

Introduction: Themes in the International Eliade

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THE DEVELOPMENT AND INTENTION OF THE VOLUME

Mircea Eliade was undoubtedly an international figure. Born and educated in Romania, he traveled and studied in India, Italy, Germany, and France. He taught at the University of Bucharest, the Sorbonne, and the University of Chicago. His academic writing has been translated into all major European and some Asian languages and his literary fiction has likewise been widely translated. One of his novels *Nuntă în Cer (Marriage in Heaven)* won the Elba-Brignetti prize for the best foreign novel in Italian in 1984, and he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature in 1979 and 1980. He carried on a lifelong correspondence with scholars of the history of religions on several continents, including Raffaele Pettazoni, Stig Wikander, Georges Dumézil, and Gershom Scholem. He received the French Legion of Honor in 1978 and honorary degrees from (among others) the University of Washington, the Sorbonne, Lancaster University, Boston College, Universidad de San Salvador, Universidad de la Plata, Ripon College, Calcutta, and Yale. However, despite all this recognition, criticism and assessment of Eliade in the anglophone West rarely takes international opinion into account, or considers Eliade's career and oeuvre as a whole. Ironically enough, this may be partly Eliade's own doing: he insisted that the Chicago journal, *The History of Religions*, be published exclusively in English. This collection of essays is an attempt to address this state of affairs and to introduce the English reader to some of the international opinion on Eliade.

None of the present contributions specifically address the question of Eliade's political past, on which the reader can consult "Mircea

Eliade: Further Considerations," in the second edition of the Macmillan *Encyclopedia*.

In some ways, this anthology began in 1996 at a session on "The Reception of Mircea Eliade in the United States" at the national conference of the American Academy of Religion. The papers offered at that session became the nucleus of an earlier anthology, *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade* (Rennie 2001). However, it became obvious that there were many contributors from outside the English-speaking world with much of importance to say. The present volume began to take shape after two symposia on Eliade held at the eighteenth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Durban, South Africa, in August 2000. Several contributors (Ulrich Berner, Chung Chin-Hong, Mircea Itu, Michiaki Okuyama, Arvind Sharma, and Bryan Rennie) attended those symposia. Others sent papers in advance for consideration and discussion. Other papers have been added since that time and some papers, sadly, omitted due to severe strictures of space.

I am aware of the self-selecting nature of any group of scholars who choose to write on Eliade and I attempted to mitigate this effect in the call for papers, which stated that "the publication will not be a *'festschrift'* for Eliade . . . [but] a balanced consideration of Eliade's significance. Given the currently divided state of evaluations of Eliade, I specifically invite contributions from scholars whose assessments are negative and those who are positive." Given that specification, and the fact that I have not selected papers on the grounds of their position in respect of Eliade, I can only report that the assessment was generally favorable.

A NOTE ON THE ORGANIZATION

The themes of the papers determine their organization. The sacralization of historical time can, in many ways, be seen as an overarching theme, homologous to the interpretation of specific historical contexts. Thus, I begin with Michel Meslin's critique of Eliade's conception and follow his chapter with that of Pablo Wright and César Cernadas, which poses a radical counterpart to Meslin's "hermeneutics of suspicion." The interpretation of specific historical contexts and the utility

of Eliadean categories in such interpretation provide the common theme for the next group, consisting of Berner, Ouellet, and Muthuraj. These headings provide permeable boundaries, many of the chapters touching on more than a single theme. Bordaş, for example, touches on both the Indian influence and the equally important question of the influence of “traditional” thought on Eliade and connects to the following section on “traditionalism.” Thus, Bordaş should be read together with Natale Spineto, under this heading, and, since Spineto also touches on the question of (a)historicism central to Philip Vanhaelemeersch’s chapter, Spineto should be read with Vanhaelemeersch on this point. Several other chapters, notably those of Ouellet, Spineto, Chung, and Muthuraj also touch on the question of history and historicism. Katrine Ore’s chapter on gender perspectives in Eliade’s history of religions stands on its own. There are, again, permeable boundaries and contiguities between all the following chapters although they each address their own central issues. I have placed the chapters of Chung Chin-Hong and Wilhelm Dancă each in its own section, although I hope that they naturally follow one from another. The final section on literature, a topic raised by Dancă but focused upon exclusively by Okuyama Michiaki, is the venue for a previously unpublished translation of one of Eliade’s works of fiction: “Men and Stones.”

A SYNOPSIS OF THE CONTENTS

That the contributors’ assessment is generally positive does not mean that their response is uncritical. Michel Meslin, particularly, shows the admirable scholarly insistence upon critical assessment that has manifested itself in those Francophone critics of Eliade who have been the most demanding and the most damning of Eliade. I think, naturally, of Daniel Dubuisson and Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine (*Mythologies du XX^e Siècle* and *Cioran, Eliade, Ionescu*—these are, as I say, particularly polemical works and should be considered alongside the responses of Rennie [*Reconstructing Eliade* 165–176] and Ricketts [*Former Friends and Forgotten Facts*]). Unlike the other Francophone authors, however, Meslin does not concentrate upon Eliade’s politics or past, but on his

understanding of the sacralization of time. Meslin builds upon the criticism made by Raffaele Pettazzoni that "it is not the primitive mythical world that confers significance on the present moment, but rather the world *hic et nunc*, which furnishes the components of any representation of the world of origins, conceived of as alternative and seen in opposition to it" (18). Thus, it is not the "the sacred" that "sacralizes" profane experience, but the latter that provides our conception and understanding of the sacred.

Not for this reason alone does Meslin disagree with Eliade's conception of the sacralization of time. We also see in Meslin's critique the claim that Christian eschatological time is linear (although the reinstatement of the divine prelapsarian condition implied by the redemption and the inauguration of the Kingdom can easily be seen to be a *return* to the paradisiacal time before the Fall, and thus as cyclical rather than linear). Meslin concludes that "[c]learly neither for the historian nor from an anthropological perspective does the sacralization of time as Eliade conceives it appear correct" (21).

While Meslin concentrates upon the historical accuracy of Eliade's analysis of the sacralization of time, Wright and Cernadas adopt a more dialectical approach, more reminiscent of Eliade's own. Using Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the positive and negative poles of hermeneutics, they suggest that a middle path between the two is useful in an assessment of Eliade. In so doing they make important comments on Eliade's insistence that even aberrant religious phenomena such as the Melanesian cargo cults are not irrational, but develop according to their own internal logic. They point out that the structuring of perspective (especially on time and myth) results in a structuring of emotion in any and every culture. They also draw attention to an important aspect often ignored in analyses of Eliade: there is a tension in his work between self-disclosure and the explication of the other. Eliade is himself an object of hermeneutics, and the consideration of "the 'theology' implied in the history of religions as I decipher and interpret it" (*Journal II* 74) is nonetheless revelatory of religious behavior for being subjective. As I suggested in *Reconstructing Eliade* (249), Eliade is not only talking about archaic religions and the other but also about the here and now and about himself. Finally, Wright and

Cernadas's chapter makes a beginning of the explanation of the implication for modern culture of the identification of the sacred and the real pervasive throughout Eliade's work.

Where Meslin comments only on Eliade's concept of the sacralization of time and makes no attempt to assess other components of his thought, Wright and Cernadas give a positive reading, but of only the general applications of his thought. The following writers, while remaining critical of Eliade in some respects, nonetheless recognize the value of his work in more specific applications. Ulrich Berner reminds us that Eliade is probably the most highly polarizing figure in the history of religions, defended as strongly as he is criticized, so that the debate on Eliade has tended to be a kind of worldview controversy between "religious" and "nonreligious" scholars of religion. Berner attempts to go beyond such a one-sided approach to show what the history of religions loses when the Eliadean approach is abandoned totally and what it loses when it follows the Eliadean approach exclusively. He attempts both to verify and to critique a central element of Eliade's theory by taking up an example from the religious history of Late Antiquity; the work of Lucian of Samosata. Berner raises the question of "the effort to understand and describe how religious people see the world" (44) to good effect, and points out that both blind discipleship and unappreciative iconoclasm are basically wrong. He draws salutary attention to the dangers of one-sided oversimplification in the study of religions, for example, the identification of any *singular* religious worldview as *the* worldview of "archaic humanity."

The assessment of an Eliadean approach as useful to the understanding of religious phenomena in specific contexts while recognizing its inherent limitations is made even more forcefully by Brigitte Ouellet. Her chapter on the study of ancient Egyptian texts admits the limitations of an Eliadean approach and gives consideration to detailed criticisms. However, it also defends his approach and emphasizes its utility and applicability to this narrowly specialized field. The essay suggests various contributions to the elaboration of a hermeneutic of Egyptian texts implied by the application of the intentions that govern an Eliadean hermeneutic and, at the same time, indicates

changes implied by advances in textual interpretation. It is rare that a specialist such as this takes the time to write on the theories of a generalist such as Eliade, and Ouellet's chapter is a significant contribution because of this. Given the acknowledged paucity of Eliade's knowledge of Egyptology, it might come as a surprise that Ouellet not only finds considerable consonance between "Categories of Eliadean Thought and Egyptian Categories" (53) but puts them to good use in explicating ancient Egyptian religion and responds to the identification of normativity in Eliade's work.

Concerning the utility of Eliade's work Joseph Muthuraj gives a significant insight into the specific utility that added to Eliade's popularity in the '60s and '70s. That is to say, its utility in dealing with human faith in an academic and pluralistic environment. The chapter attempts to follow through Eliade's insights. His understanding of religion is seen as offering much to theology and the study of the New Testament. Historical-critical methodology, which provides the concepts and tools for NT study, has largely ignored questions concerning the sacred. Muthuraj explains that Eliade's achievements help to meet the deficiency created by the historical positivism pervasive in NT scholarship. One important area of study relates to the attitude and approach to other religions in comparison with religious phenomena of early Christian experience. Except among a small group of history of religions scholars in NT studies, oriental religion and philosophy, which formed a major component in the thought world of the NT, have not received the attention they deserve. Eliade criticized the reluctance of theologians to use historico-religious hermeneutics since it raises doubts about "the uniqueness of the Judeo-Christian revelation." According to Muthuraj, and specifically for an Indian NT scholar, Eliade forms a mediating ground between Western and Eastern schools of thought because of his positive estimation of Indian religions and philosophy. Muthuraj argues that Eliade's understanding of myth enables scholars to see the richness of the experience of God by NT authors. Both the impersonal and personal dimensions of the Divine, both "Being" and "God" can be uncovered in this way. Very rarely have theologians or NT scholars looked for inspiration from history of religions scholars and too little work within the field of NT has

given serious attention to contributions made by Eliade in the study of religious phenomena. However, Muthuraj hopes that his study will help to open a field of research for NT students and theologians.

The same question that Muthuraj broached—the extent of the Indian influence on Eliade’s development—is also dealt with by the Romanian scholar, Liviu Bordaș, who deals with the history of Eliade’s stay in India and convincingly describes Eliade’s tendency to “mythologize” that history. The myth of Eliade the spiritual initiate is clearly revealed, along with its manifestation in some of Eliade’s later fiction. As well as the question of Eliade’s Indian experiences, Bordaș raises the question of his “traditionalism,” a point considered by the Italian, Natale Spineto. Bordaș and Spineto come to similar conclusions on the issue of traditionalism and neither of them concludes that Eliade was any kind of adherent. Spineto provides a nuanced understanding of the term and decisively concludes that it is inapplicable to Eliade. He shows Eliade’s dependence upon his historical context without reducing that debt to a simple duplication of the thought of traditionalists, or a radical dependence upon any one man (such as Julius Evola) with all the political baggage that this would entail. Both Bordaș and Spineto provide excellent examples of the detailed and painstaking archival work being done on Eliade. They refer to much of that work, and Spineto points out that in recent literature on Eliade’s intellectual biography one of the areas that has received the most original contributions is this assessment of Eliade’s relationship to scholars linked to “traditional thought”; particularly René Guénon, Julius Evola, and Ananda Coomaraswamy. Spineto’s presentation examines the relevant documents, summarizes the results, and establishes to what extent Eliade’s reading of the traditionalists actually influenced his work. Eliade integrates traditionalist terms and concepts within a different conceptual framework that does not admit the fundamental bases of traditionalism. Spineto aims to show that it is neither possible to consider Eliade’s works “esoteric” (as Daniel Dubuisson maintains), nor to assert that Eliade’s perspective has a connection to “Christian Kabbalah” (as Steven Wasserstrom has argued).

Together Spineto and Bordaș show the complexity of such issues as Eliade’s debt to traditionalism and the danger of coming to hasty

and oversimplified conclusions. Where Spineto overlaps with Bordas on the topic of traditionalism, he overlaps with Vanhaelemeersch on the topic of Eliade's attitudes to history and historicism. Vanhaelemeersch discusses the status of "history" in Eliade but does not reiterate the classic accusation that Eliade denies the idea of history (manifest in Meslin's chapter, for example). Vanhaelemeersch brings more nuance to both Eliade's arguments and to the arguments against him. History is a term that continues to create confusion. Instead, Vanhaelemeersch suggests that we address the issue in terms of the concept of "historicism." As a historian of religions, Eliade does not reject history as do yogins or shamans. What he rejects is a specific way of conceiving the historical character of religion. Vanhaelemeersch contrasts Eliade with the Italian form of historicism (*storicismo*). The historicism of the father of *storicismo*, Benedetto Croce, moves the discussion of Eliade and history to a genuinely philosophical level.

Katrine Ore raises the rightly perennial issue of feminism and gender relations. It is no surprise that she should conclude that "[t]he political aspects so well known to gender studies (women's studies and feminist studies) are missing in Eliade's writings" (193), but en route to this conclusion she has more to say about Eliade's attitudes toward women and the potential for the history of religions than might be anticipated. She points out that Eliade deals with feministic issues and themes, but that he uses them to think about maleness. Ore's chapter focuses on the connections between the first and second waves of feminism (c. 1880–1925 and c. 1960–1990) that meet in a reading of Eliade's books with a gender perspective in mind.

However Eliade's history of religions is understood, its elements of the dialectic of the sacred and the profane and "creative hermeneutics" are familiar. These are the elements analyzed by Chung Chin-Hong, who poses two questions: First, "What does the term *religion* indicate?" Second, "How can religion, thus understood, be interpreted?" Eliade's concepts of the sacred and of hierophany have been criticized as so ambiguous that religion appears not only as an objective reality but also as a phenomenon of subjective consciousness. However, Chung argues, Eliade's dialectic of the sacred and the profane proves this criticism wrong. He presupposes humanity as *homo religiosus* and this

is experienced in the world of human life. Thus, the question should not be “What is religion?” but “What is *called* religion?” The concern should be turned from metaphysics to experience. What is important is not what Eliade says about the conscious system of religious studies but how he changes the scheme of the question itself. Eliade’s hermeneutics is based on traditional phenomenology: his hermeneutic discourse is not greatly different from phenomenological hermeneutics. When Eliade’s attitude is criticized as being antihistorical such a criticism is due to the misconception of structure and phenomenon, sacred and profane, and this misconception is the result of ignoring the fact that what Eliade calls free variation is not imaginative but actual, and the fact that the encoding of symbolic meaning or assessment of symbol is done on the basis of experienced existence. What must be understood is the creativity of Eliade’s hermeneutics. In this respect, his hermeneutics is more than phenomenological hermeneutics. Chung sees Eliade’s phenomenology as differing from traditional phenomenology by overlapping epistemology and praxiology through phenomenology and hermeneutics. Chung calls this the surplus of phenomenology and sees that surplus as Eliade’s contribution to religious studies and as still appropriate for students of religion.

Wilhelm Dancă considers the concept of mysticism in Eliade’s work and raises the undeniably important but often neglected question of the influence of Eastern Orthodox theology on Eliade’s thought. The chapter attempts to outline the efforts of the young Eliade to understand what religion means, and his debt to the friends and teachers he had before World War II. The mystical perspective of Romanian spirituality influenced the researches of the young Eliade, who wanted to engage Romanian culture in dialog with other, larger cultures. Eliade found the ground of all religions to be the natural experience of the sacred. As a result, when he spoke about Greek, Egyptian, or Indian religions, he emphasized concepts such as “asceticism,” “absolute liberty,” “plenitude of life,” “achievement in itself,” “harmony with the universe,” and so on. The same things were emphasized when he spoke about Spanish or German mystics.

What Dancă sees as absent from Eliade’s researches are moral considerations—as is common to a great many mystics. Considering

the character of Eliade's literary writings, Dancă suggests that they represent a metaphysical interpretation of life, which does not include any moral attitude, so he tries to explain Eliade's vision of religion by considering both his academic and his literary work. *Homo religiosus*, according to Eliade, is the mystical human being in his or her natural mode everywhere and from any time. Thus reading Eliade's work, Dancă understands both Eliade's personality and the human condition as open at any time to the revelation of the sacred.

Considering both Eliade's academic and his literary work as he does, Dancă makes an appropriate connection to the concluding section of the anthology. Okuyama Michiaki focuses on Eliade's fiction, pointing out that in the preface to his *History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, Eliade announced that he would deal with the camouflage of the "sacred," or rather, the identification of the sacred with the profane, in the final chapter of the work. His term *camouflage* is applied to many examples of "myths in the modern world" to indicate that myths and symbols have not lost their vitality even today. Again, when we listen to Eliade speaking of the relationship between his scholarly writings and his literary ones, we find a preoccupation with the problem of the "camouflage of miracle in history." To the extent that Eliade was engaged in "camouflaging miracle" in his novels, Okuyama is drawn to ask whether his scholarly works might not have absorbed the novelist's prerogative of reading "miracle" into historical fact. This suggested to Okuyama his comparison with the contemporary Japanese novelist and Nobel laureate, Ōe Kenzaburō. Ōe read Eliade and was influenced by his ideas in the course of trying to integrate the experiences of his own life with his own vocation as a writer. Okuyama considers two of Ōe's novels to clarify the connection and reconsider the problems posed by Eliade's fiction.

The quest motif is ubiquitous in Eliade's fantasy fiction and reveals a search both for recovering originary values and for remodeling human life patterns. This motif can be seen in Eliade's play, "Men and Stones." This short work relates a two-man expedition into the caverns beneath the Carpathian Mountains in quest of Paleolithic remains. Professor Petruș, the older academic expert in speleology and the Paleolithic, is accompanied by the younger poet, Alexandru, both,

perhaps, representing aspects of Eliade's personality. Written early in 1944, when Eliade was thirty-seven, the year in which his first wife, Nina, was later to die of cancer, the play seems to present a premonition of that loss and an attempt to come to terms with a life rendered futile by death; both individual and collective in the horrors of the ongoing world war. It deals with the processes of creative hermeneutics and the role of the sacred in making sense of life and in making sense of foreign cultures, here represented by Paleolithic "troglobites" and human cave dwellers, who appear in Alexandru's fantasies. As in many of Eliade's works, the theme of the untellable secret, the ineffability of the real, is a constant presence.

Taken altogether, these essays reflect the ability of studies of Eliade to ignite valuable debate and to raise important issues in the study of religion. They also indicate the work that remains to be done. Whatever one feels the value of Eliade's work to be, the consideration and clarification of the questions that it raises can only serve to increase our understanding of religion and of all of the issues raised in its academic study.