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Review

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Review by: Stephen H. Phillips

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Book Reviews

A History of Religious Ideas, 3 volumes. By *Mircea Eliade*. Volumes 1 (**From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries**) & 2 (**From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity**) translated by *W. R. Trask*; Volume 3 (**From Mohammed to the Age of Reforms**) by *Alf Hiltebeitel and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, 1982, & 1985. Pp. v + 489; 565; & 352. \$20.00 (pb. \$10.95); \$25.00 (pb. \$10.95); & 27.50. (Originally published in French. Vol. 3: Paris: Payot, 1983.¹)

Mircea Eliade has attempted to define a special area of the humanities that he would call the history of religions. In this discipline as conceived by him, one does not simply describe particular religious phenomena; rather one looks for possibly universal dispositions among the religious attitudes of people of all epochs. Further, one tries to discern the worth of religious creations. Religious works are to be evaluated by attending to a “dialectic of the sacred” believed to be revealed in a series of exceptional religious experiences, or “hierophanies,” that have inspired them.

With such a radical and ambitious program, Eliade is bound to be a controversial figure. But whatever one may think of the soundness of his approach to religion and of his “discovery” of a religious dialectic, his eminence in the field of the study of religion has to be acknowledged. Eliade has contributed a mass of material on particular religious texts and practices, while his numerous works of comparison and interpretation of religious symbolologies—widely read in university courses—enjoy now a sizeable secondary literature. These three volumes continue the thought of the earlier works, and are, in my judgment, the consummate achievement of the scholar.

Ostensibly, the series is a narration of certain sequences of religious ideas worldwide. Yet although it indeed is this, it is also much more. Eliade’s effort in these volumes is, I believe, one of the great twentieth-century attempts to understand religious phenomena systematically. Its chief fault is that the system or theory is not presented or defended as such: the whole story, and the selection of and emphases within the individual accounts in particular, mask a hasty theology.

In this review, I want to elaborate Eliade’s assumptions which in fact underlie his project but which because of the work’s narrative character appear to be conclusions established by the universal history of religious ideas. Also, I want to examine the warrant of some of these theses.

But first let me say a few more words about the manner or style in which the books were written, or in which they read, or would read if one did not put up one’s critical guard. Here as in numerous previous works Eliade’s prose is at once learned and marvelously fluid, reflecting both careful scholarship and a talent for clear exposition. Now by meticulously attending to the current research in all the special areas of his immense field, Eliade appears to insulate the descriptive portion of his project and to secure its worth whatever be the merit of his large interpretative theses. One cannot overstress the exceptional achievement of personal scholarship that these three volumes represent. Further, he reports disagreements among the experts, and although sometimes he takes sides in a dispute (witness the discussion of Orphism, 2,180–202), he does not appear radically to depart from any going consensus concerning what is said in some particular text. His sympathy and enthusiasm for his material, which some might see as inappropriate, do not, in my judgment, prevent him from conveying the sense of his texts; on the contrary, they facilitate the task, I would say. My general feeling is that he is rarely to be

faulted for historical accuracy or for an entirely distorted exposition of the religious works he interprets. He himself no doubt believes that he is being as objective as the present state of research permits in his recounting of the religious ideas and phenomena themselves.

It might then seem that just because Eliade makes such a wealth of material accessible in such an easily readable form one should happily recommend these books. But as I shall show, the problem does not lie with Eliade's scholarship but with his implicit arguments and positions—and with the ease with which he fits the religious phenomena into his large interpretative scheme. The fact that he has a grand theory of religion and a religious world view does not so much undermine the basis for confidence in his accounts, though that it does to some degree, as establish the character of the work as something other than a "history." Much of what Eliade says is probably right, despite his advocacy of a metaphysics of the sacred. My principal criticism is that he leads too quickly in matters of large-scale interpretation. There are important issues to be addressed before we may accept his positions. Many of these "philosophic" issues are not considered by him, either in these books or, contrary to what he says, in his others as well.

Eliade says in the Preface to Volume 1 that he will not concern himself in this project with questions of methodology and that his arguments in support of his approach to the history of religions have been given elsewhere. He does say, laconically, what this approach is, however, and it appears to be in one respect contrary to his previously stated position. Whereas he champions an ahistorical methodology in many of his earlier works and attempts to lay bare the putatively universal structure of the human experience of the sacred, Eliade here purports to discern "progress" in the history of religions. He claims that while "every manifestation of the sacred is important to the historian of religions, . . . sometimes the importance of a religious creation is revealed by its later valorizations" (1,xiv). In other words, he says that his selection of material to relate in these books is in part determined by "crises in depth" which result in new creations whereby religious traditions are able to renew and sustain themselves. Thus we are to discern no mere eclecticism in this narration but rather at least in part a meaningful history of evaluative response. This is one of two themes that give his narration a peculiar unity. The other is a theme of mysticism that we shall examine later on.

The syncretism that is obvious in many religious developments is not viewed by Eliade as a difficulty for his theory of religious progress. Contrary to what one might expect from a defender of the validity of religious experiences, Eliade relishes the syncretisms of history. On the whole, he sees the borrowings and incorporations of religious ideas as part of the dialectic of the sacred, to be explained as culturally appropriated insight into some inadequacy of a traditional belief or practice and as an implicit attempt to widen the sphere of religious response. Thus the moments of syncretism are to be moments of "valorization" whereby a culture renews its religious life and progresses. This understanding of religious syncretism informs a large portion of the discussion in Volume 1.

As indicated, that there is a temporal dimension to the notion of a dialectic of the sacred appears to constitute a change in Eliade's thought. In *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, one of his important earlier works for questions of methodology, that dimension is not prominent, and Eliade warns against taking *a priori* an "evolutionist" approach.² But in these three volumes he appears to be Romantic—resembling Lessing, Shelley, and others—in an implicit theodicy and eschatology of historical progress, although it is conceivable that the chronological structure of the present project might be provoking

Eliade into an atypical stance. (On the other hand, he does say that “Christian faith” provides for the modern person the best defense against the “terror of history” in its idea of a historical transfiguration³—in as early a work as *The Myth of the Eternal Return* [first published 1949]. Cf. 2,397.) In any case, near the end of Volume 2 he says, “. . . there emerges the conviction that the spiritual life can progress and be perfected *in this world* and that history can be transfigured; . . .” (2,361). As suggested, it often appears that such a conviction stands at the heart of Eliade’s own project (see for example the interpretation of Mazdean theology, 2,313–15, and the imputed importance of Joachim of Fiore, 3,118–21). But it is equally true that Eliade has not abandoned the “structural” and “ontological” approach of his earlier works, as will be elaborated below.

Note that while superficially the two outlooks are blended rather well in the exposition, Eliade does not try to illumine the compatibility of the two. We may then ask why is it that the sacred, which is real and has been known to be so throughout human history, should also be progressively revealed. Further, precisely to what extent are valuations of religious creations to be a part of the “dialectic of the sacred,” and what part may the religious experiences claim?

We shall have to wait for the appearance of the fourth and final volume of the series to see the ways in which Eliade thinks that the line of ideas and progressive creations is continued in our day, for Volume 3 does not proceed much further than the era of the Reformation. A fourth volume is indeed promised in the “Preface” to Volume 3 (in French). In the Preface to Volume 1, Eliade says that in the final chapter of the projected three-volume work he will comment on the religious creations of the modern and contemporary period. That chapter is now slated for the forthcoming Volume 4.

Eliade is plainly an ecumenicist of a certain sort. He believes that there is a “unity of the spiritual history of humanity” (1,xvi). Further, he holds that this unity is not explicable solely in terms of a development of human understanding but that it requires an “ontology” of the sacred. Yet while he insists upon the reality of this “being,” he does not in these three books lay out his conception of the sacred, except in suggesting that—in addition to being “progressively revealed”—it is “transcendent,” “inexhaustible,” and “paradoxical.” We shall discuss these additional suggestions briefly, in particular the last. But Eliade’s chief contention is that the sacred is surpassingly *real*, and these further theological intimations, important as they may be, are not his main interest. Eliade is concerned with the mystical dimensions of religions to an extent that borders on the obsessive, and it is above all the “experiential” quality of encounters with the sacred that is presupposed. I dare say that these mystical dimensions are given an even greater prominence than the syncretist themes. In any case, his belief that the sacred is real and “discovered” through the religious experiences of people of all ages and cultures gives a “mystical” bias to many of his interpretations of particular religious texts.

Let me hasten to add that I myself am not convinced that for an ultimately theological project such as his a concentration on mysticism may not be largely justified. There is a strong case to be made for a broadly empirical approach, if one is to engage in religious speculation at all. But the point is that the three volumes have a mystical bent—to the disadvantage of other dimensions of religious ideas.

Given the bias, it is easy to understand Eliade’s excitement when he finds correspondences in the conceptions of traditions that have developed independently of one another. In this project, he does not set out to accomplish a comparative study. But a peculiar

feature of his narration is that while recounting a development within a particular tradition he will say in a single sentence out of the blue, “And this is like such and such.” Innumerable comparisons are made throughout this long study. Presumably, Eliade believes that the correspondences among religious ideas worldwide provide evidence for the reality of the sacred by showing the intersubjectivity of the experiences, and of the dialectic, whereby it is revealed. But many of Eliade’s comparisons seem hasty and forced. And even if the similarities that he identifies were well-established, there remains an overwhelming diversity in the “reports” of mystical encounters that surely mitigates the case for a mystical intersubjectivity worldwide.

Eliade does indeed respond to one of the issues his position raises—by making his comparisons although he does not recognize them as a “response.” And as I said, it is my conviction that a theology or religious philosophy that purports to base its abstract conjectures on mystical experiences is a project with much in its favor—and this despite the diversity in world-mysticism. Eliade in fact has a way to interpret mystic diversity (others might be made): the sacred is “inexhaustible” such that no mystical experience could reveal it entirely. But the problem is that all this is implicit, and he does not in any straightforward way either recognize or address the difficulties of a mystical theology.

Furthermore, Eliade with his experiential approach misses what I would like to call the “theoretic” or “top-heavy” nature of many religious works. In this way, his “phenomenology” of religious ideas *is* distorted. Predisposed to find experiential origins for religious conceptions, he often overlooks the logic of the ideas themselves. For example, in his treatment of the *Yogasūtra* (2,52–71) he fails to bring out the systematic and speculative nature of many of the ideas expressed, and attributes mystically empirical origins to claims that would be better explained as part of an effort to construct a coherent world view. The *Yogasūtra* puts forth a metaphysics of a trenchant dualism between the “soul” and “nature.” Many of its claims result from an effort to achieve a consistency of conception in line with the dualism, and are not, as Eliade supposes, in any straightforward way expressive of some mystical experience. (How *could* the *Yogasūtra*’s absolute dualism and consonant soteriology of “liberation”—i.e. of “*kaivalya*,” an “aloneness” that is a complete self-absorption apart from all “nature”—be warranted by whatsoever experience on the part of someone who could then tell us about it?) Moreover, although I am less familiar with many of the other texts he treats, I suspect a similar insensitivity throughout. Such appears to be especially evident in his mystical reading of Plato (2,197–202), of Manichaeism (esp. 2,394), and of Mohammed and the “message” of the Koran (3,71–89).

Of course, the nature of the exemplary encounters with the sacred can be known by us only through the works they have, on this picture, inspired. And truly religious creations are not, one may induce, especially theoretic, at least not by and large. Myths, accounts of visions, even of dreams, are to be truer indications than abstract theory, while it seems that the truest of indications are to be the actions and lives of religious people themselves. (Thus all the concern with the cults of the saints and their relics in Volume 3.) But while Eliade makes a good case, not so much here as in his other works, for the necessity of a special hermeneutics to decipher myths and religious symbols, what he presents is not the symbols themselves in their “multivalence” but rather a particular understanding of their role in a “meaningful” life. According to Eliade, it is because certain myths and stories of saintly lives, and indeed those lives themselves, are mysteriously invested with the aura of

the sacred that a life spent *in imitatio dei* would have a true significance by being grounded in what he believes to be surpassingly real (see esp. 1,xiii, 2,239ff, and 3,260–62). But how is it that we are to understand this “investment,” and which divine models shall we imitate? Clearly, the various practices of the world’s religious traditions are incompatible, i.e. pragmatically incompatible, even if we could accommodate all the conceptual differences somehow through Eliade’s empirical approach to theology or the theory of the sacred.

One could cite numerous passages that exhibit the ontological and experiential coloring of Eliade’s general view. Let us focus on one that is particularly striking. While discussing early Christianity in Volume 2, he writes:

It could even be said that the kenosis of Jesus Christ not only constitutes the crowning of all the hierophanies accomplished from the beginning of time but also *justifies* them, that is, proves their validity. To accept the possibility of the Absolute becoming incarnate in a historical person is at the same time to recognize the validity of a universal dialectic of the sacred; in other words, it is to recognize that the countless pre-Christian generations were not victims of an illusion when they proclaimed the presence of the sacred, i.e. of the divine, in the objects and rhythms of the cosmos. (2,408–09).

From this statement taken by itself, it would seem that Eliade is engaged in a Christian apologetic. The supreme revelation of the “sacred” in Christ is anticipated in other hierophanies of less significance. But this would be a mistake. Eliade believes that it is religious experiences taken as a whole which justify viewing their indications as real and as founding the value of each one severally. The reality of a sacred realm that transcends our everyday existences yet is capable of expressing itself through any phenomenon whatsoever, whether internally in trance and dream or externally in a transfiguration of some portion of objective nature, is presumed to ground the possibility of its revelations as well as to explain why they have been so diverse. (See also esp. 3,207.) The revelation of God in the historical human being Jesus is, he holds, particularly (supremely?) expressive of the reality of the sacred because, he apparently feels, there can be no more total identification of the divine with the undivine, of the transcendent and holy with the profane and the ordinary (at least, we might suppose, *for us* as opposed to Martians or porpoises) than their convergence in the life of a human being. Eliade does not believe that the life of Jesus reveals all that there is to reveal of the sacred. Not only does he conceive of the sacred as inexhaustible in its potential manifestations, he holds that all epiphanies and hierophanies reveal *something* of its character. The grave conceptual difficulty in all this is thus the obscurity of the conception of the sacred. The sacred has to be wondrously diverse and complex, while it remains to be seen how precisely the theory of its character would illumine even the “religious” occurrences, much less those with which we are more familiar.

But Eliade does not appear to be engaged in a Christian apologetic, or if he is it is one of an unusual type. In Volume 3, he takes up the development of Christian theology and the doctrines of the Church, and is roundly critical of what he sees as their narrowness. He admires the polemics of Origen, and especially his idea that the material world has in God’s scheme a positive worth as a medium of divine revelation (3,52). (Bonaventure is lauded for the same reason: 3,203.) About the exclusion of Origen’s thought as heretical, he says: “The definitive condemnation of Origen has deprived the Church of a unique opportunity to reinforce its universalism, notably in opening Christian theology to a

dialogue with other systems of religious thought (for example, the religious thought of India)" (3,53). Nicholas of Cusa is discussed in similar terms, and his championing "the unity of religions" receives highest praise (3,222–23). For Eliade, unlike the mainstream of Christian thinkers, the religious phenomenon need not have much to do with specific doctrines of belief. What we should believe is, first of all, not the main point, and secondly, to be determined by the real nature of the sacred, as it has been manifest (dialectically) in the religious experiences of the generations in all parts of the world.

Eliade does say in Volume 1—while discussing Judaism and specifically the Biblical story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac—that the "faith" of Abraham constitutes "a special case of the dialectic of the sacred: not only is the "profane" transmuted into the "sacred," . . . but its "sacralization" is not even comprehensible by the mind: infanticide is not transformed into a ritual intended to produce a particular effect Meditation on this impossibility of recognizing the sacred (since it is completely identified with the profane) will have marked consequences" (1,175–76). (Cf. 3,203.) I hazard that these consequences are to include Eliade's (previously stated) opinion that this type of faith ("for God all is possible," 1,176) is best for our modern period, though we shall have to wait for Volume 4 to see precisely how the theme is developed. However, this theme is not only Judeo-Christian, as Eliade himself points out when he discusses the Mahāyāna Buddhist identification of the sacred and the profane (*saṃsāra* = *nirvāṇa*) (2,225) and the similar conception in the *Bhagavadgītā* (2,246).

Thus Eliade tries to be non-sectarian, and is, I would say, rather successful in the effort; at least, his is a position that recognizes both the typical universalism of religious claims ("God is Lord of all, not just of some particular group," etc.) and attempts to find an accommodation that would preserve central doctrines of every major religious tradition.

Earlier, I promised to comment on Eliade's suggestions that the sacred is not only real but "transcendent," "inexhaustible," and "paradoxical." The ideas of the transcendence and inexhaustibility of the sacred were touched on briefly while we focused on his mystical theme, and I have nothing more to say about them. Let us take up the third of the three attributions, or Eliade's "negative theology," whose conflict with the other two, and indeed much more, presents a severe block to the coherence of Eliade's position. There is in general an unresolvable tension, it seems to me, between Eliade's empirical approach to the nature and value of the sacred on the one hand and the negative theology he endorses on the other. Let me elaborate this tension and thereby wind up our appraisal of some of his chief philosophic presumptions and themes.

One of Eliade's most explicit conceptions of the divine is that it is paradoxical. He sees a negative theology as the right frame for understanding the "faith" of Abraham as well as the "hierophanies" of other traditions. Indeed, he believes that there is a concurrence in the religious ideas of several traditions on this point. The theology of Pseudo-Dionysius is seen to correspond with the "*neti, neti*" doctrine of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3,67), and the same "paradoxical mode of being" is found expressed in the early Hebrew concept of Yahweh (1,182), in the *Yogasūtra* (2,70), in the Buddhist concept of the "Unconditioned" (2,105–06), in Islamic theology (3,124), and elsewhere (2,226; 2,259; 2,409–10; 3,203; 3,209ff; 3,221; 3,286; etc.).

Now negative theology is useful for Eliade's ecumenism. If we cannot characterize the sacred without falling into self-contradiction, then we can have no reason to expect hierophanies to have one particular character rather than another. (Cf. 3,207.) However, this asset is matched by a corresponding liability. Negative theology is precluded *ex*

hypothesi from providing any intellectual illumination of the relation between the sacred and the profane. Furthermore, I might add, the negative theologian (and his *confrère* in Vedāntic and Buddhist traditions) typically assumes some positive theological views. That is, he typically cheats. Also, we should be careful not to confuse the poetic and expressive language of mystics with the ideas of the negative theologians in some instances. Some use of apparent paradox, by mystics and others, need not be understood as true paradox or nonsense and contradiction. A melody is neither colored nor uncolored because it is not the type of thing that could be the one or the other. Suitable religious analogies might be made. But I for one cannot understand a paradox that cannot in principle be resolved, such as “a square circle on a Euclidean plane.” Eliade would abort his theological enterprise through endorsing what is apparently a confusion in the reflective traditions of both East and West about the merit of comprehensible assertions.

In concluding, let us shift our attention back to the more descriptive portions of the project. In spite of the presence of Eliade’s own grand theory of religion, those who enjoy works of intellectual history should not fail to enjoy these lively books of his. One has to admire the breadth of the scholar’s achievement. We are treated to accounts of the processes of Semitic syncretism, of Upanishadic mysticism, of the Eleusinian mysteries, Mazdaism, Taoism, early Germanic religion, the mysteries of Mithra, early Christian communities, the life of Mohammed, the tradition of courtly love, Bulgarian Bogomilism, Hassidism, alchemy, and Tibetan religion—to name some of the sections that I most enjoyed. Occasionally, my hackles bristled over Eliade’s handling of a familiar text, and I am disappointed by the omission of all Indian Buddhist developments after Nāgārjuna. (This omission will not be corrected in Volume 4 according to the “Preface” of Volume 3, while the “*épanouissement*” of Hinduism will be treated, we are told.) But even with regard to the (largely Indian) developments with which I am best acquainted, I must say that I have learned from Eliade. His understanding of the *Bhagavadgītā* appears to be particularly insightful, though one need not here, as elsewhere, share his estimation of the work’s precise place in the history of culture nor of its intrinsic worth. With this series, Eliade enlarges on many fronts his already impressive contribution to the study of world religions, despite the hidden agenda.

But I do not think that the series will survive as the basic text in the study of religion that apparently Eliade would like it to be. The correctness of its embedded theses is far from established, and its methodology too controversial. Yet as an attempt to interpret “sympathetically” the many diverse strands of religious intellectual history worldwide it is remarkable to say the least.

Eliade needs a defense of his emphasis on the mystical dimensions of religions. And he expresses what could turn out to be the beginnings of one: he seems to hold, much like William James, that through attending to these dimensions of personal experience we may be at once most clear-sighted about the history of religions as well as most enriched by our study. But he does not try to present a well-reasoned case for his views, and they are hardly free from question. Nevertheless, with the elegance of these three volumes Eliade makes his own “religious” appeal. Doubtless, as he says, he himself feels enriched by his study of the great religious texts and figures, and he is masterful in conveying his sense of the value of religion. I look forward to the series’ completion.

STEPHEN H. PHILLIPS

The University of Texas at Austin

NOTES

1. At the time of this writing, the translation of Volume 3 has not appeared. References to that volume are to the French edition.
2. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. xvi.
3. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 162.

Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence. *Translated with an Introduction by Robert A. F. Thurman.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984. Pp. 442. \$50.00.

Professor Thurman's translation of the great Tsong-kha-pa's masterwork on philosophical interpretation, the *Essence of Eloquence* (*drang nges legs bshad snying po*), is the first Tibetan work to appear in the prestigious Princeton Library of Asian Translations. It is a most auspicious beginning: the text is an exceptionally important one, and its appearance in English is without doubt a milestone for Tibetan Buddhist philosophical studies.

Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419) marks the culmination of the age in which the indigenous traditions of Tibetan scholastic philosophy were formed on the basis of the copious Indian Buddhist philosophical literature that had been translated into Tibetan primarily during the eighth through the eleventh centuries. This literature confronted the Tibetans with a colossal interpretation problem, which required Tibetan scholars to become philosophers, to come to terms with the Buddhist teaching by subjecting it to critical and methodical examination. The period 1100–1400 saw the rise of well-defined schools of exegesis, all claiming to represent the Buddha's final intention, and yet engaged in contentious debate about numerous subtleties of doctrine. One particular question, however, came to occupy center stage at an early date and remained the fundamental problematic of Tibetan philosophy: how is the teaching of emptiness (Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*; Tibetan, *stong pa nyid*), which is affirmed without compromise in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*-s and the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, to be squared with the ontologizing tendencies of such scriptures as the *Samdhinirmocana* and with the philosophy of Maitreya and Asaṅga? The *Essence of Eloquence* is Tsong-kha-pa's tightly argued answer, a rigorous defense of the view that the definitive philosophical account of the Buddha's doctrine is that propounded above all by Nāgārjuna's brilliant follower Candrakīrti, that is, the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, or, as Thurman translates it, "Dialecticist Centrist," position.

The *Essence of Eloquence* is famed in learned Tibetan circles as a text of unparalleled difficulty. Tersely worded, its logical formulations lead the reader along a path of tortuous complexity. To have translated it into English at all must be reckoned an intellectual accomplishment of a very high order. To have translated it to all intents and purposes correctly is a staggering achievement. In what follows I will consider first some points raised by Thurman's remarkable translation, and, second, by his lengthy introduction (pp. 1–173).

The translation reflects an enormous amount of work: Thurman has combed the entire relevant commentarial tradition on the text; he has labored to identify the extant Sanskrit texts corresponding to scriptural passages quoted by Tsong-kha-pa; and he has discussed