and sociology.

In order to approach an answer to Bouchard’s question - “What is the place of myth in contemporary societies and in relations between the cultural and the social?” - I reckon that the narrative form of religious myth should be considered the point of departure. The above-mentioned features (i.e., the exclusion of linear time; the foundational aim of myth; the heavy influence of a sense of the sacred) entail a peculiar historical approach. According to Bouchard and other scholars involved in the research of myth, historical events are conceived with a specific connotation and meaning in ‘archaic’ premodern contexts. Historical occurrences are not considered within a programmatic sequence of dates and numbers, but are examined for their possible religious significance and connection to manifestation of sacred. Thus, so do personal experience and perception of the single individual of a premodern religious community play a decisive role in the genesis of myth.

This is also the conceptual crossroads where different branches of the humanities, such as cultural sociology, the history of philosophy, and history of religions confront each other. If Bouchard acknowledges that symbols and myths are emotionally rooted¹³ and considers this the ‘prehistory’ of his survey on collective imaginaries and representations, then the history of ideas scholar, Eugenio Garin (1909-2004) shows how personal experience, including (successful and unsuccessful) attempts at formulating philosophical theories and overviews throughout the course of history, are subsumed

¹⁰ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 28.

¹¹ Philippe Sellier, “Qu'est-ce qu'un mythe littéraire ?”, *Littérature*, n. 55 (1984): 113.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 34-35.

under the concept of *idea*.¹⁴ More precisely, Garin in the first contribution of his three-essay collection, *La filosofia come sapere storico (Philosophy as Historical Knowledge)*, objects against the thesis of a unity of Western philosophy in historiographical work.¹⁵ Garin argues The claims that philosophical systems come from the same original source, and that the existence of Philosophy (with a capital 'P') hinder scholars from approaching authentic philosophical historiography.¹⁶ The veritable work of the historian of philosophy is “to establish relationships between “*ideas, theories, overviews, and real-world situations*”.¹⁷ Garin also stresses that ideas should be considered within their original context, text, or experience.¹⁸ Even though philosophy acts on behalf of the “general history of culture” here,¹⁹ every time a text is approached or a notion analysed, philosophy privileges one field of research over another. In greater detail, philosophical research focuses on aspects and facts directly connected to “the genesis and life of ideas”.²⁰ The Italian scholar identifies ideas as the essential unit in historiographical research and Western culture. Ideas operate on several levels at once. Thus, in order to understand a philosophical theory, the biographical component and social context of the author life are crucial, as well as his works and possible interpretations related to this latter.

The conception of ideas as basic units which connect and operate on several levels of a cultural universe introduces a useful methodology for approaching social myths and their birth. To make a comparison between disciplines possible and to trace back the conjugation of an “idea-archetype” from a premodern context up to the core of modernity, an additional theoretical qualification can be introduced. Before proceeding to a case study of a specific idea, I will first consider how this latter is represented, channelled and perceived through different historical and social circumstances. In order to do that, we must contextualise this idea within a convincing narrative form. For this reason, I find no statement more theoretically appropriate than that by the history of religions scholar, Bruce

¹⁴ Eugenio Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico* (Rome-Bari: Laterza 1990 [1959]¹), 14; 29-31.

¹⁵ Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico*, 3-8; 14-16.

¹⁶ Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico*, 5.

¹⁷ Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico*, 77.

¹⁸ Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico*, 76.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico*, 77.

Lincoln: “Myth, then, is not just taxonomy, but ideology in narrative form.”²¹ Taxonomy is the means Lincoln uses to analyse the concept of *mythos* and show how the meaning associated with this term has changed over the ages. According to Lincoln, taxonomy is a useful instrument to analyse notions in texts. The figurative scheme of philosophical and philological categories/notions must be crossed with their interpretation in social, political, and religious contexts.²² Then, to tell the story of myth, interactions between religious, social, political spheres through or because of the hierarchic structure of these mentioned categories must be taken in account possible.

In order to approach Bouchard’s question on the myth with a first stub of an answer, I would like to mention one last reference from Lincoln’s work on myth. This quote comes from the third part of the volume “New Directions” dedicated to alternative and contemporary approaches to the study of myth. More specifically, in the seventh chapter of the volume, the author considers the peculiarity of myth according to the conclusion of three different scholars involved in research on myth: George Dumézil (1898-1986); Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009); Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). Here follows:

Still, in properly romantic fashion, each man took myth to be an ancient or exotic genre from which modern Euramericans might recover something of inestimable value. Regarding just what this might be, however, the three differed sharply. For Eliade, it was the archaic sense of the sacred; for Lévi-Strauss, the elementary structures of the human mind; for Dumézil, the tripartite ideology of the Indo Europeans, which set them apart from all other peoples.²³

As we learn from the biographical section,²⁴ Dumézil acted as mentor towards both Eliade and Lévi-Strauss, but his ‘pupils’ took different path in their research directions. To decipher the relevance of

²¹ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth, Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.

²² Several examples might be offered here, the most enlightening one is linked to the dichotomy *mythos* – *logos* cfr. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth, Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, 3-18.

²³ Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth, Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, 145.

²⁴ Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth, Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, 141-143.

this analysis to our case study, I will borrow Eliade's position on myth to support the structure of the methodology preliminary introduced here.

Lincoln's conception of myth in its narrative form, and Eliade's notion of sacred are crucial factors to understand the utility of Bouchard's approach to 'culture'. In order to understand this multidisciplinary nature of culture, a case study, whose relevance both on a symbolical and historical level is self-evident, is offered here.

2. Case Study: The Sacred King

In the sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier. The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king; but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his²⁵

This is a quotation from the pioneering study of magic, *The Golden Bough*.²⁶ The greater part of this book focuses on the description of a peculiar kind of metahistorical²⁷ character, the Sacred King. The author of the volume, the Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer (1854-1941), offers several examples that are directly connected to or derived from this archetypical figure. The first case

²⁵ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough – A Study in Magic and Religion*, Part. I, Vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1920), 8-9.

²⁶ The painting of Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), *The Golden Bough* (1834), had a specific influence and inspirational role in Frazer's literary production, cfr. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1.

²⁷ I use the term "metahistorical" to designate a symbol or a concept, whose meaning involves anthropological, historical, and literary fields, at once.

considered is that of the ‘king of the wood’.²⁸ According to Frazer, this was attributed to the priest destined to oversee and defend the sacred grove of Diana Nemorensis (literally, “Diana of the Woodland Glade”),²⁹ located on Alban hills near the Lake of Nemi.³⁰ The authority the priest was granted with, namely the ‘kingship of the wood’, is strictly connected to the tree he surveyed day and night. This tree represented the *axis mundi* of the sanctuary (i.e. the sacred grove) devoted to Diana. Besides being known as ‘the huntress goddess’, Frazer stresses how Diana was also “mistress of mountains, forests, and lonely glades, and sounding rivers”,³¹ and last but not least, “mistress of wild animals”.³² This relationship with and wonder before such natural elements represent a fundamental component of the symbolism connected to the goddess.

Whoever wanted to take the place of the priest must, according to the main rule of this priesthood, duel and kill the king of the wood. Frazer tries to understand the reason behind this rule and its origins. The first step in this direction is to delineate the origins of Diana’s cult. The Scottish anthropologist stresses that the worship of Diana of Nemi was instituted by the mythological character of Orestes (son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra), who (according to some sources) after the killing of Thoas, King of Tauric Chersonese, fled with his sister Iphigenia to Italy, bringing with him the image of Tauric Diana.³³ The worship of Tauric Diana was characterised (in Tauris and Greece) by bloody rituals and sacrifices. Once imported to Italy, the cult assumed a milder form. Frazer reports that within the sanctuary at Nemi grew a tree, whose branches should never be broken. The only exception was granted to the case of the “fleeing slave”. In the fortunate case of a slave escaping from his constraining situation, if he could break branch and, empowered by the exceptional infringement of the sacred norm, killed the priestly figure in single combat, then he could reign in his stead as ‘King of the Wood’.³⁴ According to the ancient Roman poet, Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.), “the fateful branch was that Golden Bough which, at Sybil’s bidding, Aeneas plucked before he essayed the perilous

²⁸ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1-43.

²⁹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 2, n. 1.

³⁰ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1-5.

³¹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 6.

³² Ibid.

³³ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 10.

³⁴ The reference is *Rex Nemorensis* (literally ‘King of the Wood’).

journey to the world of the dead.”³⁵ Thus, Frazer, in accordance with a very specific version of popular lore,³⁶ associates the gory part of the rule to the bloody sacrifices performed in Tauris, and he identifies the fleeing slave with Orestes.

Frazer, through a cultural-anthropological reconstruction, tried to decode the symbolism of ‘the hero’ by analysing the mythological element of the Golden Bough. The association, and then identification of the custodian of a cult (Orestes) with the hero of an epic poem (Aeneas) is possible by mean of the bough. The bough/broken branch grants access to another dimension.

Although the Golden Bough represents a crucial element, the symbolism linked to the *Rex Nemorensis* entails another important component in this collective representation. Frazer not only attempt to retrace previous examples associated with this rule for accessing the priestly duty, but the Scottish anthropologist also tries to identify the ‘progenitor’ of this lineage of kings. Frazer sees this in the mythological character of Virbius. This minor divinity associated with the worship of Diana Nemorensis had a previous human incarnation in the form of Hippolytus. The latter, after he had been trampled to death by the horses of Poseidon, was restored to life by Asclepius and then transferred by Artemis herself to the sacred grove.³⁷ After being resuscitated and deified, Virbius becomes the first Rex Nemorensis. Frazer stresses two factors of relevance here: Virbius is the mythical predecessor and/or *archetype* of the line of priests who served Diana under the title of King of the Wood;³⁸ “the mortal King of the Wood had for his queen the woodland Diana herself”.³⁹ The marital union between the king and the queen of the wood leads the Scottish anthropologist to another consideration. This relationship between the ‘priestly king’ and the queen provides a reliable of overview of the nature and representation of *power* in a specific context. Thus, in the following chapter Frazer states:

³⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 11.

³⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 11, n. 1.

³⁷ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 19.

³⁸ All those who later succeeded him, had to face the same violent death Virbius suffered from.

³⁹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 40.

The union of royal title with priestly duties was common in ancient Italy and Greece. At Rome and in other cities of Latium there was a priest called the Sacrificial King or King of the Sacred Rites, and his wife bore the title of Queen of the Sacred Rites. In republican Athens the second annual magistrate of the state was called the King, and his wife the Queen; the functions of both were religious.⁴⁰

The symbolism associated with the unification of royal and priestly duties is self-evident. King and Queen oversee both of these functions because of their union. The couple subsumes the union of royal and sacred power, man and woman, god and goddess. This binary sexualized representation of power “works” not only because of the unification between the sacred and secular dimensions, but because of the nature of this union. By taking the example of the two Spartan kings who were, at the same time, officiants and priests of the worship of Zeus and Heavenly Zeus,⁴¹ Frazer shows that the origin of royalty is divine. Spartan kings exerted their royal power and offered all state sacrifices, because they were considered direct descendants of god (i.e. Zeus). The divine couple represents, holds, and express the essence of *power* in its entirety (i.e. royal and spiritual features combined). Given this category of the priestly kingship, Frazer considers (in the second volume of the first part)⁴² several cases in which the sovereign oversees and exerts both spiritual and royal power. In so doing, he aims to connect the figure of the leader to a telluric dimension.⁴³ This implies another factor in the mechanism of the “divinization” of the king, that is to consider this figure liable for any possible change in the natural environment. More specifically, being “king or priest” “endowed with supernatural powers”⁴⁴ entails both privileges and burdens towards social context. If we can discern a privilege in the control of the course of nature, then, at the same time, the occurrence of any natural calamity (i.e. storms with consequent failure of crops, famines etc...) is the direct responsibility of

⁴⁰ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 44.

⁴¹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 46-47.

⁴² Frazer, *The Golden Bough – A Study in Magic and Religion*, Part. I, Vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1920), 171-194; 266-323; 324-348.

⁴³ Cfr. Frazer, “Departmental Kings of Nature”, in *The Golden Bough*, Part. I, Vol. II, 1-6.

⁴⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Part. II, 1.

the divine king.⁴⁵ The fact of considering the sovereign responsible for something also implies that this latter could be held accountable for specific actions, and punished. More precisely, this “guilt” might also entail the execution of the leader. Several reasons could put the king to death,⁴⁶ but one interests Frazer the most, in the divine power connected to the kingship. The author shows that many cases of the ritual murder and killing of the king are possible declination of the rule of the priesthood of Diana Nemorensis’ sanctuary. Any of the bloody rituals thereby described aim to eliminate the leader to obtain his power. The nature of this power is complex. Although divine kingship is given to a mortal exponent of the earthly world, the investment with this charge mean a change in the perspective of social and political dynamics. Any competitor for the throne wishes to obtain and to participate in the divine life. Killing the king means, for the individual of a premodern social context, obtaining (in specific cases) his divine soul but, at the same time, leaving aside the mortal spoils. Frazer emphasizes this aspect of the “mortality of the gods”: the bloody sacrifice, killing, or murder culminates in the transfer of the divine soul to a new body/exponent of society.⁴⁷

One last aspect should be considered here: this manifestation of power is connected to a peculiar vision of history. The religious and political spheres coincide and are ruled by the same figure, because the manifestation of power occurs in precisely this way. The Sacred King is a symbol which gathers meanings and necessities of different natures - first and foremost, social and religious ones. According to the methodology previously introduced, the emotional part of the myth is well represented by the dynamic linked to the ritual killing. A religious (priestly) value is linked to the union/marriage with Diana of the Woodland Glade.

Further explanations and interpretations will be offered in the end. An aspect I would like to stress, for now, is the fact that the Sacred King is a symbol, a representation of social anxieties and expectations, as well as the expression of the sacred in its pure form. What should not be missed here is that this symbol belongs to broader, archetypical form, expressed in a narrative form.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Part. III, 9-119.

⁴⁷ Frazer, *The Golden Bough – A Study in Magic and Religion*, Part. III, 198-199.

3. Eliade's *Homo Religiosus* and Its Desacralization

At the end of the methodological premise, I introduced, through a passage from Lincoln's work, what seems to be the characterizing feature of myth according to the history of religions scholar, Mircea Eliade, that is "the archaic sense of sacred".⁴⁸ The adjective archaic is not chosen randomly. Given Bouchard's conceptualization of myth,⁴⁹ or more specifically the conceptual gap separating premodern civilizations and modern societies heavily structured along the Enlightenment's social conformities, it is possible to understand what this sense of archaicness consists of. A more accurate insight was provided by Sellier, who listed among the main distinguishing traits of religious myth the fact of presenting itself as a 'foundational tale'.⁵⁰ In the first pages of *The Sacred and The Profane*, Eliade seems to concur with this statement:

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.⁵¹

In this passage it is already possible to find most of the elements that characterize Eliade's hierophany (literally, 'manifestation of the sacred') and theophany ('manifestation of god'). This is the essence of the experience and representation of the world according to a specific process of religious valorisation:⁵² before talking about a world, this latter must be founded. What does that mean? To "separate chaos from cosmos", in other words, is to discern what is sacred from what is not. Eliade then introduces the dichotomy between the Sacred and the Profane. The experience of Sacred is qualitatively different from that of Profane. The main difference between the two categories, says

⁴⁸ See note 25.

⁴⁹ Bouchard, *Social Myth and Collective Imaginaries*, 5.

⁵⁰ Sellier, "Qu'est-ce qu'un mythe littéraire ? ", 113.

⁵¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane* (New York: Harvest, 1987), 22.

⁵² Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 23.

Eliade, lies in the perception of space. If nonreligious man finds only certain meaningful spots in the world (like his birthplace), then religious man - "*homo religiosus*" - has a constant source of meanings (like a church or a temple).⁵³ The foundation of a sacred area or place is linked to a process of consecration. In its most basic form, this latter act consists in demarcating the sacred cosmos from chaos. Chaos is everything excluded or outside of this consecrated area. But the most pressing question is: how does a place become sacred? Eliade provides an answer:

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.⁵⁴

This statement clarifies what this foundational act means and implies. Eliade says that for *homo religiosus* a sacred place represents an experience of continuity. More specifically, the Romanian scholar shows that the separation between the profane world and a holy site is the *threshold*. The threshold, or doorway "shows immediate solution of continuity" and represents a "vehicle of passage from the one space to the other".⁵⁵ Another crucial factor to stress is the fact that at the threshold, or at the edge of any sanctuary boundaries, it is possible to find certain intermediary beings. The threshold has its guardians, gods, and spirits, who prevent hostiles from entering. By sending specific *signs*, these entities also interact and operate on the same level of the individual involved in this dimension of the sacred.

The irruption of gods helps in the foundational act, as well as in the defense of the sacred cosmos. However, theophanies and hierophanies have no sense without a total immersion on the part of the individual in the dimension of the sacred. Going back to the foundation of the sacred site, intermediary beings help the individual by showing the most sacred place where to found a consecrated site. Once the spot for the temple or church has been chosen, this point becomes the axis mundi for the religious community installed there. The sense of sacred, however, is not confined to

⁵³ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 24.

⁵⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 26.

⁵⁵ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 25.

the first foundational act, for which time is not conceived in a linear way. The conception of time in the sacred is cyclical,⁵⁶ which very much implies that the cosmogonic act (i.e. the act of choosing and laying the foundation of a universal point of reference, namely the *axis mundi*) should be eternally performed and repeated. According to Eliade, the fact of eternally recreating a sacred cosmos through, for example, foundational rituals (e.g., by positioning a spear in the centre of the village or a smoke hole in the roof of a temple)⁵⁷ allows the individual to participate in the life of gods.⁵⁸ Eliade's *homo religiosus* is in touch with divine life and totally plunged into the dimension of sacred. This latter conception of the individual aiming his actions towards the perpetuation of the dimension of the sacred also concerns the use of symbols and a convincing narrative, in this case: myth. However, if the sense of sacred was omnipresent and well-developed in premodern social contexts, then with the advent of the modernity, both heroic mythologies based on a solar structure (solar hierophanies) and divinized nature were subjected to a process of desacralization.⁵⁹ More specifically, Eliade identifies the very beginning of this fall of the sacred cosmos in the diffusion of Christianity and the historicization of the figure of Christ.

Conclusions

Although it is attested that there are modern social myths which are characterized by aims other than the sense of the sacred, this latter played a major role in the conception, representation, and narrative of symbols from antiquity up until the advent of modernity. The process of desacralization here introduced by Eliade not only involves *homo religiosus* himself, but the symbols of his world. All the symbolical elements belonging to the 'story' of the death of the sacred king suffered are destined to the same fate of Eliade's sacred cosmos. If we approach the myth of the king according to Lincoln's perspective ("Myth, then, is not just taxonomy, but ideology in narrative form"),⁶⁰ then we can discern the seeds of modernity. The killing of the king was aimed to emphasize and celebrate the qualitatively

⁵⁶ Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History* (New York, Bollingen, 1954), 57-59.

⁵⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 25.

⁵⁸ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 26.

⁵⁹ Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 154; 158.

⁶⁰ Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth, Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, 147.

alternative dimension of sacred. The mythical representation of the priestly king was both the expression of sacred (hierophany) and of power (kratophany). All those involved in the process of *imitatio dei* (the “imitation of gods”) by considering the king responsible for earthly/historical facts and equal to gods, expressed their sentiments by abiding to a ritual that was part of the mythical representation. The slaying of the king manifests the most emotional part of the community, as well as a story of power recreated every time through a kind of eternal return between two polarities: the myth (symbolical and rational part) and rites (emotional and irrational part). According to this dynamic, the death of the sacred king harbors and symbolizes the beginning and end of all religious civilization. More specifically, by adopting Bouchard’s cultural model, it is possible to see the beginning of the desacralization process in the beginning of modernity. As part of a modern mythological narrative (Lincoln), the death of the king represents the sacrifice of the notion of the sacred (Eliade) on the altar of modernity. Thus, the case study here offered is relevant because of the symbolical death and rebirth of myth through a more convincing modern narrative: the myth of the king ends its existence to introduce the myth of personal sovereignty. This “storytelling of power” presents us with two considerations: firstly, the topic of the Western cultural imagination interconnects different fields of study; and in its basic essence, the conception of modern collective imaginaries is yet another testimony to the maxim: “the future has an ancient heart”.

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