INTRODUCTION

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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. 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.

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 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-
religious 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, Haraberezaiti in Iran, the mythical “Mount of the Lands” in Mesopotamia, Gerizim in Palestine—which, moreover, was called the “navel of the earth.” 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. According to Islamic tradition, the highest place on earth is the ka’aba, because “the Pole Star bears witness that it faces the center of Heaven.” For Christians, it is Golgotha that is on the summit of the cosmic mountain. All these beliefs express 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. It is striking that the same symbolism is found in regard to

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6 See the bibliographical references in Eliade, Myth, pp. 10 ff.
7 A. E. Wensinck and E. Burrows, cited in ibid., p. 10.
8 Wensinck, cited in ibid., p. 15.
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.”

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.”

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.

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 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 ṑāb āpsī, “the Gate of Apsū,” āpsū 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 tehom, the Hebrew equivalent of āpsū. And, just as Babylon had its Gate of Apsū, the rock of the temple in Jerusalem contained the “mouth of the tehom.”

The āpsū, the tehom 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 tehom” designate not only the point of

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10 L. I. Ringbom, Gran tempel 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.
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