

Mat MESSERSCHMIDT *

Mircea Eliade and the Death of God in America

Abstract: In this paper, I will discuss the reception of Mircea Eliade in the American academy, particularly among scholars of Christian religion. I will focus especially on an objection voiced by many American academics during Eliade's earliest years at the University of Chicago – namely, the charge that Eliade's thought is “anti-historical” (a charge that, as I will indicate, can mean more than one thing). This objection to Eliade sometimes went hand in hand with the notion that Eliade's treatment of “historical religions,” by which scholars generally meant Abrahamic religions, was unfair or under-nuanced. Taking as my starting point the work of theologian Thomas Altizer, the author of America's first full-length book on Eliade, I will address this picture of Eliade the anti-historian, starting from Altizer's belief that Eliade's conceptions of the sacred and the profane can help us understand the historical event that Nietzsche called “the death of God.” I will argue on the basis of Altizer's work that Eliade can be taken as offering us, to speak in Heideggerian terms, a “history of Being,” one that is based on the history of the sacred and the profane, according to which history is narrated as the gradual, continual receding of Being.

Keywords: death of God, history of Being, history of religions, sacred, profane

In 1979, the American theologian Thomas Altizer said of Mircea Eliade, “Mircea Eliade is the most distinguished and influential religious scholar of our time, and his coming to America in 1955 might almost be said to mark the point at which America passed from a Christian or Judeo-Christian religious ground to a truly pluralistic religious identity” (Altizer 1979, 257). The notion that Eliade diversified religious scholarship in the United States is not surprising or controversial; however, it is also worth pointing out, that it was Altizer himself, who was not a scholar of comparative religions, but rather a Christian theologian, who wrote America's first full-length book on Eliade's thought. The book, titled *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, appeared in 1963.

In general, in fact, despite Altizer's accurate statement in the late 70s about Eliade's role in the diversification of religious scholarship, much of the earliest response to Eliade in the United States (that is, the response during the 1960s) came from people thinking primarily about Christianity.

* PhD Student, The Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago, USA; email: matmesserschmidt@uchicago.edu

Eliade arrived in the United States just in time for the rise of “death of God theology,” the brand of Christian (and sometimes Jewish) theology which posited that a loss of belief in God was in some way unavoidable, a line of thinking of which Altizer was a leading light. Today I will focus centrally on Altizer’s reading of Eliade, and argue that his work serves as a platform from which to understand Eliade’s relationship to history.

A scholar who, like Eliade, was to so thoroughly alter the course of religious studies was bound to elicit strong reactions, and Eliade had his share of detractors in the United States. Many of the objections leveled against him raised some version of the following charge: he was not a historian, but an anti-historian. For Eliade, the argument went, transhistorical truths about human nature trumped historical change, and the phenomenon of “the sacred” appeared in so similar a manner across vastly separated times and spaces that historical development and cultural difference seemed to be radically downplayed. Eliade’s critics felt this way¹ about his work nearly all the time, but it is worth noting that even those whose careers were deeply inspired by Eliade often felt compelled to cede some version of these criticisms. A striking example is that of Wendy Doniger, a professor at my university, the University of Chicago Divinity School where she worked extensively with Eliade. Doniger writes, in her preface to *Shamanism*, that Eliade’s work implies “assumptions about unchanging human attributes that we no longer find true or useful,” and that these assumptions led to his being called an “anti-historian of religions” (Doniger 2004, xxii).

The objection that Eliade was “anti-historical” based itself on both the content of Eliade’s scholarship and its methodology. Eliade was accused of demonizing history, valorizing the experience of the sacred as a sort of escape from history, as the successful obtainment of a nonhistorical point of view. The unchanging nature of sacrality corresponded, in his thought, according to his critics, with an untenable notion of an unchanging human nature. This picture of humanity went hand-in-hand with a methodological approach that sought first to find similarities across time, rather than developing a diachronic picture of change across time, allegedly treating differences between cultures or epochs as accidents too often.

It is useful to keep in mind the thematics according to which American sympathizers and detractors of Eliade organized themselves in general terms, as we now approach the more specific issue of Eliade’s treatment of Christianity, because the theme of Eliade as a historical or anti-historical thinker is important here, as well. Kenneth Hamilton’s oft-quoted 1965 essay on Eliade’s treatment of religion, called “‘Homo religiosus’ and Historical Faith,” argues that Eliade’s basic assumptions leave him unprepared to adequately consider the spiritual outlook of a worshipper who belongs to a “historical religion,” by which Hamilton means an Abrahamic religion. Reading Eliade primarily on the basis of the work *The Sacred and the Profane*,

Hamilton concludes that Eliade's picture of sacrality is admirably perceptive when applied to non-historical religions. For these religions, such as archaic religions, "The sacred provides a center around which [religious man] can order his universe" (Hamilton 1965, 216). This cosmic center is not subject to historical change, because it stands in "sacred time," and "sacred time is not really temporal but only the manifestation in time of the eternally real and true" (Hamilton 1965, 216). The center of the universe is thus an ahistorical sacrality. So far, for Hamilton, Eliade's picture of *homo religiosus* is fine. Eliade's stance becomes objectionable for Hamilton (and others like him) only when he turns to historical, Abrahamic religion. For the Mircea Eliade of *The Sacred and the Profane*, Judaism and Christianity represent *losses* of the sacred, because this ahistorical center of the universe, sacrality, has been infected with history. Here, Hamilton claims, Eliade's scholarly standpoint rather arbitrarily privileges archaic religion over Judeo-Christian religion, asserting the former as *true* religion by unjustifiably evaluating Judeo-Christian religiosity against the standard of a sort of sacrality that is foreign to it. Hamilton's 1965 essay, early on in America's reception of Eliade, invites us to inquire, Why is Judeo-Christian religion's experience of the sacred being judged, in Eliade's work, according to the paradigm of archaic religion? Why not the other way around? Or, rather, why does one manifestation of the sacred have to be understood as a diminished or imperfect *version* of the other?

When we turn to Thomas Altizer's meditations on Eliade's thought, however, we can see that Christianity's relationship to the sacred as expressed in *The Sacred and the Profane* is not *refuted*, but is certainly *deepened*, by casting our gaze elsewhere in the Eliade corpus. Altizer, a death-of-God theologian, gives us a radically different kind of American Eliade reading. We observe immediately, when we begin reading Altizer's book, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, that we are considering a strain of Eliade's thought that is neither so tone-deaf to the diachronic concerns of the historian as many of Eliade's critics would have us believe, nor is it so straightforwardly dismissive of Christianity as a critic like Hamilton takes Eliade to be. The first major epochal transition identified by Eliade is a kind of "death of God," but the first "death of God" discussed by Eliade appears not at the beginning of modern times, as by Nietzsche, but in the receding of the *deus otiosus*, the High Deity or Supreme Being who, Eliade posits in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, has already departed in virtually every observable religion. Eliade says, in his journal that the lesson of the concept of the *deus otiosus* is that "myths and religions, in all their variety, are the results of the vacuum left by the retreat of God ... 'true' religion begins only after God has withdrawn from the world" (Eliade 1977, 74). Religion only gains cultural stability once the High Deity has been lost or killed, and then replaced by a pantheon of weaker, compensatory gods. When

humanity's encounter with the sacred ossifies into "religion," God is lost. The sacred, Eliade says in his journal, hides itself by showing itself. This structure's "most radical" example, Altizer says (Altizer 1979, 265), is Christianity, in which God fully enters the world of the profane by becoming man, thus appearing as utterly un-sacred. According to this logic, religion, as a visible scheme of cultural organization, is always founded on a *loss* of the sacred. This loss has always already taken place prior to religion's appearance, meaning religious experience can only be understood diachronically – that is, historically – with reference to the prior loss of the sacred which causes it. On this picture, Christianity is not just a "real" religion, for Eliade, but even offers a paradigm or template for "the religious" – precisely in and through its historicity.

There is thus a tragic trajectory in humanity's experience of the sacred, according to the Eliade narrative that Altizer develops. Once we have fallen into history, the following rule applies: the more religious we become, the more the sacred recedes in favor of the profane, which comes to dominate more and more of human experience. On the journal page referenced above, dealt with at length by Altizer, Eliade could not be clearer:

Today, when I was leafing through my *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, I lingered especially over the long chapter on the sky gods; I wonder if the secret message of the book has been understood, the "theology" implied in the history of religions as I decipher and interpret it. And yet the meaning emerges clearly: *myths and religions, in all their variety, are the results of the vacuum left in the world by the retreat of God, his transformation into deus otiosus, and his disappearance from the religious scene. ... But has it been understood that "true" religion begins only after God has withdrawn from the world? That his transcendence merges and coincides with his eclipse? The movement of religious man toward the transcendent sometimes makes me think of the desperate gesture of the orphan, left alone in the world.* (quoted in Altizer 1979, 262)²

Yet this historical creep of the profane is not the end of the story, according to Altizer, because a concept which comes directly from Eliade, namely, that of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, implies, in a way not fully plumbed by Eliade himself, that access to the sacred depends, for historical humanity, not on an overcoming of the profane but on a reconciliation of the sacred and the profane. This is not an uncontroversial claim, since Eliade first and foremost defines the sacred as that which is not profane. Altizer argues that Eliade demonstrates the possibility of the ultimate reconciliation of the sacred and the profane in his work on yoga and alchemy. In alchemy, profane materials unite to become a more sacred substance; in yoga, true Being is reached from the standpoint of temporal Becoming.

If Eliade had pushed such a logic to its natural conclusion, Altizer argues, he would have seen a tremendous opportunity in the modern death

of God. For Eliade, the sacred is, definitionally, the absolutely real. With the death of God, modern humanity's consciousness becomes filled with the profane as never before, and we accept the profane as the ultimate reality. The absolute amplification of the profane and our embrace of it as the utterly real implies the possibility of a radical, dialectical synthesis of the sacred and the profane. Altizer names Nietzsche as the thinker who most clearly sees this dynamic in his vision of the Eternal Return, but Nietzsche lacks the vocabulary of the historian of religions possessed by Eliade, which would have allowed him to more fully contextualize his vision of the death of God in concrete history.

It hardly needs to be said that this is not, contra the Eliade critics we discussed earlier, an "anti-historical" Eliade. That is not to say that every single aspect of the anti-historical charge has been addressed in Altizer's picture of the Chicago historian of religions. On the whole, however, one crucial and central objection seems to have been confronted. Critics of Eliade object to his methodological premise according to which we must obtain the position of a phenomenological *epoché* that lets the sacred phenomenon appear as spontaneous, self-generated, and transhistorical, arguing that this implausibly implies an identical experience of the sacred across time. But the possibility of such an experience, the accessibility of the sacred phenomenon, is, for Eliade himself, radically historically contingent, and, perhaps even more importantly, "the sacred," which Eliade at times calls "being," can not only lose its accessibility, but even its very status as absolute Being. Indeed, in *The Sacred and the Profane* during his discussion of modern humanity, Eliade specifies that it is "on the archaic levels of culture" that "*being and the sacred are one*" (Eliade 1989, 210), suggesting that it is otherwise in modern culture.

As a means of articulating what is wrong with the picture painted by some American scholars under which Eliade is an "anti-historian," I would like to suggest that, following the strain of Eliade's thought developed by Altizer, we can understand Eliade's work as providing us, to speak in a Heideggerian diction, with a history of Being. This sounds, perhaps, like a more ambitious claim than I take it to be. I mean only that Eliade, in his history of the sacred and the profane, gives us a diachronic narrative of humanity's sense of its relation to "ultimate reality," and a history of what *counts* as "ultimate reality." This paradigm of interpretation is suggested, I think, by Eliade's own terminology. In Eliade's work, the term *hierophany* replaces the more traditional term *theophany*, as Eliade points out that not all manifestations of the sacred are manifestations of a god. "Hiero-" indicates the sacred, ἱερός, Being, and "-phany" indicates φάνειν, to show, or, in modern philosophical terms, to phenomenize. The sacred is Being. On these terms, Eliade's history is the history of the gradual loss of Being, of

Being's diminishing ability to show itself, to phenomenize itself. This history unfolds in the recession of the Sky God, his transition into the distant, passive *deus otiosus* in agrarian cultures, the admixture of the temporal into the sacred in historical, Abrahamic religion, and, finally, in modern man's utter embrace of the profane. We might translate these moments as, respectively, Being's refusal to show itself to humanity, humanity's decision to do without Being, humanity's confusion as to what Being is, and humanity's forgetting of Being. History is, as by Heidegger, the history of a relationship with Being, which is the history of the receding of Being, until, as on Heidegger's picture of the modern technological world, ontological difference is decisively effaced. For Eliade, this means the immersion in the profane as the absolutely real. Yet this inversion is not a straightforward replacement of the sacred by the profane, as it sometimes appears to be in Altizer's interpretation. It is an inversion we can never fully commit to; the distant memory of the sacred as Being lives on in us. Eliade makes abundantly clear that mythological structures live on in the mind of modern humanity, and modernity never quite kills the archaic human³.

There thus may be, in Eliade's history as in Heidegger's, a strong element of nostalgia, as implied by those who say Eliade is anti-historical, and it may be that nostalgia, by its very nature, is *normatively* resistant to historical change. When Carl Olson wrote, shortly after Eliade's death, that "Eliade's understanding of *homo religiosus* betrays a nostalgic attitude towards archaic religious beings" (Olson 1989, 102), he is entirely correct. However – and here I borrow the phrasing of the American Eliade scholar Douglas Allen's useful 1988 discussion of critical responses to the question of Eliade and history – to confirm that Eliade "*favours* a return to some archaic mode of being" is not at all to consent to the accusation that he "assumes an ahistoric archaic model for all religious experience" or that he "universalized a nonhistorical archaic ontology as the norm for all religion" (Allen, 1988, 548). A negative assessment of historical change (if that is what we see in Eliade) is not the same as a suppression of historical change, or the denial of the importance of historical change. Nostalgia, in fact, *affirms* the fact of historical change and the importance of that change, even as it laments it. Nostalgia for Being indicates the loss of Being. "The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible *in* the sacred" because "The sacred is saturated with *being*," and "religious man deeply desires *to be*," whereas "modern man has desacralized his world and assumed a profane existence" (Eliade 1987, 12-13). This is the story of the loss of Being. We can call this nostalgic, but certainly not resistant to integral, fundamental historical change.

Here we can note a methodological dynamic that both Heidegger and Eliade grapple with: as an inheritor of Husserl's phenomenology, it is

difficult, on the face of things, to produce something like a “history of Being.” After all, the phenomenological *epoché* brackets the interpretive structures responsible for belief in both “history” and “Being.” There is something fundamentally ahistorical in the starting point of Husserl’s approach, which “presupposes ... that human experience forms an infinite but unified field for potential investigation,” where this “unity” holds across historical epochs (Geuss, 2002, 211)⁴. Again, Douglas Allen’s precise wording is helpful: “Eliade insists upon the irreducibility of the sacred, which involves the phenomenological *epoché* and the sympathetic effort to participate in the experience of *homo religiosus*” (Allen 1972, 170). This description strikes me as accurate, but raises questions about the feasibility of the endeavor. Eliade’s kind of comparative religions will require the scholar to “sympathetically participate” in the “experience” not only of another human being, but of another human being on the other side of a history of vast change in the very possibilities open to “experience.” Isn’t such an imaginative leap problematic for the *epoché*, which is strictly performed in the first person, here and now, and which depends on a certain universalizability of its own results? For this reason, the project of engaging in an *epoché* that scrutinizes someone else’s religious experience of the sacred across time and space is always, as Allen’s phrasing indicates, an “effort,” and not an accomplished fact. This is not to say that one cannot generalize to a degree from the starting point of the *epoché*, as Husserlian philosophy obviously does, but the journal entry which we read at length above indicates that, when we are concerning ourselves with the question of the experience of the sacred, certain experiences are irrecoverable to modern humanity.

Yet Eliade indicates that close investigation of the “structure of religious phenomena” (Eliade 1963a, 107) is the only way to identify what holds together a phenomenon as “religious.” Since the sacred is accessed in a special kind of experience, if one does not pay attention to transhistorical similarities in the structure of the sacred experience, one fails to ever develop a sufficient sense of what the sacred is, and, consequently, of what religion is. In the essay “History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912-1962,” Eliade’s goal, in taking his phenomenological approach⁵, seems to be an avoidance of the “reductionism” that he condemned – the “reduction” of religion to one aspect of religion. In Husserlian terms, Eliade sees himself as going back to “the thing itself,” in his case, religion, rather than reducing religion to an “interpretation” that may express an aspect of religion, such as social cohesion, Oedipal drives, will to power, the material interests of a ruling class, etc. To the critics that accuse him of ignoring diachronic concerns, Eliade responds that religion is always structured around hierophany, the experience of the sacred’s revealing itself, and that this means starting with a phenomenological approach, not *starting* with a diachronic approach.

When one starts with this diachronic approach, one neglects “the *essence* and the *structure* of religious phenomena” (Eliade 1963a, 107), going straight to how religion changes without having a clear idea of what religion is.

I will now summarize my understanding of Eliade’s relationship to history by addressing a statement of his about Nietzsche. Eliade says that “In Nietzsche ... a new idea confronts us: the responsibility of history in the degradation, the oblivion, and ultimately the ‘death’ of God. The following generation of scholars will have to wrestle with this new meaning of history” (Eliade 1969, 48). Eliade is a kind of scholar of the death of God, although there is no single moment, perhaps, that can be called the definitive death of God, for him. In the terms in which we discussed them earlier, the receding of the Supreme Being⁶, the advent of historical religion, and the beginning of the modern, post-Enlightenment, secular world are all “deaths” of God in a sense, although only the last one is the “death of God” referred to in the Nietzschean phrase. God’s death, on Eliade’s picture, is more gradual⁷. Unlike Nietzsche, Eliade seems to view the death of God as more or less a bad thing. God’s unfortunate death is “*the responsibility of history*”. When humanity falls into history, God dies. Each epoch of religious (or pseudo-religious) experience must be understood in light of the degree to which God has died. Eliade’s comments on the deaths of sky gods suggest that he agrees with Nietzsche that “history” kills the highest Gods: “one might say that ‘history’ has effectively pushed into the background the divine ‘forms’ of a celestial nature ... but that ‘history’ ... has not been able to do away with the direct and abiding revelation that the sky is something sacred” (Eliade 1963, 111). “This new meaning of history,” which is the meaning of a history in which God dies, is the history of the loss of Being. This “degradation of God” is the “new meaning of history” which “scholars will now have to wrestle with.” In the final analysis, it is not fair to suggest that Eliade, by formulating a supposedly anti-historical conception of religion, is effectively running from this “new meaning of history” – to the contrary, he faces it head on.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Robert Pippin, chairman of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, for arranging the travel funds which made it possible for me to present this paper at the Politehnica University of Bucharest in November 2018.

Notes

¹ See Douglas Allen’s “Eliade and History” for a history of this objection (Allen 1988).

² Altizer’s essay’s strategy in reading Eliade is interesting in its attempt to, rather seamlessly, reference diverse genres of writing within the Eliade corpus in building a coherent picture of an author deeply concerned with the “death of God.” Literary works, diary entries, and historical scholarship all figure centrally in his argument. One might question whether such diverse sorts of texts can really be treated as a single, unified “body of work” without

motivating such an interpretive paradigm. In Altizer's defense, however, his view of Eliade as a "death of God" thinker had already been articulated in *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, with a more exclusive focus, there, on Eliade's scholarly work in comparative religions.

³ I have serious disagreements with many of the objections raised by Mac Linscott Ricketts against Altizer's interpretation of Eliade in his 1967 essay "Mircea Eliade and the Death of God" (as, for example, his assertion that, contra Altizer, "Eliade does not, in fact, believe that God *is* dead" – a claim that seems at least under-nuanced to me, and certainly contrary to much of what Eliade would write later in *The Quest*). Ricketts does, however, make a fair point when he points out that, in *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred*, Altizer's treatment of Eliade and modern "profane" existence does not really acknowledge that "One of the recurrent themes in all [Eliade's] studies is that the modern world, for all its denial of religion, is teeming with manifestations of 'crypto-religious' behavior which signify that the transcendent realm still persists in the depth of man's psyche, whence it is continually emerging in the form of symbolically significant actions, whose meaning can be deciphered by a historian of religions" (Ricketts 1967, 41).

⁴ Geuss, in this essay, is discussing the *epoché* precisely in relation to historical investigation – Foucault's historical investigations, specifically. From a Foucauldian standpoint, he suggests, one aspect of the *epoché* as it appears in Husserl is untenable for the historical genealogist: the historian cannot accept the *epoché's* universality.

⁵ To be fair, despite the frequent reference to "Eliade the phenomenologist of religious experience" by myself and many others, Eliade does not fully self-identify, in *The Quest*, with what he identifies as the phenomenological approach to world religions. He does, however, see it as an essential part of what the ideal approach would be.

⁶ "The fact is that the primitive High God became a *deus otiosus* ... Ultimately he is forgotten... This oblivion of the High God means also his death. Nietzsche's proclamation was new for the Western, Judeo-Christian world, but the death of God is an extremely old phenomenon" (Eliade 1969, 47-48).

⁷ In this sense Heidegger's picture of Nietzsche pushes Nietzsche in the direction of Eliade, as Heidegger insists that the seeds of the death of God had been planted in Western values all along (Heidegger 1996).

References

- Allen, Douglass. 1972. "Mircea Eliade's Phenomenological Analysis of Religious Experience." In *The Journal of Religion*. 52, no. 2: 170-189.
- Allen, Douglass. 1988. "Eliade and History." In *The Journal of Religion*. 68, no. 4 (October): 545-565.
- Altizer, Thomas J.J. 1963. *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectics of the Sacred*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Altizer, Thomas J.J. 1979. "Mircea Eliade and the Death of God." In *CrossCurrents*. 29, no. 3 (Fall): 257-268.
- Doniger, Wendy. 2004. "Foreword to the 2014 Edition." In *Mircea Eliade, Shamanism*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. 2nd edition. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. xi-xxii.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1963a. "History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912-1962." *Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, no. 2 (April): 98-109.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1963b. *Patterns in Comparative Religions*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. Cleveland and Chicago: Meridian.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1969. *The Quest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Eliade, Mircea. 1977. *No Souvenirs Journal, 1957-1969*. Translated by Fred H. Johnson, Jr. New York: Harper & Row.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt.
- Geuss, Raymond. 2002. "Genealogy as Critique." In *European Journal of Philosophy*. 10, no. 2: 209-215.
- Hamilton, Kenneth. 1965. "'Homo religiosus' and Historical Faith". *The Journal of Bible and Religion*. 33, no. 3 (July): 213-222.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Nietzsche*. In *Gesamtausgabe* 6.1 and 6.2. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Olson, Carl. 1989. "Theology of Nostalgia: Reflections on the Theological Aspects of Eliade's Work." *Numen* 36, no. 1: 98-112.
- Ricketts, Mac Linscott. 1967. "Mircea Eliade and the Death of God." *Religion in Life: a Christian Quarterly* 36: 43-48.