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History of Religions and a New Humanism

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*Mircea Eliade*

HISTORY OF  
RELIGIONS AND  
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Despite the manuals, periodicals, and bibliographies today available to scholars, it is progressively more difficult to keep up with the advances being made in all departments of the History of Religions.<sup>1</sup> Hence it is progressively more difficult to become a historian of religions. A scholar regretfully finds himself becoming a specialist in *one* religion or even in a particular period or a single aspect of that religion.

This situation has induced us to bring out a new periodical. Our purpose is not simply to make one more review available to scholars (though the lack of a periodical of this nature in the United States would be reason enough for our venture) but more especially to provide an aid to orientation in a field that is constantly widening and to stimulate exchanges of views among specialists who, as a rule, do not follow the progress made in other disciplines. Such an orientation and exchange of views will, we hope, be made possible by summaries of the most recent advances achieved concerning certain key problems in the History of Religions, by methodological discussions, and by attempts to improve the hermeneutics of religious data.

<sup>1</sup>Since *Religionswissenschaft* is not easily translatable into English, we are obliged to use "History of Religions" in the broadest sense of the term, including not only history properly speaking but also the comparative study of religions and religious morphology and phenomenology.

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Hermeneutics is of preponderant interest to us because, inevitably, it is the least-developed aspect of our discipline. Preoccupied, and indeed often completely taken up, by their admittedly urgent and indispensable work of collecting, publishing, and analyzing religious data, scholars have sometimes neglected to study their meaning. Now, these data represent the expression of various religious experiences; in the last analysis they represent positions and situations assumed by men in the course of history. Like it or not, the scholar has not finished his work when he has reconstructed the history of a religious form or brought out its sociological, economic, or political contexts. In addition, he must understand its meaning—that is, identify and elucidate the situations and positions that have induced or made possible its appearance or its triumph at a particular historical moment.

It is solely insofar as it will perform this task—particularly by making the meanings of religious documents intelligible to the mind of modern man—that the science of religions will fulfil its true cultural function. For whatever its role has been in the past, the comparative study of religions is destined to assume a cultural role of the first importance in the near future. As we have said on several occasions, our historical moment forces us into confrontations that could not even have been imagined fifty years ago. On the one hand, the peoples of Asia have recently re-entered history; on the other, the so-called “primitive” peoples are preparing to make their appearance in the horizon of greater history (that is, they are seeking to become *active subjects* of history instead of its *passive objects*, as they have been hitherto). But, if the peoples of the West are no longer the only ones to “create” history, their spiritual and cultural values will no longer enjoy the privileged place, to say nothing of the unquestioned authority, that they enjoyed some generations ago. These values are now being analyzed, compared, and judged by non-Westerners. On their side, the Westerners are being increasingly led to study, reflect on, and understand the spiritualities of Asia and the archaic world. These discoveries and contacts must be extended through dialogues. But to be genuine and fruitful, a dialogue cannot be limited to empirical and utilitarian language. A true dialogue must deal with the central values in the cultures of the participants. Now, to understand these values rightly, it is necessary to know their religious sources. For, as we know, non-European cultures, both oriental and primitive, are still nourished by a rich religious soil.

This is why we believe that the History of Religions is destined to play an important role in contemporary cultural life. This is not only because an understanding of exotic and archaic religions will signifi-

cantly assist in a cultural dialogue with the representatives of such religions. It is more especially because, by attempting to understand the existential situations expressed by the documents he is studying, the historian of religions will inevitably attain to a deeper knowledge of man. It is on the basis of such a knowledge that a new humanism, on a world-wide scale, could develop. We may even ask if the History of Religions cannot make a contribution of prime importance to its formation. For, on the one hand, the historical and comparative study of religions embraces all the cultural forms so far known, both the ethnological cultures and those that have played a major role in history; on the other hand, by studying the religious expressions of a culture, the scholar approaches it from within, and not merely in its sociological, economic, and political contexts. In the last analysis, the historian of religions is destined to elucidate a large number of situations unfamiliar to the man of the West. It is through an understanding of such unfamiliar, "exotic" situations that cultural provincialism is transcended.

But more is involved than a widening of the horizon, a quantitative, static increase in our "knowledge of man." It is the meeting with the "others"—with human beings belonging to various types of archaic and exotic societies—that is culturally stimulating and fertile. It is the personal experience of this unique hermeneutics that is creative. It is not beyond possibility that the discoveries and "encounters" made possible by the progress of the History of Religions may have repercussions comparable to those of certain famous discoveries in the past of Western culture. We have in mind the discovery of the exotic and primitive arts, which revived modern Western aesthetics. We have in mind especially the discovery of the unconscious by psychoanalysis, which opened new perspectives for our understanding of man. In both cases alike, there was a meeting with the "foreign," the unknown, with what cannot be reduced to familiar categories—in short, with the "wholly other."<sup>2</sup> Certainly this contact with the "other" is not without its dangers. The resistance at first opposed to the modern artistic movements and to depth psychology is a case in point. For, after all, recognizing the existence of "others" inevitably brings with it the relativization, or even the destruction, of the official cultural world. The Western aesthetic universe has not been the same since the acceptance and assimilation of the artistic creations of cubism and surrealism. The "world" in which preanalytic man lived became ob-

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto described the sacred as the *ganz andere*. Although occurring on the non-religious plane, the encounters with the "wholly other" brought about by depth psychology and modern artistic experiments can be reckoned as parareligious experiences.

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solete after Freud's discoveries. But these "destructions" opened new vistas to Western creative genius.

All this cannot but suggest the limitless possibilities open to historians of religions, the "encounters" to which they expose themselves in order to understand human situations different from those with which they are familiar. It is hard to believe that experiences as "foreign" as those of a paleolithic hunter or a Buddhist monk will have no effect whatever on modern cultural life. Obviously such "encounters" will become culturally creative only when the scholar will have passed beyond the stage of pure erudition—in other words, when, after having collected, described, and classified his documents, he will also make an effort to understand them *on their own plane of reference*. This implies no depreciation of erudition. But, after all, erudition by itself cannot accomplish the whole task of the historian of religions; just as a knowledge of thirteenth-century Italian and of the Florentine culture of the period, the study of medieval theology and philosophy, and familiarity with Dante's life do not suffice to reveal the artistic value of the *Divina Commedia*. We almost hesitate to repeat such truisms. Yet it can never be said often enough that the task of the historian of religions is not completed when he has succeeded in reconstructing the chronological sequence of a religion or has brought out its social, economic, and political contexts. Like every human phenomenon, the religious phenomenon is extremely complex. To grasp all its valences and all its meanings, it must be approached from several points of view.

It is regrettable that historians of religions have not yet sufficiently profited from the experience of their colleagues who are historians of literature or literary critics. The progress made in these disciplines would have enabled them to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings. It is agreed today that there is continuity and solidarity between the work of the literary historian, the literary sociologist, the critic, and the aesthetician. To give but one example: If the work of Balzac can hardly be understood without a knowledge of French nineteenth-century society and history (in the broadest meaning of the term—political, economic, social, cultural, and religious history), it is nonetheless true that the *Comédie humaine* cannot be reduced to a historical document pure and simple. It is the work of an exceptional individual, and it is for this reason that the life and psychology of Balzac must be known. But the working-out of this gigantic *œuvre* requires to be studied in itself, as the artist's struggle with his raw material, as the creative spirit's victory over the immediate data of experience. A whole labor of exegesis remains to be performed after the historian of literature has finished his task, and here lies the role of the literary

critic. It is he who deals with the work as an autonomous universe, with its own laws and structure. And at least in the case of poets, even the literary critic's work does not exhaust the subject, for it is the task of the specialist in stylistics and the aesthetician to discover and explain the values of poetic universes. But can a literary work be said to be finally "explicated" when the aesthetician has said his last word? There is always a secret message in the work of great writers, and it is on the plane of philosophy that it is most likely to be grasped.

We hope we may be forgiven for these few remarks on the hermeneutics of literary works. They are certainly incomplete;<sup>3</sup> but they will, we believe, suffice to show that those who study literary works are thoroughly aware of their complexity and, with few exceptions, do not attempt to "explicate" them by reducing them to one or another origin—infantile trauma, glandular accident, economic, social or political situations, etc. It serves a purpose to have cited the unique situation of artistic creations. For, from a certain point of view, the aesthetic universe can be compared with the universe of religion. In both cases, we have to do at once with *individual experiences* (aesthetic experience of the poet and his reader, on the one hand; religious experience, on the other) and with *transpersonal realities* (a work of art in a museum, a poem, a symphony; a Divine Figure, a rite, a myth, etc.). Certainly it is possible to go on forever discussing what meaning one may incline to attribute to these artistic and religious *realities*. But one thing at least seems obvious: Works of art, like "religious data," have a mode of being that is peculiar to themselves; they *exist on their own plane of reference*, in their particular universe. The fact that this universe is not the physical universe of immediate experience does not imply their non-reality. This problem has been sufficiently discussed to permit us to dispense with reopening it here. We will add but one observation: A work of art reveals its meaning only insofar as it is regarded as an autonomous creation; that is, insofar as we accept its mode of being—that of an artistic creation—and do not reduce it to one of its constituent elements (in the case of a poem: sound, vocabulary, linguistic structure, etc.) or to one of its subsequent uses (poem carrying a political message, or which can serve as a document for sociology, ethnography, etc.).

In the same way, it seems to us that a religious datum reveals its

<sup>3</sup> It is necessary also to consider, for example, the vicissitudes of the work in the public consciousness, or even "unconscious." The circulation, assimilation, and evaluation of a literary work present problems that no discipline can solve *by itself*. It is the sociologist, but also the historian, the moralist, and the psychologist, who can help us to understand the success of *Werther* and the failure of *The Way of All Flesh*, the fact that such a difficult work as *Ulysses* became popular in less than twenty years, while *Senilità* and *Coscienza di Zeno* are still unknown, and so on.

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deeper meaning when it is considered on its plane of reference, and not when it is reduced to one of its secondary aspects or its contexts. To give but one example: Few religious phenomena are more directly and more obviously connected with sociopolitical circumstances than the modern messianic and millenarian movements among colonial peoples (cargo-cults, etc.). Yet identifying and analyzing the conditions that prepared and made possible such messianic movements form only a part of the work of the historian of religions. For these movements are equally creations of the human spirit, in the sense that they have become what they are—*religious movements*, and not merely gestures of protest and revolt—through a creative act of the spirit. In short, a religious phenomenon such as primitive messianism must be studied just as the *Divina Commedia* is studied, that is, by using all the possible tools of scholarship (and not, to return to what we said above in connection with Dante, merely his vocabulary or his syntax, or simply his theological and political ideas, etc.). For, if the History of Religions is destined to further the rise of a new humanism, it is incumbent on the historian of religions to bring out the autonomous value—the value as *spiritual creation*—of all these primitive religious movements. To reduce them to sociopolitical contexts is, in the last analysis, to admit that they are not sufficiently “elevated,” sufficiently “noble” to be treated as creations of human genius like the *Divina Commedia* or the *Fioretti* of St. Francis.<sup>4</sup>

This does not mean, of course, that a religious phenomenon can be understood outside of its “history,” that is, outside of its cultural and socioeconomic contexts. There is no such thing as a “pure” religious datum, outside of history. For there is no such thing as a human datum that is not at the same time a historical datum. Every religious experience is expressed and transmitted in a particular historical context. But admitting the historicity of religious experiences does not imply that they are reducible to non-religious forms of behavior. Stating that a religious datum is always a historical datum does not mean that it is reducible to a non-religious history—for example, to an economic, social, or political history. We must never lose sight of one of the fundamental principles of modern science: *the scale creates the phenomenon*. As we have said elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> Henri Poincaré asked, not without irony: “Would a naturalist who had never studied the

<sup>4</sup> We may even wonder if, at bottom, the various “reductionisms” do not betray the superiority complex of Western scholars. They have no doubt that only science—an *exclusively Western creation*—will resist this process of demystifying spirituality and culture.

<sup>5</sup> *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris, 1948), p. ii (*Patterns in Comparative Religion* [New York, 1958], p. xi).

elephant except through the microscope consider that he had an adequate knowledge of the creature?" The microscope reveals the structure and mechanism of cells, which structure and mechanism are exactly the same in all multicellular organisms. The elephant is certainly a multicellular organism; but is that all that it is? On the microscopic scale, we might hesitate to answer. On the scale of human vision, which at least has the advantage of presenting the elephant as a zoological phenomenon, there can be no doubt about the reply.

We have no intention of developing a methodology of the science of religions here. The problem is far too complex to be treated in a few pages.<sup>6</sup> But we thought it useful to repeat that the *homo religiosus* represents the "total man"; hence, the science of religions must become a total discipline, in the sense that it must use, integrate, and articulate the results obtained by the various methods of approaching a religious phenomenon. In the past few years a number of scholars have felt the need to transcend the alternative *religious phenomenology* or *History of Religions*<sup>7</sup> and to reach a broader perspective in which these two intellectual operations can be applied together. It is toward the integral conception of the science of religions that the efforts of scholars seem to be orienting themselves today. To be sure, these two approaches correspond in some degree to different philosophical temperaments. And it would be naïve to suppose that the tension between those who try to understand the *essence* and the *structures* and those whose only concern is the *history* of religious phenomena will one day be completely done away with. But such a tension is creative. It is by virtue of it that the science of religions will escape dogmatism and stagnation.

The results of these two intellectual operations are equally valuable for a more adequate knowledge of *homo religiosus*. For, if the "phenomenologists" are interested in the meanings of religious data, the "historians," on their side, attempt to show how these meanings have

<sup>6</sup> Certain preliminary suggestions will be found in some of our preceding publications. See especially *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 1-33; *Images et symboles* (Paris, 1951), pp. 33-52, 211-35 (*Images and Symbols* [New York, 1961], pp. 27-41, 160-78); *Mythes, rêves et mystères* (Paris, 1957), pp. 7-15, 133-64 (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* [New York, 1961], pp. 13-20, 99-122); "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in *The History of Religion: Essays in Methodology*, ed. M. Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago, 1959), pp. 86-107.

<sup>7</sup> These terms are used here in their broadest sense, including under "phenomenology" those scholars who pursue the study of structures and meanings, and under "history" those who seek to understand religious phenomena in their historical context. Actually, the divergences between these two approaches are more marked. In addition there are a certain number of differences—sometimes quite perceptible—within the groups that, for the sake of simplification, we have termed "phenomenologists" and "historians."



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been experienced and lived in the various cultures and historical moments, how they have been transformed, enriched, or impoverished in the course of history. But if we are to avoid sinking back into an obsolete "reductionism," this history of religious meanings must always be regarded as forming part of the history of the human spirit.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In one of his last works, the great historian of religions Raffaele Pettazzoni reached similar conclusions. "Phenomenology and history complement each other. Phenomenology cannot do without ethnology, philology and other historical disciplines. Phenomenology, on the other hand, gives the historical disciplines that sense of the religious which they are not able to capture. So conceived, religious phenomenology is the religious understanding (*Verständniss*) of history; it is history in its religious dimension. Religious phenomenology and history are not two sciences but are two complementary aspects of the integral science of religion, and the science of religion as such has a well-defined character given to it by its unique and proper subject matter" ("The Supreme Being: Phenomenological Structure and Historical Development," in *The History of Religion*, ed. Eliade and Kitagawa, p. 66).