

A RESPONSE TO CARL OLSON'S "MIRCEA ELIADE,  
POSTMODERNISM, AND THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE  
OF REPRESENTATIONAL THINKING"

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"Archaic, Modern, Postmodern," the penultimate chapter of my monograph, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (SUNY 1996), is in many ways the conclusion of the book's argument. If refuted, the entire book is seriously weakened. However, Carl Olson's argument (*MTSR* 11/4 [1999]: 357-385) has grave shortcomings. He responds vigorously to this one chapter, but neglects the foregoing chapters, which are its premises. For example, he calls the recognition that history is not an empirical category but requires socially constructed models to give it meaning one of the "minor agreements" between Eliade and Foucault (360). For Eliade, historical existence is meaningless until some artifact of human culture be employed to render it meaningful. Olson, however, claims that "the history passed down to us is not a body of facts like Eliade thinks" (360). Yet the whole of my chapter 9 argues that in Eliade's work we find a complex understanding of history as something other than a "body of facts." Failing to consider the complexity of history for Eliade, Olson has already refused that which is postmodern about him. Accepting this complexity, the similarities between Eliade's and Foucault's attitudes to history (even as described by Olson) is immediately apparent.

Olson similarly neglects my analysis of Eliade's equation of the sacred and the real (chapter 2 in *Reconstructing Eliade*). Although he recognizes that "Eliade is convinced that when a religious object comes into being it also becomes real" (363), Olson ignores the dialectic of the sacred and the profane in which religious objects do not "come into being" *ex nihilo*, but by the transformation of the apprehension of the perceiver. Again, to argue that Eliade continues "to hold out the possibility of finding absolutes because all knowledge is not as relative as Foucault claims" (363), is to ignore completely my analysis of Eliade and relativism (chapter 11). Olson's case consistently fails to consider arguments elsewhere in my book. He never quotes from anywhere *other* than chapter 17, although I make comments about Eliade's affinities with postmodernism elsewhere.

Ignoring my analysis of Eliade, it is easy to say that he is "in sharp contrast to Foucault" (364). Considering my analysis, Eliade can be seen to agree with Foucault that there is a plurality of real and meaningful worlds. Ignoring my analysis, it is easy to write that "[w]hen Eliade writes about Being he presupposes its presence, . . . whereas Derrida . . . calls into question the presence of Being" (367). Considering my analysis, it can be seen that the apprehension of Being (i.e., the sacred/real) is relative to the cultural conditioning of the perceiver (*Reconstructing Eliade*, 19, 210). It requires argumentation, then, to substantiate Olson's claim that "the radical relativity of Being for Derrida is anathema to Eliade" (368). Olson realizes that Being is related to reality in Eliade's works but he assumes that this implies that "Being is not a human construct for Eliade" (368). This ignores the Kantian identification of reality as a category of the understanding, which I take to be fundamental to Eliade's work. "Reality" is a human construct insofar as the attribution of reality can be made or withheld relative to cultural conditioning (*Reconstructing Eliade*, 22). This does not mean, however, that I make Eliade into a skeptic, as Olson insists (371), but that I make him into a species of relativist as I explicitly state in the book: "Eliade manifests the primary characteristics of the relativist in seeing alternative worldviews as each true" (127).

Olson sees Derrida as convinced of "the total relativity of meaning" but insists that Eliade cannot share this conviction "because he cannot imagine how it is possible for human beings to function without an assurance that there is something irreducibly real and meaningful" (364 [quoting *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, 153]). Again, Olson ignores my interpretation of Eliade as arguing that human beings fabricate out of their own cultural conditioning the factors that determine what we perceive to be real. In fact, Eliade can be compared to Derrida in many particulars.<sup>1</sup> Where Derrida identifies a longing for a center, Eliade has his symbolism of the center, the desire to live in close proximity to the sacred. Where this leads Derrida to his critique of binary opposition, Eliade analyses the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Derrida considers the longing for the center to spawn a "centering" or privileging of one of the binary pair and to give rise to the play of

<sup>1</sup> The following is adapted from *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, Bryan Rennie (ed.), Albany: NY, SUNY Press, forthcoming. Even here, however, the treatment of this topic is all too brief. Much remains to be done and I have but made some suggestive comments.

binary opposites. Eliade has the dialectic of the sacred and the profane (in which one of a pair is—always already—revealed to be “above” the other). In Eliade’s thought this elevation is dependent upon the preparation of the subject and could, therefore, always be different (*Reconstructing Eliade* chapter 1, esp. 19). Where Eliade concludes that religion is a human universal, Derrida states that “for me there is no religion” (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John D. Caputo [ed.]. [New York: Fordham University Press, 1997], 21). Yet Derrida observes that religious thought, though lost, returns, for example, in the structure of Saussure’s linguistics. The homology is that both thinkers destabilize the binary opposition between religious/non-religious and the unthinking privileging of either one. I do not mean to imply the indebtedness of either author. They were both products of the same philosophical genealogy through Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Saussure, both products of similarly marginalized cultures (Algeria and Romania), both influenced by Romantic forebears. It would not be in the least astonishing if they came to similar conclusions.

None of this is to say that Eliade “is” a postmodernist. Although Olson characterizes me as claiming that Eliade “shared enough affinities with postmodern thinkers to be called postmodern himself” (357), I nowhere say that Eliade himself “can be called postmodern,” nor do I ever label him a postmodernist as Olson suggests I do. I consistently *separate* Eliade from postmoderns with phrases such as, “[f]or Eliade, and for those who embrace postmodern thought” (241), and by stating that, in Eliade’s work, “despite the unquestionable emphasis on the archaic, the modern is there, as is the postmodern” (238). My point was that

a consideration of certain “postmodern” characteristics in the thought of Mircea Eliade occasions a substantial improvement in the understanding of both Eliade and of the recent postmodern phenomenon [and that] careful inspection of Eliade’s writings . . . reveals his ‘anti-historical’ tendency to be counter-modern and remarkably close to later thought which has been labeled “postmodern.” (231, 232)

“Even if it is true that Eliade anticipated some themes associated with postmodernism, this does not necessarily make him a precursor of it or a representative of postmodernism,” Olson protests (357). I grant that anticipating the themes of a later mode does not make one a *representative* of that mode. But I did not claim that it did. On the other hand, how can an author anticipate the themes of a later mode of thought *without* being a precursor of it?

Olson is similarly confused about the relation of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Postmodernism. He writes: "Eliade is not reacting against the Romantic movement and the Enlightenment, whereas postmodernism is a definitive, negative, and critical reaction to the intellectual projects of the Romantic and Enlightenment modes of thinking" (373-374). This treats postmodernism as a monolithic orthodoxy, and it treats Romanticism and the Enlightenment as somehow allies instead of opponents. The Romantic movement was itself a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, and postmodernism is in many ways a *continuation* of that Romantic project. Reaction against the Enlightenment *was* a product of the Enlightenment. Only if we agree with Olson in that Eliade *agreed* with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, whereas "undisputedly recognized postmodern thinkers" did not (357), does this separate Eliade from postmodern thinkers. Olson assumes that he does, as is shown (but not supported) by his repeated statement that Eliade is "a product of Enlightenment philosophy." Well, I would argue, so is Derrida.

Nor is this the final confusion in Olson's argument. He interprets Eliade as "captive to a representational mode of thinking" and defines this as assuming "a correspondence between appearance and reality." He goes on to claim that "the phenomenological aspect of Eliade's method . . . suggests a metaphysical position and a coherence theory of truth" (374) and finally concludes that Eliade's "coherence theory of truth [is] diametrically opposed to the postmodern position" (378). To begin with an assumption of representational thinking presupposing a *correspondence* between appearance and reality, and then criticize a *coherence* theory of truth smacks of an astounding philosophical naiveté. I cannot determine whether Olson finally takes Eliade to embrace a correspondence or a coherence theory of truth. My analysis is that he is closer to a *pragmatic* theory of truth—a theory of the factors required for a subjective attribution of truth, which is, in the final analysis, what *works* to fulfil the existential need of humanity. The practical outcome of belief is a matter of the highest concern for Eliade. For example, his distinction between "modern" and "religious" humanity in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* is based upon the practical ability to tolerate the terror of history.

It is notable that Olson discusses "Eliade's reaction to the postmodern position on meaning" (378) and tells us that "Eliade cannot accept the postmodern notion of the simulacra" (381). In point of fact, Eliade never mentions postmodernism. Olson presents

himself as knowing what Eliade does and does not think, believes, assumes, and with whom Eliade would agree, with whom he would find himself comfortable, and with whom he shares convictions. This is typical of the unwarranted certainty of the modern as opposed to the warranted uncertainty of the postmodern. The point of the demonstration in *Reconstructing Eliade* of the failings of previous critical scholarship on Eliade (see chapters 14 and 15) was to reveal that there has been a consistent, specifically modernist, misreading of Eliade. Olson continues this misreading. Although he displays a broad knowledge of postmodernist authors he has no sympathy for their position. His interpretation of Eliade is irreducibly modern. His (real) Eliade searches for the one true reality of the singular sacred—whereas mine is irreducibly postmodern—there are a potentially infinite number of sacred worlds, limited only by the imagination. My interpretation of Eliade's writings was made assuming the self-coherence of their author and attempted to confer as high a degree of coherence upon them as possible. I conclude that Eliade relativizes the human perception of the real. As such he was a precursor of postmodernism. My interpretation relies upon internal consistency and coherence with the printed word to which I have access, not upon some imagined access to intentional states.

My reading of Eliade is an unusual one, but it is supported throughout *Reconstructing Eliade* more thoroughly than can be appreciated by a reading of one chapter. Nor am I alone in this interpretation. In the forthcoming anthology mentioned above are a number of references to Eliade's links to the postmodern. Rachela Permenter traces the connection between Romanticism and Postmodernism and assesses the presence of "Romantic Postmodernism" in Eliade's fiction. She suggests that Eliade's "work offers a dependable bridge from Romantic to postmodern thought." William Paden argues that Eliade has "two voices," the second of which is "post-foundationalist and to some extent postmodern." Norman Girardot insists that Eliade "stands on the cusp between the modern . . . and the postmodern." Girardot states unequivocally that "Eliade's approach was . . . (to employ an appropriately clumsy term) proto-postmodern. Eliade is . . . a partial anticipation of what we have come to call, rather apocalyptically now, postmodernism."<sup>2</sup> Douglas Allen argues

<sup>2</sup> I attempt to trace more specifically the implications of Eliade's position in "Mircea Eliade: A Secular Mystic in the History of Religions," *The Unknown Remembered Gate*, Eliot Wolfson and Jeffrey Kripal, (eds.), Seven Bridges Press, forthcoming.

that “[i]t is also possible to interpret Eliade’s negative judgments about modernity as sharing characteristics with antimodern postmodernist approaches.” To be fair, Allen also states that “[a]lthough Eliade sounds like this postmodernism when arguing against modern forms of reductionism, in many fundamental respects he clearly rejects such a postmodernist orientation.” However, that does not lessen my point, which is not, and never has been, to claim that Eliade *is* postmodern. Rather “I am consciously attempting to clarify Eliade’s thought by means of postmodernism and postmodernism by means of his thought in the understanding that both are to some extent imaginary constructs” (*Reconstructing Eliade*, 232).

In the final analysis, Olson’s critique of my correlation of Eliade and postmodern thought cannot be considered a serious challenge since it does not consider the whole of my argument. In fact, along with its other serious shortcomings, it merely continues the modernist misreading of Eliade.

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