

Colonialist Discourse in the “History of Religions” Method: A Linguistic Critique of Mircea Eliade’s Dialectic

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A recent article by Alexander Soucy in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* takes up the question of how “performances of authority, primarily through language, relate to the larger context of religious studies” noting that “the tradition of the academic study of religion has historically been white, male, and biased toward textual traditions or the textual aspects within traditions” (2009, p.352). Soucy suggests that by continuing this trend “we uncritically accept” and lend “authority to elite male modes of religious practice while either ignoring or devaluing practices associated with women or other marginalized groups” (Soucy 2009, p.352). The centrality of Mircea Eliade’s method in religious studies curricula may be an instance of this trend. Eliadean methodology attempts to locate “original,” “archaic,” and “primary” religion in historical or existent “primitive man” and extrapolate a broader understanding of all human religious belief and practice from the resulting monolithic construction. Eliade names this monolith “archaic religion” and his dialectic places it in opposition to the “highly evolved” religions (1987:107).

Irvine and Gal remind us “there is no ‘view from nowhere,’ no gaze that is not positioned” (2000:36). This aim of this paper is to locate and describe Eliade’s gaze using methods from linguistic anthropology and assess the implication of that gaze for religious studies. After a survey of existing critical literature on Eliade's dialectic of binaries, a linguistic critique will be introduced

and applied in an examination of Eliade's discourse from *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Eliade 1987). Drawing on a broadening of Irvine and Gal's (2000) notion of linguistic ideology and postcolonial critiques of the sociolinguistic field by Errington (2001), this linguistic critique of Eliade will explore the analogous relationship between "ideologically constructed representation[s] of linguistic difference" (Irvine & Gal 2000:37), the multiple conversions of "colonial linguistics" (Errington 2001) and the ideologies constructed through Eliade's dialectic of binary oppositions. A further aim is to critique Eliade's claim that "archaic" practices derive meaning exclusively through reactualization of ur-forms (Errington 2001) discounting the possibility of change and dynamic meaning-making. In closing, the paper will consider the implications of an Eliadean Community of Practice within Religious Studies curricula.

Background: Review of Literature

Previous critiques of Eliade's dialectic of binary oppositions include feminist (Christ 1991, King 2002), postcolonial (Kehoe 1996, Bilimoria 2000, Joy 2001), theories of religion (Smart 1978, Alles 1988, Segal and Wiebe 1989), postmodern (Olson 1999, King 2002), and methodological (Leach 1966, Strenski 1973, Allen 1978, Werblowsky 1989).

In her feminist critique, Christ is concerned with the "androcentric biases" of "paradigms through which the origin and history of religion have been conceptualized" (1991:75). She points to Eliade's practice of capitalizing and giving grandiose names to male gods ("Lord of the Wild Beasts") but referring only to unspecified (and lower-case) "goddesses" criticizing his use of the diminutive terms "figurines" and "statuettes" for female forms (Christ 1991:84).

Christ draws attention to Eliade's valorization of the "Indo-European" conquest over "sedentary populations" which he compares to "carnivores hunting" (1991:88). Christ uncovers gendered features of Eliade's discourse, the particular (female) versus the universal (male), and Eliade's claim that the "hierarchical relation of the sexes . . . is one of the essential characteristics of humanity" (1991:93). Christ concludes that Eliade's history of religion is "distorted by dualism, Idealism, and false universalization of male experience" (1991:93). Similarly, King argues against methods which are "rooted in largely unexamined and androcentric assumptions that can cause serious deficiencies" (2002:373).

In her postcolonial critique, Kehoe accuses Eliade of an "arrogant cultural imperialism that denies humanity to the first nations of the Americas" and labels his "new humanism" as really a "very old primitivism" (1996:377). Kehoe takes issue with Eliade's labeling of "historically described and contemporary societies 'archaic'" and attributes his failing as a scholar to attempts to establish the existence of a quality in contemporary western society by contrasting it with a quality in "archaic" peoples, while misrepresenting . . . the "archaic" peoples (1996:383,384). Kehoe critiques Eliade's Enlightenment practice of "dissecting phenomena into so many quanta to be subsumed into European categories" (1996:387). Eliade's primitivism, in Kehoe's view, is more than the "familiar Western oppositional dualism," it is also a "yearning to shed bourgeois clothing and partake" of the "archaic ecstasy" himself (1996:388). In Kehoe's reading, Eliade may lead an "inauthentic [life] of spurious culture" (Sapir 1924)

but by constructing the idea of the “primitive shaman” he can reassure himself that he lives in a world where “archaic ecstasy” is still possible (1996:38).

Bilimoria addresses the “key European Enlightenment presuppositions,” and “various imperial and neo-colonial imperatives” in religious studies offering a critique of the oppositional binaries found in Eliade (true/false, transcendental/totemic, belief/myth, sacred/profane) (2000:171,198). Joy’s postcolonial critique of religious studies points to the:

“dualist division between the unified subject who is the scholarly enquirer, traveler, colonizer and the object/other (whether person or society) that is the recipient of imposed categories of difference -- whether idealized projections or simplified reductions to a predetermined system of classification” (2001:177).

Smart proposes a “grammar of religion” to replace Eliade’s sacred/profane polarity with a “wider theory of emotional charges and their ritual accompaniments” (1978:176). He takes issue when “a theory is . . . an expression of a worldview, which is then brought to bear upon worldviews” and concludes that Eliade’s hermeneutic is just that; “the vehicle of a certain worldview” (Smart 1978:177,183). Alles sees Eliade’s dialectic as proposing the existence of a “totality, an integral, coherent system that crosses the bounds of culture and history” and calls on the critique of Said (and others) that “totality” is “an instrument of Western colonial domination and cultural imperialism” (1988: 115,117). Segal and Wiebe critique Eliade’s claim to the *sui generis* character of religious phenomena because it does not allow any conditions under which it can be proven wrong (1989:600).

Olson disputes Eliade's assertion that history is a "body of facts" drawing from Foucault (1967:189):

"it is impossible to reach primal untainted material because even the most primary historical data is itself a product of interpretation" (Olson 1999:360)

Drawing again on Foucault, Olson argues the "multiple layers of events within discourse" suggest "it is only possible . . . for the historian to compose fiction" (Olson 1999:361). Olson contrasts Eliade's linear, hierarchical hermeneutics with Deleuze and Guattari's de-centered rhizomatics and concludes Eliade is a "product" of Enlightenment thought (Olson 1999:366,383). King is also critical of a "transcendental pretense of modernity" which she says "universalizes thinking itself and assumes that the workings of one's own mind [and culture] . . . reflect what is universally rational, human . . . spiritual" (2002:371).

Leach accuses Eliade of using "any snippets of exotic ethnography which conveniently come to hand" in order to construct his notion of "archaic religion" (1966:279) and of taking for "granted the Lévy-Bruhl fashions of his youth which assumed that ethnographic evidence reflects a pre-logical archaic mentality radically different from that of rational thought" (1966:279).

Strenski suggests Eliade's "methodological prescriptions are disastrous for the study of religion" and criticizes him for rejecting an empirical approach to the study of history in favor of searching for "higher," "trans-historical," "primary," "original" "prehistoric" meanings (1973:303-306). Strenski argues that Eliadean methodology makes religion "independent of culture" (1973:310). In order to

systematize phenomena, Allen argues that Eliade seeks an “invariant core,” an “essential meaning” of symbols (1978:273). Werblowsky critiques Eliade for grouping together disparate experiences (those of a “paleolithic hunter and the Buddhist monk” for example) and finding commonality in their “presumed non-western, non-modern existential experience (1989:297).

A Critique from Linguistics

Linguistics offers a new framework for critiquing Eliade’s discourse and uncovering the systems of thought (Sapir 1929, Whorf 1944) underlying his language. More specifically, a postcolonial critique from linguistics offers an approach for uncovering the ideologies underlying Eliade’s discourse. Errington describes the project of colonial linguistics as reducing “complex situations of language use and variation to unified written representations” (2001:20) - similarly, Eliade’s discourse of oppositional binaries reduces complex structures of belief and variation to unified representations of an essential “archaic religion.” By analogy with Errington’s model we discover an Eliadean *colonial hermeneutics* whereby Eliade’s dialectic has the characteristics and processes Errington identifies in colonialist linguistic projects.

Irvine and Gal’s notion of a “linguistic ideology” provides a framework for examining the way language is used to describe beliefs, practices and peoples and how “the describer’s ideology has consequences for scholarship” (Irvine and Gal 2000:36). By applying this linguistic idea to the Eliadean *colonial hermeneutics* we can examine how Eliade uses the processes of “iconization,” “fractal recursivity” and “erasure” (Irvine and Gal 2000) to construct monolithic identities out of a plurality of ideas, cultures, and beliefs. Errington describes a

similar feature of colonial linguistics as legitimizing "simple views of enormously complex situations" (2001:20). Thus a postcolonial linguistic methodological framework can provide new tools for exploring the way Eliade's dialectic draws borders between constructed monolithic identities and holds those identities in opposition thereby continuing the "exploitative" colonial project (Errington 2001). Eliade may not be producing these identities with the intent to further exploitation, nevertheless the ideology of the project is still present in his discourse.

Analysis of Eliade's Discourse

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade is concerned with finding "the sacred in its entirety" within a "history of religions" (1987:10-11). Eliade defines "sacred" as "the opposite of the profane" (1987:10) and in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Eliade makes this binary ideology explicit, saying "the religious experience presupposes a bipartition of the world into the sacred and the profane" (1984:133). This dualism saturates Eliade's worldview, as when he writes: "the polar antagonism becomes the 'cipher' through which man unveils both the structures of the universe and the significance of his own existence" (1984:174).

Eliade's ideology of binary opposition recurs in his construction of classificatory systems. Eliade's language in *The Sacred and the Profane* builds oppositions within an evolutionary progressivist hierarchy: "primitive religions" vs. the "most highly developed" (1987:11); "primitive peoples" vs. the "more civilized peoples" (1987:119-120); the "agricultural world" vs. the "truly 'primitive' world of nomadic herdsmen, of totemistic hunters, of peoples still at the stage of gathering and small-game hunting" (1987:164); the "highly evolved religions" vs. the "archaic" (1987:170); "our nonreligious contemporaries" vs. "the primitive and

oriental cultures" (1987:178). Eliade then uses these constructed boundaries to bind a linguistic image (in this case, the label he applies) with the social image, resulting in an iconization (Irvine & Gal 2000:37) of the "archaic" or "primitive."

Eliade also "projects these oppositions" (Irvine & Gal 2000:38) from one level of his dialectic (sacred/profane and primitive/civilized) to another (the opposition between specific peoples, territories and nations). In an example of this fractal recursivity, Eliade lists the "people who have played an important role in history" (1987:120). He contrasts the "civilized peoples" (the "Mongol," "Chinese," "Sumerian," "Babylonian," "Indo-European," "Indian," "Greeks and Romans," "Celtic," "Baltic," "proto-Slavic," "Polish" (1987:120)) with the "primitive peoples" ("Maori," "Akposo Negroes," "Sek'nam of Tierra del Fuego," "Andaman Islanders," "Yoruba of the Slave Coast," "Samoyed," "Koryak," and "Ainu" (1987:119-120)).

Although Eliade proposes that "religious experience" is not possible without the bipartite opposition of sacred and profane, and this "polarity . . . is often expressed as an opposition between real and unreal" Eliade's ideology limits those who can have access to this language: "naturally we must not expect to find the archaic languages in possession of this philosophical terminology, real-unreal, etc.; but we find the thing" (1987:13). Eliade ignores attributes that do not fit the monolithic image he has constructed of 'primitive' man. In one example, he ignores the archeological record of goddess worship in preagricultural societies claiming "it is obvious that a preagricultural society, devoted to hunting, could not feel the sacrality of Mother Earth" (1987:17). This is *obvious* to Eliade because he has simplified the idea of the preagricultural and "facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away" (Irvine & Gal 2000:37).

The Eliadean method presumes that once these “essential truths” are understood, one can know *a priori* what religious experience means to all people, in all times, in all places. This notion resembles¹ Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist method of building a periodic chart of cultural elements, a static repertory of meanings which can only be recombined in different ways (Lévi-Strauss 1961:160).

Conclusion: An Eliadean Community of Practice

The Eliadean Community of Practice (CofP) within religious studies reproduces these colonialist ideologies and “modes of subordination” (Errington 2001:19) through “mutual engagement,” “joint enterprise” and “shared repertoire” (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999:175-176). Introductory religion courses at the university level provide an example of one sphere where this CofP may be constructed. For example, “Approaches to Religion,” a required course for religion majors at the City University of New York’s largest religious studies program, is described as:

“A modern critical study of religion using a variety of methods . . . Approaches include those of philosophy, psychology, the arts, history, sociology, and anthropology.”

An example syllabus for the course begins with Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1987) and proceeds to address a selection of methods for the study of religion (from Durkheim, Freud, Jung, Dewey, Otto and Tillich) passing each author’s method through Eliade’s dialectic of the sacred and the profane and Eliade’s notion of an *a priori*, ultimate reality.

¹ Although Eliade is seeking essential characteristics, he is not as concerned with using a data bound methodology for his practice as those in the structuralist camp and is frequently criticized for not being empiricist enough (see esp. Dudley 1976 and Leach 1966).

When Eliade's History of Religions methodology is centered in religious studies coursework, students are encouraged to adopt Eliade's dialectic of binary oppositions and are rewarded with deeper levels of membership as they acquire "sociolinguistic competence" in Eliade's language (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999:174). Failure to acquire competence in the practices of the Eliadean CofP results in an inability to provide the expected answers in class discussion and writing assignments and exclusion from the broader religious studies CofP.

Eliadean methodology attempts to locate "original," "archaic," and "primary" religion and extrapolate a broader understanding of all religious belief and practice from the resulting monolithic construction. This leaves little room for subaltern, feminist and postmodern approaches to religion. A consequence of the Eliadean CofP, therefore, is the continued reproduction of a questionable religious studies methodology. Along with membership in the Eliadean CofP, comes a potential for reproduction of the ideologies underlying this Eliadean methodology. If religious studies is going to free itself from the longstanding bias in favor of white, elite, male, textual modes of understanding religious variety and practice, the methods of reproducing these modes must be critiqued, reworked and replaced.

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