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Experience and hermeneutics in the history of religions – a hypothesis on Mircea Eliade's work



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Abstract:
The aim of this study is to analyse the fundamentals of Eliade's view of the History of Religions, with a focus on the origins of this view, in the context of the criticism against the field of study corresponding to religious studies as they have developed over the last two centuries. The first part of the study briefly evaluates religious studies as to where it falls on a spectrum ranging from scientific objectivity to ideology, while the second part aims at developing the hypothesis according to which the principles of the study of religions are found in the notion of "experience," under the determinative influence of Nae Ionescu's lectures.

Key words:
Micea Eliade, Nae Ionescu, religious fact, experience, hermeneutics, ideology, religious phenomena

Introduction: the public dimension of the History of Religions research in Romania

In Romania, the debate over contemporary religious phenomena acquired a significant reverberation on the public level as a result of the *European Congress of History of Religions* (ECHR) held in Bucharest, September twentieth through twenty third, 2006. Under the patronage of the Romanian presidency and organized by *The Romanian History of Religions Association, The European History of Religions Association,* and *The International History of Religions Association*, the purpose of the event was to reflect the effort of knowing our own religious dimensions, in a country in which, for almost half a century, totalitarian ideology had left its mark upon the religious manifestations of the Romanian people.

The most important project that came to light at this congress was the idea of founding a university department and a research institute in this field. Andrei Oişteanu, one of the initiators of this event, emphasized the fact that founding an institution on its own with a view to teach History of Religions is a necessity because, due to intercultural conflicts, the topic of religions is forever contemporary. The presidency has considered it necessary to reanalyse the role of the History of Religions in Romanian schools and universities.

The present event, of great international resonance, reminds us of a trend from the interwar period, when the last generation of intellectuals was about to be born, before

Romania was annexed to the communist block. More than 80 years ago, Nae Ionescu*, the spiritual mentor of the entire generation to which Mircea Eliade belonged, wrote: "Never since the establishment of the modern Romanian state have the public life and the spiritual atmosphere of this country been more honestly and openly interested in the religious problems than today."[1] Then as well as now – though in different contexts, with different actors, and for different reasons – the political factor was involved in promoting a project in which had to be rethought, on the level of public research and education strategy, the impact of religious subjects and their role in the intellectual debate. The interwar context speaks to us about how a young man like Mircea Eliade was to become a great scholar in the field of History of Religions.

The aim of this text is to emphasize the fundamentals of the History of Religions in Mircea Eliade's view, with an accent on the manner in which the Romanian scholar's perspective came into being, and in interaction with the criticism generated by certain scholars in the field of religious studies as it took shape in the second half of the 19th century and continued to develop in the 20th century.

I. "Religious studies" between scientific objectivity and ideology

One of the theses of the critics states that religious studies is a field of study that tries to build a decontextualized and ahistorical phenomenon that is separated from the problems of power.[2] The fundamental concept that is responsible for placing religious studies within the Western Christian assumptions about God and salvation (even when not in a strictly confessional sense) is that of a transcendent intelligent being that gives purpose and meaning to human history. Ever since Max Mueller, the founding fathers of *religionswisseschaft* have promoted, even without stating doctrinaire Christianity, a kind of ecumenical theology disguised as a scientific study of religions or as a phenomenology of religion.[3] We refer to classic authors whose contributions to the History of Religions has been determinative: Rudolf Otto[4], Nathan Soderblom[5], Gerardus Van der Leeuw[6], Joachim Wach, Joseph M. Kitagawa (influenced by Wach), et al. Wach himself states in his article "The Meaning and Task of the History of Religions" (1935) that the science of religions is not purely academic, its purpose being that of widening and deepening the meaning of the numinous, enhancing faith, and encouraging a new and comprehensive experience of what religion is and means.

Mircea Eliade is one of the most influential theoreticians in the modern history of religious studies. From the Romanian scholar's point of view the History of Religions belongs with the humanistic sciences and not with the theological or political fields of study. Those who criticized Eliade's methodological principles state that behind this methodology stand theological and ontological presuppositions about a transcendent reality. What is perceived as sacred in a hierophany proves the existence of primordial ontology characterized by Eliade in Parmenidean (the real is atemporal), Platonic (the archetypes), or Indian terms (the temporal experience is atemporal).[7] Even Eliade's antireductionism is understood as an attempt to ideologize religious studies, under the pretext that antireductionists, together with reductionists, make use of the same reference specific to Judeo-Christian mono-theologism.[8]

However, they all notice that Eliade, when defining religion in terms of believing in the transcendent, makes use of the presupposition of a transcendent ontology that provides general references for all life forms that could be characterized as religious.[9] One

of the Eliade's critics, Ninian Smart,[10] belongs to the tradition of comparative religion as it was developed by authors like Mueller, Van der Leeuw, and Otto. Along this line of thought, N. Smart attempts to build the principle according to which religion cannot be reduced to theology or sociology, and in the context of these analyses he distancing himself from Eliade. The academic study of religions intended to eliminate any theological association and to assume scientific objectivity; hence Smart's critique of Eliade's perspective as being too dependent on the ontology of the transcendent.[11]

At the heart of this criticism there lies the abolition of what commentators call the modern myth of a religion whose content, briefly put, is the following: there is an ultimate reality that we call either God or The Transcendent, who, ontologically speaking, is outside the world but who bestows significance upon human relations, history, and sufferance. This unconditioned reality makes itself known through various types of experience, and is refracted by various types of language, symbols, and culture. Today, university departments, academic curricula, and scientific publications contribute to the perpetuation of this myth.

II. The Fundamentals of Eliade's view of religion: a hypothesis

When Eliade was admitted into college, the aura of the metaphysics professor, Nae Ionescu, was becoming more and more visible among the young students. The encounter with this Socratic personality has been perceived in different ways. Thus, Mircea Vulcănescu describes the influence Ionescu had on him personally in the following terms: "Nae Ionescu was standing in front of us, ready, confessing an intransigent Christianity, as old as the hills, a monk-like Christianity, firm on its radical and realistic positions, born from the genuine spirit of fathers' traditions."[12] To Vulcănescu, Ionescu plays the role of a catalyst of the religious experience of the generation of the '30s, yet not of any religious experience other than that of orthodox Christianity: "in the sense of the regeneration of the orthodoxy within us." He is seen more like an *avva* in the Skete desert, in the sense of Eastern mysticism, rather than a Socrates of philosophy; he is more a teacher of freedom who takes his apprentices out of the religious crisis and puts them in the Church, rather than a "sickener" – in Constantin Noica's terms – whose mission is to transmit crises out of whose confrontations the spiritual maturity would rise.

Eliade's perception is much different, or at least much more nuanced. Professor Carl Schmidt, who Eliade meets in Berlin in 1942, reminds him of the Ionescu. What impresses him in Schmidt is "his metaphysical courage, his nonconformism, the vastness of his vision."[13] On reading Ortega y Gasset, Eliade finds Ionescu in a meditation upon the human condition: "I don't think there is a more appropriate image of life than that of a shipwreck". Eliade's comment reveals nothing Christian, not even a mystic accent or shiver of holiness in Ionescu's personality: "I remember that the same image obsessed Nae Ionescu during the last years and in his last lectures. And not in the sense of a catastrophic event but of the human condition in general: man is, from the very beginning, a fallen being; he struggles to survive, to last and, especially, to save himself spiritually."[14] Here, Eliade embraces entirely the significance of metaphysics promoted by Ionescu,[15] his mentor, from whose lectures on metaphysics Eliade took the meaning of spiritual salvation. An atypical figure in the academic world, by excellence non-academic, the professor of metaphysics would start his inaugural lecture at the university by speaking of the epistemological function of love. Thus, the academic image of Ionescu

would be the more surprising as, during the lecture on metaphysics, he would speak of "redemption," "holiness," "orthodoxy," and "heresy," diverting from the tradition of idealism and positivism.

Nae Ionescu probably plays the most important role in Eliade's intellectual growth, more important than reading those authors whose theses in the field of religions the future scholar will embrace and write about.[16] So powerful was the connection that ten days after the professor's death, Eliade sees him in his dream entering the room smiling and saying to him: "See, Mircea, the entire mystery is here, open a door and go through the other side" (a revelation that has nothing particularly theological or Christian in it).[17] We cannot say whether Eliade conferred a religious significance to the "mystery" of his leaving the country only a few weeks after Nae Ionescu died in 1940. But it is significant that in his journal (August 28, 1959) the mentor's death is evoked in connection to obtaining freedom.

What the budding scholar will learn from his metaphysics professor is the importance of experience, rather than that of doctrine or of faith. Under the influence of Ionescu's metaphysical view, Eliade will become preoccupied with the relation between human consciousness and religiousness, in precisely the terms used by Ionescu ("religious experience" and "religious act," rather than "faith").[18] Eliade will be seduced, under the influence of Ionescu's teachings, by the idea that "religion, Christianity in this case, could have been an issue of individual experience rather than one of faith or *dogma*."[19] From the perspective of this mystical philosophy of experience, Eliade will become preoccupied with the history of religions. His preoccupation with Christianity is expressed in specific terms: it is a religion of heroism and of the struggle of the individual, not of divine grace, the Christian *experience*.

Although the notion of experience is articulated within the context of Eliade's preoccupation with Christianity, this notion is not tributary in any way to monotheistic ideology. He is interested in religious experience without having any religious crisis (as he confessed towards the end of his life). Approaching the religious phenomenon from the perspective of religious experience will determine the articulation of Eliade's antireductionist view.[20] The notion of experience is not conditioned by the Christian view, though it appears in the context of a philosophy that asked questions in Christian terms, as did Ionescu's philosophy. It could be analysed within the framework of phenomenology or of the 20th century hermeneutics. One of the intentions of Eliade's hermeneutics is to be understood as a possible technique of spiritual initiation of the interpreter. Thus, "hermeneutics becomes a spiritual technique, that is a way of changing the subject himself." [21]

This enables us to explain the impact that Eliade, in his turn, had in his carrier as a professor at the University of Chicago in the midst of an age of post-war religious rebirth. Charles H. Long confessed that, "when he was talking about a ritual or a symbol, he would hardly ever use an expression like ... *and they thought that* ... He would rather say something like ... *and then the divinity appeared*. We were being guided in a field of a different discourse which was trying to bring in front of our eyes an imaginary world of religion."[22] Perhaps this method was a result of the type of hermeneutics that Eliade understood to apply to any authentic religious fact.

From this standpoint Eliade will sign the "Werblowski manifesto," in which were expressed the five minimal preconditions of research in the field of religion. The idea that the History of Religions is a scientific field of study completely distinct from theology

and international politics was among these preconditions.[23] In the context of western deprovincialization, the field of religions is equally affected by the encounter among civilizations and cultural diversity. Eliade's preoccupation with methodology in a field facing the *new humanism* is manifest in defining History of Religions as a complete field of study and the *homo religious* as a *complete man*. It is only now that the employment of hermeneutics is admitted to be necessary, since even for the History of Religions synthesis goes through hermeneutics – a total hermeneutics because, as Eliade puts it in *The Quest*, it is called to decode and explain any type of encounter between man and the sacred, from prehistory up to the present, and it represents the way of analysis of religious facts as expression of various *religious experiences*. At the heart of this hermeneutics lies the task of searching for the meaning that makes intelligible the "experience" or the existential situation that generated a religious form. A hermeneutics centred on a double "experience," of the one who lives religiously and of the interpreter who encompasses this feeling. Hermeneutics, like Ionescu's metaphysics, is thus "a fact of life, of feeling" – under no circumstances an ideological construct.

Therefore, I believe, on the basis of the Smartian definition of religion, and at the same time, under the influence of a *total hermeneutics*, based on the model promoted by Eliade, that the field of study of religion would clarify the criticism addressing the difficulties of founding or epistemic justification, refocusing on what constitutes the unique (non-ordinary) object of study: *religious experience*. I believe this because, no matter whose culture or history it might belong to, the *religious experience* recommends itself by its authentic, non-dissimulated, living nature, and the study of religion at the heart of which lie the founding experiences cannot but explain the human being in a more complete and profound manner.

Notes:

* Nae Ionescu was a major Christian-Orthodox thinker during the interwar period, who developed a church-oriented discourse. He is considered to be a major ideologist of the movement called *Mişcarea Legionară*.

1. Nae Ionescu, „Învăţământul teologic" (July 5, 1926), in *Roza vânturilor*, Bucharest, 1990, p. 19-20. Ionescu was considered a major Christian-Orthodox thinker during the interwar period, and developed a church-oriented discourse. He is known as a major ideologist of the extremist movement called *Mişcarea Legionară*.

2. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. IX. This criticism is not new. I limit myself to only a few considerations in order to clarify my position at the beginning of the presentation. As in the case of Pettazzoni, for Eliade historicity conditions any religious creation; implicitly, any religion should be understood from a historical point of view. "By simply being in the presence of a hierophany, we are in the presence of historic documents" (*Tratat de istorie a religiilor*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992, p. 22). In Eliade's case, through the formula "historia ancilla phenomenologiae," the conflict between historic determination and religious form is transcended. In the expression "the History of Religions" the emphasis is on religion. It is more important to do understand a thing than to make its history. In Eliade's case, "history offers materials for documentation, verification and essentializing. This is the direction of Mircea Eliade's view on the issue of the cooperation between history and

phenomenology" (Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade*. Cluj: Editura Dacia, 1980, p. 258). Eliade himself protested against the accusation of ahistorism or antihistorism. In Marino's opinion, Eliade's attitude towards history is not reduced only to admitting the "conditioning" that history does, but there is also a second super-historical conditioning, without these two excluding or conditioning each other in any way.

3. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35. Thus, the *a priori* natural abilities theory, according to which man is capable of recognizing the infinite in finite forms, does indeed represent a particular formulation of the general idea of natural religion, clearly different from the traditional Christian belief regarding God's incomprehensibility. In this way the absolute need for a historical revelation is stated. However, "we can see how permeated is his formulation with Judaeo-Christian monotheist assumptions, more so in some respects than some of the deists, and more so than Herder or Hegel" (p. 34).

4. This is true in the same way in which the "theology of religions" has a sustainable value as a contribution to the methodology of religious studies (cited by Philip C. Almond, *Rudolf Otto and Budhism*, in Masefield and Wiebe, 1994, p. 69; see Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, General Bibliography, p. 261).

5. Soderblom and Van der Leeuw were Christian theologiens. Soderblom's interest is concentrated in the expression "man's will to believe" (cited by Sharpe, Eric J, *Comparative Religion: a History*, 1986, London, Duckworth, p. 226), which, in Fitzgerald's opinion, expresses in the highest degree and clearer than anything else the European philosophical and theological interest (Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 36).

6. Van der Leeuw always considered himself a theologian, before everything else, and his phenomenology is founded on Christian assumptions (Sharpe, op. cit., p. 232-233).

7. Cited in Ninian Smart, *Beyond Eliade: The Future of Theory in Religion*, in "Numen", 25 (2), p. 171-183.

8. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan (editors), *Religion and Reductionism: Essay on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994; Segal R., *In Defence of Reductionism*, in "Journal of the American Academy of Religion", 51 (1).

9. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

10. Fitzgerald characterized him as follows: "The founder of one of the best religion departments in the United Kingdom at the University of Lancaster," "emeritus professor of religious studies at another first-rate department in the University of California at Santa Barbara," "the most persuasive British writer to formulate some kind of theoretical model for studying religion" (Timothy Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 55).

11. Ninian Smart, *Beyond Eliade: The Future of Theory in Religion*, in "Numen", 25 (2), p. 171-183

12. Mircea Vulcănescu, *Nae Ionescu aşa cum l-am cunoscut*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1992, p. 47-48.

13. Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal, I*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993, p. 19.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 25.

15. "The metaphysical problem arises for the individual when his spiritual personality is perfectly well-formed, that is at the moment when nothing happing outside him can influence him anymore. [...] Metaphysics is nothing but the awareness of the relations between you and reality and the attempt to consciously valorize this external reality." "In a broader definition, philosophy is "an act of life, an act of living" that means reducing the sensible reality "to the necessities of your personality, the way it is well-

formed, well or wrong; because this is what philosophy means – to modify the sensible reality and to try to bring it into agreement with yourself, to project your own spiritual structure on the entire cosmos" (*Curs de metafizică*, Humanitas, 1991, p. 10, 11, 14). When the course of metaphysics touches upon topics such as "love – mystical instrument of knowledge" or "living and knowledge," metaphysics is closer to the meaning of a quasi-spiritual experience rather than to the effort of reason to think the world in its being.

16. See James Frazer with his *Golden bow* and *Old Testament folklore*, Vittorio Macchioro with his studies on orphism, Raffaelle Pettazzoni with his book dedicated to mysterial religions.

17. Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal, I*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993, p. 403.

18. In addition: "This should be the preoccupation of a philosophical system of religion, to define the religious act through research..." Nae Ionescu, *Prelegeri de filosofia religiei*. Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Editura Biblioteca Apostrof, 1993, p. 15.

19. Florin Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade, prizonierul istoriei*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005, p. 83.

20. *Ibidem*, p. 125.

21. Afloroaei Ştefan, *Cum e posibilă filosofia în Estul Europei?* Iaşi, Romania: Editura Polirom, 1997, p. 252. The fact that the study of the religious phenomenon in Eliade's case has a double conditioning, both hermeneutical and phenomenological, could also be seen in the fact that it formulates with particular clarity the phenomenological exigency imposed on the subject as an essential condition of interpretation; namely, the fact that the attention paid to the intentional dimension of the religious fact converts the phenomenological description into a real comprehension of it, which, in its turn, presupposes a communication between the subject-interpreter and the religious intention (see Eliade, *Încercarea labirintului*. Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Editura Dacia, 1990, p. 112). We can say that in Eliade's case the hermeneutics of the religious fact is phenomenological hermeneutics structured around the hermeneutical experience understood as comprehension.

22. Țurcanu, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

23. *Ibidem*, p. 551. Later, Eliade emphasized that it is necessary for historians of religions to orient themselves towards humanism, a fact that has been neglected so far.

24. Smart was trying to give as comprehensive a definition of religion as possible, taking into account the following seven aspects: experience (as religious experience, out of the ordinary), the social aspect, narrative, doctrine, ethics, ritual, and the material (concrete manifestations).