

Are Historians of Religions Necessarily Believers?

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As defined by leading practitioners like Mircea Eliade, the history of religions, like the phenomenology of religion, purports only to describe, not to endorse, the believer's view of the origin, function, and meaning of religion. I argue that historians, whether or not phenomenologists, in fact commit themselves to endorsing the believer's view.

Take, as representative, the position of Eliade. According to him, religion originates and functions to link human beings to the "sacred" — an impersonal realm beyond individual gods. Human beings seek to encounter the sacred both temporally and spatially. They long to experience both the places where the sacred has manifested itself — for example, a particular stone or tree — and the pre-fallen, Edenic epoch when the gods, who are agents of the sacred, were near:

. . . since religious man cannot live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred, we must expect to find a large number of techniques for consecrating space. . . . Religious man's desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to his desire . . . to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.¹

It is easy to understand why the memory of that marvelous time haunted religious man, why he periodically sought to return to it. *In illo tempore* the gods had displayed their greatest powers. The cosmogony is the supreme divine manifestation, the paradigmatic act of strength, superabundance, and creativity. Religious man . . . seeks to reside at the very source of primordial reality, when the world was *in statu nascendi*.²

Human beings, says Eliade, yearn to experience the sacred not as the means to an end but as the end itself. They seek the sacred because they seek the sacred, not because they seek something else through it. Security and peace of mind are among the many happy consequences of contact with the sacred, but contact itself remains the end. Human beings, for Eliade, not merely want but need contact with the sacred: ". . . religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a real existence. This religious need expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for being".³ In saying continually that man is *homo religiosus*, Eliade is saying that contact with the sacred is man's essential need.

In saying that religion serves to manifest the sacred, Eliade invariably professes to be merely presenting the believer's own view of religion:

A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. *But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred*, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, *for those who have a religious experience* all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality.⁴

Eliade laments, for example, that "the main interest" of Westerners who study primitives

. . . has been the study of material cultures and the analysis of family structure, social organization, tribal law, and so on. These are problems, one may say, important and even urgent for western scholarship, but of secondary importance for the understanding of the *meaning of a particular culture*, as it was understood and assumed by *its own members*.⁵

As a historian of religions, Eliade claims to be seeking no more than the believer's point of view: "The *ultimate* aim of the historian of religions is to understand, and to make understandable to others, religious man's behavior and mental universe".⁶ In contrast to the theologian, from whom he regularly distinguishes himself, Eliade the historian never strays from empirical evidence, which presumably means the reports and observations of believers themselves:

The procedure of the historian of religions is just as different from that of the theologian. All thology implies a systematic reflection on the content of religious experience, aiming at a deeper and clearer understanding of the relationships between God-Creator and man-creature. But the historian of religions uses an empirical method of approach. He is concerned with religio-historical facts which he seeks to understand and to make intelligible to others.⁷

The issue at hand is not whether Eliade accurately presents the believer's point of view. Assume that he does. The issue is whether he is merely describing or outright endorsing that point of view.

I argue that Eliade outright endorses the believer's view.⁸ To begin with, Eliade argues that believers are often unconscious of the full meaning of religion for them. As he says of religious symbols in particular:

. . . we do not have the right to conclude that the message of the symbols is confined to the meanings of which a certain number of individuals are fully conscious, even

when we learn from a rigorous investigation of these individuals what they think of such and such a symbol belonging to their own tradition. Depth psychology has taught us that the symbol delivers its message and fulfils its function even when its meaning escapes awareness.⁹

In imputing to believers a meaning of which they are considerably unconscious, Eliade is surely venturing beyond mere description.

Even more striking, Eliade argues that nonbelievers, whom he equates with moderns, are unconsciously religious:

. . . nonreligious man in the pure state is a comparatively rare phenomenon, even in the most [consciously] desacralized of modern societies. The majority of the 'irreligious' still behave religiously, even though they are not aware of the fact. . . . [T]he modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals.¹⁰

Eliade goes so far as to say that "even the most avowedly nonreligious man still, in his deeper being, shares in a religiously oriented behavior".¹¹ In attributing to nonbelievers a religiosity of which they are not just partly but wholly unconscious and which not just exceeds but contradicts their self-professed atheism, Eliade is surely venturing far beyond mere description.

Most important, Eliade pits his would-be mere description of religion against the outright explanations of social scientists, whom he faults for explaining religion reductively rather than irreducibly religiously:

. . . a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it — the element of the sacred.¹²

If Eliade intends to be only describing religion, he cannot consistently oppose that who intend to be explaining it, reductively or not. His social scientific antagonists would surely grant that a description, which aims at only presenting the believer's point of view, must be nonreductive. They would simply deny that an explanation must be.¹³ In order to oppose them Eliade must himself be not merely describing religion but explaining it — nonreductively.

Ordinarily, the social sciences seek to explain only the origin, function, and meaning of religion, not its object. They seek to determine why believers, believe, not whether what believers believe is true. In opposing social scientific explanations, Eliade is thereby committed to an irreducibly religious view — the believer's presumed view — of only the origin, function, and meaning of religion.

I argue that Eliade is in fact thereby committed to the believer's view of the object, or referent, of religion as well. I argue that he is committed to the reality of the sacred itself, not just of the human need for it. In an earlier essay I argued that Eliade's endorsement of the believer's view of the *meaning*, or significance, of religion itself commits him to the reality of the sacred. For the heart of the meaning of religion for believers is the reality of the sacred. Now I want to argue, more concretely, that Eliade's endorsement of the believer's view of the *function* of religion commits him to the reality of the sacred. For if, according to Eliade, the function of religion for believers is to reach the sacred, its fulfilment requires the existence of the sacred. By contrast, the origin of religion — the existence of a need for the sacred — does not itself entail the existence of the sacred.

In saying that the function of religion for believers is to reach the sacred, Eliade may, to be sure, be saying only that religion is *intended* to reach the sacred, not that it necessarily does. Only if he is saying that religion for believers *actually* functions to reach the sacred is he committed to the reality of the sacred.

The proof that religion, for Eliade, functions to reach the sacred stems not just from his endorsement of the believer's presumed view that it does — why else would the believer continue to be religious? — but also from Eliade's own claim that it does. Eliade's relentless praise of religion suggests strongly that, for him, it actually works. Why else would he laud it so effusively? Since the need for the sacred that he says all humans feel is, for him, both innate and, except for moderns, conscious, he cannot be crediting religion with either implanting that need or, insofar as the need remains unconscious in moderns, even awakening it. He must, then, be crediting religion with fulfilling it.

Indeed, Eliade declares outright that religion accomplishes its function. As he says of myth in particular:

He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place. . . . As a summary formula we might say that by 'living' the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a 'sacred' Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.¹⁴

In fact, Eliade says that even modern, seemingly secular myths, which he considers less potent than earlier, explicitly religious ones, still work:

A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. . . . Even reading includes a mythological function . . . because, through reading, the modern man *succeeds in obtaining*

an 'escape from time' comparable to the 'emergence from time' effected by [earlier] myths. Whether modern man 'kills' time with a detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another 'history'.¹⁵

Surely Eliade is saying here that religion, as represented by myth, works in fact, not just in the believer's mind.

To be sure, Eliade is committed to the reality of the sacred only if he is committed to the reality of the need for it and of the fulfilment of that need. If Eliade is saying not that believers really need the sacred but only that they think they do, religion could succeed not by actually linking them to the sacred but only by convincing them that it had. Eliade could even be saying that the need religion fulfils is the need to *think* that one has reached the sacred.

Nowhere, however, does Eliade characterize the need religion fulfils as less than a need actually to reach the sacred. For example, he writes, as quoted, of "religious man's desire to live in the sacred",¹⁶ not just to think that he has.

What is true of Eliade is, I believe, true of other historians of religions as well. They profess to be only conveying the believer's point of view, but in fact they are therefore necessarily endorsing it. They are therefore necessarily believers themselves.

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest Books, 1968), p.28.
2. *Ibid.*, p.80.
3. *Ibid.*, p.64.
4. *Ibid.*, p.12. Italics added.
5. M. Eliade, "On Understanding Primitive Religions", in *Glaube/Geist/Geschichte: Festschrift für Ernst Benz*, Gerhard Mueller and Winfried Zeller (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 1967), pp.502-503. Italics in original.
6. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.162. Italics added.
7. M. Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism", in *The History of Religions*, Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (eds) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp.88. See also Mac Linscott Ricketts, "In Defence of Eliade", *Religion*, 3 (Spring 1973), pp.13-34.
8. See my "In Defense of Reductionism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 51 (June 1983), pp.98-102, from which I have taken the next few arguments. In another, yet unpublished paper I argue the opposite: that Eliade is in fact indifferent to the believer's point of view.

9. M. Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism", pp.106-107.
10. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 204-205.
11. Ibid., p.211.
12. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), p.xiii.
13. See Wayne Proudfoot, "Religion and Reduction", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 37 (Fall-Winter 1981-82), pp.13-25.
14. M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, tr. Willart R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), p.18.
15. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.205. Italics added.
16. Ibid., p.28.