

Tradition and Presupposition in Collingwood and Eliade**

Abstract: There are different authors, such as Heikki Saari (1998), who considered Collingwood's emotivist theory of magic. Also, Collingwood's *Folk Tales Manuscripts* were published in 2005 (see *The Philosophy of Enchantment*). Yet, no one dared to exploit them for a larger view of his theory of presuppositions. I am the first to assume this dare. My pretext is a careful reading of the *Folk Tales Manuscripts*, together with Eliade's works on anthropology and archaic cultures. This way I have discovered that Eliade made a point that Collingwood himself did not make but that can be read between the lines if we consider his *Folk Tales Manuscripts* in the new light of the theory of presuppositions systematically exposed in his *Essay on Metaphysics*. My thesis is a very simple one: There are presuppositions of the archaic thought (the beliefs of the archaic man), just as there are presuppositions of our modern thought, and there is no way we can neglect it.

Key words: hermeneutics, history, Robin George Collingwood, Mircea Eliade.

My exploration of a possible parallel between Collingwood and Eliade has two premises that I will not discuss or question: 1. both their approaches of human culture are hermeneutical; 2. the two share a special interest in history though they do not consider history in the same sense. Later in this section I will point out Collingwood's as well as Eliade's conceptions of history and hermeneutics.

When looking at Collingwood's *Folk Tales Manuscripts* what attracts my attention is a general rapprochement to Eliade's work though at the surface of things their fields of interest carry different names and the roads they follow seem totally different: the comparative study of religion or the history of religion on Eliade's part, and respectively the study of the fairy – tales under a more general purpose of exposing the method of history as re-enactment of foreign experiences starting from historical evidence found in the present – on Collingwood's. However, their terminology is not as different as one may think: they both talk of re-enactment; of understanding

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the ways of the primitive man, subsuming this task under the more general theories of the sacred, mythical or magical; of certain beliefs or preamble data that determine practices, customs, magical or religious behaviour. They both detach their accounts from pure ethnological, psychological, or sociological as they are not resumed to these disciplines but go beyond them by putting the particular matter of understanding and interpreting past, ancient or archaic experiences that man lived.

Moreover, considering Collingwood's account of the fairy – tales and magic after completely assimilating his future theory of the absolute presuppositions, the similarities between him and Eliade are even more striking. The latter offers an interesting perspective on the former as an opportunity to accomplish that incredible schleiermacherian desire to understand an author better than he understood himself, as perhaps Collingwood never thought of his elaborated theory of presuppositions as throwing a new light over his conception of magic. But one who read his *Essay on Metaphysics* and agreed with its author on the very essence of it has no doubt: *The Folk Tales Manuscripts* can be read as an anticipation of the theory of presuppositions (Collingwood, 1940). There is a basis for magical practices and their basis is feeling, emotion of a particular kind, i. e. emotional and not rational (theoretical) ideas that have been felt *semper, ubique ab omnibus* and which are not the appendage of the savage only, but of the savage inside us all, within the civilized man. And let us remember that he uses these very Latin words meaning “always, everywhere and by everybody” when referring to the absolute presuppositions of thinking. However, Collingwood is not saying that absolute presuppositions are universal, but relative as they change from one historical epoch to another. As Llewelyn put it, they are “relatively absolute” (Llewelyn, 1961, 50), this paradoxical expression making perfect sense within the context of Collingwood's theory.

What I am suggesting is that by reading Collingwood through Eliade the theory of presuppositions can be expanded as to covering new domains and cultural spaces, the magical and religious experiences, and the archaic cultures. And when talking about the basis of magical practices, customs and beliefs in his *Folk Tales Manuscripts* Collingwood may not have made evident but what we could call today, after studying his systematic theory, the ‘presuppositions’ of the primitive man's thinking and behaviour.

In Collingwood's opinion, whoever wants to understand magic or the fairy-tales that express it should endeavour to understand the mind of the savage, his beliefs and customs and in order to do so he considers different magical practices that reveal certain feelings and emotions. In order to understand the magical practices that characterize a certain age, the historian has to reconstruct an experience of thought and emotion.

Just as the presuppositions that he will later systematically expose, these emotions are somehow universally human (the fact that Collingwood wants to stress is that they do not characterize only the primitive man, but the civilized one as well) and yet they differ from people to people and change as the customs that reveal them alter and as also alter as a consequence the fairy-tales or stories linked to the customs and beliefs of a certain society. The difference is obvious: presuppositions constitute our thinking whereas emotions – as basis of magical practices – do not. Yet, I am sure that Collingwood does not use the term “emotion” in a psychological sense, but in order to dissociate our theoretical thinking from a rather practical one. That is why he uses the expression “emotional ideas” in order to designate these feelings that underlie our magical behaviour. His idea that presuppositions guide our practical thinking as well as our theoretical one, that there are presuppositions both of our thinking, culture and civilization is well known. Magical practices are determined by the practical thinking of the primitive man just as our laws and constitutions are determined by ours. And yet the resemblance between ‘emotions’ and ‘presuppositions’ is obvious, too. To what I already said I will add that both emotions and presuppositions are subject of historical change.

By talking of the savage within us, the civilized ones, Collingwood intends to bring forward the idea that magical behaviours and the particular emotions or feelings on which they are based are not as far from us as we would like to believe when we depreciate primitive ways. We still have such primitive feelings and Collingwood exemplifies this intensely in his *Folk Tales Manuscripts*. However, when I consider the Romanian Mircea Eliade I find the same idea that there still exists some primitive man inside the modern one, therefore ancient myths still have a word to say to us, moreover mythical motives are present in our modern literature, films etc. Eliade’s idea seems to continue Collingwood’s own thought: there are frameworks of thought that characterize certain ages of the archaic culture and not only. I choose to refer to the preamble data of the primitive man’s mind. What I want to suggest is that after reading Eliade, moreover after reading Collingwood the way I do, through Eliade, it becomes clear to us not only that we preserve behaviours and basic data from the archaic times, but primary that the archaic man is entitled to possess such fundamental beliefs or ‘presuppositions’. What I suggest is that Collingwood’s theory of presuppositions can be applied to the thinking of the primitive man. We can take the beliefs of the archaic people to be as much presuppositions as our own ‘civilized’ ones. My idea was inspired by Collingwood’s own *Folk Tales Manuscripts* and by the similarities between Eliade and Collingwood that I will consider in the next paragraph. And the argument of my idea lies in Collingwood’s observations that we are not superior to the primitive. Their practical thinking made them our equals in knowledge and keeps them from

falling into obscurity as well as far from the prejudices of the unfair comparison to modern world of natural sciences: “They have enough biology to breed cattle; enough botany to grow crops; enough astronomy to work out an agricultural calendar; enough mineralogy and chemistry to prospect for ores, to smell copper and tin, and to alloy them into bronze, or to mine and smelt and forge iron, or to find and work clay and fire it into pottery; enough physics to use medicinal herbs, and enough surgery to perform operations, sometimes delicate ones, with flint knives and deer – sinews; enough engineering to construct a plough or a boat; and so forth” (James, Wendy; Smallwood, Philip (eds.), 2005). They challenge us by their ‘technical skills’, and by their ‘scientific intelligence’ (as there can be no technical skills without intelligence) and also by magic that is connected to their every act.

So why would not their thinking and acts be determined by ‘presuppositions’ as our modern sciences and institutions are? Collingwood’s positive answer stresses on the so-called emotions that underlie magical acts or believes, as we know them from folk tales. Eliade goes a bit further and gives a more daring positive answer: magical and mystical experiences involve hierophanies (appearances of the sacred). Myths (stories of the sacred, of how the world or a certain reality, institution, practice, custom came into being, of gods’ or heroic creatures’ deeds done at the beginning of all times), symbols (paradigms that explain certain religious phenomena), rites (the repeating of an original gesture that some god did) are all hierophanies.

On the basis of this thesis – the primitive man’s mind is determined by certain ‘presuppositions’ or frameworks of thought that change from one age to another – I compare Collingwood and Eliade. The two themes that I will consider in order to accomplish this parallel between the two are history and hermeneutics. They are undeniably related and Eliade expresses this idea in the following way: “Hermeneutics could become the only acceptable justification for history. An historical event will only justify its appearance when it is understood. This could mean that things happen, and that history exists with the sole purpose of forcing man to understand it” (Eliade, 1990, 116). Within the economy of Collingwood’s narrative the relation between history and hermeneutics is also very important. Collingwood’s concept of history is resumed by these two statements: “All history is the history of thought” and “The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind” (Collingwood, 1946, 215). His conception of history as re-enactment of past thought provides us with a link between history and hermeneutics. In order to understand the past, the historian has to interpret present evidence and reconstruct past thought. Collingwood’s theory of re-enactment as well as his theory of presuppositions has hermeneutical relevance.

What is obvious to me is that Collingwood and Eliade do not refer to the same notion of time, to the same notion of history or to the same kind of past. As well as Collingwood, Eliade talks of 're-enactment', 'reconstruction' and 'reliving' (Eliade, 1990). By means of rituals every archaic man relives an event that took place in *illo tempore*. Moreover, every gesture and act that the archaic man does is to him but the repetition of some original gesture done at the beginning of time by some mythical creature. His acts have a meaning and are legitimate and real so far as they repeat a pattern, a model. And not only the archaic man but every Christian today by remembering Christ's suffering does not just take part into the Eastern ceremony but also becomes contemporary to the events that he commemorates. In his turn, the historian of religion does nothing else but relives foreign existential situations in order to understand them from within.

Both Collingwood and Eliade are obsessed with the past, with what there was and with the idea of repetition. The difference between them is that Collingwood talks of history and the re-enactment of past events that took place in history, whereas Eliade is concerned with the mythical times when the universe was first created. And there is still one more difference between the two: the reconstruction of the past event is mental for Collingwood whereas it is more than just mental, existential for Eliade.

The historian of religion does not only re-enact a foreign past but also a foreign existential situation. Consequently, hermeneutics is not only an experience of thinking but it is "creative", meaning that by practicing it the historian of religion changes himself in order to relive and understand foreign experiences and by it enriches himself, too.

Next I will say that the history of religion that is Eliade's main concern and pure history are quite different things as in the name of the former the stress should not fall on 'history' but on 'religion'. Although all religious facts (hierophanies, myths, rituals) take place in history, their true meaning is beyond history. And Eliade remarks that the work done by the historian of religion presupposes a greater effort than the work performed by the pure historian, as he is not simply aiming at reconstructing a past event by means of present evidence. Besides reconstructing the history of a particular hierophany or myth the historian of religion searches for the meaning of that religious fact (Eliade, 1994).

So far Eliade's hermeneutics is about deciphering the meanings or the most profound meaning of religious phenomena. But it is even more as it also concerns the conditions of possibility of meaning. Given a certain religious phenomenon the historian of religion can reconstruct its history by finding out the meanings that it has developed in time. But his effort is hermeneutical the more so as he explores hierophanies (symbols, myths, rites) and frameworks of thought (patterns).

Resuming, the topics that I identified as legitimating my intention to place Eliade and Collingwood together are: the hermeneutical and historical relevance of their theories, their insistence on the idea of re-enactment, their obsession with what there was, and their interest in discovering the patterns (or presuppositions) that characterize a certain epoch. Now I will examine this final topic as well as the differences on this topic between the two.

First of all, when Eliade talks of symbols as patterns with a multitude of meanings and variants different from one culture to another he shows a stirring similarity to Collingwood's theory of presuppositions. But he is even more close to the British idealist when he exposes those "horizons of aesthetic values" or "horizons of religious values" (Eliade, 1990, 112, 115) that characterize the mind of the primitive man during different epochs in history. Each epoch marks a radical change in technology (hunting, agriculture, using metals) and each of them corresponds to certain changes within man's mentality: "Man being who he is, neither a spirit nor an angel, it is obvious that his experience of the sacred takes place by means of a certain body, though a certain mentality and in certain social circumstances. The primitive hunter could not understand the holiness and the mystery of the fertility of land, as the farmer will. Between these two different horizons of religious values the gap is obvious..." (Eliade, 1990, 115).

Essentially, what Eliade is saying here is that there are certain frameworks of thought that characterize a certain age. At this point, he is so close to Collingwood's account of absolute presuppositions except for the fact that his examples are not moments in modern science but moments in the development of man. However, both the idea of a radical difference and the one of change from one framework of thought to another are present.

The same idea of the historical frameworks of thought is involved when Eliade claims that any magical or religious behaviour involves a theory, certain categories or conceptions that configure the primitive man's mind. For instance, alchemic practices are based on certain magical beliefs, that gold lengthens one's life etc. Also when a witch burns a doll that has a lock of her victim's hair in order to harm her she does it under the basis of some magical belief – that our personal objects, nails and hair preserve our soul etc. There is a whole mental universe made up of beliefs and so called theories that underlie different magical practices. Generally, every cultural product (legend, myth) involves such a mental universe of beliefs and in order to understand that particular creation we should make out the mental universe that formed it (Eliade, 1992, 1994). So the purpose of hermeneutics is to discover by reconstruction the beliefs that make our myths, religious or magical acts possible.

All that Eliade is saying brings forth and also suggests a new way of reading Collingwood's theory of presuppositions. This new reading retrieves Collingwood's own intuitions from his *Folk Tales Manuscripts*, which, if

accepted next to his *Essay on Metaphysics*, complete his account. There are presuppositions of the archaic thought just as there are presuppositions of our modern thought, there are presuppositions of both science and civilization, there are presuppositions that underlie art, as there are presuppositions that underlie science or philosophy, but this is another discussion.

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