

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Theses - ALL

December 2017

REREADING MIRCEA ELIADE: SOME MYTHS AND TRUTHS ABOUT THE SACRED, THE HISTORICAL, AND THE WWII

Cong Fu

Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thesis>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fu, Cong, "REREADING MIRCEA ELIADE: SOME MYTHS AND TRUTHS ABOUT THE SACRED, THE HISTORICAL, AND THE WWII" (2017). *Theses - ALL*. 180.

<https://surface.syr.edu/thesis/180>

This is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Abstract

This project grows out of my dissatisfaction with a number of popular critiques against Mircea Eliade's approach to religious phenomena, in particular the charges along the lines that his academic writings are crypto-theological, ahistorical, and fascist. The set of questions I ask are as follows: Does Eliade assume the existence of a transcendent, autonomous entity in his explanation of religion, as his critics claim? Is "ahistorical" accurate to capture Eliade's sense of the relationship between religious phenomena and history? Why does Eliade not take advantage of the more "historical" or "scientific" tools of analysis of his time, such as Marxism and the like?

Through close examination of Eliade's works, especially the two foundational pieces, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, and the newly published diary, *The Portugal Journal*, I argue that Eliade writes about the sacred consistently as an element of human experience rather than an autonomous existence outside experience. Secondly, I argue that Eliade does not dismiss the political origins or manipulation of religion, but highlights the dynamic encounter between humans and natural phenomena in its origin. In terms of the general relationship between religion and history, Eliade seems to have a Weberian sense of elective affinity. Thirdly, I argue that Eliade downplays the "scientific" theories of his time in his interpretation of religious phenomena, because he perceived an intrinsic opposition in them to the spiritual freedom that he desperately struggled for to defend himself from personal and historical disasters of WWII. Eliade's fundamental pragmatic position with regards to religion emerges from these discussions.

**REREADING MIRCEA ELIADE:
SOME MYTHS AND TRUTHS ABOUT THE SACRED, THE
HISTORICAL, AND THE WWII**

by

Cong Fu

B.A., Nanjing University, 2012

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Religion

Syracuse University
December 2017

Copyright © Cong Fu 2017
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgement

I would like to take the opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Phillip P. Arnold, for his unwavering support for and patience with me with regard to and beyond this thesis project. It is my luck to have an advisor like him that allows me to explore and figure out important things at my own pace.

I'm also very grateful for my first reader, Professor Joanne Punzo Waghorne, for her interest in my project, for her careful comments and adorable exclamations, and for the shared sympathy for Eliade and annoyance at his critics. My thanks extend to other faculty members, Professor Zachary J. Braiterman in particular, for help at different stages of the thesis and with my studies in general. These brilliant minds open my eyes.

My sincerest thanks also go to the Department of Religion, without whose generosity I would not have been able to either begin or complete my studies. I especially want to take the opportunity to thank our Graduate Records Coordinator, Ms. Jacqueline Borowve. Jackie made me aware of the option to take another year for the program, which in retrospect changed the course of my life in its best direction.

Last and not least, I will always remember the kindness bestowed upon me by my fellow students, Fatima, Sam, Sara and others. Thank you all for your constant encouragement, advice, and company along the way.

Table of Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>I. THE CRYPTO-THEOLOGIAN?</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>II. THE AHISTORICAL SCHOLAR?</u>	<u>23</u>
<u>III. WWII AND SPIRITUAL FREEDOM</u>	<u>37</u>
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>49</u>
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>54</u>

Introduction

I began to think about writing on Eliade when I read, in 2015, of the last chapter of *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (hence *Eternal Return*), “The Terror of History.” It caught my attention because Eliade was obviously writing with the existential crises caused by the catastrophes in the early decades of the twentieth century in mind. The “problem of history as history,”¹ the meaning of historical tragedies, was the secular version of the problem of evil post-Holocaust, another area of interest of mine. Aware of the so-called “Eliade scandal,” I came to doubt deeply the political criticism about the fundamentally “fascist” nature in Eliade’s scholarship. Meanwhile, my dissatisfaction grew with the scholarly criticism of Eliade’s approach, especially of his alleged crypto-theology and his ahistorical method. Not least because I was not entrenched in a critical tradition that would have enabled me to understand these terms automatically. These initial thoughts led to current project.

The questions I’m asking are as follows: Does Eliade assume the existence of a transcendent, autonomous entity in his explanation of religion, as his critics claim? Is “ahistorical” accurate to capture Eliade’s sense of the relationship between religious phenomena and history? Why does Eliade not take advantage of the more “historical” or “scientific” tools of analysis of his time, such as Marxism? These questions are asked together in response to a certain existing chain of reasoning: Eliade’s purported theological convictions and his ahistorical approach are the two sides of the same coin, and these qualities are further attributed to the

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 151.

mythological, traditionalist positions in the Iron Guard ideologies to which he adhered in his youth. To be sure, answering these questions otherwise do not necessarily amount to a strong refutation that Eliade's scholarship is not contaminated by fascist ideologies. Fortunately, this is not the objective of this project -- Elaine Fisher has already exposed convincingly the rhetorical slippage in "correlating mythocentric and sui generis theories of religion systematically and intrinsically with Fascist politics."² In asking these questions, I'm mostly interested in giving a nuanced -- and sometimes new -- reading of Eliade that does more justice to him than existing stereotypes like "crypto-theologian," "ahistorical," and "fascist." I should also mention that, for the current project, I'm mostly concerned about *understanding*, rather than in *evaluating* or *applying* his scholarship.

In terms of understanding, the publication of the English edition of *The Portugal Journal* (hence *Portugal Journal*) in 2010 is especially opportune. *The Portugal Journal* is the journal that Eliade kept from 1941 to 1945 when he served as cultural attaché to Portugal. This Journal is an invaluable source for a number of reasons. For one thing, it concurred with the inception of two of Eliade's foundational treaties, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (hence *Patterns*) and *Eternal Return*. Unlike his *Journals I-IV*, the *Portugal Journal* is his only journal to be published in its entirety and unedited by him. Its candor is unmistakable; to the embarrassment of its author, it contains revelations of his relations with the Iron Guard, his hopes for a Germany victory, his struggle with hypersexuality, and his hubris. As a result, it provides the best available unmediated access to the personality, experience and context out of which *Eternal Return* and

2. Wendy Doniger, introduction II to *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach & Mircea Eliade*, ed. Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxxi. For Fisher's entire arguments, see Fisher, "Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship: The Quest for Ur-Fascism and the Study of Religion," in *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions*, 261-284.

some other works developed. As the translator Mac Linscott Ricketts says in the preface, “[f]or historians of religions, most precious is what this journal reveals about the inception of his two major works in the field, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* and *Cosmos and History*, and the importance he assigned to them.”³ The manuscript itself was written in Romanian and is now preserved in the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. Before this English edition, there was a Spanish edition published in 2001 and a Romanian edition in 2006. Due to its relatively late appearance, only a few English scholars have consulted it substantively, most notably Moshe Idel and Carlo Ginzburg.

As for Eliade’s academic treatises, *Patterns* and *Eternal Return* constitute my primary sources for discussion. Given the volume of Eliade’s entire oeuvre, the decision is practical. However, the importance of the two of Eliade’s earliest published academic books is indisputable. In his 1958 preface to *Eternal Return*, Eliade acknowledged that this book was “the most significant” and the first to be read in all his books.⁴ Note that by the year 1958, a number of his most important treatise had already been published, including *Patterns* (French; 1949), *Shamanism* (French; 1951), *Yoga* (French; 1954), *The Forge and the Crucible* (French; 1956), and *The Sacred and The Profane* (German; 1957). It was very likely that for Eliade, *Eternal Return* was closest to the core messages he intended to convey through religious studies. *Patterns*, on the other hand, epitomizes the global perspective and the morphological, and therefore *ahistorical* approach that characterize his presentation of religious phenomena. In the

3. Mac Linscott Ricketts, preface to Eliade, *The Portugal Journal*, trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), xi.

4. Eliade, *Eternal Return*, xv.

foreword to *Patterns*, Eliade stated the principle to study religion on its own plane of reference, which was later famously expanded in the opening chapter to the journal *History of Religions*.⁵ In this sense, *Patterns* is an exemplary piece of work for us to map out Eliade's sense of the relationship between religious phenomena and history. Apart from these two books, I have also looked up passages in other works by Eliade that his critics have cited and misinterpreted. However, this occurs mostly in the first chapter.

Literature Review

Criticism of Eliade's alleged theological explanations for religious phenomena has become quasi-standard. Many scholars claim that Eliade proclaims the existence of an autonomous, transcendent entity outside history. Notable examples include Russel McCutcheon, Jonathan Z. Smith, Daniel Dubuisson and Manuel A. Vásquez. For example, Dubuisson asserts that "it [Eliade's work] simultaneously allows and even goes so far as to claim the existence of a transcendent — the Sacred — that possesses the faculty of making itself visible to human perception..."⁶ Vasquez brings it a step further, indicating that for Eliade, the sacred actively intervenes in history: "Eliade must stress the total irreducibility and alterity of the sacred: the sacred is the *ganz Andere* (wholly other) that founds and drives history through its

5. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 1. See also, Eliade, "History of Religions and a New Humanism," *History of Religions* 1, no.1 (1961): 4.

6. Daniel Dubuisson, *Twentieth Century Mythologies: Dumezil, Levi-Strauss, Eliade*, trans. Martha Cunningham (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing LTD, 2006), 178.

hierophanies...”⁷ Even J. Z. Smith, a far more nuanced and sympathetic reader of Eliade, can't avoid arriving at the conclusion that Eliade speaks of a “supra-mundane, transcendent world” in *Patterns*.⁸ However, Bryan Rennie has meticulously demonstrated that, for Eliade, the sacred is merely an “intentional object of human experience which is apprehended as the real.”⁹ In Chapter One I'd like to revisit this topic. As Rennie's analysis starts from Eliade's own texts, I will instead focus on dismantling the arguments and alleged evidence advanced by his major critics.

A second standard issue with Eliade is the apparent absence of history in his presentation of religious phenomena. Eliade has insisted on an anti-reductive approach to religion, i.e. that religion should be studied as something religious. Understandably, it has invited intense criticism. Vázquez, following many before him, problematizes Eliade's methodology as follows: it emerges “not as the investigation of the cultural, historical, and psychosomatic conditions that make experience possible, but as the quest for *homo religiosus*'s deep mental structures... which point to the irreducible reality of the sacred.”¹⁰ In a similar vein, McCutcheon criticizes Eliade for “[ruling] out interpreting stories of the origins of the universe as themselves arising from

7. Manuel A. Vázquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103.

8. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Acknowledgements: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949-1999). Part 2: The Texture of the Work,” *Chicago Journals* 39, no. 4 (2000): 346.

9. Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstruction Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 21. See also, Rennie, “The Influence of Eastern Orthodox Christian Theology on Mircea Eliade's Understanding of Religion,” in *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209.

10. Vázquez, *More than Belief*, 103-104.

sociopolitical and historical contexts.”¹¹ In this connection, Rennie and Smith have different readings on this issue. Rennie locates the irreducibility of religious experience in Eliade in “the human will or the human ability to create,” as opposed to the *expressions* of such experience that are necessarily the socially, culturally, and historically conditioned.¹² Smith argues that Eliade’s project in *Patterns* is essentially morphological, which by definition scants the historical. Even so, however, Eliade manages to “[give] the historical more prominence than it usually receives in morphological works, by accepting into his analysis both historical modification and the effects of diffusion.”¹³ Here I propose to read *Patterns* closely and present a more nuanced picture of how Eliade navigates the relationship between religion and history.

Apart from these scholarly criticism, researchers have investigated in-depth into the intellectual and biographical making of Eliade’s thought on religion. Much ink has been spilled over the links between his scholarship and his scandalous prewar affiliation with the Iron Guard, a Romanian far-right movement. Notable discussions include Ivan Strenski, Rennie, McCutcheon, Steven Wasserstrom, Dubuisson, and, most recently, Idel, some more polemical than others. Meanwhile, attention has been also paid to influences of modern esoteric currents, the Romanian and Balkan spiritualities, the Hindu experience, Eastern Orthodox Christian theology, etc. on him. *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions*, edited by Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, contains a good sample of the various discussions of Eliade’s intellectual biography. A number of scholars, such as Elaine Fisher, Carlo Ginzburg, etc. have

11. Russel T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

12. Rennie, *Reconstruction Eliade*, 187.

13. Smith, “Part 2: The Texture of the Work,” 348.

also discussed Eliade's thought in the light of the problematics of modernity. Both Fisher and Ginzburg juxtapose Eliade with other thinkers on modernity, including Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin, etc. the similarities between which constitute a subtle rebuttal against the trends to politicize Eliade's scholarship in the direction of fascism and the like. I'd like to bring into the discussion more biographical details, especially Eliade's experience during WWII as documented in *Portugal Journal*. This work is particularly valuable for contextualizing Eliade's intellectual outlook.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter One, I examine Dubuisson's and Vásquez's claims about Eliade's theological assumptions in explaining religious phenomena. Upon close reading, the texts they quote as evidence do not support the argument that Eliade resorts to an autonomous or active transcendent entity. The two scholars converge on quoting Eliade out of context, confusing categories of reality, and mistaking phenomenological description of a religious person's experience for author's own convictions. In fact, the texts quoted point to the consistent reservation with which Eliade writes about the sacred; it is always described within the boundary of human experience. Indeed, Eliade does not preclude the possibility of the existence of the sacred in and by itself. However, he is not the crypto-theologian the way they claim him to be.

In Chapter Two, I look at the problem of ahistorical-ness in Eliade's account of religion. In particular, I read *Patterns* in light of the three questions by McCutcheon: if Eliade excludes the sociopolitical and historical origins of religious phenomena, if he is aware of the political use and implications of religious ideas and practices, and if he lends implicit support to the power

structures that the religious phenomena in question are embedded in. I argue that, among others, Eliade does not dismiss the political origins or manipulation of religious thoughts or practices, although he highlights the dynamic encounter between humans and natural phenomena. In terms of the general relationship between religion and history, Eliade seems to have a Weberian sense of elective affinity. For him, particular religious phenomena and historical circumstances coalesce as a result of mutual attraction and enhancement, as opposed to teleological relations of determination.

In Chapter Three, I contextualize Eliade's apparent lack of enthusiasm for historical explanations of religion with his experience during the World War Two. *Portugal Journal* attests to Eliade's constant wrestling with the problem of meaning and survival in the face of personal loss and historical destruction. To defend himself against nihilistic despair, he resorts to an act of absolute freedom, in which he denies subjugation to any natural and historical law. He chooses to believe that everything is possible, including the reversal of temporal progression. For Eliade, contemporary scientific philosophies, such as Marxism, run counter to the spiritual freedom he desperately needs, for their assumption is precisely the inextricability of humanity from natural and historical laws. In other words, they rest upon the profound un-freedom of humanity.

In lieu of conclusion, I hope to call attention to Eliade's Jamesean pragmatist stance on religious matters. It is attested to in both his scholarly and his personal writings. In retrospect, his close attention to human experience of the sacred but not the sacred itself, and the integrity of experience he preserves in not seeking explanations in sociopolitical and historical terms fit in well with this overall pragmatist position, which also prompts him to renounce all the laws and the limits they put on humanity in his self-defense against despair.

I. The Crypto-Theologian?

Of all the critiques against Eliade, the accusation of him being a crypto-theologian is a recurrent one.¹⁴ The epithet “crypto-theologian” is intended to designate a multitude of failings. In his 1996 book, Bryan Rennie has convincingly refuted two strands of accusations associated with this term, that Eliade “makes an unwarranted assumption of the ontology of the sacred,” and that he makes “‘normative’ statements which are insupportable and unacceptable in a supposedly unbiased academic study.”¹⁵ However, the accusations continue to be circulated and capitalized by scholars, often without even acknowledging the existence of counter-arguments like Rennie’s. This chapter undertakes a close examination of this charge of ontological assumptions in more recent works. To limit the scope of the discussion, I will focus on Daniel Dubuisson's *Twentieth Century Mythologies*, and Manuel A. Vázquez's *More than Belief*. The two scholars converge on quoting Eliade out of context, confusing categories of reality, and mistaking phenomenological description of the experience of people studied by the scholar for the scholar's claim about how the world works. Read in context, the same quotes instead suggest Eliade describes the sacred strictly within the boundaries of human consciousness or experience. At most, one can say that he does not preclude the possibility of its existence outside human experience.

Dubuisson has characterized Eliade’s hermeneutics variously as resembling a “mystic outlook,” as “theist phenomenology,” “platonian idealism,” etc. Further, he claims that Eliade’s

14. This chapter is an expansion of a previous term paper submitted as “On the accusation of Eliade being theological.”

15. Rennie, *Reconstruction Eliade*, 201.

scholarship “is nothing but the ‘religious’ translation of his earlier political obsessions.”¹⁶ One of the decisive errors of Eliade is his metaphysical convictions; that is, according to Dubuisson, “it [Eliade’s work] simultaneously allows and even goes so far as to *claim the existence of a transcendent — the Sacred — that possesses the faculty of making itself visible to human perception...*”¹⁷ The passage by Eliade that Dubuisson refers to in support of his claim is as follows:

This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of absolute realities. It is the experience of the sacred — that is, an encounter with a trans-human reality — which gives birth to the idea that something really exists, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence. It is, then, through the experience of the sacred that the ideas of reality, truth, and significance first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculations.¹⁸

Dubuisson decides that this is an “[affirmation of] the existence of a transcendent reality,” hence an outrageous violation of the academic practice of the history of religions, “which discipline... must remain entirely focused on humankind, dedicated to the study of human collective creations as well as individual works.”¹⁹ However, this alleged affirmation of an agential, transcendent reality flies in the face of the original passage from which Dubuisson excerpts the above statement. In the original text, Eliade ponders on the function of myth to “keep the world open” for the archaic mind:

ON THE ARCHAIC levels of culture religion maintains the "opening" toward a superhuman world, the world of axiological values. These values are "transcendent," in the sense that they are held to be revealed by Divine Beings or mythical Ancestors.

16. Dubuisson, *Twentieth Century Mythologies*, 134.

17. *Ibid.*, 178 (italics mine).

18. *Ibid.*, 179.

19. *Ibid.*

Hence they constitute absolute values, paradigms for all human activities. As we have seen, these models are conveyed by myths. Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining *consciousness* of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestors. This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of absolute realities. It is the *experience of the sacred* — that is, an *encounter* with a trans-human reality — which gives birth to the idea that something really exists, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence. It is, then, through the *experience of the sacred* that the ideas of reality, truth, and significance first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculations.²⁰

First of all, phrases like "on the archaic levels" and "they are held to be" make it clear that Eliade is merely describing the views of the archaic as understood by him, instead of his own metaphysical convictions or any theology he is propagating. Secondly, Eliade describes the transcendent consistently as mediated through experience. Actually, mediation is a misleading word, for it presupposes two entities on the two ends of a medium. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is the "experience of the sacred" — regardless of an independent existence outside experience or not — that plays a role in the formation of cultural ideas and values. Therefore, it is the "consciousness" of another world that myth evokes and elongates, the "experience" of the sacred or an "encounter" with a trans-human reality that awakens ideas of absoluteness, meanings, and values. To justify Dubuisson's indignation, Eliade would have proclaimed a divine being going around and blowing the mind of primitives; but Eliade stays strictly within the boundary of human experience. The formation of cultural values is not attributed to the transcendent, but to the human experience of it — whatever that might be. To acknowledge the impact of the experience of something is not the same as to acknowledge the autonomous existence, will or power of that thing itself; that is two different categories of reality. By no

20. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard Trask (NY: Harper & Row, 1963), 139 (italics mine).

means does this passage “claim the existence of a transcendent ... that possesses the faculty of making itself visible to human perception,” as Dubuisson asserts.²¹ It is also clear that contrary to Dubuisson’s claim that Eliade makes history of religion a theological discipline, instead of “a historical as well as anthropological science... [that is] entirely focused on humankind,”²² Eliade does not venture beyond the human at all.

This is not the only instance in which Dubuisson confuses Eliade’s presentation of experiences of the religious man, the subject of his study, with a presentation of the scholar’s own metaphysical convictions. In another case, while the quote begins as “[*f*]or religious man, nature is never only ‘natural’...” Dubuisson analyzes it as “*For Eliade*, all nature is saturated with Being...”²³ Indeed, a scholar’s own experience may inform his understanding of that of his subject of study. Eliade may have imposed his own occultist metaphysics on the mind of the primitive. Yet to establish this more evidence is required than an assertion. At least one needs to reconstruct, on the basis of other sources, Eliade’s personal religious vision, and compare it with his presentation of the religious man. And what if the so-called primitive do share similar understandings of the world with Eliade?

In this regard, Dubuisson does frequently slip in excerpts from Eliade’s nonacademic writings to support his claim about his erroneous metaphysical assumptions. However, he reads Eliade arbitrarily again. For example, he accuses Eliade of believing in the existence of a divine

21. Dubuisson, *Twentieth Century Mythologies*, 178.

22. *Ibid.*, 179.

23. *Ibid.*, 249 (italics mine).

structure that underlies and valorizes the world. According to him, Eliade “allows that ‘the world is ‘holy,’ that its existence responds to a *providential design* whose intelligence is beyond the ordinary aptitudes of human reason.”²⁴ He quotes Eliade from *The Ordeal by Labyrinth*:

If there is no absolute to give meaning and value to our existence, then that means existence has no meaning. I know there are philosopher who do think precisely that; but for me, that would not be just pure despair but also a kind of betrayal. Because it isn't true, and I know that it isn't true.²⁵

The book consists of conversations between Eliade and Claude-Henri Rocquet. For the first short quote, Dubuisson makes it appear as if Eliade directly states, unqualified, that “the world is ‘holy,’” while the original text is an observation of eastern European peasant: “... that made me think of...the eastern European peasant, *for whom* the world is ‘holy.’”²⁶ As with the second quote, Eliade is reflecting on a dream he had of two old men dying, just about to “[disappear], forever, leaving no trace, no witness, of an admirable life-story”.²⁷

The dream about the two old men... If God doesn't exist, then everything is dust and ashes. If there is no absolute to give meaning and value to our existence, then that means existence has no meaning. I know there are philosopher who do think precisely that; but for me, that would not be just pure despair but also a kind of betrayal. Because it isn't true, and I know that it isn't true. If one reaches the stage of thinking it is true, that is a crisis so deep that it goes beyond personal despair: it is the world itself that is “smashed,” as Gabriel Marcel put it.²⁸

24. Ibid., 193 (italics mine).

25. Ibid., 193.

26. Eliade, *Ordeal of the labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 92 (italics mine).

27. Ibid., 66.

28. Ibid., 67 (italics mine).

Here Eliade wrestles with his age-old problem of irreversible loss. It will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Three. Here it suffices to say that Eliade clearly clings to a belief that would somehow rescue meaning from the precarious human existence. To that end, the “God” he refers to may perform a number of functions other than the architect of the world and its meaning. HE could mete out justice in the after-life, for example. It is not the same as an unfathomable, “providential design” according to which the world is constructed. Curiously, after Eliade emphasizes that “he knows” God exists, he adds that “if one reaches the stage of thinking” that God doesn’t exist, it could be as much as the annihilation of the world to him or her. It seems to suggest that Eliade accepts that people may disbelieve, only that it will entail devastating consequences. This quote offers a glimpse of Eliade’s pragmatism when it comes to personal beliefs, to be discussed in the third chapter. The point here is Dubuisson’s claim about Eliade’s belief in a “providential design” is a stretch.

Vásquez, on his part, has consistently criticized Eliade for his appeal to “a supra-historical sacred”²⁹ or “a transhistorical, onto-theo-logocentric sacred”³⁰ in explaining religious phenomena. It runs counter to the embodied, emplaced approach to religion for which he advocates. This critique could have been fair, had he made it clear that the sacred of Eliade always refers to “a mode of experience, ‘a structure of the human consciousness’... a relationship with the real, rather than the real itself.”³¹ The assumption that humans are genetically wired to

29. Vásquez, *More than Belief*, 286.

30. *Ibid.*, 325.

31. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, 195.

long for and experience the sacred is indeed debatable--if not outright erroneous--in explaining the vast varieties of religious phenomena across cultures. However, Vázquez misses this subtle difference. He quotes Eliade's statements but leaves out contextualizing details, bending the quotes to his own liking. For example, he quotes

[The goal of the history of religion is] to identify the presence of the transcendent in human experience, to isolate— within the vast mass of the ‘unconscious’ — that which is trans-conscious. It's for this reason that the study of symbolism appears to me so fascinating and decisive. A symbol can reveal what is happening in the depth (psychoanalysis) as well as in the heights...I said a word or two on it in the chapter...but nowhere have I explained the analytical function of the history of religions, the way in which it helps us to unmask the presence of the transcendent and the supra-historic in everyday life.³²

Vázquez sees in this passage Eliade's aim to “[recover] the sacred as a priori category of existence.”³³ Indeed, the phrase “to identify the presence of the transcendent in human experience” invites different interpretations. It suggests either that there is an external, autonomous entity for humans to encounter, or that the transcendent is a structural element within human experience. However, the issue is settled soon, for Eliade immediately paraphrases his statement, that it is a “transconscious” that his discipline seeks after. The sacred is, in the last analysis, a matter of consciousness supposedly common to humanity. The comparison to psychoanalysis that Vázquez does not quote, the “analytical function” of the history of religion, also makes it clear that Eliade is interested in exploring the dynamics of the human mind. Now it

32. Eliade, *No Souvenirs*, tran. Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 83 (italics mine). The sentences underlined are not quoted by Vázquez. Vázquez indicates that it is a quote of Otto from *Ordeal by Labyrinth*. Actually, it first appears in Eliade's journal, *No Souvenirs*, and got quoted by Eliade's interlocutor in *Ordeal by Labyrinth*.

33. Vázquez, *More than Belief*, 102.

becomes evident what he means by “to unmask the presence of the transcendent and the supra-historic in everyday life;” it is to uncover the orientation towards or experience of the sacred that often go unnoticed in everyday life, just like unconscious drives in psychoanalysis. If Eliade does make ontological assumptions, it is assumptions about human conscious instead of any autonomous divine entity.

It should be acknowledged that sometimes Vázquez stumbles upon the right target, problematizing Eliade’s unwarranted assumptions on the human mind. For example, he characterizes Eliade’s interest in primitive peoples as motivated by the belief that “they provide an open window to the essence of humanity, which in *illo tempore* was inextricably bound up with the sacred.”³⁴ Whether it is a valid representation of Eliade or not, the statement is right in its general direction, that Eliade is interested in understanding human beings, not gods. He also hits at the point in saying that “Eliade...places phenomenology at the service of ontology, of the search for the ‘spiritual unity subjacent to the history of humanity.’”³⁵ “Spiritual unity” can be read as indicating something that is common to all humanity, i.e. a structural element in consciousness, the orientation towards the sacred. At these moments Vázquez’s historical-materialist approach to religion represents the most forceful critique to Eliade’s antihistorical, internalist hermeneutics.

However, Vázquez confuses the distinction between the sacred as an ontological entity and the sacred as an element in human experience. Therefore, he often slips into criticism against

34. Ibid., 101.

35. Ibid., 102. This appears on page 69 of *The Quest*, instead of page 70 as Vázquez cites it.

Eliade's alleged proposition on the former when he has collected evidence for the latter. Right after discussions of quotes above, he goes on to assert that for Eliade, the sacred is an active force in driving and shaping human history:

Eliade seems at times to associate *ontos*, that is, the sacred, with the noumenal, Being-itself, a supra-historical essence that acts in space and time...Eliade must stress the total irreducibility and alterity of the sacred: the sacred is the *ganz Andere* (wholly other) that *founds and drives history* through its hierophanies...³⁶

No further passages from Eliade are referred to to support this bold claim. Either Vázquez thinks that the previous discussions are solid enough to base this conclusion on—which is clearly not— or that he intends to use what follows, a statement from McCutcheon, to support his own claim:

Eliade, as McCutcheon correctly point out, “sets up an implicit distinction between the study of religious aspects of human life and the study of that which is expressed in these varied forms, the study of *the sacred conceived as an ahistorical agent that operates outside and through the natural world.*”³⁷

Unfortunately, McCutcheon quotes a passage from Eliade that comes nowhere near suggesting the existence of a supernatural, agent-like character. He is merely restating his principle of studying religious phenomena on its own plane of reference:

Obviously there can be no purely religious phenomenon...Because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic...But it would be hopeless to try and explain religion in terms of any one of those basic functions which are really no more than another way of saying what man is.³⁸

36. Ibid., 103 (italics mine).

37. Ibid. (italics mine).

38. Eliade, *Patterns*, xvii.

The entire passage in the original texts that opens *Patterns* is too long to be quoted here. Suffice it to say that the gist of this paragraph is that “it is the scale that makes the phenomenon.”³⁹ That is, a religious phenomenon may be a physiological, psychological, sociological, etc. phenomenon on the scale of physiology, psychology, or sociology. Only on the scale of history of religions (as Eliade understands it) can it appear as a *religious* phenomenon. What is unique and irreducible on this scale is, according to Eliade, the element of the sacred.⁴⁰ This heavily perspectivist assumption is incompatible with the essentialism that McCutcheon accuses him of. With the metaphor of scale, it makes no sense to say that Eliade thinks “behind such instances [religious phenomena] there is a form or essence...”⁴¹ In the last analysis, the sacred emerges with a change of scale or perspective; it has no independent existence in its own, let alone “[operating] outside and through the natural world.”

Vásquez picks up this theme of the sacred as an “ahistorical agent” in Eliade more fully in a later discussion of Eliade’s theory of space in religion. According to him, Eliade attributes an “ontogenic power” to the sacred something, instead of seeing the sacred as “a purely relational and contingent — thus empty in itself—category” like Durkheim: “For Eliade ... the sacred itself has ontogenic power, the power to give rise to reality, to space and time, and, thus, to make possible the emergence of the social...” and “the sacred is the numinous, the ‘wholly other,’

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid. Further discussions on this passage will be made in Chapter Two.

41. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 13.

Being-itself which has the power to create an ordered cosmos out of chaos."⁴² In this vision, the sacred is best represented by the genesis God who hovers over waters of chaos and commands "let there be light." To support his claim, he quotes "[for the archaic,] the sacred is equivalent to a power, and in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with being..."⁴³

It seems that Eliade indeed talks about a powerful, world-founding sacred. However, his discussion on space starts with experience: "for religious man, space is not homogeneous; he *experiences* interruptions, breaks in it."⁴⁴ The discussion that follows refers to the realm of experience—note how many times the word "experience" has appeared. It is the experience of space on the part of the religious person that he is trying to elucidate, and it is the experience of the sacred, of breaks and interruptions in a homogeneous space, that suggests a qualitative difference in space and makes orientation possible. A quick example would be Jacob's ladder. Whether this revelation of his dream is true or not in our standards does not matter; the experience of the dream is enough to lead him to recognize the nonhomogeneity of this place, and give it a name. Here Eliade merely gives a phenomenological description of human experience. At most, one can say that he does not preclude the possibility of the existence of a sacred entity.

Vásquez has summoned other quotes from Eliade to demonstrate his erroneous assumptions about the sacred. Not unexpectedly, these quotes often appear outrageous to any

42. Vásquez, *More than Belief*, 265 (italics mine).

43. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard Trask (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 13.

44. *Ibid.*, 20 (italics mine).

scholar that is proud of the principles in the critical study of religion. For example, Vázquez quotes Eliade as acknowledging the ‘autonomy of hierophanies: the sacred expresses itself according to the laws of its own dialectic and this expression comes to man *from without*.’⁴⁵ A bit further down, Eliade is found to have said that “[in] actual fact, [a sacred] place is never ‘chosen’ by man; it is merely discovered by him; in other words, the sacred place in some way or another reveals itself to him.”⁴⁶ Again, these quotes are intended to disqualify Eliade as a scholar for granting autonomous status to the sacred, and not recognizing that sacred space, for example, “[is] the mere product of human praxis.”⁴⁷

However, is a sacred space a product of social construction solely? One may consider the following practice that Eliade mentions in determining a sacred place: “sometimes a domestic animal, a bull for instance, is let loose; in a few days’ time a search is made for it, and it is sacrificed on the spot where it is found, which is recognized as the place for building the town.”⁴⁸ This practice, alongside a few other similar practices, comes after the second quote above in the original text. Situated within this context, Eliade is more or less justified to say that a sacred place is not chosen but discovered, or that it reveals itself to a person. It is another way of saying that for “archaic man,” the choice of where to build a town is not arbitrary; the sacredness of a place is indicated after they follow an age-old procedure. Where the bull ends up is a sign from

45. Vázquez, *More than Belief*, 266 (italics original).

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Eliade, *Patterns*, 370.

the divine, even though it is them the humans that release the bull. In this sense, the sacred is not completely a product of “human praxis.” The result is open and not entirely in the control of humans. There is a large element of chance. With this in mind, the first quote on the “autonomy of hierophanies” make more sense. One of the “laws of its own dialectic,” according to which the sacred expresses itself, is captured in this practice of letting loose a bull. There must be numerous other procedures through which humans believe they may receive signals from the sacred. For *them* a hierophany does “comes to man from without.”

This chapter examined the discussion of the sacred in Eliade in two recent works of Dubuisson and Vásquez. I argue that they have incorrectly accused Eliade of claiming the existence of the sacred and its forceful intervention into human history. The accusation of crypto-theologian dissipates in the air when one reads Eliade’s statements in context, bears in mind the fine distinction between the experience of the sacred and the sacred in itself, and see Eliade as a phenomenologist describing the experience of the religious person. The findings support Rennie’s conclusion that Eliade’s concept of the sacred is “a mode of experience, ‘a structure of the human consciousness’... a relationship with the real, rather than the real itself.”⁴⁹ It does not necessarily presuppose an autonomous, transcendent entity beyond human experience, even though it does not preclude its possibility either. Is this generosity an academic position worthy of much outcry and condemnation? Or does it herald scholarly practice in the post-colonial age, when the most ethically sensitive among the academia try not to do violence to the traditions not their own? Certainly, this chapter reminds scholars of taking more seriously those most elementary academic procedures, reading and quoting, to begin with.

49. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, 195.

II. The Ahistorical Scholar?

The other side of the cardinal sin of Eliade -- as it appears to today' s critical studies-dominated field of religion -- is his seemingly hopeless innocence as to the politics of the sacred. With his famous principle of reading religion "on its own plane of reference," Eliade does not take upon himself to unravel the complex relationships between a discourse or practice around the sacred on the one hand, and the power structures or struggles that may have informed, exploited, or contested it on the other. In this connection, McCutcheon has compellingly demonstrated that reading religious narratives and enactments apolitically is inadequate. Contrasting Eliade' s theory of cosmogonic myths with those of Smith, Lincoln, etc., McCutcheon raises important issues as to whether Eliade "rules out interpreting stories of the origins of the universe as themselves arising from sociopolitical and historical contexts," whether he is aware of the "political uses and implications of myth," and if, in these ways, he lends "[implicit] support and legitimacy to the structures of authority" that he studies.⁵⁰ This chapter reassess Eliade' s so-called "ahistorical" approach in the terms of the three questions above. The second question will be addressed first.

For sure, the impression of Eliade' s lack of attention to politics is indeed easily justified. It is not that he only deals with materials of innocuous nature. Oft-times the myth or ritual he discusses is of rich political significance, but he seems to miss the point consistently. *Eternal Return* is abundant with instances that invite more critical interpretations. In one section, for example, he enumerates cases where ancient kings (claimed to) build temples and royal cities

50. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 43-46.

on divine or celestial models.⁵¹ Then he brings up the setting up of Cross by Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores when they took possession of newly-conquered islands and continents.⁵² These can be easily interpreted as political acts; in these acts the actors involved proclaim extraterrestrial sanction to boost authority, establish dominance, consolidate rule, etc. Eliade, however, arrives at the following conclusion: “the innumerable gestures...reveal the primitive’s obsession with the real, his thirst for being.”⁵³ In another instance, Eliade refers to a Qur’ an verse “[y]our women are your tilth, so come into your tillage how you choose.”⁵⁴ For him, it demonstrates ancient societies’ perception of the agricultural/cosmic structure in the sexual union; it is not read as a statement normalizing male domination in sex. Similarly, the common claim about the divine/cosmic origin of a system of justice is invoked as an innocent example that for the primitives, profane activities always have their mythical prototypes.⁵⁵ As a final remark, he observes that in archaic ontology, “an object becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype,”⁵⁶ which glosses over all the power dynamics with regards to class, gender, colonialism, etc. behind these phenomena.

To his credit, McCutcheon notices moments when Eliade touches upon the political uses and implications of religious ideas and practices. In fact, Eliade not infrequently acknowledges

51. Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 7-9.

52. *Ibid.*, 11.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 26.

55. *Ibid.*, 27.

56. *Ibid.*, 34.

that “such symbolic expressions promote certain social arrangements.”⁵⁷ In *Patterns*, Eliade frequently indicates the close connection between celestial divinities and privileged social classes in certain cultures. As he observes, “sun hierophanies tend to become the privilege of a closed circle, of a minority of the elect.”⁵⁸ He further comments on the political significance of the Babylonian Sky God Anu: “He is the supreme ruler, and the symbols of his kingship are used by all kings as source and justification for their authority...That is why only kings invoke him, never common men.”⁵⁹ On the after-death arrangements and the moon, he notes that “[s]ometimes the privilege of repose on the moon after death is reserved to political or religious leaders... This is one of the aristocratic, or heroic systems, which concede immortality only to the privileged rulers or the initiated (‘ magicians ’), which we also find elsewhere.”⁶⁰ He seems quite comfortable to suggest that religious myths and symbols reflects and may be used to justify sociopolitical realities.

It should not come as a surprise, however, for Eliade argues that *homo religiosus* invoke divine prototypes to validate aspects of existence just all the time. As he observes, for the primitives “all essential activities of human life, [such as] hunting, fishing, gathering fruits, agriculture and the rest...were revealed by the gods or by ‘ancestors.’ ”⁶¹ The creation myth,

57. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 43.

58. Eliade, *Patterns*, 150.

59. *Ibid.*, 65.

60. *Ibid.*, 172.

61. *Ibid.*, 394.

for example, serves as “model and justification for all human activities,”⁶² which include the act of procreation, “the cheering up of a despondent heart, the feeble aged and the decrepit,” the hastening of the production of music, war, etc. -- basically, whenever it is “a question of *doing something*.”⁶³ In a world where all cultural acts are believed to be, or should be based upon divine precedents, it is only natural that the way its political life is ordered finds parallels and justification from its symbolic resources. Therefore, not only Eliade takes note of the political significance of religious imagination, but also it is a logical extension of his general observation that for *homo religiosus*, every significant act in social life should have a religious rationale.

The third question brings up the issue of the ethical implications of scholarship. For McCutcheon, it is an easy step to take from ignoring a power structure to lending support to it. In that way, it becomes an ethical obligation that scholars confront the power dynamics whenever possible, especially with regards to domination and oppression. Granted that this obligation is valid, Eliade *can be seen as* an ethical scholar. He sets out to discredit the evolutionist hypothesis in the scholarship of religion, which finds its roots in centuries of colonial structures. The evolutionist perspective assumes the inferiority of the so-called “primitive” religions and the superiority of Christianity. Eliade seeks to demonstrate, on the contrary, the vast capacity of the “primitives” to experience the sacred and even to conceive a supreme god that closely parallels that of the Christians. In that way, the evolutionist scheme could be exploded. As he says,

62. Ibid., 412.

63. Ibid., 411 (*italics original*).

if one can show...that religious lives of the most primitive peoples are in fact complex, that they cannot be reduced to ‘animism,’ ‘totemism,’ or even ancestor-worship, that they include visions of Supreme Beings with all the powers of an omnipotent Creator-God, then these evolutionist hypotheses which deny the primitive any approach to ‘superior hierophanies’ are nullified.⁶⁴

He even goes so far as to think that Christianity is hardly original or revolutionary: “Almost all the religious attitudes man has, he has had from the most primitive times. From one point of view there has been no break in continuity from the ‘primitive’ to Christianity.”⁶⁵

Additionally, within a given society, Eliade seems to be constantly rectifying a prejudice against the religiosity of lower classes, and of those oppressed and colonized peoples. In *Patterns* he often refers to two categories of religious visions, those of the “elites” and those of “the masses.” He sees both as authentic and valid. For example, on the interpretations of Hindu gods Durga or Siva, he argues that “the meaning given by the masses stands for as authentic a modality of the sacred manifested in Durga or Siva as the interpretation of the initiates.”⁶⁶ On the issue of “idolatry” and “faith,” one with far-reaching implications, he takes pains to illustrate the validity of the former, which is often associated with the masses and the less advanced cultures. According to him, idolatry is as “fully justified by both the religious experience itself and by history.”⁶⁷ In fact, he hesitates to use the politically charged categories

64. Ibid., 6-7.

65. Ibid., 463.

66. Ibid., 7.

67. Ibid., 230.

of “faith” and “idolatry.” “It is not a battle between faith and idolatry, but between two theophanies, two moments of religious experience,” as he states.⁶⁸

That said, it is understandable that Eliade's downplay of power dynamics in favor of the primitive's fixation on the real remains disturbing to many critically minded and ethically sensitive scholars. Perhaps one way to think more positively of this -- not that Eliade is not justified in his position otherwise-- is that he exposes the underlying logic in the way domination and oppression operates, by going at its roots, that is, the manipulation of humanity's fundamental thirst for the real and for being. In other words, the question Eliade (inadvertently) answers in the context of political examination of religion is, if religion is manipulated for political ends, what is it about religion that makes it useful?

Finally, let's go back to the first question. The simple answer is that Eliade does not rule out the sociopolitical origins of religious phenomena. To be sure, with the goal to study religion on its own plane of reference, he parts ways with scholars examining religion as social, political, or economic products. For him, religion is the “imaginative responses...to the presence of the sacred in the world.”⁶⁹ As argued in the previous chapter, for him the sacred is not necessarily an ontological entity, but an element in experience. The *homo religiosus* perceives the sacred in certain qualities and modes of being – such as those represented by the sky, the moon, the rocks, etc.-- that differ categorically from his or her own existence and realities as a human being. According to Eliade, these primary glimpses of the sacred inspire religious imagination. At the same time, however, he leaves space for other explanations that account for the origins of

68. Ibid.

69. John Clifford Holt, introduction to Eliade, *Patterns* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), xiv.

concrete religious beliefs and practices throughout his arguments. In fact, for him, the latter is indispensable to a complete account of the vast varieties of expressions of religiosity in the world.

In the foreword to the English edition of *Patterns*, Eliade legitimizes different approaches to religion along with his own with the statement that “[i]t is the scale that makes the phenomenon.”⁷⁰ Of course, it is primarily to justify his own position, i.e. “a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level...if it is studied *as something religious*.”⁷¹ It implies that a phenomenon can simultaneously be a linguistic, economic, social or political phenomenon *if studied as such*. In much sense, this principle overthrows claims to absolute objectivity. It points to the inevitable correlation between findings on the one hand and assumptions and vantage points on the other. Understandably, not every perspective has the same explanatory power, and oft-times one phenomenon calls for a multitude of perspectives for elucidation. Eliade is not unaware of this. As he clarifies it, he does not “mean to deny the usefulness of approaching the religious phenomenon from various different angles.”⁷² To the ire of his critics, however, he quickly adds, “...but it must be looked at first of all *in itself*.”⁷³ He also claims that “[t]o try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is

70. Eliade, *Patterns*, xvii.

71. Ibid. (italics original).

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid. (italics mine).

false; it misses the one *unique and irreducible element* in it—the element of the sacred.”⁷⁴

Indeed, these statements appear essentialist, but they become less so when put in conjunction with the last lines of *The Sacred and the Profane*, where Eliade concludes that “nonreligious man had lost the capacity to *live religion consciously*,” and that “[h]ere the consideration of the historian of religions ends. Here begins the realm of problems proper to the philosopher, the psychologist, and even the theologian.”⁷⁵ For Eliade, what distinguishes his subject matter from the rest of the sea of human phenomena as *religious*, is the element of awareness of the sacred, or better, of the consciousness orientation towards the sacred in thoughts and acts. And to capture *this particular element*, he believes that his approach, that of history of religions, is most appropriate. To approach it like any other physiological, psychological, or sociological phenomena miss the opportunity to uncover the unique element.

As mentioned above, Eliade locates the uniqueness of religious phenomena in the awareness of the sacred. For him, the sacred is only perceived in certain modes of existence, ones that differ dramatically from humans' own. Qualities of such modes of being are intuited, and then invested with religious significance. In this sense the sky, the moon, the rocks and the like becomes hierophanies. The sky, for example, reveals an existence of infinite height and ever-lastingness that contrasts dramatically to the tiny little being of a human. “The sky shows itself as it really is: infinite, transcendent. The vault of heaven is, more than anything else, ‘something quite apart’ from the tiny thing that is man and his span of life...”⁷⁶ In Eliade’s

74. Ibid. (italics mine)

75. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 213.

76. Eliade, *Patterns*, 39.

account, the mere fact of being high up is seen as “powerful” and “...filled with the sacred” by the primitives.⁷⁷ The moon symbolizes a mode of being that is locked in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. “The moon...is a body which waxes, wanes and disappears, a body whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death... But this ‘death’ is followed by a rebirth: the ‘new moon.’ ”⁷⁸ The rock, by contrast, exemplifies autonomy, hardness and strength, qualities that are generally absent from the fragile existence of humans. As he states, a majestic rock shows

man *something that transcends the precariousness of his humanity*: an absolute mode of being. Its strength, its motionlessness, its size and its strange outlines are none of them human... In its grandeur, its hardness, its shape and its colour, man is faced with *a reality and a force that belong to some world other than the profane world of which he is himself a part.*⁷⁹

The quote above offers an important insight into Eliade’s conception of the sacred. That “reality” and “force,” which is to be infused with religious values and become the sacred, becomes so because it is perceived as “not human.” It “transcends the precariousness of ... humanity,” and “belong[s] to some world other than the profane world of which [humans are themselves] a part.”⁸⁰ In other words, the recognition of the sacred arise in the encounter with qualities that contrast with the general human conditions, all the dependence, weakness, and finiteness that characterize human existence. Rennie makes a similar observation on the meaning of transcendence -- often used as a quality or synonym of the sacred-- in Eliade’s texts.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 154.

79. Ibid., 216 (italics mine).

80. Ibid.

According to Rennie, it is a “transcendence of specific, known ‘modes of being’ : the cultural, the historical, the human, and the mundane.” It is the same with other synonyms or attributes of the sacred used by Eliade, “by transhistorical Eliade meant ‘not subject to historical conditioning,’ by transhumance, ‘not subject to the human condition,’ and by transmundane, ‘highly significant.’ ”⁸¹

After he elaborates on mode of beings possibly symbolized by an entity in nature, Eliade usually takes pains to establish the correspondence between its symbolism and the vast number of symbols, divine figures, myths and rituals that surround it across different cultures. In doing so, he indicates that the latter, the systems that are commonly known as "religions" today, is a response to the perception of the former. Meanwhile, however, he is also aware of his own explanatory limits. He discusses the limits in the exposition on the sky and sky gods. As he observes, sky divinities often exhibit attributes beyond the qualities in the sky symbolism. For example, in general Supreme Beings are at the same time creators, good, eternal, founders of the established order and guardians of the laws. Some of these functions cannot be traced back to sky hierophanies. They have a “form... a proper and exclusive mode of being which cannot, therefore, be explained simply in terms of events in the sky, or human experience.”⁸² In the case of the Indo-Aryan sky divinities, he cautions that “[i]t would be hard to reduce [their] historical forms to any single theophany, or single series of sky theophanies. Their personalities richer, their functions more complex.”⁸³ In acknowledging the dissonance between sky

81. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, 198.

82. Eliade, *Patterns*, 109.

83. *Ibid.*, 67.

symbolism and the actual historical forms of sky divinities, Eliade creates space for other explanations. In fact, he readily brings in other sources of influence: ethnic traits, cultural transmission, social class, etc. As he notes on the varying notions on miraculous herbs and fruits, “differences may have arisen from ethnic genius, or social group, or simply from the vicissitudes which must occur when such a theme is transmitted...”⁸⁴

Now I’ ll take a different approach to the first question. McCutcheon criticizes Eliade for missing the sociopolitical origins of religious imagination, or as J.Z Smith puts it concisely, “as below, so above.”⁸⁵ It is, in the last analysis, a historical materialist critique. In response, I will examine Eliade’ s understanding of the general relationship between historical materiality and religious ideologies and its symbolic apparatus. I argue that the way Eliade conceives this relationship is more akin to Weber’ s concept of “elective affinity.”

By historical materialism I basically mean a one-way causal relation captured in the statement “[l]ife is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”⁸⁶ As Marx understands it, ideas are not free-floating, self-generating, self-explaining entities, but produced and regulated by the dominant class in the productive relationships of society - sometimes by a specialized group of thinkers that take as its task the perfection of the “illusion of the class about itself” - in the service of reproduction of that relationship.⁸⁷ In faulting Eliade with

84. Ibid., 295.

85. Smith, introduction to Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), xv.

86. Karl Marx, “The German Ideology: Part I,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, eds. Robert C. Tucker (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 155.

87. Ibid. 173.

“[ruling] out interpreting stories of the *origins* of the universe as themselves arising from *sociopolitical and historical contexts*,”⁸⁸ McCutcheon restates Marx’ s theory about the social determination of consciousness.

By contrast, “elective affinity” as a model of interaction describes a less stringent causal relation. The co-appearance of certain typical action and conditions of existence does not result from a strict deterministic relationship, but from an inherent, mutually favoring compatibility. As Kalberg puts it,

A compatible intermingling of two or more ideal types indicates the existence of an elective affinity model. *A non-deterministic though typical and reciprocal interaction* of regular action is hypothesized. Inner relationships of ‘adequacy’ are implied. *A mutual favoring, attraction, and even strengthening is involved* whenever ideal types coalesce in a relationship of elective affinity, and this attraction does not result from a common opposition to externally constraining forces. Each such interaction model involves an inner affinity between two or more separate ideal types.⁸⁹

It should be noted that elective affinity is a *theoretical* relationship. It describes *logical* interaction between analytical entities (“ideal types”) instead of historical realities. In fact, Kalberg emphasizes Weber’ s awareness of the frequent disruption of patterns of elective affinity in empirical experience. According to him, “[Weber] takes cognizance in principle of the capacity, above all, of power, charismatic leaders, and historical imponderables selectively to skew, weaken, and even contradict all affinity and antagonism models•••”⁹⁰

Eliade seems to suggest -- on the empirical level -- a non-deterministic, mutually attractive relationship between religious ideas and historical conditions of existence similar to

88. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 43 (italics mine).

89. Stephen Kalberg, *Max Weber’s Comparative-Historical Sociology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994), 103 (italics mine).

90. *Ibid.*, 116.

“elective affinity.” The two attract and enhance each other, instead of the former being consciously invented or manipulated by the latter. For example, as Eliade validates the anti-idolatry development in religion, he writes:

The assailants of idols... are justified both by their own religious experience and by the point in history when their experience occurs. There is, in their life time, a revelation more ‘complete’, *more consistent with their spiritual and cultural powers*, and they cannot believe, they cannot see any religious value, in the hierophanies accepted in previous stages of religious development.⁹¹

For another example, as he observes the correlation between empires and strong sky god, or between passive sky god and less centralized political entity, he states:

In the great political organizations like China and the Mongol empires the sovereignty myth and the very existence of an empire reforge the efficacy of sky god. But when *he gets no help from ‘history’*, the supreme divinity of the Uralo-Atlaics tends, in the minds of his worshippers, to become passive and remote.⁹²

The mode of relation indicated by words like “consistent” and “get help” is similar to “compatibility” and “enhancement.” It suggests that condemnation of idolatry takes hold as a result of negotiation between religious experience and historical circumstances. Eliade leaves space for the authenticity of religious experience; but he also implies that a religious experience needs to be validated by historical circumstances, or, in Weber’s terminology, to be “compatible” with circumstances of existence. In this connection, he writes “the Jewish prophets owed a debt to the events of history, which *justified* them and *confirmed* their message...” A religious experience is subjected to the test of historical happening, to explain and to console in the Jewish case. By implication, it could be disregarded in the event of failing

91. Eliade, *Patterns*, 25-26 (italics mine).

92. *Ibid.*, 63 (italics mine).

that test, even if the experience itself is authentic. Indeed, at one place he argues “…

‘history’ made it inevitable that these epiphanies of elementary forces of life should be outgrown.”⁹³ The idea of a "compatibility" test of history runs throughout his texts.

To conclude, Eliade does not preclude sociopolitical or historical explanations of religion. On the contrary, he completes the tools of analysis by highlighting the dynamic encounter between humans and his or her environment. Particular modes of existence embodied in the environment give rise to the perception of the sacred, and inform their share of the religious beliefs and practices of humanity. Meanwhile, religious beliefs and practices are also subject to a match-making mechanism; only those compatible with historical conditions survive and thrive. It is not a strict deterministic relationship between history and consciousness, however. In retrospect, Eliade anticipates Vasquez’ s so-called “non-reductive materialism,” which acknowledges that

within the dynamic parameters set by the evolution and the relative plasticity of neural networks, religious practices and beliefs exhibit great local and global variability and creativity, as a result of intricate, *often non-teleological relations of codetermination among social, cultural, neurophysiological, and ecological dynamics*.⁹⁴

93. Ibid. 110.

94. Vásquez, *More than Belief*, 14 (italics mine).

III. WWII and Spiritual Freedom

The previous chapters indicate that, while not excluding the sociopolitical or historical explanations of religion, Eliade allows the possibility of the transcendent and, more importantly, of a religious person's authentic experience of the sacred. The prized tools of analysis offered by modern social science, sociology for example, are given general acknowledgement and left aside. This turns out to be especially disturbing to the field of religion, which takes pains to distinguish itself from theology. Some attempt to devalue his works on account of an alleged shared substructure with fascist ideologies in them, as discussed in Introduction. In this chapter, I will try to understand this particular aspect in Eliade's treatment of religion in light of his experience in the years of the Second World War. A desperate struggle for meaning in the face of (imminent) personal and national catastrophes, which he thought could only be won in an act of spiritual freedom, drives him to protest against those *scientific* theories, for he perceives in them fundamentally enslaving assumptions about humanity.

On April 6, 1944, two days after the Americans' bombing of Bucharest, Romania, Eliade wrote that

I'm thinking of writing a book, *Teroarea Istoriei* [The Terror of History], on this theme: that until a little while ago, any personal tragedy, any ethnic catastrophe had its justification in a cosmology or soteriology of some sort: cosmic rhythms, reabsorption into water, ekpyrosis or purification by fire, historical cycles, "our sins," etc. Now, history simply terrorizes, because the tragedies provoked by it no longer find justification and absolution.⁹⁵

The book he envisioned became *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, the "most significant" among his books in his own evaluation. The notebooks from the five years of war, published

95. Eliade, *The Portugal Journal*, 107.

after his death as *The Portugal Journal*, contain rich details of personal experience, especially of his chronic wrestling with existential crises induced by individual and national tribulation that “no longer [found] justification and absolution.”⁹⁶

To begin with, he suffered constantly from the awareness that his past was forever gone. The past is variously referred to as “the *lost youth*,”⁹⁷ “the youth *that had passed*,”⁹⁸ “*dead youth*.”⁹⁹ The poignant sense of time’s irretrievability often developed into attacks of despair, as he wrote in the entry of 26 September 1942: “I have felt the most terrible despair and *angoisse* in moments when I realize that certain things *have passed*, irremediably; that *no matter what may happen*, it will never be possible to live them again.”¹⁰⁰ The agony over the passing of time was sometimes intertwined with a sense of the futility of life, as he observed his indulgence in melancholy: “[n]ever more than then do I feel more clearly that everything passes, that everything is in vain.”¹⁰¹

The general sense of meaninglessness is aggravated by the larger historical crisis in which he saw himself. He despaired over the inevitable destruction of his nation throughout the journal. In his own words, it was one of his “daily obsession,” that his nation had “little chance of

96. *Ibid.*, 107.

97. *Ibid.*, 19, 41, and 75 (italics mine).

98. *Ibid.*, 21 (italics mine).

99. *Ibid.*, 22 (italics mine).

100. *Ibid.*, 36 (italics original).

101. *Ibid.*, 22.

surviving” an Allied victory.¹⁰² From his perspective, the defeat of Germany would spell the annihilation of the Romanian state, nation, and culture. The Soviet Russia would occupy his country, remove its elite class, and execute millions of Romanians.¹⁰³ Here nationalistic dynamics was clearly in play. As he predicted, the “Slavic” colossus would happily wipe out the “Romanian” people.¹⁰⁴ Even the so-called communism, “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” was a pretext for “the dictatorship of the most abject *Slavic* elements.”¹⁰⁵ The socialism it practiced was only a caricature, a disguise for Russification.¹⁰⁶ It threatened to eliminate the Romanian culture as he had known it: “the path of mysticism, of withdrawal from the world, or of anarchy, of total detachment from it,” implying that the Slavic culture was its opposite.¹⁰⁷

For Eliade, a Russian victory would jeopardize not only the Romanian culture, but also the European civilization. He invoked ancient wars to assimilate the current war into a paradigm of the great bearers of Greco-Roman traditions versus barbarians from the east. For example, he observed that the Russians had aggressively amounted onto the stage of Europe through this war, just like the Turks penetrated into Europe by defeating the Latins and the Greeks.¹⁰⁸ In another entry he imagined how the Greek tragedian Aeschylus, writer of *The Persians*,¹⁰⁹ would have

102. Ibid., 86.

103. Ibid., 86 and 106.

104. Ibid., 106.

105. Ibid., 35.

106. Ibid., 217.

107. Ibid., 54.

108. Ibid., 48.

109. *The Persians* is set in the years of the Greco-Persian Wars.

lamented over the “surrender of Europe to the *Asiatic hordes*” in the event of a Russian victory.¹¹⁰ If Russia won, Europe would be destroyed and -- interestingly-- an “uninteresting” world would arise.¹¹¹ The meaning of “uninteresting” is unclear, but it may be the mode of being of humans in the Soviet Russia that Eliade found banal, as he wrote another day:

Actually, I have every reason to believe that Soviet Russia will win and that a new historical cycle will begin. The “man” I discover in all archaic societies was superseded long ago in Europe. From the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution on, we witness another anthropology. *Only the Soviet man can achieve it completely.* Modern man is a hybrid. He no longer thinks like the traditional one, no longer valorizes life as he did, but he lacks the courage to become *a machine for the production of economic values, as in Soviet Russia...*¹¹²

In a sense, the predictable destruction of Romania and Europe augmented Eliade’s anguish over the irretainability of any happening in time, personal endeavors, achievements, and the like. The death of Eliade’s first wife Nina raised a different crisis in his struggle with temporality. Nina died of uterine cancer in late 1949 after weeks of pain. It posed the age-old problem of suffering, and Eliade could not justify it in any meaningful terms. He mused over the biblical story of the Job, but in his brutal honesty he wrote a heart-felt protest. He insisted that nothing short of “abolishing” the history of the suffering could compensate him:

Job...gets back his wealth, and God gives him other children. But this thing does not console me. Who recompenses Job’s sufferings? In order for him to enjoy life and God again, it would be necessary for all that he suffered, all his past, to be abolished: things would have to be exactly as they were in the beginning, when he had not suffered, had not been tried. But this ‘history’ remains...*If Job loved very deeply his first wife, how could he be consoled with the second wife God gave him?* And the memory of his

110. Ibid., 67 (italics mine).

111. Ibid., 61.

112. Ibid., 103 (italics mine).

sufferings—did this not plague his newly obtained happiness? And, especially, the memory of his children, *dead because of him*, because he, Job, had been tempted by God?¹¹³

It should be noted that, in the biblical story, Job does not lose his wife; there is not a “first wife” or a “second wife” of Job. It was Eliade that lost his first wife. It was also revealing that Eliade should question if Job would be at peace with the memory of his children, who “[died] because of him.” Normally it would be a stretch to hold Job accountable for the death of his sons and daughters, but here again Eliade put Job into his own shoes. A few entries earlier, Eliade thought that he might be blamed for Nina’s uterine cancer, having insisted on her going through a curettage some ten years ago.¹¹⁴ It was Nina who “[died] because of him.” Remorse probably made it even more difficult for him to come to terms with her suffering. Anyway, Eliade’s solution to the problem of suffering is radical: only the erasing of the history of suffering itself would appease him.

The death of Nina induced in Eliade further rumination over humans’ limited ability of self-realization in history. He found it dreadful that a particular course of life was often triggered by a chance event—which is, in another sense, “destiny.” Once set in motion, the chance event developed into a “history” that came to engulf those involved irreversibly. In his own case, he fell in love with Nina. Unfortunately, it led to tragedy, and more unfortunately, it was irrevocable. As he reflected upon his twelve years with his Nina,

My tragedy was not consummated on 20 November 1944 [the day Nina died], but on 25 December 1932, when the friendship I had had with Nina up till then was transformed

113. *Ibid.*, 149 (italics mine).

114. *Ibid.*, 143.

into love—which led later to our marriage, with all its joys and all my melancholies. 25 December 1932, was irreversible. Sometimes I wanted to get free, but even if I had succeeded in doing so, *the simple fact that I had loved Nina had modified everything*. Destiny had intervened, and then history. Unfortunately, *I could not make things that once had been no longer be*. Only God can do that. —And, I hope, death. I hope that in death all will be fulfilled for me, *without my suffering for being divided, for having chosen, for having lived the fragment and the finite*.¹¹⁵

In this quote Eliade expressed a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of the “destiny” and “history” that had permanently, irredeemably “modified” his being, and everything else. Only God or death could revoke the initial choice he had made. The notion of suffering from dividedness, a choice, or fragmentality, as indicated in the last sentence, requires further illustration. In another entry Eliade commented upon a drama of two young people’s unsuccessful cohabitation. The stories are similar: their initial encounter led to their falling in love and cohabitation, and eventually to tragedy, and this history was inalterable. Then he observed further:

They suffered because they could not escape from their refuge, from the microcosmic milieu of their bed, their neighbors, their slippers, their quarrels, etc...they were reduced, diminished, restricted...Can this be man’s life? Does the meaning of existence come down to this sad, desperate *surrender to chance events*? ...The hero can’t even guess that *life is not reducible to their unfortunate love, to youth and sexual vigor, to family, job, etc*. He is chloroformed by his own fatality. It seems to him that everything begins and ends with the “heavenly joys” of the time he met her, etc. No window anywhere—through which he can look outside and can escape.¹¹⁶

The dividedness, choice, or fragmentality means a person’s bondage with one particular progression of events. He or she could not take multiple courses of life at the same time. As that one course consumed a person’s energy and dictated his or her happiness and sorrows, it

115. Ibid., 177 (italics mine). See also, *ibid.*, 84.

116. Ibid., 220 (italics mine).

effectively “reduced” that person into that one possibility of actualization. His or her fate depended entirely on the outcome of that one course. And what made it even more frightening, was that it always started with “chance events.”

As Eliade wrestled with these individual and collective tragedies, he was met with the limits of existence as a human being. A mere person could not travel back in time, nullify what had already taken place, choose mutually exclusive courses in one lifetime, or stop the victorious Russian armies from subjugating his country and assimilating Europe. In a bold move—perhaps because he also wrote extensively in the fantastic genre—Eliade resorted to a different mode of existence; he envisioned an existence of “absolute freedom.” As he wrote, “I struggle against despair in two ways: through an effort at faith (*in the sense of absolute freedom*) that brings me very close to Nina, and through stupefaction in the historically concrete...”¹¹⁷ A person with absolute freedom is able to transcend the laws of time. It is a person for who “everything is possible,” including the abolishment of his wife’s death in history:

If Jesus Christ, who was more than man, who was God—could sweat, urinate, and defecate, then everything is possible for God, everything is possible in the world. Therefore, when the moment comes that I can believe absolutely in these things—everything will be possible for me too. *I shall then be free. I shall be able to make Nina not to have suffered, not to have left my side. I shall be able to abolish the past, thereby obtaining a present of bliss and life eternal.*¹¹⁸

Eliade mused over and alluded to a vision of absolute freedom in different situations, not always related to Nina’s death. Altogether, it pointed to a state of existence beyond the laws of

117. Ibid., 150 (italics mine).

118. Ibid., 142 (italics mine).

physics, of biology, of personal development, and indeed not by any “laws discovered reason.”¹¹⁹ It should be emphasized, though, that the state of freedom was primarily realized in the realm of the spirit. It was mainly spiritual. Note, for example, that in the quote above Eliade wrote “when the moment comes that I can *believe* absolutely in these things...I shall then be free.”¹²⁰ It was an exercise of mind to break free from the notions of the workings of nature, of humans and of history, that is, not to think or act or feel along these lines, and not to be unconsciously controlled or conditioned by them. In Eliade’s own words,

To be related to my observations about the regeneration of archaic man through the abolition of Time, through the return to the auroral moment, in *illo tempore* of the beginnings. The meaning that *incipit vita nova* can have for a modern man: not the repetition of the cosmogony as in the case of primitives, nor the resumption of Creation—but the abolition of “the past,” the transcendence of History, in the sense that, through *a desperate act of freedom*, i.e., through *a maximum living of the Spirit*, you “denounce” *first with respect to yourself, all the conditionings of the past, all the “bonds and chains” of your own and of others*, and you endeavor to be as at the beginning of the World.¹²¹

Of course, if Eliade could always exercise such spiritual freedom was another story. In fact, he not infrequently complained in the journal of his precarious ability to believe. As he wrote, “[a]s often as I can, I pray—and I believe. I believe with all the strength of my being that I will meet Nina again... And when I believe all these things, I feel I’m a man. Why can’t I keep always the certainty and freedom I have then?!”¹²² Additionally, sometimes the concept of

119. Ibid., 152.

120. Ibid., 142 (italics mine).

121. Ibid., 269 (italics mine).

122. Ibid., 153.

freedom extended beyond the spirits into the physics. Eliade also believed that humans could actually defy physical laws. For example, he brought up the magical deeds of Yogins:

Reading Dilthey, Heidegger. All good: philosophy begins with an existential analysis, with the difference between *res* and *sum*, etc. But all these analyses start from the man of today, the European of today, with his science and culture as background! It is not man in general. If a yogin succeeds in walking on hot coals, in swallowing razor blades, in levitating, in making himself invisible, in realizing a state of apparent death, etc.—can't these things also be taken into account? Why do we always take as our object fallen man, the European man of today? Why don't we take account of other men's capacity for freedom, of their creative will, of their possibilities for transcending "fallen man"?¹²³

This quote also indicated that, for Eliade, philosophies that began with "the European man of today" stood antithetical to the vision of freedom. It brings us to the question of Eliade's apparent apathy towards the *scientific* theories of his time. In his journal, broodings over the catastrophes looming ahead intercede with reflections on intellectual matters. Expressions of dissatisfaction with the "philosophy in fashion"¹²⁴ during his time appear constantly throughout the texts. Under scientific theories he lumped together marxism, materialism, scientism, historicism, skepticism, socialism, atheism, positivism, physiologized medicine, etc. He did not enthuse over these schools of thought in vogue, because, for him, they posed a fundamental threat to the spiritual freedom of humans. The anthropology they rested upon was one of humanity's complete bondage to laws of nature, biology, economics, society, history, etc. They were intrinsically incompatible with the spiritual freedom he envisions and struggles for. As he found a kindred spirit in Lev Shestov, the Russian-born Jewish existentialist philosopher, he wrote

123. *Ibid.*, 149.

124. *Ibid.*, 5.

I like Chestov [Lev Shestov]. He's a man who *fights against necessity*, who believes that *freedom can be something more than the obligation to submit to laws discovered by reason...* If I were able to meet Chestov today, I'd draw his attention to the fact that *the creative freedom of faith, which Adam lost in choosing reason, critical thought, general and necessary knowledge*—that this freedom is permitted also to the man of today. God means that all things are possible, Kierkegaard repeats. There are people who believe this so strongly that for them almost anything is possible.¹²⁵

Among the “laws discovered by reason,” Marxism received several lengthy treatments at separate times, perhaps because of its connection with the Soviet Union. For Eliade, the problem of Marxism lay in its ungrounded generalization of a mode of being that barely rose above the mechanical workings of matters to all humanity. He made a distinction between an “impoverished humanity,” and “the liberated man” or “the real man.” The former, because of its state of material deprivation, remained a passive subject to the interplay of natural, biological, and socioeconomic forces. The later, by contrast, responded to life's situations more actively, creatively, and therefore more freely while remaining part of the biological and social world. Marxism could only account for the former, but offer no insights into the later, as he wrote two different entries:

Indeed, if “the greatest reality corresponds first of all to what one eats,” then poverty is nothing but a larval state, a regression to the embryonic modality. In that case, Marxism is right to accord a primordial importance to hunger and the struggle for bread. The class with which Marxism is concerned, the proletariat, is an exploited humanity, a hungry humanity. For it, the real is that which it can eat. Thrown back into the fetal phase, *impoverished humanity cannot separate itself from living matter*, it cannot obtain the freedom to contemplate that is possessed by the adult, the liberated man, that is, the man who controls the means of production...¹²⁶

My lack of interest for sociology, Marxism, and so forth is owing to the statement often made that these disciplines give you the illusion of having global explanations of history, *while in fact they take account of nothing but the human mob*. I have no doubt that

125. Ibid., 151-152 (italics mine).

126. Ibid., 183 (italics mine).

thousands of inert and ruthless persons behave exclusively on the basis of economics, but by the same token one can say that they behave biologically or physically, as objects subject to the laws of gravity. *The elect man—and any man can become elect when he is infused with spirit—moves on another plane.* Actually, I learn nothing about the real man by learning economic laws that make him become proletarian or criticize his social institutions. *I learn essential things about the real man by following the reaction of the individual vis-à-vis the spirit; man vis-à-vis death, vis-à-vis love: there is an object for research!*¹²⁷

As mentioned earlier, Eliade thought a world dominated by the Soviet Russia would be “uninteresting,” partly because of the Marxist vision of humanity it put into practice. In his opinion, the Soviet Russian alone succeeded in installing an anthropology whereby a human is merely “a machine for the production of economic values.”¹²⁸ In such a modality of existence, the spiritual freedom that Eliade desperately needed would be impossible.

To sum up, I have argued in this chapter that Eliade downplays the more “scientific” approaches to religion in a protest against their intrinsic opposition to spiritual freedom. His experiences during the WWII years, a constant wrestling with problems of the lost, death, imminent destruction and the like, pushed him to mind’s limit. To defend himself from nihilistic despair, he envisioned a mode of consciousness unbounded by laws discovered by the so-called science, i.e. a spiritual freedom that enables him to rise above natural and social laws, including the irreversibility of time. For him, a person free in spirit believes that everything is possible for him or her. This radical freedom run counter to the basic assumptions about humanity made by

127. Ibid., 22. See also *ibid.*, 162, for another entry in this connection: “If Marxism triumphs in the world and Christianity is abolished, it will demonstrate that man cannot endure the paradox of being man: that is, of being finite and ephemeral, yet having a nostalgia for the infinite and eternity, attempting all experiences and knowing all shortcomings, in an effort to obtain coincidence with the Absolute, reintegration and regeneration. Then, because this paradox is so cruel, because men suffer and make others suffer (the exploitation of man by man, etc.)...then it is better to put an end to the human condition, ... and return to the natural, biological state, renouncing the spiritual freedom...”

128. *Ibid.*, 104.

modern scientific theories, whereby humans are understood as subject to the laws of society, economics, physiology, among others. In the last analysis, Eliade's aversion to those scientific theories constitutes a deliberate protest as to what kind of consciousness a human being is allowed in the modern world.

Conclusion

In lieu of conclusion, I like to call readers' attention to a Jamesean, pragmatist position that Eliade takes consistently in his private and academic writings with regards to religious phenomena. As William James proposes in the beginning chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, an empiricist criterion for the value of any religious experience or statements is “[b]y their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.”¹²⁹ In other words, the value of a religious phenomenon is not determined (and oft-times depreciated) by its biological origins, but by its impact on private and social life. On this ground James impugns medical materialism for confusing questions of different orders and attempting to discredit the value of a religious revelation on the basis of the neurotic constitution of its author. Interestingly, Eliade has made a similar argument along these lines: “The ‘influences’—economic, social, national, natural—that affect ‘ideologies’... would not annul their objective value any more than the fever or intoxication that reveals to a poet a new poetic creation impairs the value of the latter.”¹³⁰

For Eliade as well as for James, the “objective value” of religious (or any other) ideologies is not undermined by their points of origin, be it biological or social, but by the values they hold according to different standards. While James have proposed different criteria of values, Eliade evaluates religious ideas in terms of how they empower or disempower humans in certain existential contexts. For example, as Eliade reviews philosophies of history in the last chapter of *Cosmos and History*, he states that “there is no question here of judging the validity of

129. William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

130. Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 159.

a historicistic philosophy, but only of establishing to what extent such a philosophy can exorcise the terror of history.”¹³¹

There is, however, a fundamental difference between James and Eliade. For all his value talk, James cares about the truthfulness of religious revelations. Hence he acknowledges the conundrum of choosing between “good” and “truth”; sometimes the revealed experience, however “good” it is, awaits “the verdict of the rest of experience” for validation.¹³² He refrains from giving an unreserved sanction to what merely feels “good.” It is telling that he ends his discussion by defending the possibility of revelations: “If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity.”¹³³ It seems to be an apology to appease the sensibilities of his Christian audience, but it may also be an argument against the more science-oriented part of the audience who may challenge the value discussion on the basis that the religious experiences he is going to talk about are not even true to begin with. The thought of religion being mere illusions makes him uneasy.

Eliade, by contrast, frequently dismisses the relevance of the question of verifiability in evaluating religious ideas and practices. For example, on the reappearance of cyclical theories of time in his time, he observes, “[i]ncompetent as we are to pass judgment upon their validity, we shall confine ourselves to observing that the formulation... betrays at least the desire to find a

131. Ibid., 160.

132. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 17-18.

133. Ibid., 25.

meaning and a transhistorical justification for historical event.”¹³⁴ Similarly, he also avoids passing truth judgments on historicism, as quoted above, “*there is no question here of judging the validity of a historicistic philosophy, but only of establishing to what extent such a philosophy can exorcise the terror of history.*”¹³⁵ Again, in his journal, he writes, “*I’m not sure now if the occult sciences are ‘real.’*” But, at least, their world is invigorating: a world where man is free, powerful, and the spirit is creative.”¹³⁶ Unlike James, Eliade does not see truthfulness as a prerequisite for value. It is also interesting that he flip-flops James’s statement above as he states, “[a]ll these social, economic, and other influences would, on the contrary, be occasions for envisaging a spiritual universe from new angles.”¹³⁷ While James feels compelled to defend the possibility of authentic religious visions against explanations resting upon nonreligious causes, Eliade unabashedly celebrates the opportunity to envisage the universe anew because of certain socio-historical causes.

In retrospect, it is only logical that Eliade should stay within the boundary of human experience in his description of the sacred, for the reality beyond experience does not concern him. It also fits well with the fact that he did not dedicate himself to excavating the exact historical conditions, processes, or accidents that lead to a certain religious imagination. This fundamentally pragmatist position is also reflected in his renunciation of contemporary scientific

134. Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 147.

135. *Ibid.*, 160 (italics mine).

136. *Ibid.*, *Portugal Journal*, 152 (italics mine).

137. Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 159.

(i.e. *valid*) philosophies in favor of a spiritual freedom that he believes to be crucial to save humanity from the terrors of history.

Eliade's pragmatism reminds me of a TED talk by Elizabeth Gilbert, author of the international bestseller *Eat, Pray, and Love*, in 2009. Gilbert proposed a radical idea about the creative spirit in that talk. As she reflected on the “utter maddening, capriciousness of the creative process,” she suggested installing a “protective psychological construct” -- the Greek and Roman idea of “genius” -- in an attempt to safeguard the artist’s sanity.¹³⁸ For ancient Greeks and Romans, genius is some attentive spirit that take charge of an artist’s creative efforts. According to Gilbert, that belief relieved her of much of the burden of assuming the full responsibility for the uncontrollable process of creativity and in that way protected a fragile human psyche like hers. Gilbert was aware that our times of rational humanism would probably not support such an idea. Yet she asked, why not? Perhaps this is also the question that Eliade poses to those readers that are deeply rooted in modernity -- if not to scholars of religion: why not re-embrace religion if it can save one from despair to some extent?

Finally, to scholars of religious studies, this study provides another occasion to rethink about a number of basic and interconnected questions concerning the practice of the field: What is a religious experience or an experience of the sacred, and how should scholars present that experience in a way that does justice to all parties involved? Or is such justice even a relevant issue in an academic framework? What is religion or religious phenomena? To what extent is it created by the scale, i.e. the theoretical lenses that a scholar uses? In this regard, what is the nature of and the relationship between tools of analysis and the religious data? Where does the

138. Elizabeth Gilbert, “Your Elusive Creative Genius: Subtitles and Transcript,” *TED*, accessed 4 May 2017, www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius/transcript?language=en.

valued "scientific objectivity" end and creativity begin? In the last analysis, what is and what should be the scholarly practice of religious studies? And what fundamental assumptions can we make about human beings -- for example, in what ways does universality apply with regards to human nature? Lastly, what does the all-too-frequent unfair criticism of Eliade reveal about the intellectual and political making of his critics in particular and of the religious studies circle in general that was once dominated by those critical discourses? While they are beyond the scope of the current paper, these questions are worth asking with every self-identified scholar of religious studies.

Bibliography

- Doniger, Wendy. Introduction II to *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach & Mircea Eliade*, edited by Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, xxvii-xxxiv. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Dubuisson, Daniel. *Twentieth Century Mythologies: Dumezil, Levi-Strauss, Eliade*. Translated by Martha Cunningham. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing LTD, 2006.
- Eliade, Mircea. "History of Religions and a New Humanism." *History of Religions* 1, no.1 (1961): 1-8.
- . *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- . *Myth and Reality*. Translated by Willard Trask. NY: Harper & Row, 1963.
- . *No Souvenirs*. Translated by Fred H. Johnson, Jr. NY: Harper & Row, 1977.
- . *Ordeal of the labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*. Translated by Derek Coltman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- . *The Portugal Journal*. Translated by Mac Linscott Ricketts. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010.
- . *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- . *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard Trask. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959.
- Fisher, Elaine. "Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship: The Quest for Ur-Fascism and the Study of Religion." In *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach & Mircea Eliade*, edited by Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, 261-284. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Gilbert, Elizabeth. "Your Elusive Creative Genius: Subtitles and Transcript." *TED*. Accessed 4 May 2017. www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius/transcript?language=en.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Mircea Eliade's Ambivalent Legacy." In *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach & Mircea Eliade*, edited by Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, 307-323. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Holt, John Clifford. Introduction to Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, xi-xvi. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

- Idel, Moshe. *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2014.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Kalberg, Stephen. *Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Marx, Karl. "The German Ideology: Part I." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 146-200. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- Rennie, Bryan S. *Reconstruction Eliade: Making Sense of Religion*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996.
- . "The Influence of Eastern Orthodox Christian Theology on Mircea Eliade's Understanding of Religion." In *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach & Mircea Eliade*, edited by Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, 197-214. NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Ricketts, Mac Linscott. Preface to Eliade, *The Portugal Journal*, translated by Mac Linscott Ricketts, ix-xii. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. "Acknowledgements: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade's Patterns in Comparative Religion (1949-1999). Part 1: The Work and Its Contexts." *Chicago Journals* 39, no. 4 (2000): 315-331.
- . "Acknowledgements: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade's Patterns in Comparative Religion (1949-1999). Part 2: The Texture of the Work." *Chicago Journals* 39, no. 4 (2000): 332-351.
- . Introduction to Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated by Willard R. Trask, ix-xxi. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Strenski, Ivan. *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi Strauss and Malinowski*. University of Iowa Press, 1987.
- Vásquez, Manuel A. *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Wasserstrom, Steven M. *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Vita

Cong Fu

Syracuse University
Religion Department
501 Hall of Languages
Syracuse, NY 13244 USA
cofu@syr.edu

Education

Syracuse University

M.A. in Religion, December 2017 (anticipated)

Certificate of Advanced Studies in Conflict Resolution, June 2017

Nanjing University

B.A. in English Language and Literature, May 2012