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**BETWEEN SACRUM AND PROFANUM. THE PROBLEM OF  
MYTH IN THE WORKS OF  
MIRCEA ELIADE AND LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI**

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**Abstract:** In 1966, two thinkers – Mircea Eliade and Leszek Kołakowski – independently of each other carried out a comprehensive analysis of the mythological sphere of human life. Each became an important researcher in the philosophy of culture and religion not only in his own country but also in the world. In their view, myth serves the human being to explain the existence of the world, of which we remain a constituent element, or it serves as a defence against the destructive influence of the Enlightenment heritage. Rationalistic anthropological concepts abolish boundaries that make it impossible for human beings to orient themselves axiologically, while myth sets strict boundaries between what is good and bad in human conduct. Myth is a response to transience, fear, uncertainty and human despair in the choice between individual freedom and autonomy and acceptance of and submission to the sacral order. Both Eliade and Kołakowski consider myth in relation to the tension between sacrum and profanum. They refer to the same concepts in their research to explain what myth is. The aim of this paper is to answer whether they interpret in the same way what myth is and what its significance for human existence is.

**Key words:** Myth, Leszek Kołakowski, Mircea Eliade, sacrum, profanum, religion, human being, sacral order.

Mircea Eliade and Leszek Kołakowski are European intellectuals who, independently of each other, in 1966 completed monumental works (Eliade – *Aspects of Myth*; Kołakowski – *The Presence of Myth*) on the question of what the phenomenon of myth is and what role it plays in human life. They both state that myth is a fundamental component of human existence, which protects human reason from the randomness of fate and determines the meaningfulness of life. It is a response of the irrational part of the human constitution to the indifference of the surrounding reality. Both thinkers do not come from Western Europe, but in the course of their lives, were forced to emigrate in that direction for political reasons (Paris, Chicago, among others). Both were involved in totalitarianism [Eliade – fascism (Livezeanu, 2003) Kołakowski – communism (Turoń-Kowalska 2018)] as intellectuals supporting the ideology. In their analyses, both come to the conclusion that “religion is something more”; that without myth, human being does not function properly; that there is a constant tension between the *sacrum* and the *profanum*, which has a direct impact on people’s existence in the world. This article aims to compare these two concepts, whose authors have permanently found a leading place in international discussion. More, they set its benchmark.

## 1. Kołakowski’s need and search for a definition of myth

Kołakowski, one of the most important Polish thinkers in the philosophy of culture and in the study of the phenomenon of myth, was of the opinion that the widespread Nietzschean or Sartrean chimera, according to which man can completely liberate himself, liberate himself from everything – from every tradition and from every existing sense, and that every sense can be decreed or abolished at any time by the power of arbitrary will or whim. The chimera, instead of opening before man the perspective of divine self-creation, suspends him in darkness. In this very darkness, where everything is equally good, everything is equally indifferent (Kołakowski 1984, 173), he would repeat after Fyodor Dostoevsky that if there is no God, everything is permitted. Kołakowski upholds the Russian writer’s statement and undermines Nietzschean nihilism. The affirmation of a world in which the individual remains outside good and evil is unacceptable. It abrogates the imperative to make a decision and inevitably connected with it human responsibility. Within the framework of nihilism, total negation of the incurable world can only mean total affirmation, but for Kołakowski, it is only apparent and unattainable, and its attempt can become a convenient justification for remaining outside any criteria of distinguishing good and evil. In the post-Nietzschean era, one can see the absence of absolutely no “master over oneself”; the old world of

values, which was theological, has collapsed. In short, we have no higher authority above us since God cannot exist, now we ourselves are God (Nietzsche 1971, 11).

Kołąkowski's critical stance as a philosopher of culture towards such a state of affairs brings him to seek an answer to the question of the legitimacy of the mythological order in culture in our contemporary times. It seems that the world in which the individual is the centre of interest, the Cartesian "I", which has become the creator of the surrounding reality, has, according to Nietzschean prophecy, invalidated the mythical sphere of man. However, Kołąkowski, like Eliade, agrees that myths and symbols, mystical rituals and techniques, legends and beliefs containing more or less explicitly the *concordantia oppositorum* – the merging of opposites, the fusion of pieces reveal above all man's deep dissatisfaction with the situation in which he currently finds himself, and which we define as the human condition (Eliade 1994, 127-128). Kołąkowski's question about *conditio humana* reveals that self-consciousness implies to the human being an image of reality as radically different from what it is. This has to do primarily with the inability to accept one's own being. "Not-self" appears as radically alien, indifferent, distant. The affirmation of individual life can be achieved through reintegration into an infinite and absolute reality. We are thus confronted with a sense of alienation of the human being, who tries to "fit" their own history and cancel out the feeling of alienation. The search for meaning exceeds scientific cognition, which is not sufficient -- its main task revolves around placing empirical phenomena in order. "Thus, at the most cursory glance, it is evident that in all cases, the point is the same: to avoid consenting to an accidental world, exhausting itself each time in its impermanent situation, which is what it is now and refers to nothing. (...) All reasons in which mythical consciousness is rooted, both in its original variety and in its metaphysical extensions, are thus acts of value affirmation. They can be fruitful insofar as they satisfy a real need to tame the world of experience through its understanding interpretation, relating it to an unconditioned being. But the ultimate rationales, which guide the choice of convictions in scientific thinking, are also acts of value judgements" (Kołąkowski 2005, 18-19). This is the need to justify diverse experiences as meaningful through trust in a purposeful order; the need for the permanence of human values that transcend biological permanence; and the need to have a single, unchanging image of the world to which we relate given experiences.

This brings Kołąkowski to the heart of the answer to the question of the human condition: the experience of the world's indifference and the attempt to overcome it. The suffering of all kinds is evidence of indifference; "What we escape from," he wrote, "is the experience of the world's indifference, and attempts to overcome this indifference

constitute the central sense of the human struggle with fate in its everydayness and in its extremes” (Kořakowski 2005, 106). Kořakowski inscribes in human nature precisely this experience, the feeling of the external world as *Not-Self*. Man is a rational being who not only participates in being in the world but has the capacity to relate intelligibly to his participation in it. He, therefore, acquires a specific distance from the world around him and in relation to himself as part of that world. “It is not that he is a sentient and sensitive subject that distinguishes him among living creatures, but that he is able to become a subject for himself, i.e., to acquire a split consciousness that becomes its own observer; that he not only relates intelligibly to the world, but relates intelligibly to this intelligibility itself; that he not only knows that he is in the world, but is one who knows that he knows, or rather, that he is conscious of being conscious precisely” (Kořakowski 2005, 170-171). Myth allows us to abolish the indifference of the world by attributing meaningfulness through non-empirical qualities. Mythologies aim to understand things in relation to their pre-empirical order and to create a certain set of values. Kořakowski does not define myth directly, he tries to sketch a certain intuition that will allow us to understand what it is and what its function is. A community living in a given culture has a chance to interpret the world and preserve its identity through the process of teleologization. This process involves a shift from intersubjective experiences to an objective dimension. From experiences in society to superegotic values, truth or continuity of being. Myth ensures the coherence and continuity of the human mode of existence and the integration of the consciousness of the collective subject – humanity. Humanity, in turn, creates culture on the basis of myth, thus a given culture always becomes an image of this myth. Any diagnosis of the state of culture will be a question about the myths that form the basis of its functioning.

## 2. Eliade’s need and search for a definition of myth

For Mircea Eliade, too, the importance of myth plays a fundamental role in the creation of social structures and the formation of religious consciousness. In archaic culture, it is always a true story, explaining various aspects of life based on the *sacrum*. Eliade says that the difficulty of defining myth lies in the lack of consensus among scholars and, at the same time, its accessibility to laypeople. He doubts that a definition of myth would be able to encompass the types and functions of myths in all traditional and archaic societies. Eliade defines myth as follows: “Myth tells a sacred story, it describes an event that took place in the initial period, the legendary time of ‘beginnings’. In other words, the myth tells how, through the achievements of Supernatural Beings, our reality came into being; either a global reality – the Cosmos – or just

a certain fragment of it: an island, a plant species, human behaviour, an institution. So it is always a story of 'creation', an account of how something came into being, began to be. Myth speaks only of what has actually happened, of what has manifested itself" (Eliade 1998, 12). This is a very general way of defining what myth is. At the starting point, however, an important point stands out: the protagonists of myths are always supernatural beings whose significance is determined by their creative activity of 'origins'. "In sum, myths describe diverse and sometimes dramatic incursions of the realm of the sacred (or 'supernatural') into the World. It is on this intrusion that the World is founded, and it is because of it that the World is as we see it today. What is more: it is due to the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man is what he is today – a mortal, sexual and culture-creating being. [...] Myth is considered sacred history and at the same time 'true history' because it relates to the real factors" (Eliade 1998, 11-12; Eliade 1999, 31). To sum up: myth becomes a model of human beings' behaviour, it determines all significant human activities. As a model of human activity, it constitutes the absolute and fundamental basis of cultural and social life. Its metaphysical and theological character performs an educative and educational function through proper reading and understanding of the sacred message. At the same time, it provides man with the tools with which to liberate himself from the terror of his own transience (Rega 2001, 105).

Kořakowski, in his essay "Epistemology of Strip-tease", describing the meaning of the biblical myth in relation to the contemporary problems of the European civilisation, defined the same thing as Eliade: a human being is what he is because of the intervention of a transcendent being. The Polish philosopher claims that nudity is not experiential, it is not contractual. One should be ashamed of nakedness, i.e. man learns that nakedness exists not from himself, not from observation, but it must be contained in the universal mind. In the myth-making work of the ancient Hebrews, the true nature of man is his shame (the awareness of nakedness). Shame, however, is made visible with the gaze of the other "Other", in this case, God. The primitive hid in the bushes, ashamed of their nakedness and this shame shaped the definition of man in this culture (Kořakowski 2002, 18-20). For Eliade, too, after all, all human creativity is determined by reference to a Supernatural Being. Man feels that he is torn and separated from something. The difficulty of defining the nature of this disconnection lies in the impression that he is separated from "something" powerful, completely different. This separation is difficult to capture in words. In the depths of his being, human longs for a return to a timeless, primordial state before the advent of History. This disconnection is like some kind of tear in man (what Kořakowski called eternal schizophrenia) and in the world together. For Eliade, it is a "fall"

because it meant a fatal catastrophe for the human race, and at the same time, an ontological change in the structure of the world (Eliade 1994, 127-128; Eliade 1966, 402-404). Myth allows us to set reality in order, to interpret it properly and to have a sense of understanding of the surrounding world and, most importantly, of the place of man. Within myth, we are always dealing with a certain "creation", explaining how the reality was created, what attitudes will be desired and expected of the human being; myth is the pattern of all meaningful activities, both of everyday life and the sphere of the *sacrum*. Through knowledge of myth, man gains power over the thing in question and can operate it in any way he wishes. This power consists rather in knowledge, which is expressed in the solemn narrative of the myth. Through the ritual of reading, the primordial bond between man and the *sacrum*, as well as his relationship with the natural order, is updated.

Myth, in a certain way, codifies beliefs, and through this, it becomes the guardian of moral principles and necessarily influences the practical side of human life. Kołakowski, like Eliade, calls mythical any conviction that not only transcends finite experience but relativizes all possible experience. In the moral perspective, the absolute and infinite reality limits the fundamental human experience of the world and constitutes the need for man's responsibility towards himself, for permanent involvement in the improvement of his imperfect nature. Man and the world are ontologically deficient phenomena, remaining imperfect in their essence, which is why Kołakowski points out that the source of morality is transcendence. Myth does not provide knowledge but reveals the area of values to which the participant has access. Symbolic cognition does not bear the mark of scientific cognition, religious symbols refer to the non-empirical sphere, hence the question of religious values is justified. Myth preserves the values that testify to its humanity, through which it recognises the inner sense of the reality around it. "The world of values is a mythical reality. The components of experience, situations and things, insofar as we experience them as equipped with qualities of value, we experience as participating in this reality which transcends absolutely the totality of possible experience. We know this reality in such a way that we relate the finite experience to it, in the knowledge that no finite experience can reach it. We know it, therefore, as the *praecedens* of all experience, of all history, of all humanity, of all personal life, of all social coexistence of human beings" (Kołakowski 2005, 46).

### 3. History according to Kołakowski

If mythic consciousness is present in any interpretation of the world and its values, it is also present in any understanding of history

as meaningful. This means that we must relate every event to what is the order intentionally associated with history or what is the vocation of human in history. For an event to become intelligible (meaningful), it is not sufficient that it can be interpreted because of the empirically experiential dependencies of historical processes. In this way, mythical consciousness would be used to understand events in the likeness of natural events, and this is undeniably “something more” for Kołakowski. Sensibility here does not reveal itself through extra-human or motivational conditions. It makes us always relate the event to the goal towards which the historical course is moving or relate it to the human vocation that is actualised in history. “The presence of a vocation or potency that reinvents its laws, or sets empirical existence in motion directed towards the convergence of existence with essence, does not require a providential project. It requires, nevertheless, a mythical instance of appeal which overtakes all historicity and makes it relative, thus making the event understandable as compatible or incompatible with the human vocation” (Kołakowski 2005, 52). In this context, then, the essence of human does not consist in his being a reality or a hypothesis in historical history. It becomes a legitimate rule for understanding events because of the extra-temporal set of requirements that co-determine humanity on the condition that this extra-temporal set precedes all human historicity. This, according to Kołakowski, allows for an almost fundamental conundrum in the post-Nietzschean era, in particular in the post-Ottoman era: only such an extra-temporal set justifies in a meaningful way that we can speak of inhuman situations and demand their abolition; that we can define certain circumstances as contrary to the idea of humanity and must be completely eroded from our world. If the *eidōs* of humanity that precedes the actual existence of a human being was absent, we could not speak of situations opposed to the idea of humanity. From an empirical point of view, history closed within the limits of events, despite the causal explanation, causes human to be called to nothing, humanity requires nothing special and demands nothing. Human, more or less true, is what he is in every given moment. The appeal to extra-temporality in myth is undeniably necessary. It is also necessary for the extra-temporal to precede human historicity. Kołakowski’s conclusion is as follows: “Therefore, also through the myth present in us what happens, therefore practically our being in history renews every now and then its energy from the root of myth. Thanks to it, we gain the right to give meaning to events and the right to vote for or against anything that happens. (...) Hence factual history requires myth, hence philosophy gives birth to myth, hence we have no right to consider ourselves fully as creators of myth, but rather as its ‘momentary’ discoverers” (Kołakowski 2005, 54-55).

#### 4. History according to Eliade

In the works of Romanian thinker, we also find a description of the issue of “extra-temporality” in the sphere of myth. However, unlike in Kołakowski’s work, it is not just a justification of the sense of human action or an indispensable element of defining human dignity, but a fundamental issue for understanding in general what *homo religiosus* means and what crucial role the reactivation of Big Time plays in the context of myth. Time, similarly to space, is inhomogeneous and discontinuous for *homo religiosus*. From the ordinary duration of the history of secular time emerges a sacred time best made visible in the festive period. Rituals are a way of transcending secular time and immersing into sacred time, at which time secular time is suspended. Sacred time is actually a mythical time that is made present again. In traditional cultures, there was no awareness of the passage of time, life took place around everyday matters. Secular time did not absorb the attention of archaic man because nothing happened that required special attention. The only contact with the *sacrum* in sacred time made human feel reality in its fullness. The religious being thus lives in two kinds of time: the more important, sacred time offers a paradoxical aspect of circular, reversible, recoverable time and constitutes some form of eternal present to which human periodically returns by means of rituals (Eliade 1996, 56). Religious rituals allow one to immerse oneself in sacred time and thus, through myths, make present acts that took place *in illo tempore*. Time and space during festive rituals are the actualisation of myth. The ritual of reliving the beginning makes one experience the sacral dimension of existence by recalling the memory of the act of creation and all the rules and laws governing the cosmos, which have a direct impact on the rules and laws governing social life. Eliade mentions that “The periodic realisation of divine acts, that is, religious festivals, again instils in human the message of the sacredness of patterns. The ritual repair of boats, the ritual sowing of *yam* no longer resemble the corresponding work done outside sacred time. They are ‘more exact’, they are closer to the divine example, they are also a r i t u a l, i.e. they are religious according to their intentionality. One does not ritually repair a boat because it needs repairing, but because *in illo tempore* the gods have shown people how to repair a boat. It is no longer a matter of some empirical procedure, but a religious act, an *imitatio dei*” (Eliade 1996, 71; Eliade 1994a, 23). The imitation of the archetype, as perceived by *homo religiosus* living in the atmosphere of myth, is not only the recollection of past events that lay at the foundation of the existence of human and the world but above all, it is the making present of the content contained in the ritual. By listening to the mythical account, one enters the world of the presence of supernatural forces. The course of secular time is interrupted, and its

place is taken by sacral time, in which man becomes contemporary with the gods. Mythical history thus becomes reversible through man's participation in the ritual and is recovered anew.

The inhomogeneity of the experience of time by archaic human allows for the emergence of breaks (*ouvertures*) in the continuous line of secular time through which human enters sacred time. Its individual sections merge with one another and form a holistic whole – the past and future disappear, the phenomenon of passing, which is an indispensable element of secular time, ceases to exist. The eternal present appears. In this way, a new kind of time is created, called by Eliade sacred time. The peculiarity of the impermanence of this time makes it unable for the original situation described by the myths to belong to the historical order nor to be located in historical time. This time is interpreted as ontologically correct because supernatural forces carried out events in it that determined the creation and placing the world and human in order. Against modern tendencies, Eliade points out that in the mentality of *homo religiosus*, it is not a series of accidents in historical time that determines human's place in the world. What is decisive is the awareness that human is the product of mythical events from the primeval times. From the perspective of the living myth, a change takes place in the consciousness of man – history, secular time lose their significance in favour of mythical events performed in non-historical time. "The longing for 'beginnings' is, therefore, a religious longing. Human longs for the return of a time when the gods were actively present; he longs to live in a fresh, pure and 'strong' world – a world that would be in the state in which it came out of the Creator's hands. The periodic return to *in illud tempus* is largely explained by a longing for a fullness of the beginning" (Eliade 1996, 75; Eliade 2009, 76). Myth constantly actualises the Big Time and makes human beings move into a supra-human and supra-historical dimension, which, among other things, allows them to approach this inaccessible reality in the dimension of individual, secular existence. Myths not only explain the functioning of the world on the basis of a transcendent genesis, but they enable human beings to feel that they are co-creators in the actions of natural beings.

## 5. Sacrum profanum according to Eliade

Eliade's study of myth and religion is based on the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. These two mutually exclusive elements form an indissoluble bond and allow, on the basis of dissimilarity, to explain each other. Eliade's definition of 'sacred' indicates that it is the opposite of profane (Eliade 1996, 6). It reveals the fundamental difference that separates these two spheres by specifying that the sacred manifests itself in the profane and thus becomes recognisable in our reality. In the

process of transforming events into extra-temporal mythical models, historical elements are extracted from their natural context and become part of sacred history, which is spoken in symbolic language. Events in this process are transformed into symbols and lose their previous *profanum* character. In the situation of the appearance of the *sacrum*, the ontological status of the *profanum* changes. Paradoxically, the object of the *sacrum* belongs at the same time to the sphere of the *profanum*, while the object of the *profanum* suddenly appears as 'something quite different' (*mirum*) from its previous meaning. Let us return to the example of the boat, which was a manifestation of the divine. Thanks to the understanding of 'human activities as revealed *in illo tempore*', every activity became a sacred activity. The *sacrum* is of expansive nature, but through mythical symbols, reality becomes not only intelligible but also sacred in its deepest structure. An object belonging to the natural state of things appears as 'something quite different', the profane order is obscured in favour of the *sacrum* order. "When something 'sacred' manifests itself (*hierophany*), at the same time something is also 'hidden', it becomes implicit. Hierophany reveals the *mirum* to us; on the one hand, it is a familiar object from the natural order of things, on the other, it is 'something quite different', something mysterious, something fascinating – above all, it is something sacred. The language of myth not only reveals the inner structure of the *sacrum* but makes it possible to establish close contact with it. The *sacrum*, when 'manifesting' itself through an object, is always separated from the rest of similar things and from its environment; one could say that it partly 'falls out' of the natural order and reveals a new reality to us. Through symbolism, we move from the empirical world to the non-empirical, supernatural world by merging the two different levels but at the same time keeping them distinct. The object is different through its sanctification, its structure changes, it becomes more real. Thus what is sacred is for the religious being authentically real, containing supernatural power, efficacy and eternity. After all, the *sacrum* is placed in a timeless, indestructible, merely permanent time. Eliade's *homo religiosus* exists, resides, lives in the real world, sanctified by the intrusion of the *sacrum*. "Religious man from time to time turns to the archetype, to 'pure' states, hence the tendency to convert to the first moment, to repeat what was in the beginning. As long as we have not grasped the fact that recurrences, repetitions simplify and play the role of producers of archetypes, we will not understand how religious experiences and the continuity of divine forms are possible, in a word, how history and form are possible in the sphere of religion" (Eliade 1996, 85). The absolutely eternal *sacrum* presents itself in the impermanent *profanum*. Any human action then ceases to be a secular, individual, or unworthy activity because by means of it the human being establishes a bond with the *sacrum*. "Virtually every hierophant,

even the most elementary, reveals this paradoxical convergence of sacrum and profanum, of being and non-being, of the absolute and the relative, of eternity and becoming” (Eliade 1966, 32-33). The *a priori* notion of the *sacrum* is present in the consciousness of human regardless of the historical location or moment in which he finds himself, but it is necessary in order to give meaning to his existence. Sacred time is restored through the repetition of a certain mythical pattern. By imitating the gestures and actions of a Supernatural Being, we enter the realm of the *sacrum* and participate in the sacred, defending ourselves against the nothingness and chaos that prevailed before the mythical period. Mythic archetypes thus give a new religious dimension to the events of which human life is composed. On a phenomenological path, Eliade comes to the conclusion that sacred time and archetype are constitutive elements that describe the phenomenon of myth. They form a permanent structure through which *homo religiosus* wishes to express his experience of the *sacrum* and tries to establish the closest possible bond with it. With its help, a man tries to solve the riddle of his existence and make sense of what is transitory, transient and changeable.

## 6. Sacrum profanum according to Kołakowski

As, until recently, a fierce opponent of all kinds of religiosity and a philosopher sceptical of any kind of unquestionable and absolute resolution, Kołakowski, as a philosopher of myth and culture, concludes in his analysis *If there is no God...*: “In other words – religion really exists. Such a formula may seem insignificant, but we ascribe to it a meaning that is by no means free from dispute. It means that specifically religious values are indecomposable, that is, they fulfil instrumental functions only thanks to the fact that they are non-instrumental” (Kołakowski 2000, 231). The fundamental issue for a thinker is, therefore, the consideration of religious tradition, which is an authentic form of belief that does not pretend to reach a scientific level, that does not rid itself of its true connotations and that can only be understood within a specific cultural phenomenon, within a specific community. The understanding of religious expressions coincides with the participation of believers in all kinds of religious acts. The epistemological separation of the act of believing from the act of understanding defines the limits of the sensible. The area of the *sacrum* remains beyond such a distinction, “the understanding of words coincides with the feeling of participation in the reality to which words refer” (Kołakowski 1988, 180). In spite of the significant criticism of the rational arguments for the existence of God; the insufficient logical deductions proving that the creator’s world is the best possible one; the dogmas imposing an inherent “shame” on human; the justification

justifying partial evil with the unshakeable order of things; Kołakowski explicates the need for the existence of religion as a cultural need for the *sacrum*, in order to understand that the world in which we exist is not “an emptiness inexplicably thawed out into a multitude of individuals, emerging and annihilating them, heading in its turbulences from nowhere to nowhere, an emptiness which seems to mock us with its aimlessness in its unconsciousness and lack of affection” (Eilstein 1991, 22). The anthropocentric understanding of history brings with it the same apparent movement of the theocrats, compensating for the awareness of human weakness, self-defeat, natural human invalidity (Kołakowski 1989, 59), and so it relates to the same theme of the problem, although with the words “if there is no god, everything is allowed”, Kołakowski draws particular attention to the fact that we deprive human existence of a moral spine, of a certain reference point guiding our actions, of a sense of rightness and of the possibility of deciding, when the area of freedom of one ‘I’ overlaps with the area of freedom of another existence.

Kołakowski’s research on religion thus reveals a certain contradiction in human consciousness: rationalism and the need for a full sense of meaningfulness provided by non-rational forms. It is, therefore, necessary to consider whether it is possible for a human to participate in a mythically defined reality and, at the same time, not to participate in a reality that denies him a sense of responsibility for his decisions. Myth is a source of defence against existential anxiety, nihilistic awareness of one’s own being, it erects a structure coherent with the perspective of a happy ending, which allows one to completely tame the world and bear its strangeness. For Kołakowski, however, mythology understood in such a way carries danger and can be illusory; in order to be socially fruitful, it should be constantly suspect and the values flowing from it should never be finished and ready. Myth justifies empirical existence by an unconditioned order, while human existence itself, being within the defined limits of experience, undermines the veracity of the mythical facts assumed. “We cannot imagine at this moment a return to myths that could effectively restore the state of hierocratic despotism over secular life. Nor can we imagine a culture completely rinsed of its mythological ingredients” (Kołakowski 2005, 123), Kołakowski states, because two spheres co-present in the life of existence, the mythical and the rational, are constantly looking for the rules of their coexistence.

This coexistence is Kołakowski’s answer to the place of the kingdom of the *sacrum* and the kingdom of the *profanum* in human reality; to acknowledge the difference between them is to consent to the infinite existence of the antagonism of two spheres which jointly constitute existence, neither of which can receive complete autonomy and take over the culture. If the realm of the *sacrum* were to disappear,

we would have to face the most dangerous illusion of civilisation: a human with full plasticity could negate the human himself. If the realm of the *profanum* were to disappear, by virtue of arbitrary decisions grounded in transcendence, it would be possible to negate the most important value belonging to human – his freedom. As Kołakowski notes, “to acknowledge the difference between the *sacrum* and the *profanum* is to negate the complete autonomy of the secular order and to accept that its improvement has its limits. Since the *profanum* is defined in opposition to the *sacrum*, its imperfection must be regarded as something natural and, to a certain extent, curable” (Kołakowski 1984, 172) and *vice versa*. The intellectual history of culture, in this case, European culture, is a search for a harmonious principle of coexistence of the *sacrum* and the *profanum*; it is the history of a seemingly latent conflict, yet every now and then it manifests itself, especially at the moment of an attempt at the domination of one area over the other. The histories of all religions encompass the fundamental elements of the cultural structures of which they are composed. The mythological legacy of Europe, to which Kołakowski refers, has been eroded by rationalism, relativism and scepticism, and has emerged as a conflict reaching back to the Edenic shame and nakedness of our forefathers, who at the same time discovered in themselves a curiosity about the world and a desire to rule over it. Kołakowski agrees that “one may consider Christian religiosity – both as regards its doctrinal side and as regards its sensitivity – as a seminary of the European spirit, (...) just as in all great religions, there lives inevitably in the Christian faith a permanent tension between the image of the finite world, which reveals the Creator, and the image of this world as a negation of God” (Kołakowski 1990, 29), and permanently the kingdom of the *profanum* with its negation complements the kingdom of the *sacrum* (and *vice versa*), creating the cultural being of Europe.

## 7. Conclusions

In 1966, more than twenty years after the end of the Second World War, two Eastern European thinkers independently completed a study of the phenomenon of myth. Both Eliade’s “Aspects of Myth” and Kołakowski’s “The Presence of Myth” should provide an intellectual foundation for all thinkers dealing with the above issue. Eliade advocated a holistic, anti-reductionist, anti-evolutionist approach to religion (Doty 2000, 272; Ellwood 1999, 99). This was closely related to a certain concept of man, according to which a human being is *homo religiosus*, the objective correlate of which is the existence of the *sacrum* as the irreducible core of all religious phenomena. Myth refers to events that were made by supernatural beings in the primeval world. The time in which these events occurred is significantly different in

consciousness from secular time, in which the ordinary course of events takes place. This double perception of time – historical and *in illo tempore* – becomes the centre of the definition of myth. In every myth, there is an anti-historical attitude, regardless of the richness of its content and the diversity of its forms. Such an attitude manifests itself in a constant aspiration to stay in sacral time and an orientation towards the repetition of exemplary divine acts. Sacred time and archetype thus form the constitutive elements of myth, determining the negative attitude towards history (Mietliński 1976, 221).

Kołąkowski assumes the complete indivisibility of the phenomenon of religion into its first elements, its irreducibility to the level of atavistic nature, as a consequence of which religion is not a phenomenon that can be reduced genetically or functionally to needs whose source can be some primordial cause. In the expression 'religion really exists', for the sceptic that Kołąkowski has always been, there appears a definition of religion as a homogeneous, irreducible phenomenon that has its own object of reference. At this point, however, a fundamental difference appears between the Romanian and the Polish intellectual, which determines their further research and conclusions on the area of *sacrum* and *profanum* and the attempt to define myth: Kołąkowski rejects the existence of a supernatural reality. Religious needs are a consequence of man's alienation from nature. Religion restores him to the status of a thing by reference to the absolute, i.e. it places his life, suffering and death within the framework of a rationally conceived order within which they turn out to be values (Kołąkowski 2000, 234). Moreover, there also appears here, absent from Eliade, a justification stemming from the heritage of the Enlightenment, which restored freedom to the individual, but at the same time turned into an ideology of doubtful axiological awareness. According to Kołąkowski, it requires revision in order for humanistic beliefs not to reach a suicidal stage (Kołąkowski 1999). The Enlightenment negation of 'absolute values' revealed the danger of relativism. For Kołąkowski, the rejection of the *sacrum* means the rejection of the boundaries that define the human being. The utopia of the perfect autonomy of the human being means that there is no recognition of 'evil' because it can only be identified through the *sacrum* (Kołąkowski 1984, 173).

Despite the need for the 'coexistence' of the kingdoms in Kołąkowski's thought – *sacrum* and *profanum* – and their constant tension, behind the dialectic of *sacrum* and *profanum* in Eliade's work, there is a different meaning. With Eliade, one can also say with certainty that *sacrum* can be said to be the opposite of *profanum* (Caillois 1995, 19). The *sacrum* needs the *profanum* in order to provide a background against which it can reveal itself. The temporal, the finite and the historical are necessary in order to reveal the eternal, the

infinite and the supra-historical. Hierophany is precisely the revelation of the sacred and the secular, its essence, therefore, being to show the dialectic between the *sacrum* and the *profanum*. The *sacrum*, however, is not, as in Kołakowski's case, a part of the culture, a state of mind, a 'kingdom', bringing together a set of characteristics of a certain attitude. For Eliade, the *sacrum* is a constitutive element of human consciousness, and yet, on the other hand, Eliade gives expression to his own conviction about the real existence of the *sacrum*. The *sacrum* manifests two sides: the objective in the form of hierophany and the subjective as a permanent part of the human psyche. Hierophany is at the same time ontophany, the revelation of being – the *sacrum*. *Profanum* is non-being, the unconsecrated reality of human existence. "Religion begins where there is a full revelation of reality: both the *sacrum* – that which is in the full sense of the word, which is not illusory and disappearing – and human's relationships with the *sacrum*, relationships which are many-faceted, changeable, sometimes ambivalent, but which always place human at the heart of reality" (Eliade 1994, 9-10). The *sacrum* is always inextricably linked to hierophany. It constitutes a morphological whole in which a certain way of relating the human being to the sacred is manifested. Hierophany concretises reproduces in different variants a certain constant element – the archetype, which is a symbolic expression of the universal, existential situation of human in the world. Eliade does not understand the term 'archetype' in the sense of Jung, for him, it is above all a general, primary and model structure of the manifestation of the *sacrum*, that which guarantees the fundamental unity of human's religious experience. Kołakowski understands the archetype as an element of the collective subconscious, Eliade understands it as an ideal entity – in a Platonic or Augustinian manner – as a model pattern revealed in myth and actualised in ritual (Eliade 1992, 176-177; Eliade 1997, 117-120).

The point of contact between the two intellectuals in their research on myth, despite the different definitions, is its fundamental role for the axiological consciousness of human. For Kołakowski, the sphere of myth, contrary to the rationalistic vision of human, defines the boundaries between what is good and bad – so necessary for us to be able to speak of 'human dignity'. To invalidate the mythical sphere of a human is to make axiological orientation impossible for a human. Eliade would agree with Kołakowski. His 'sacred history' contained in myths becomes a model of human action and limits actions to imitation, to the actualisation of behaviour determined by the *sacred* in myth, and is necessarily a criterion of human conduct.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that Kołakowski, in 1966, while still a revisionist in communist Poland, though almost as a political enemy, was the author of the foreword entitled 'Mircea Eliade

– religia jako paraliż czasu’ (Mircea Eliade – religion as the paralysis of time) to the first Polish edition of the ‘Traktat o historii religii’ (Treatise on the History of Religion). It must be remembered that Kołakowski’s text had to go through censorship, moreover, it was written by an intellectual who still had one foot entangled with communism in Poland, and the other was already entering the field of philosophy of culture and myth in exile. However, he managed in one paragraph to synthesise the Eliade myth, with which their author would probably agree: “[Myth –A.T.K.] sustains invariably the fundamental desire of human: the immobility of time. This is the centre around which, according to this theory, all temporally limited and culturally bound form of religious life crystallises, especially its constitutive component – a myth. Myth is always a challenge to transience, it is a halt in the passage of time, it is that peculiar ‘happening’ that suspends the real sequence of moments and can be recreated in a version that is always as the original. (...) Human is able to free himself from his own historicity and attain, as it were, a divine *nunc-stans*, an eternal present, where there is no ‘before’ and ‘after’, no ‘earlier’ and ‘later’, but everything is always becoming” (Kołakowski, 2002a, 38-39). Despite the differences in the analytical work on myth, it is possible to add, in Kołakowski’s words, that “true participation in myth is a full act of personal acceptance of mythic realities”. And in this particular case, the Romanian and Polish intellectuals remain in the agreement.

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