

# COVID-19 as archetype rather than event: Thinking COVID-19 in the light of Eliade's 'terror of history'

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For Eliade, linear time constitutes the metaphysical substrate of modernity. Consequently, the modern subject experiences time as an irreversible series of events occurring within an absolutised history. It is this subject that 'makes' that history. By extension, this time, and the history it valorises, cannot be transcended. This sets up the modern view against a premodern one where temporality is seen in multiple ways, allowing history to be transcended by archetypes. Eliade mourns the alternative ways of being and meaning cultivated by the premodern self that have been lost to hegemonic modernity and its associated, often precarious, subjectivity. He believes that these archetypal modes need to be recovered to counter the damage caused by modernity's desire to 'make history'. I reflect on this Eliadean thesis in the light of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis, drawing on an example from the Islamic tradition to show what an archetypal, rather than event-centred, approach to the crisis might look like. Specifically, I examine the thoughts of British Muslim theologian, Abdal Hakim Murad, on COVID-19, who reflects on the phenomenon both in the light of the archetypal Islamic concept of the divine names and the event-centred capitalism of late modernity.

**Contribution:** Through an examination of Eliade's important text, the article continues the decolonial interrogation of modernity's foundations and its implications for being and acting in the world as distinct from premodern approaches. By highlighting time in both approaches, Eliade shows modernity's foundations to be just as 'theological' as those of religion.

**Keywords:** Mircea Eliade; archetypal time; terror of history; COVID-19; late modernity; Abdal Hakim Murad; divine names.

## Introduction

Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History* (Eliade 1974), in particular its chapter on the 'terror of history', can be read as an attack on the notion of event. As the importance of the autonomous historical event comes to the fore, archetypes and other transhistorical ways of viewing reality recede into the background. In this article, I want to examine some implications of seeing coronavirus not as autonomous event but as cosmic archetype. In this regard, I analyse a lecture by Cambridge academic and British Muslim theologian Abdul Hakim Murad, who does precisely that. But I will interpret Murad's ideas in the light of Eliade's general thesis and so I begin this article by examining the central arguments of *Cosmos and History*, then proceeding to Murad's perspective, before reflecting on such archetypal approaches in the light of Eliade's understanding of modernity's historicist underpinnings. The article suggests that a subjectivity cultivated on transhistorical archetypes offers an alternative to a modern self that seeks to make itself in history, together with the unpredictable consequences that may follow from the latter.

A word on our methodology may be in order here. Our approach to reading Eliade has been driven by the perspective that informs Mortimer Adler's 'Great Books' project. For Adler, there is a core of very significant ideas, contained in the 'great books', that have had an enduring historical impact (Berlau 2001). A dated ethnocentrism coloured Adler's selection and subsequent decades have rightfully expanded the list. However, I think the guiding idea that informs Adler's selection remains axial: these works undoubtedly changed the way scores of people looked at the world and so are worthy of deep, reflective readings. Adler articulated the methodology of such reading in his now famous *How to Read a Book* (Adler 1940). Here he proposed various layers of reading in order to arrive, as far as one can,

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to the meanings and arguments intended by the author. Whilst this, of course, does not forestall different interpretations, it does, at the very least, force a non-superficial engagement with the text. My approach to Eliade's text has strived to be informed by the same spirit of deep engagement. It is noteworthy that Eliade, posthumously controversial but in his time generally acknowledged as the foremost Western scholar in religion studies, considered *Cosmos and History* as his most important work.<sup>1</sup> So it certainly qualifies as a 'great book' in that it portrays the essential thinking of someone who had a determining influence on the discipline. I believe that seeking to unearth the essence of this text via Adler's method, as will be seen, highlights Eliade not only as a consequential and empathetic scholar of the 'other', via his well-known deployment of the categories of sacred time and space, but, conversely and so equally, as a scholar of 'us', that is, as a perceptive diagnostician of the modern condition.

## Reading *Cosmos and History*<sup>2</sup>

*Cosmos and History* sought to recall earlier, cosmically oriented views of time but was also a reflection on how these perspectives were displaced by the modern notion of history.<sup>3</sup> Premodern societies are aware of history, especially sacred history. But they reject any autonomous value given to the historical event itself. The event is always part of a wider cosmic scheme which allows it to be overcome through the ritual renewal of time, disciplines of the body, or by viewing the event eschatologically. Eliade's aim in *Cosmos and History* is to introduce a somewhat 'provincial' modern West to other ways of approaching time via these premodern ontologies.<sup>4</sup> In his view, such an approach is necessary because the dominant paradigm, bereft as it is of a transhistorical standpoint for understanding and explaining away the event, makes the modern subject captive to the inexorable flow of events. Unlike in premodern humanity, time cannot be renewed, escaped through bodily practice or put to an end. Moderns are compelled to live under the 'terror of history'.

Eliade focuses especially on archaic, pre-Socratic societies. For such societies, objects of the external world do not have any intrinsic value. They acquire value only because they participate in a reality that transcends them. This reality, and its associated acts and rituals, was established at the beginning of time. The passage of life now is simply an

1. See Eliade (1974:xv). Eliade additionally recommended that if his books were to be read in order, this should be the first.

2. This was one of Eliade's own titles for his draft before changing it to *The Myth of Eternal Return* at his publisher's behest for the original French publication of the book (*Le Mythe de l'éternel retour*). The original draft title was re-introduced for the English translation of the book, which was then titled *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History* (Eliade 1974:xiii). There is a suggestion here that Eliade preferred this latter title, which speaks to his concern about the modern notion of history, and so we have opted for it as our shorthand description for the book.

3. That is, events that are irreversible, unforeseeable and possessed of autonomous value.

4. 'With us it is an old conviction that Western philosophy is dangerously close to "provincializing" itself (if the expression be permitted): first by jealously isolating itself in its own tradition and ignoring, for example, the problems and solutions of Oriental thought; second by its obstinate refusal to recognize any "situations" except those of the man of the historical civilizations, in defiance of the experience of "primitive" man, of man as a member of traditional societies' (Eliade 1974:xii).

imitation of that consecrated period (*in illo tempore, ab origine*). There are obvious resonances here between this perspective and Plato's Theory of Ideas (Eliade 1974:34–35). According to Eliade, Plato's theory is a discursive recapitulation of this pre-Socratic *Zeitgeist*. For pre-Socratic humanity, the ideas were 'real' and lived as such. The archaic human being acknowledges only acts that have a primordial archetype: life is a ceaseless repetition of gestures gone before. The connection to primordiality provides meaning to life. The goal of the archaic being is to lose himself or herself in that primordiality via the said repetition. They need to lose their person to the impersonal. They see themselves as real only to the extent they cease to be selves.

Eliade brings forth numerous examples from such cultures in order to illustrate his point (Eliade 1974:51–92). Thus, purification rites are associated with archaic humanity's quest to free themselves from the recollection of sin, seen as a succession of personal events that taken together constitute history. Sin is seen as being imprisoned by the flow of events. Such a succession of events has no archetype. Rather, amongst archaic, pre-Socratic peoples, time is biological not historical. Time can be annulled and renewed. Every birth, every marriage, every new reign and so forth presents an opportunity to renew time and space and recollect the primordial archetypes. In traditional medicine also, a cure is effective only if it is linked to its mythical origin. In this constant resort to primordiality, archaic humanity strives to exist in a 'paradise of archetypes', in a continuous now, that actively opposes history. For Eliade, archaic humanity, far from desiring a lost paradise of animality, sought transcendence and spiritual beatitude. They existed as mystics at a collective level.<sup>5</sup>

After the pre-Socratic phase, however, and until the rise of modernity, there was a rise of historical consciousness (Eliade 1974:95–137). Yet this still was different from the hyper-historical consciousness that was to characterise modernity. Early agrarian societies, associated with the rise of 'history', still sought the periodic abolition of profane time and space through annual rituals of regeneration and construction rites which re-actualised cosmogony. Even the building of a house signified the mythical beginning. This period also saw the rise of the great world religions, which whilst asserting history on the one hand refused it on the other. So in Indian thought, for example, karma justifies suffering in history and time. Time by its mere existence is a symbol of a degenerating universe as per the yugas. However, the same system also offers an escape from that history through spiritual exercises. Likewise, in Christianity, the visceral nature of history and its necessity are juxtaposed by an eschatology, which ultimately overcomes this history. This history is also overcome through the salvific role of religion which cultivates conditions for individual regeneration in the face of the

5. Of course, not every archaic person was a mystic just as not every modern one is a historicist! The point here is about the kinds of norms that govern society, its dominant forms of cultivating the subject. In addition, it is noteworthy that initiatic training in archaic societies often involves strenuous spiritual techniques – techniques which are often practised by the more experienced adherents of world religions. For some of the initiatic training undergone by archaic societies, see Durkheim (1995).

unrelenting flow of events. In both cases, Indian and Christian, history is tolerated because it has ultimate meaning.<sup>6</sup> And in both religions, as of course in others, history can be overcome. There is then a profound continuity between, on the one hand, the archaic perspective which refuses 'history' (events that are irreversible, unforeseeable and possessed of autonomous value) to focus on the 'now', and, on the other, the more generally premodern one, encapsulated by the world religions, which whilst acknowledging and tolerating history have in place their own mechanisms for transcending it.

I would like to reflect here on what this Eliadean perspective implies for the concept of individuality and memory. Regarding individuality, as the goal of the archaic person is to lose his or her personality in the impersonal and the transcendent, the objective of human life is not the assertion of the self but its withdrawal. I think that it follows that in this perspective tradition can be defined as the studied loss of the self in the great primordial drama of life and its connected rituals. Tradition is the antithesis of the discrete, autonomous self. Tradition in this definition is also generative of memory. Rituals and primordial patterns of life must be remembered in order to win adherence. However, there is also a paradox at play here. It is not event-centred memory, as in history, that assumes importance but an embodied focus on primordial memory which, by that very focus, negates or minimises a concern with historical memory. The event is always seen within the larger primordial scheme where time as the flow of events is capable of being abolished or renewed. The archaic personhood is not held hostage by historical memory. Transposing, as he regularly does in his book,<sup>7</sup> to the context of modernity, Eliade notes that even historical memory tends to mythicise individual events and figures. Such figures and events tend to become absorbed under archetypes (instead of persons) and categories (in place of events).<sup>8</sup> Thus, modern popular memory works in the same manner as archaic ontology.

In Eliade's view, this resort to archetypes and categories in popular memory should not occasion surprise. It is not simply a resistance to the flow of historical events but

6. Of course, this applies to suffering as well. Given such a perspective, it is relatively straightforward to locate the role of suffering amongst both archaic peoples and adherents of world religions. Whilst suffering is inevitable, it is always meaningful because it belongs to a cosmic order. It was not unintelligible or absurd. It may have been provoked through personal fault, through malevolence, through the degeneration of time and so forth, but it could always be justified. And because its cause could be discerned, so could its cure, be it through a priest, a healer or a spiritual exercise.

7. Thus, in chapter 2 as well, for example, whilst typically drawing on numerous archaic cultures to demonstrate their regeneration of cyclical time, he remarks, towards the end of the chapter, on the Hegelian split between nature and history which breaks with this older perspective and opens the way to the current hegemony of looking at the event as irretrievable and autonomous (Eliade 1974:90).

8. Eliade provides a remarkable example of a young man in Romania who was said to have been thrown off the cliff by a jealous mountain fairy, leading his fiancée to pour out a funeral lament of great rustic beauty. All this was said to have happened 'long ago'. But the folklorist who recorded the ballad managed to track his fiancée, old but still very much alive, who said that the young man had slipped and fallen off the cliff. Within a generation, the event had become myth. But fellow villagers, who were also contemporaries of the incident, rejected the 'authentic' version. For them, the death of a young man on the eve of his wedding held a deeper significance that could only be captured by the myth (Eliade 1974:44–46)! I do not think Eliade's point in relating this incident here is to create a separation between history and myth – another discussion altogether. Rather, it is to alert the readers that the mythicisation of event is more natural than what it may appear at first sight.

shows the secondary character and transitoriness of human individuality. It is this latter that constitutes the authenticity and irreversibility of 'history' as we now know it. But such hyper-historical consciousness is a product of modernity and its cultivation of this individuality. There is nothing 'natural' about it. On the contrary, archetypes and categories fold into the impersonal, into the loss of individuality and historical memory. As we will see later, such a view of self is a de facto theology and should be seen as such. Eliade observes that we ourselves realise this impersonal at certain moments, and writes poetically:

What is personal and historical in the emotion we feel when we listen to the music of Bach, in the solution necessary for the solution of a mathematical problem, in the concentrated lucidity presupposed by the examination of a philosophical question. (pp. 47–48)

Here I think Eliade alerts us to another significant feature of time in his perspective: the moment and act of experience are transhistorical. They are shorn of time. It is once the experience passes that we capture it as history, as a pleasant memory of a time in which we listened to Bach or solved a mathematical puzzle. But the *act* of listening, solving or examining is a timeless one. It is, of course, preceded by a series of events that build to the act and followed by our memory of the act. But the act itself transcends history. The event is always subsidiary to the moment of experience, which subsequently becomes 'history'. In that moment, we lose ourselves (our sense of our 'I-ness') and we fold over into the impersonal.

Eliade's point is that folding into the impersonal has been characteristic of human collectives, not just individuals. It has formed an integral part of the metaphysical systems of archaic peoples. And as we have seen, it fundamentally resonates with the major world religions, even though the latter are more sensitive to history and the flow of time. But there are streams within these world religions that continue to echo, in a more direct way, the archaic trajectory. Unlike the concern with newness and the irreversible which is the marker of the hyper-historical mindset, these streams arc towards the origin and to repetition of primordial patterns, facilitating the absorption, even loss, of the self in transcendence.<sup>9</sup>

One such stream in relation to Islam is a perspective that sees the universe as a theatre for manifesting the divine names, with creation losing its 'I-ness' when seen in the light of this manifestation. This perspective has recently been articulated by British Muslim scholar Abdal Hakim Murad, in relation to how Muslims can view the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In this perspective, COVID-19 becomes archetype as it disappears as a discrete entity and becomes absorbed into the divine names.

9. Of course, there is 'individuality' in premodern societies, as well as cruelty, greed, jealousy, conflict and so on. But the point here, as indicated in an earlier footnote, is that free-standing individuality was not constituted as a *norm* of society and only became so with the onset of modernity. In addition, modernity's autonomous individual is not as 'free' as normatively constituted. Aside from the pull of natural human desires to which individuals are subject (and which premodern societies attempted to regulate in various ways in order to maintain tradition), such an individual is now also exposed to, and shaped by, the seductions of global capitalism which tends to normalise what some might consider excessive desire.

## Murad: COVID-19 as theophany

The stream that emphasises the divine names has its roots in the very basic theological concept of *qaḍā wal qadar*. This concept, along with belief in Allah, in the angels, in the divinely revealed books, in the prophets and in the Day of Judgment, forms the bedrock of belief in Sunni Islam. The concept entails acceptance and acknowledgement of Allah's foreknowledge of all creation and that he brings all created entities into existence according to that knowledge. Specifically, *qaḍā* refers to Allah's eternal, beginning-less knowledge of all things, whilst *qadar* refers to their coming into physical existence (Fakier 1982:38).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, all things occur only through divine will or fiat and Muslims are obligated, ultimately, to see them that way. Significantly, recognition of this fiat does not imply any negation of human responsibility. Humans, as a whole, are not privy to God's eternal knowledge and so, unaware of their location in this fiat, assume responsibility for their actions (Fakier 1982:37–40).

From this perspective, there is no open-ended history. Rather, the Muslim should strive to recognise the divine imprint in every circumstance of their lives. This, naturally, is not easy as one deals with the strains and stresses of everyday life. Still one is obligated to see life this way and the spiritual resources of the Islamic tradition are available to cultivate this attitude to existence. In the cultivation of this mode of being, the phenomena of existence come to be seen as the various reflections of God's acting. And in reflecting on God's acting, the divine names come into view.

For Murad (2020), we need to see the coronavirus from the perspective of what God may mean by it. Microbes as a category belong to the 'army of God' and at times reflect the divine names of *al-Razzāq* and *al-Laṭīf*, respectively, 'the Sustainer' and 'the Ever-Kind'. In this capacity, they enable functions such as digestion and the decomposition of dead matter, and in so doing serve to maintain the balance of creation. But, as part of this balance, they may also manifest the divine names, *al-Qaḥḥār* [the Compeller] and *al-Muntaqīm* [the Avenger]. Here they serve to humble the haughty. Murad observes that, in the Islamic tradition, small, taken-for-granted creatures such as frogs, gnats and birds played a role in the destruction of tyrants such as Pharaoh, Nimrod and Abraha. Transposed to the present, the coronavirus serves to confront the hubris of capitalism, the inequalities it generates and the environmental destruction that proceeds in its wake. Capitalism has been forced to 'fast' (at least temporarily) and its associated consumer culture has been compelled to tone down as the world now focuses on survival rather than shopping. The virus is nature's payback for our reigning form of life. In truth, says Murad, we as humans are the virus (Murad 2020).

10. It should be noted here that Fakier follows the Asharite interpretation of standard Sunni doctrine. The other interpretation of this doctrine, namely, that of the Maturidites, essentially holds to the same position although expressed in different terminology. Both schools, however, oppose the Mutazilites who believe that humans create their own acts, which would appear to lead to a more open-ended view of history.

But in forcing us to stop, the virus also allows introspection on the key features of this form of life. Here Murad is particularly concerned with its approach towards death. Being well-versed in Islamic law, Murad is cognisant of the need for adequate healthcare and the necessary medical interventions in order to tackle the virus. But his concern in this presentation is more metaphysical. In classical Islamic civilisation, such medical interventions were coupled with a healthy acceptance of death as a natural part of life. In fact, death was welcomed and Murad quotes the saying of the Prophet where death is described as the believer's precious gift.<sup>11</sup> It is the passageway to one's true home. Death in the Islamic tradition is linked to another divine name, *al-Mumīt* – God as the causer of death – and so is another reflection of God's acting in this world. The modern unease with death resides in maintaining a nothingness beyond it. For Murad, this belief in a void is the major 'terrorism' of the age. Atheism offers none of the timeless rituals and hope that characterises premodern approaches to death. The modern unease ('the epidemic of fear and sorrow' as Murad calls it) is not only with death, but also with the frailty of the world. Unemployment, stock market dives and business failures in the wake of the virus have naturally caused large-scale consternation. But, for Murad, the lessons to be drawn from these, as directed to his primarily Muslim audience, are for a return to primordial Islamic principles. These include, as indicated, the acceptance of death as part of the natural cycle of the universe. It also includes the acceptance of all things, both weal and woe, as reflections of God's creative activity. This activity may play out in divine names of majesty (*jalāl*), such as the 'Compeller' or names of beauty (*jamāl*) such as the 'Sustainer'. Either way, it is for the Muslim to recognise God behind all things. Upon this recognition, he or she can develop the qualities of *tawakkul* [trust in God], *riḍā* [contentment with divine decree] and *taslīm* [willing submission to God]. These are the hallmarks of the *walī*, most often defined as the 'friend of God', but which Murad significantly translates as the 'truly Muslim person'. Such recognition requires spiritual practice. Murad sees the enforced lockdown caused by the virus as an ideal opportunity to undergo *khalwah* [seclusion], a practice typically associated with Sufi orders,<sup>12</sup> and which allows a studied withdrawal of the self from excessive connection to the world to be again absorbed under primordial principles (Murad 2020).

In Murad, like Eliade, time is apparent rather than real. Murad asserts history and briefly refers to the 'end times' in which he hints we now live. There is an echo of Eliade's reference to the Kali Yuga here (Eliade 1974:113–115). However, such historical time is of minimal importance. For Murad, time in reality reflects God's names and – here

11. According to the website 'Hadith of the Day', there is a prophetic saying in Tirmidhi which is translated as follows: 'the gift to a believer is death'. But this saying needs to be seen in the light of another, contained in Bukhari and quoted by the same website, which states, '[n]one of you should wish for death because of a calamity befalling him; but if he has to wish for death, he should say: "O Allah! Keep me alive as long as life is better for me, and let me die if death is better for me."' See 'Death', 2019, viewed 11 May 2021, from <https://hadithoftheday.com/death/>.

12. Murad, in his presentation though, connects it to the practice of the Prophet as well as Mary, mother of Jesus.

we extend Murad's argument – as God is beyond linear time, it takes place in the 'now'. But it is for the Muslim to connect to that 'now' and events such as COVID-19 are lessons that spur such return to God. COVID is not primarily an event in historical time; rather, as an instantiation of God's archetypal majesty, it should goad Muslims to transcend this very historical time.<sup>13</sup> Like in Eliade, the concern is always to go back to the origin.<sup>14</sup>

## Reflecting on Murad through Eliade

There is an obvious objection to Murad: he is a theologian and his perspective only makes sense if we accept the premises of his theology. The same thing can be said of Eliade: whether he talks about the perspectives of archaic and world religions on time, he is essentially presenting their theologies. How can the outside observer be expected to buy into the realities they purportedly convey?

Eliade, to the extent that he can,<sup>15</sup> addresses this objection in the final chapter of his *Cosmos and History*, a chapter entitled 'The terror of history'. In our reading of this chapter, Eliade's argument is presented on two fronts. The first argument, somewhat implicit, is that the location of the outside observer is not an Archimedean point but must itself be grounded in a view of time. That is, the viewpoint of the observer must necessarily be grounded in a theology even if we call that theology 'secular'. The second front, more explicitly detailed in the chapter, assesses the consequences of this secular theology for our mode of being in this world. This theology, premised on a perspective that sees events as autonomous and irreversible, secretes its own way of relating to existence, with certain philosophical and psychological consequences following in its wake. I will address both fronts in turn.

According to Eliade, from the 17th century onward a theory of linear progress started asserting itself in Europe, culminating in the triumph of evolutionism two centuries later (Eliade 1974:145–146). Whilst the theory of archetypes and cycles was never fully extinguished even in the 20th century, and continued in its own fashion to be reflected in works by scholars such as Spengler, the die had been cast. Humankind, especially after Hegel, was destined to move through existence as historical beings, ideally onwards and upwards, but in any case free of the burden of archetypes and repetition. We are now subject to the force of the event in itself and for itself, to 'reality', to the 'terror of history'. Transcendence is cast off, more blatantly in some modern philosophies than in others, but whatever the degree there is the assumption that we need to navigate by our own lights.

13. Murad deals more extensively with this 'now' in a talk entitled 'Presence in Every Breath' (Murad 2021).

14. Eliade may not have been the keenest student of Islam but he perceptively quotes the fourth verse in the 10th chapter of the Qur'an as follows: 'Allah is he who effects the creation hence he repeats it' (Eliade 1974:62). Eliade employs the verse in relation to the periodic renewal of creation though more broadly the verse alludes to continuous divine activity in creation.

15. He mentions that the scope of the work does not allow him to explore the question in detail (Eliade 1974:141).

What is the theology at play behind this assumption? Eliade says that in rejecting repetition and absorption into what has gone before, the modern human being wants to assert autonomy. He or she wants to assert the self over and above tradition. This valorisation of autonomy, this refusal to be absorbed by tradition, is seen as the marker of true freedom. The self is only free if it can act by its own lights. In this vision of one's mode of being in the world, there is an emphasis on originality and novelty as against primordiality. History needs to be 'made' (Eliade 1974:154–156). The more history is made, the further is one from tradition and the more is one's freedom realised. He or she is continuously involved in self-making, a making which occurs against the current of time conceived as linear.<sup>16</sup>

Eliade's thoughts on this topic may not appear particularly original.<sup>17</sup> But what is remarkable is how natural this assumption has become. Open-ended time and the autonomous self lie at the theological heart of the modern project. The fact that this view of time and self has become so naturalised should not obscure the fact that it is an assumption of relatively recent historical vintage. The standpoint that regards archaic and world religion perspectives on time as subjective (and often as counterfactual and outdated) proceeds not from any supposed neutral, dispassionate standpoint, but from a counter-subjectivity informed by a different vision of time and, as a corollary, our place in the world.

Yet it is really the second front that bothers Eliade, much in the same way that Murad sees the *consequences* of atheism as its 'terrorism'. How, Eliade asks, does one deal with the horrors of the modern world such as atom bombing and mass deportation if there is no transhistorical meaning to history? In the past, horrors could be tolerated because there was meta-historical meaning at play and the event was given no value in and of itself. It was, as was seen, always part of a larger cosmic framework. In the modern world, salvation, if sought at all, is sought through history and, whilst Eliade does not explicitly say so, given the vicissitudes of events, this is a difficult position to maintain. It is hardly surprising that existential *angst* comes to characterise much of 20th century philosophy. But the philosophy of despair, whilst it may have crafted pessimism as a heroic virtue, has profound psychological consequences. Its conscious break with tradition has meant that modernity has lost the spiritual resources, such as the *khalwah* [seclusion] mentioned by Murad, by which this angst-ridden human condition can be transcended or annulled. Perhaps, even more depressingly, the modern subject is increasingly conscious that his or her 'freedom' is more circumscribed in reality than touted in theory. The modern subject typically does not make history. Rather, they normally form part of a mass who are being

16. The irony of this theology, of course, is that history itself becomes transcendent. Salvation is now sought in it, as in Marxism. Autonomous history, in other words, itself becomes an archetype of sorts.

17. For example, see Rene Guénon's marvellous essay, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Guénon 1962), which was written about a decade earlier than Eliade. Guénon's essay was originally published in 1942, whilst Eliade's book was first published in 1949.

made by history, specifically by an increasingly group of elite human beings. Eliade was writing around the 1950s and used as an example the distinction between the leadership (those who make history) and the followers (those made by that history) in Marxism and Fascism (Eliade 1974:157). Yet transposed to the early 21st century, his insight continues to reverberate as the lines are drawn between the billionaires and one percenters, on the one hand, and the rest of humanity, on the other, who need to follow in their wake. In contrast, says Eliade, it is the archaic subject or the adherent of world religions who is truly free: free to annul time, free to be no longer what he or she was, free to transcend his or her condition through spiritual techniques, or free because he or she is free in God.<sup>18</sup> For Eliade, there can be no freedom without a conception of the transcendent, of the truly transhistorical.

## Conclusion

There is a convincing argument that COVID-19 is, in a profound sense, a product of late capitalism. Increasing human encroachment upon natural habitats, driven ultimately by economic forces, leads to closer contact between humans and wildlife and hence the greater possibility for the transmission of zoonotic pathogens. Whilst there has been political mishandling of the virus, consternation about vaccine procurement and distribution, arguments about the sustainable length of lockdowns and so forth, the fundamental cause of the virus is our current mode of being in this world, one, which if left unattended, will likely generate more pandemics with greater frequency in future (Murdoch 2020). As Ed Yong (2020), a science writer for the Atlantic has observed:

The desire to name an antagonist, be it the Chinese Communist Party or Donald Trump, disregards the many aspects of 21st-century life that made the pandemic possible: humanity's relentless expansion into wild spaces; soaring levels of air travel; chronic underfunding of public health; a just-in-time economy that runs on fragile supply chains; healthcare systems that yoke medical care to employment; social networks that rapidly spread misinformation; the devaluation of expertise; the marginalization of the elderly; and centuries of structural racism that impoverished the health of minorities and indigenous groups. It may be easier to believe that the coronavirus was deliberately unleashed than to accept the harsher truth that we built a world that was prone to it, but not ready for it. (n.p.)

It is worth recalling here another observation by Eliade in his *Cosmos and History* at this point. He believes that the return

18. For Eliade, the horizon of archetypes cannot be transcended unless we accept a philosophy of freedom which does not exclude God. This transcending occurs through faith, namely, the freedom to intervene even in the ontological constitution of the universe through faith in God. For Eliade, it is a pre-eminently creative freedom. It is only through such freedom that history can be justified. For Eliade, in the final analysis, Christianity is the ideal antidote to the despair of the modern, fallen, human being (Eliade 1974:159–162). It can be argued, however, that Islam, with its distinctive emphasis on God's sole dominion (being one of the meanings of *tawhid*, often translated as the oneness of God), in addition to its well-known abhorrence to attributing partners to God (*shirk*), allows, at the very least, an equal 'freedom in God'. Yet I think many Muslims, who see the religion as a way of duty to God, would resist the descriptor 'creative'. Freedom, here, does not change the ontological constitution of the universe but seeks to be in conformity with it by disciplining the self to accept God's will. It is with the disciplining of the self – the refusal to be held captive by wants and desires that are at odds with God's law and decree – that freedom comes into view.

to periodicity and cycles characteristic of some 20th century writers, such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, marks a wariness of 'too much history'. As consciousness of the precariousness of existence grew following the two world wars, and as deployment of nuclear power showed that humankind had the potential to wipe itself out, Eliade believed that he may have been witnessing amongst such writers and others a desperate attempt to stave off the 'events of history' and to return, in some form, even if artificially, to the archetypes. He prophesises (Eliade 1974):

In other words, it is not inadmissible to think of an epoch, and an epoch not too far distant, when humanity, to ensure its survival, will find itself reduced to desisting from any further 'making' of history in the sense of which it began to make it from the creation of the first empires, will confine itself to repeating prescribed archetypal gestures and will strive to forget, as meaningless and dangerous, any spontaneous gesture which might entail 'historical' consequences. (pp. 153–154)

The deeply insightful Eliade was wrong with this particular prediction. Humankind has continued relentlessly to 'make' history, leading to some of its current predicaments. The reason, of course, is that the autonomous self has remained the dominant form of subjectivity. Against Eliade's hope, it has not been shocked enough by the events of the 20th century to change its theological trajectory. And as long as this assertive self holds sway, it is difficult to see how a balanced relationship with nature will be restored. This self, as Murad indicates, is integrally tied to a runaway consumer culture which thrives on the immediate satisfaction of wants. There is limited scope for the self to transcend itself in this hegemonic form of life. Fortunately, there are voices such as Murad's as well as those in other traditions, however faint, that continue to point to alternate trajectories for the self – trajectories in which the self is not shifted and swayed, willy-nilly, by historical events, but, via its attachment to archetypes, can find some sort of repose, or to use Eliade's phrase, freedom.<sup>19</sup>

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19. All this should not be mistaken as an argument for a return to some supposedly more idyllic past. In any case, such a nostalgia grates against the trajectory of the archetypal approach that typically sees phenomena in a now. In addition, the undoubted accomplishments of modern science need to be recognised and respected. But allowing archetypal approaches to come into view challenges the unwarranted confidence modernity places solely in its own techniques, in its ability to navigate by its own lights, in what Talal Asad has called its 'hubris' (Asad 2018:156), all underpinned by its regnant view of time. So ours is not a call to a form of neo-Luddism but rather to what South African philosopher Danie Goosen has termed an 'alternative modernity' (Goosen 2015).

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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