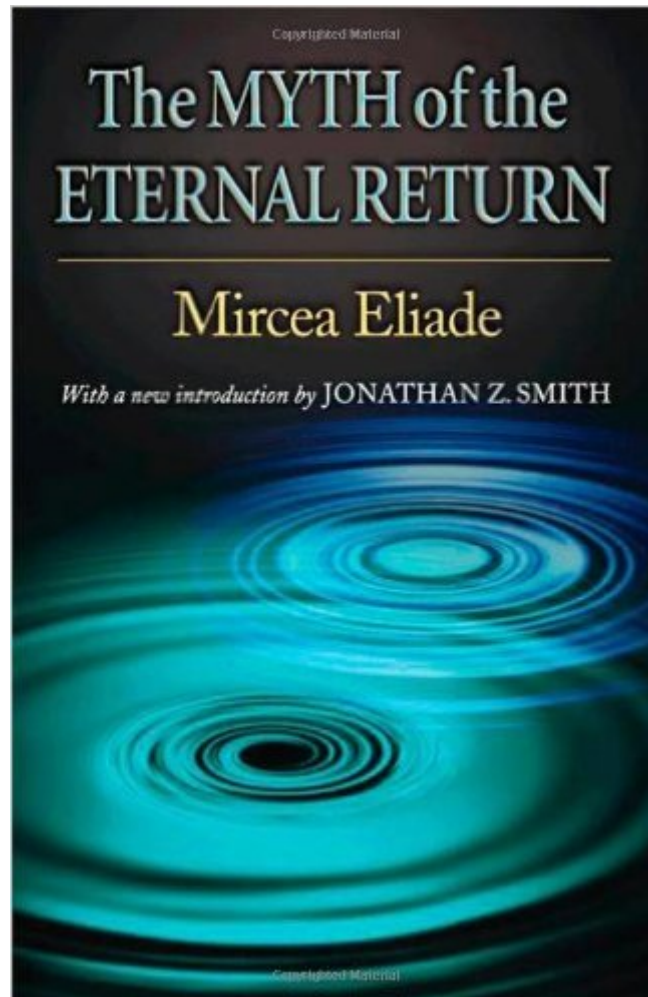


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The Myth Of The Eternal Return: Cosmos And History (Bollingen Series (General))



Synopsis

This founding work of the history of religions, first published in English in 1954, secured the North American reputation of the Romanian émigré-scholar Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). Making reference to an astonishing number of cultures and drawing on scholarship published in no less than half a dozen European languages, Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* makes both intelligible and compelling the religious expressions and activities of a wide variety of archaic and "primitive" religious cultures. While acknowledging that a return to the "archaic" is no longer possible, Eliade passionately insists on the value of understanding this view in order to enrich our contemporary imagination of what it is to be human. Jonathan Z. Smith's new introduction provides the contextual background to the book and presents a critical outline of Eliade's argument in a way that encourages readers to engage in an informed conversation with this classic text.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Somewhere on the cover, or in the preface, or even in the introductions to other of his many profound works in the field of comparative religious studies, one will find Eliade's famous counsel: "I consider it the most significant of my books; and when asked in what order they should be read, I always recommend beginning with *The Myth of the Eternal Return*." One of the enduring monuments of twentieth century academic writing, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* expounds Eliade's seminal ruminations on the advent of the nuclear, or post-modern era - the naissance of our capacity for apocalyptic self-annihilation - an attempt to demonstrate in analyzable terms the relation

between the foundations of the contemporary psyche to the seemingly adventitious madness which actively anticipates (and even militates in favor of) an end-time, an Armageddon, a Judgment Day, if you will. Eliade thus asks the arch-question: "What can protect us from the terror of history?" The discussion is framed within a comparison between what Eliade deems as the distinctive difference between the ancient and modern, the archaic (or primitive) and contemporary world-view. The modern envisions reality as a series of events which fulminate in a linear, progressive history - a history which had a beginning and will have an end. The ancient experiences reality as an endless, cyclic repetition of primordial acts. "... the life of archaic man (a life reduced to the repetition of archetypal acts, that is, to categories and not to events, to the unceasing rehearsal of the same primordial myths) although it takes place in time, does not bear the burden of time, does not record time's irreversibility; in other words, completely ignores what is especially characteristic and decisive in a consciousness of time.

I am a newcomer to the scholarship of Eliade, being referred to him, through lecture, only recently by the late Terence McKenna (who explicitly mentions the universally respected academic cornerstone "Shamanism") and Stephan Hoeller. In my initial interest for finding his works I was concerned with where to enter the massive corpus, having already a keen insight into the subjects of cultural and religious psychology (that is to say, their history). By reading a fair amount of reviews on the highly rated tomes, I came across one that mentions Eliade himself recommending this particular offering as a starting place to his brand of information; this a result of Eliade being asked--as he often was, apparently--basically, 'Where would one begin with you?' Having that come straight from the source, it was simply a matter of placing my order (along with "Shamanism"), and embarking upon my studies in his stream of thought. I could regale the reader with a long and involved report, but would rather say something more to the point: I cannot praise this book too much. It comes highly recommended to anyone interested in the main differences, psychologically speaking, between our distant "ahistorical" ancestors' (from across the globe) and our own "historicistic" modes of religious worship, social activity, and spiritual reconciliation to "time". Eliade touches upon the non-Jungian archetypes that comprise the tribal structure, and how actual events became interpreted mythologically (thus meaning nothing in themselves); how archaic man was clearly freer than we, his time-bound successors--freer to approach the deity, to appease the deity, to co-create with the deity, et cetera.

It is always a joy to read a great man's greatest book- and the author himself considered this to be

the most significant of all his works. He would expand the central concepts elsewhere, but it is here that they first seem to burst forth. The way he rattles out references and examples with only a line or footnote you get the feeling that he can't be bothered with detailed analysis because he is too caught up with the central ideas and is being swept along with them. It is an infectious enthusiasm. The central idea here is that for traditional man (man before our brief and temporary modern epoch) no act or object was real if it did not repeat or imitate an archetype. All meaning, all reality, flowed down from above. The goal was to achieve connection through the divine center with the archetype and therefore become one with the god or hero, indeed to abolish profane time itself and be transported into the mythical moment when the original model took place. This wasn't superstitious imitation; it was becoming one with true reality. Nothing in a traditional society had any reality if it had no connection to the Divine- from buildings, cities, clothing, utensils- or your own life. The goal of life was to find the center of your being in the manner of the great heroes. Through arduous seeking and wandering through the profane and illusory earthly existence one would finally find the center and breakthrough into a life that was real, enduring, and effective. The ultimate expression of this mode of life and behavior in the West was Platonic philosophy. In reading this book I could not but wonder if this principle is not at the deepest core of every human being, and the reason why everything "modern" inevitably seems to be so cheap, meaningless, and illusory.

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