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Reflections on Chicago's "Cloud Gate"

-- Jeremy Biles

April 22 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the death of Mircea Eliade, prodigious writer of novels, articles, journals, and numerous scholarly books in comparative religion. Eliade was also a "founding father" of the history of religions discipline at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he taught from 1956 until his death in 1986. From his and his colleagues' vision emerged what came to be known as the "Chicago School" of the study of religion.

Eliade's work came under fire in the years leading up to his death, and has been vigorously criticized in the decades since. He has been accused of being methodologically unsound and at times prone to conceptual inconsistency. Moreover, his endorsement, while still a young man in his native Romania, of the Iron Guard (a far-right, fascistic political group) has given rise to serious concerns regarding his early political sensibilities and their possible reverberations in his scholarship.

Notwithstanding these very real challenges -- and I have no interest in apologetics here -- Eliade remains, as Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested, the giant upon whose shoulders subsequent students of comparative religion stand.

Eliade is perhaps best known for his obsessively revisited insights into the relations between "the sacred and the profane." In his book of that title, Eliade builds on Rudolf Otto's famous formulation of the "holy," asserting that humans become "aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane." He terms this irruption of the sacred into the profane a "hierophany" -- a manifestation saturated with numinous power.

While Eliade believed that "archaic" peoples were and are particularly attuned to hierophanies, he also insisted that religious myths and symbols, though often obscured or distorted, remain alive in the contemporary world; he repeatedly drew attention to the presence of religion in popular culture, claiming that the sacred "haunts our novels as well as our films."

Indeed, the sacred haunts much art, even contemporary art apparently devoid of religious images and forces. Among the vast array of hierophanies Eliade treated in his scholarly works, the "omphalos" ("navel") and related images and objects -- sacred stones and such -- enjoy a position of privilege. The omphalos constitutes a center, or "axis mundi," around which a community can be built; it manifests a kind of sacred centripetal force, bringing order to chaos, and ensuring felicitous intercourse between the heavens and the earth. Jacob's ladder, the Ka'aba of Mecca, a cosmic tree, the omphalos at Delphi, the altar of a Christian church or a Hindu temple: Each of these indicates a site where, Eliade claims, divine power can "come to earth, the point at which the transcendent might enter the immanent."

A spectacular contemporary example of an omphalos can be found in the heart of Chicago. Within the surreal expanse of Millennium Park -- with its metallic serpentine bridge, the

extraterrestrial architecture of the Frank Gehry-designed pavilion, the gigantic and ever-changing LED faces of "Crown Fountain," and the mysterious, almost labyrinthian garden -- is an eye-catching and crowd-pleasing sculpture called "Cloud Gate." This massive, elliptical structure, designed by British artist Anish Kapoor, is made of highly polished stainless steel that reflects the city surrounding it.

Kapoor's ingenious use of reflection may usefully be submitted to an Eliadean interpretation. Not only is Chicago literally gathered, or centered, in the surface of this centric sculpture; the mirrors of this artifact, as its title suggests, also bring the sky down to earth -- a fine symbol of connection between the transcendent and the immanent.

The religious resonances do not end there. Kapoor, whose works frequently allude to mythic imagery, has designated the concave underbelly of his sculpture an omphalos. Why this peculiar reference? When passing beneath the gate, visitors can look up into the reflective vault of the chamber, and there gaze upon their own images. Seeing themselves in the curving space of this omphalos, they are part of a celestial constellation -- transformed, transcendent, often in giddy communion. This piece of contemporary art gathers the city, centering visitors around it, with a magnetism that verges on divine.

"Cloud Gate" thus attests to Eliade's continuing applicability, while demonstrating his claim that humans thirst for holiness, for experiences that lie beyond the everyday, for the irruption of the sacred into profane life. And this desire for the extraordinary finds its counterpart in modern life, which still swarms with "half-forgotten myths," elusive symbols, and disguised hierophanies -- evidence of what Eliade called "the persistence of the sacred."

I suspect that Eliade would have delighted in the mythic resonances of "Cloud Gate," here in this city where he did so much of his significant work -- for both the scholar and the sculpture put humans in touch with the sacred, drawing down the heavens to touch the earth.

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