

MIRCEA ELIADE AND THE TOTAL HERMENEUTICS  
OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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Most of the scholars who comment on Mircea Eliade's history of religions, understand its structure synchronically.<sup>1</sup> Any attempt to understand the entire framework of his study of religion, however, must investigate the process by which his ideas developed. Although Eliade crystallized such ideas as 'hierophany', 'homo religiosus', 'homo symbolicus' and so forth in his early years, some of his important concepts and categories show crucial changes which usually have been underestimated or even overlooked.<sup>2</sup> These latter concepts and categories, including such ideas as 'new humanism', 'total man', and 'total hermeneutics' must be investigated diachronically as well as synchronically. It is only by combining these approaches that we can fully understand Eliade's methodological framework as a coherent whole.

For example, some scholars emphasize the hermeneutical aspect of Eliade's history of religions.<sup>3</sup> It is true that his study of religion was always oriented to the understanding of religious meaning. Nevertheless, I have found in my reading that Eliade does not appear to have used the term 'hermeneutics' until October 1959 when he wrote the preface for *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, except in the case of *Yoga*, in which he once referred to the specific hermeneutics of the Vedas.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that Eliade's concern with hermeneutics as such was stimulated by his contact with Paul Ricoeur. In a journal entry dated October 15, 1959, he wrote:

Fascinating article by Paul Ricoeur, "Le Symbole donne à penser" (*Esprit*, July-August, 1959). Ricoeur asks how one can base thought on religious symbols. He chooses his examples from my *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. His first exegesis of them is the one I tried myself. Ricoeur, being a philosopher, uses a hermeneutic that I didn't dare use in *Patterns*. First I had to convince the "scholars"—Orientalists, sociologists, philosophers—that I was right to base my argument on documents and not on "speculations." Next, I tried to systematize my ideas on symbols in a few articles.... But I haven't yet had the time to write down, at my ease, all my thought on this problem, which is, at the same time, the key by which modern man can still penetrate into the religious phenomenon. It is also the path by which we can restate the problems for contemporary philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

And a week later, on October 22, Eliade said:

I've finally finished the preface for the English translation of *Mythes, rêves et mystères*.

I see the history of religions as a total discipline. I understand now that the encounters, facilitated by depth psychology, with the stranger within, with that which is foreign, exotic, archaic in ourselves, on the one hand – and, on the other, the appearance of Asia and of exotic or “primitive” groups in history – are cultural moments which find their ultimate meaning only from the perspective of the history of religions. The hermeneutic necessary for the revelation of the meanings and the messages hidden in myths, rites, symbols, will also help us to understand both depth psychology and the historical age into which we are entering and in which we will be not only surrounded but also dominated by the “foreigners,” the non-Occidentals. It will be possible to decipher the “Unconscious,” as well as the “Non-Western World,” through the hermeneutic of the history of religions.<sup>6</sup>

He also referred to hermeneutics three times in the foreword to the English translation of *Mythes, rêves et mystères* which was originally published in 1957 and in the text of which the term ‘hermeneutics’ does not appear at all. Similarly in the foreword to *The Two and the One* written in November 1960, Eliade emphasizes the importance of hermeneutics for the history of religions, although he never used the term in original articles which appeared in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* from 1958 to 1961 and in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* published in 1959.

This paper is to show that it is crucial for understanding of Eliade’s ideas on the methodology of the history of religions to take notice of the first decade of his living in Chicago as well as the decade of his living in Paris from 1945 to 1955. Eliade forms the framework of his study of religions in Paris and tries to systematize them under the title of ‘total hermeneutics’ in Chicago. The purpose of this paper is to trace Eliade’s use of the term ‘hermeneutics’ chronologically in order to show the transition of his use of the term and to clarify the specific meaning of Eliade’s hermeneutics so that we can also understand the coherence of his framework of history of religions.

### 1. Hermeneutics Required by the Historical Situation

In the foreword to the English translation of *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Eliade considered the unique condition of modern Western culture; saying:

Hermeneutics is Western man’s response – the only intelligent response possible – to the solicitations of contemporary history, to the fact that the West is forced (one might almost say, condemned) to this encounter and confrontation with the cultural values of ‘the others.’<sup>7</sup>

This era is one in which Westerners encounter “the ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ peoples”<sup>8</sup> as well as being the era of “the development of depth-psychology and the systematic study of

symbolism."<sup>9</sup> The latter not only urges a Westerner to discover the continuity between the archaic and the modern but also helps him/her "to enter into the spiritual universe of 'exotic' and 'primitive' peoples."<sup>10</sup>

It would be worth our while to compare Eliade's understanding of the modern epoch with Ricoeur's. In his *Symbolism of Evil* originally published in French in 1960, Ricoeur characterized "modernity" as follows:

The historical moment of the philosophy of symbols is that of forgetfulness and restoration. Forgetfulness of hierophanies, forgetfulness of the signs of the sacred, loss of man himself insofar as he belongs to the sacred. The forgetfulness, we know, is the counterpart of the great task of nourishing men, of satisfying their needs by mastering nature through a planetary technique. It is in the age when our language has become more precise, more univocal, more technical in a word, more suited to those integral formalizations which are called precisely symbolic logic, it is in this very age of discourse that we want to recharge our language, that we want to start again from the fullness of language.<sup>11</sup>

The epoch of forgetfulness and restoration has two possibilities, that is, "the possibility of emptying language" and "the possibility of filling it anew."<sup>12</sup> According to Ricoeur, one of the most outstanding features of "modernity" is the "crises of language." Therefore, our age needs "filling language anew," not by meaningless horizontal thought but by meaningful vertical thought. Both types of thought aim to interpret symbols: in the former case, hermeneutics is understood as a demystification and a reduction of illusion, while in the latter, it is understood as the manifestation and restoration of a meaning.<sup>13</sup> For Ricoeur, the problem of language is coextensive with the interpretation of symbols, because "the symbol gives rise to thought"<sup>14</sup> and fulfills language with meaning. Ricoeur insists on the necessity of a hermeneutics for this interpretative procedure.

When Eliade talks about hermeneutics in the foreword of *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, as well, he suggests that it can stimulate philosophical thinking and widen its horizons. An exhaustive study of the relationship between Eliade's ideas and Ricoeur's lies outside this paper, but it is important to point out what appears to be a reciprocal relationship between the two. On the one hand, Eliade's notion of hermeneutics as a necessary response by Westerners to the modern condition seems to depend upon Ricoeur's idea of hermeneutics. On the other hand, however, Eliade's emphasis on symbolism proceeds that of Ricoeur, suggesting that Ricoeur had been influenced by Eliade with regard to the importance of symbolism.<sup>15</sup>

Eliade also referred to this unique age of Western history in the foreword to *The Two and the One* written in 1960, a year after the foreword to *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* was written. For him, the era after the Second World War is characterized by "an encounter with the 'others,' with the 'unknown,'" which became a "historical inevitability" for Western

peoples.<sup>16</sup> Orientalists and ethnographers revealed different cultural landscapes, in which Westerners found the “primitive” and “exotic” people as their “outer others.” This rapid appearance of the “other” people in the Western history urges Westerners to incorporate this historical situation as an integral part of their own beings.<sup>17</sup>

Depth psychology is another crucial aspect of this age. In the foreword to *The Two and the One*, Eliade says; “it is depth psychology that has revealed the most *terrae ignotae*, has caused the most dramatic confrontations.”<sup>18</sup> Freud revealed the worlds submerged in the unconscious and Jung discovered the existence of the collective unconscious. These discoveries of “unconsciousness” under Western consciousness executed a kind of “break-through,”<sup>19</sup> in which Westerners began to encounter the “unknown” in themselves as the “inner other.”

Eliade regards the double encounter with the “outer other” and “inner other” as a good opportunity to “recover what is still recoverable of the spiritual history of humanity.”<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, a Westerner can not continue to live without that “part that is made up of fragments of a spiritual history the significance and message of which he/she is incapable of deciphering.” On the other hand, the dialogue with the “others” must be begun “no longer in the empirical and utilitarian language of today ... but in a cultural language capable of expressing human realities and spiritual values.”<sup>21</sup> With the former Eliade insists that it is impossible to live cut off from religious meaning, and with the latter he emphasizes the importance of deciphering the messages spoken by the “other.” This deciphering depends upon hermeneutics.

When Eliade writes as follows, he was aware of a historical significance of these encounters:

Now an encounter with the “totally other,” whether conscious or unconscious, gives rise to an experience of a religious nature. It is not impossible that our age may go down to posterity as the first to rediscover those “diffuse religious experiences” which were destroyed by the triumph of Christianity. It is equally possible that the attraction of the unconscious and its activities, the interest in myths and symbols, the fascination of the exotic, the primitive, the archaic, and encounters with the “others,” with all the ambivalent feelings they imply – that all this may one day appear as a new type of religious experience.<sup>22</sup>

It is this encounter as a religious experience that makes it possible for a Westerner to achieve a sort of “breakthrough,” by which Westerners not only can know themselves better but also can be lead the way to “world unity.”<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Hermeneutics and New Humanism

The historical situation of the encounter with the “other” raises a variety of inquiries,

by orientalists, ethnologists, depth psychologists, historians of religions, and so on. Eliade argued that these attempts oriented to a total knowledge of the human being must be integrated into a "new humanism." Under the term "new humanism," Eliade criticizes the attitude of study characterized by naturalistic "objectivity," arguing that any "strange" or "aberrant" act must be considered as a human behavior. It is rather "intelligent sympathy" that is necessary for a hermeneut, because such a behavior has to be considered in its own right. "It is the frame of mind itself that has had to be changed."<sup>24</sup>

If hermeneutics is the Westerner's response to the encounter, and if such an encounter is a kind of religious experience, there must therefore be an important connection between hermeneutics and the history of religions. And if the studies of the "other" must be integrated under a "new humanism," the "intelligent sympathy" of a hermeneut must also be one of a historian of religions. As Eliade says:

When the history of religions has become the "complete discipline" that it should be, men will understand that the world of the "unconscious," like the strange worlds of the non-Westerners, can best be analyzed on the plane of religious values and behavior.<sup>25</sup>

In his famous article, "A New Humanism" (originally entitled "History of Religions and a New Humanism"), which was written for the first issue of a new periodical, *History of Religions*, first published in the summer of 1961, Eliade deals with the central role of a "new humanism" in the history of religions.

As shown in his earlier works, our historical era can be characterized by encounter, confrontation, or contact with the "other." This historical situation stimulates us not only to widen our "knowledge of man" quantitatively but also to deepen it qualitatively through a "true dialogue," which gives rise to a "unique hermeneutics."<sup>26</sup> This hermeneutics can be culturally creative when our understanding of "others" relativizes or even destructs the Western cultural world. In other words, it is through an understanding of the "other" that cultural provincialism is overcome. This sort of understanding of "others" must be made not from outside but from within, not on the basis of some established theory but "on their own plane of reference" because they reveal their meanings only insofar as they are regarded as autonomous entities. For, Eliade says:

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.<sup>27</sup>

In this historical situation, we can distinguish between two dimensions of understanding. First, Eliade insists that the hermeneutics of religious data is an urgent task for the history of religions because it is the least-developed aspect of the discipline. According to him, scholars analyzing religious phenomena have sometimes neglected to

interpret their meaning. However, historians of religions must understand the meanings of the phenomena. Here, hermeneutics has a phenomenological dimension.

Secondly, when Eliade attempts to understand a religious phenomenon so as to “identify and elucidate the situations and positions that have induced or made possible its appearance or its triumph at a particular historical moments,”<sup>28</sup> he is well aware of the historicity of religious data. Because religious data are various expressions of religious experiences, to understand their meaning is, for Eliade, coextensive with understanding the various existential situations in history. Here, hermeneutics has a historical dimension. Although we can find the two dimensions of hermeneutics above, Eliade does not systematize them until later.

He also mentions the creativity of hermeneutics as a personal experience, when he talks about the creativity of the meeting with the “other.” But he does not take up the existential dimension of hermeneutics this point in time.

By pointing out that “the *homo religiosus* represents the ‘total man’,” Eliade regards the study of religion as a “total discipline,” which integrates the results achieved by the various approaches to religious phenomena. However, he still does not use the term a “total hermeneutics.” Eliade, in this article, points out the creativity of the tension between religious phenomenology and history of religions, that is, “the tension between those who try to understand the *essence* and the *structures* and those whose only concern is the *history* of religious phenomena....”<sup>29</sup> But he does not yet indicate a concrete means of unifying and systematizing the two methods.

### 3. Creativity of a Total Hermeneutics

In his article entitled “Crisis and Renewal in History of Religions” published in *History of Religions* in 1965, Eliade insists that the history of religions is not merely a historical discipline but is also a “*total hermeneutics*, being called to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter of man with the sacred, from prehistory to our day.”<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that Eliade talks about “encountering” again, but now, it is not with the “other” but with the “sacred.” The encounter with the outer and inner “other” changes not only the consciousness of Western peoples but also their mode of being. This is his first use of the term “total hermeneutics,” and contrary to general belief, the term appears in this article only once. Nevertheless, the importance of this term cannot be overestimated.

Eliade argued that this hermeneutics “leads to the creation of new cultural values....”<sup>31</sup> Eliade compares this with a scientific discovery:

a creative hermeneutics unveils significations that one did not grasp before, or puts them in relief with such vigor that after having assimilated this new interpretation the consciousness is no longer the same.<sup>32</sup>

Being opened to the “unfamiliar” world of meaning by the encounter with the “exotic,” the “unconscious,” the “other,” or the “sacred,” the hermeneut’s consciousness expands its horizons, when, simultaneously, the hermeneut is opened to a new mode of being. The “creative hermeneutics *changes* man.”<sup>33</sup> He goes on to say:

it is also a spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself. This is true above all for the historico-religious hermeneutics. A good history of religions book ought to produce in the reader an action of *awakening*...<sup>34</sup>

As Eliade himself states later, hermeneutics is creative in two ways. On the one hand, it is creative for the hermeneut. On the other, it is creative because it “reveals certain values that are not apparent on the level of immediate experience.”<sup>35</sup> If, as Eliade says, creative hermeneutics is the “royal road of the history of religions,”<sup>36</sup> this can be seen in the idea that the history of religions is both a “pedagogy,” for it is “susceptible of changing man,” and a “source of creation of ‘cultural values’.”<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. Toward a Systematic Hermeneutics

On June 24, 1968, Eliade wrote as follows:

I emphasized this: hierophanies and religious symbols constitute a prereflective language. As it is a case of a special language, *sui generis*, it necessitates a proper hermeneutics. In my work, I have tried to elaborate this hermeneutics; but I have illustrated it in a practical way on the basis of documents. It now remains for me or for another to systematize this hermeneutics.<sup>38</sup>

In the preface to *The Quest* published in 1969, as well, he referred to a “prereflective language” which is constituted by the manifestations of the sacred expressed in myths, symbols, rituals, and so on and, as a result, requires a special hermeneutics. In other words, the history of religions deals with “a series of ‘messages’ waiting to be deciphered and understood.”<sup>39</sup> Eliade insists that such a history of religions must be able to recognize and decipher the “‘religious’ structures and meanings of these private worlds or imaginary Universe,” and, therefore phenomenology and history are to be unified under a “systematic hermeneutics of the sacred and its historical manifestations.”<sup>40</sup>

It might be important for understanding of the development of Eliade’s ideas to take notice of some additions he made to the original articles when he included them in *The Quest*. For example, Eliade emphasizes the necessity of understanding the “history” of a religious phenomenon when he adds the following sentence to the article “History of Religions and a New Humanism”:

It is not enough to grasp the meaning of a religious phenomenon..., and, consequently, to decipher its "message"; ... it is also necessary to study and understand its "history," that is, to unravel its changes and modifications and, ultimately, to elucidate its contribution to the entire culture.<sup>41</sup>

It seems reasonable to suppose that he added this sentence in order to alter the orientation of his study of religions which had had a tendency toward phenomenology.

Here is another example:

Ultimately, the historian of religions is forced by his hermeneutical endeavor to "re-live" a multitude of existential situations and to unravel a number of presystematic ontologies.<sup>42</sup>

Eliade talks about an existential aspect of understanding because of the existential and ontological character of the documents a historian of religions is dealing with. With this sentence, Eliade added an existential dimension of hermeneutics to the original article in which he referred the two dimensions of hermeneutics, that is, the phenomenological dimension and the historical dimension.

This existential dimension of understanding can be already seen in 1960 in his *Journal II*:

[February 18, 1960] The meaning of my "learning": I grasp the true meaning only after having gone through all the material (enormous, inert, somber documentation); I would compare my immersion in the documents to a fusion with the material – to the limit of my physical resistance: when I feel that I'm suffocating, that I am being asphyxiated, I come back up to the surface. A descent to the center of dead matter, comparable to a *descensus ad inferos*. Indirectly, the experience of death. Drowned in the documents, what is personal, original, living, in me disappears, dies. When I find myself again, when I return to life – I see things differently, I *understand* them.<sup>43</sup>

Eliade, however, did not connect such an existential and ontological aspect of understanding with his idea of hermeneutics, until *The Quest* written 9 years later.

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Stimulated by Ricoeur's article, Eliade hermeneutically reconsiders Western cultural situations in history, so that he is convinced of the existential dimension of "encounter" with the outer/inner "other." Through the deciphering of the "messages" of the "other," hermeneutics cooperates with the history of religions on the same horizon of "new humanism." Such a hermeneutics must be creative because it not only opens the "other"



world of meaning to a hermeneut but also opens the hermeneut to a new mode of being. After all, by means of the idea of “total hermeneutics,” Eliade attempts to unify religious phenomenology and the “history” of religions in order to systematize the study of religions. He also emphasizes the existential dimension of understanding which is intrinsic to the history of religions because of the nature of “religious” data. For Eliade, the history of religions must become a “total hermeneutics” because it deals with the knowledge of *homo religiosus* who represents the “total man.”

#### Notes

- 1 Ironic that it is Eliade’s own synchronic approach that is most criticised.
- 2 Joseph M. Kitagawa is correct when he says: “In retrospect, it becomes clear that during his stay in Paris, 1945-1955, Eliade solidified most of his important concepts and categories, such as *homo religiosus*, *homo symbolicus*, archetypes, *coincidentia oppositum*, hierophany, *axis mundi*, cosmic rope, nostalgia for Paradise, androgyny, initiatory scenario, etc., all of which became integral parts of a coherent outlook or system that aimed at what Eliade later called a total hermeneutics.” Joseph M. Kitagawa, *The History of Religions: Understanding Human Experience* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 347.
- 3 David M. Rasmussen, *Symbol and Interpretation* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade’s Phenomenology and New Directions* (New York: Mouton, 1978), Adrian Marino, “Mircea Eliade’s Hermeneutics,” in *Imagination and Meaning: The Scholarly and Literary Worlds of Mircea Eliade*, ed. Norman J. Girardot and Mac Linscott Ricketts (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 19-69, etc.
- 4 Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969), 113.
- 5 Mircea Eliade, *Journal II, 1957-1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 67-68.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 69-70.
- 7 Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 8.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 349.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.
- 14 Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 347.
- 15 It is useful for us to cite the following sentences: “Ricoeur accepts Eliade’s understanding of religious symbolism; for him, the symbol presents to us the possibility of a new hermeneutical meditation. Ricoeur goes beyond Eliade’s morphology of religious symbols to philosophical reflection.” Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 50.
- 16 Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 10.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 9.

- 19 Ibid., 10. "The discovery of the unconscious could be put on a level with the maritime discoveries of the Renaissance and the astronomical discoveries that followed the invention of the telescope. For each of these discoveries brought to light worlds whose existence was not even suspected. Each, by shattering the traditional image of the world and revealing the structure of a hitherto unimaginable Universe, achieved a sort of 'break-through.' Now a breakthrough like this will inevitably have consequences. The astronomical and geographical discoveries of the Renaissance not only completely altered the picture of the Universe and the conception of space; they assured, for three centuries at least, the scientific, economic and political supremacy of the West, and at the same time opened the way that leads fatally to world unity." (Ibid., 9-10.)
- 20 Ibid., 14.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 11-12.
- 23 Ibid., 10.
- 24 Ibid., 12.
- 25 Ibid., 11.
- 26 Mircea Eliade, "History of Religions and a New Humanism," *History of Religions*, 1 (1961): 2; idem, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 2-3.
- 27 Ibid., 6; idem, *The Quest*, 6-7.
- 28 Ibid., 2; idem, *The Quest*, 2.
- 29 Ibid., 7; idem, *The Quest*, 8-9.
- 30 Mircea Eliade, "Crises and Renewal in History of Religions," *History of Religions*, 5 (1965): 5; idem, *The Quest*, 58.
- 31 Ibid., 8; idem, *The Quest*, 61.
- 32 Ibid.; idem, *The Quest*, 62.
- 33 Ibid.; idem, *The Quest*, 62.
- 34 Ibid.; idem, *The Quest*, 62.
- 35 Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 129.
- 36 Eliade, "Crises and Renewal in History of Religions," 9; idem, *The Quest*, 62.
- 37 Ibid., 12; idem, *The Quest*, 66.
- 38 Eliade, *Journal II*, 313.
- 39 Eliade, *The Quest*, Preface.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., 8.
- 42 Ibid., 10.
- 43 Eliade, *Journal II*, 92.

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