D. H. Lawrence as a Theorist of Religion

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Eric Sharpe's history of Religious Studies, after a little more than two decades, justly remains the recognised classic survey of the discipline. It is a book few of us would wish to face the daunting task of writing and evinces an uncommon breadth and depth of knowledge paired with an enviable literary elegance. It has incontestably moulded the self-awareness of scholars in this field and even critics have found their very critical horizon has only become apparent from the vision afforded perching upon *Comparative Religion*'s historical shoulders.

Documenting the emergence of a discipline necessitates a clear articulation of its boundaries. Sharpe's boundaries take the form of scholarly streams feeding into a single intellectual river. The model is parsimonious and would, I suspect, satisfy many of the theorists discussed. We live, however, in an era when every boundary is contestable and the very ideas of theory and discipline are being questioned. Can knowledge be separated from power? What of imperialist and engendered agendas in the study of world religions? Is scientific investigation to be privileged and divorced from other modes of knowing? These are current concerns and they have informed some primary criticisms of Sharpe's book.

The questions, in themselves, are honest and vital. I am not convinced they form a legitimate platform from which to launch a critique of *Comparative Religion,* but they do suggest ways in which that book's necessarily restrained focus on a somewhat insular development of social-scientific ideas might be expanded to illuminate wider cultural and political worlds. In this paper I will offer a single instance of this expanded approach.

Chapter nine of *Comparative Religion* deals with 'Religion and the Unconscious'. It traces a trajectory from Sigmund Freud through Carl Jung to Mircea Eliade. It is an important chapter insofar as Eliade's presence has dominated post-war studies of religion, has heavily defined the discipline and is currently under attack.[1] I have considerable admiration for Eliade's work but there is much that has slowly come to trouble me as he surreptitiously shifts data and eventually skews every ethnographic world to fit his somewhat imperialistic paradigm. For him space is always singular with its cental *axis mundi.* The sacred, too, is ultimately one with his

[1] J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward a Theory in Ritual, Chicago,* 1987, ch. 1.

secret message that the History of Religions is an obituary for a now *otiose* god. With Jung he shares that Platonic dualism which privileges the sacred over the profane, the spirit over the body, the archetypal one over the manifest many.

The current critique of Eliade demands a fidelity to local traditions and instead of monolithic explanation of unified space linked to a singular spiritual domain seeks places, bodies and plural notions of truth. This new perspective, we are convinced, is the gift of post-modernity but if we expand our intellectual horizons we observe remarkable and unexpected precedents. What I would like to briefly do is add a small appendage to chapter nine of Sharpe's book indicating the interdependence of academic thought with other creative and socio-political domains and note the pioneering insights of one theorist of religion usually considered a poet and novelist. As his books *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1923) and *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1923) suggest, he belongs to the chapter on 'Religion and the Unconscious' even though he probably never read Freud and leads in a direction antithetical to Jung and Eliade. As he once said:

> Jung is very interesting, in his own sort of fat muddled mystical way. Although he may be an initiate and a thrice-sealed adept, he's soft somewhere, and I've no doubt you'd find it fairly easy to bring his heavy posterior with a bump down off his apple-cart.[1]

Eric Sharpe arrived in Australia in 1977. Fifty five years earlier a questing compatriot, justly considered 'the first [poet] powerfully gifted with the religious vision after the great Romantic poets',[2] also landed in this country as he 'looked over all the world for something that would strike *[him]* as religious'.[3] I am, of course, referring to D. H. Lawrence who once said 'I am a passionately religious man, and my novels must be written from the depth of my religious experience'.[4]

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1 T. Boulton, ed., *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 7 vols., Cambridge, 1981, vol. 5, p. 540, to Mabel Dodge Luhan 23/9/1926.

2 V. de Sola Pinto, 'The Burning Bush: D. H. Lawrence as Religious Poest', in *Mansions of the Spirit: Essays in Literature and Religion*, ed. G. A. Panichas, pp. 213-38, New York, 1967, p. 219.

3 'New Mexico' in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. E. D. McDonald, New York, 1936, p. 142.

4 *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 165, to Edward Garnett 22/4/1914

I wonder how Sharpe's initial experience compared to Lawrence's. On the 22nd June, 1922 he wrote to Catherine Carswell from his house overlooking the Pacific ocean:

> If you want to know what it is to feel the 'correct' social world fizzle to nothing, you should come to Australia. In the *established* sense, it is socially nil. Happy-go-lucky, don't-you-bother, we're in Australia.

As the passage continues the observation becomes troubled and urgent.

> There seems to be no inside life of any sort: just a long lapse and drift. A rather fascinating indifference, a *physical* indifference to what we call soul or spirit. It's really a weird show. The country has an extraordinary hoary, weird attraction. As you get used to it, it seems so *old,* as if it had missed all this Semite-Egyptian-Indo-European vast era of history, and was coal age, the great age of ferns and mosses. It hasn't got a consciousness- just none- too far back. A strange effect it has on one. Often I hate it like poison, then again it fascinates me, and the spell of its indifference gets me. I can't quite explain it: as if one resolved back almost to the plant kingdom, before souls, spirits and minds were grown at all: only a quite live, energetic body with a weird face.[1]

Lawrence's focus is tantalising as he moves beyond a concern for the spirit of place to the very body of place. A fortnight later, mesmerised by the 'land where one can go out of life',[2] he wrote:

> There is a great fascination in Australia.... It is rather like falling out of a picture and finding oneself on the floor, with all the gods and men left behind in the picture. If I stayed her six months I should have to stay forever.[3]

He did not stay, of course, but continued on to New Mexico where he joined 'queer' Apache, Navajo and Hopi dances[4] and found that for which he had searched the world. In Taos, Lawrence lived religiously amongst a people who he believed bore witness to 'a vast

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1 *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 271, to Catherine Carswell 22/6/1922
2 *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 273, to Katherine Throssell 3/7/1922.
3 *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 275, to S. S. Koteliansky 9/7/1922.
4 *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 312 ff., to Catherine Carswell 29/9/1922.

and pure religion.... It is the oldest religion, a cosmic religion.... It is the religion which precedes the god-concept, and is therefore greater and deeper than any god-religion'.[1] It is a religion where all is god without the fall into either pantheism or supernaturalism. 'To come into immediate *felt* contact, and so derive energy, power, and a sort of joy. This effort into sheer naked contact, *without an intermediary or mediator,* is the root meaning of religion'.[2]

With the Australian base-line and the American experience Lawrence had proof for his religious theory of the body and place. Religion sprang from a raw bodily consciousness of life and was at heart pre-spiritual, pre-intellectual, unconscious. Lawrence considered universal world religions to be a failure of nerve which accompanied the birth of the doctrine of Spirit and his diatribe against Jesus, Buddha and, in particular, Plato could be passionate. I cannot here expand upon his particular interpretations of faiths or his more detailed idiosyncratic discussion of particular traditions. Rather, I want to inquire as to the intellectual source of his unprecedented concern with the religious significance of place and the body. Which takes us back to chapter nine of Eric Sharpe's book.

At the time when Freud was grooming Jung as his successor he once wrote to his intellectual 'son and heir' that he had but two followers with truly original minds, indeed so original that he soon came to reject them both.[3] Jung himself was of course one while the other, who Jung called his *doppelgänger* and from whom he derived his theory of types, was soon to be diagnosed schizophrenic, was hospitalised, escaped the asylum and Jung's treatment, enlisted in the war and died, perhaps suicided, as a result of a long standing addiction to cocaine.[4] The details of his life remain mysterious but all accounts agree on his genius; in Ernest Jones' words he was 'the nearest approach to the romantic idea of a genius I have ever met.... Such penetrative powers of divining the inner thoughts of others I was never to see again'.[5]

This is the kind of description we might expect of Lawrence, but Jones was referring to Otto Gross. Some scholars have noted that

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1 *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places*, Harmondsworth, 1927, p. 147.

2 *Loc. cit.*

3 E. Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Harmondsworth, 1964, abridged ed., pp. 325-8. Freud's letter was written 28/2/1908.

4 J. Byrne, *A genius for Living: A Biography of Frieda Lawrence*, London, 1995, p. 68.

5 Cit. M. Green, *The von Richthofen Sisters: The Triumphant and Tragic Modes of Love*, London, 1974, p. 43.

Lawrence's ideas are in places closer to Wilhelm Reich than they are to Freud or Jung,[1] but Gross anticipated every key idea Reich was later to develop.[2] His theories, mostly forgotten, are worth momentarily resurrecting.

Gross was inspired by a group who met in Schwabing from 1897 to 1903 and called themselves *Die Kosmische Runde* or The Cosmic Circle. They, in turn, were heavily influenced by Johann Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (1861), which belongs to a generation of patriarchal scholarship[3] about primitive matriarchy and which has been recently refashioned by feminist theory. The Cosmic Circle anticipated this shift long ago, however. Bachofen privileged the Apollonian values of patriarchy but was imaginatively engrossed by Dionysian matriarchy. Nietzsche had borrowed the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy from Bachofen and *Die Kosmische Runde,* fired by Nietzsche yet returning to Bachofen's interest in mythology, now advocated social transformation through a resurgence of matriarchy and all that accompanied it.

In this movement, so influential on Gross, patriarchy was, as it still often is said to be, aligned with institutions, mechanism, the family, intellectualism, mind, and spirit and was opposed to matriarchy, nature, free sensuality, blood-knowledge and the body. *Die Kosmische Runde* rejected Christianity and Judaism, Plato and Aristotle in preference for Gnosticism[4] and pre-Indo-European and pre-Judaeo-Christian religions. Gross thus wrote eulogising the fertility traditions of Babylon and the 'love-religion' of Astarte before the tragic intervention and fall of Judaic monotheism.[5] In his reading of the Genesis myth, the fall was from matriarchy into the patriarchal enslavement of women and a world where sexuality was contained by a reproductive economy.[6] Pairing Freud's teachings with Marx, his vision for the future utopia focused on liberated sexuality as a means to personal, social and religious

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1 See D. Boadella, *The Spiral Flame: A Study of the Meaning of D. H. Lawrence*, Notthingham, 1956.

2 Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-3.

3 E. Free, 'The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology', in *Darwin to Einstein: Historical Studies in Science and Belief*, ed. C. Chant and J. Fauvel, pp. 195-213, Essex, 1980.

4 What appealed was the Gnostic inversion of Judaeo-Christian myth and their focus on the feminine aspects of divinity, but Gnosticism is, of course, more divided in the spirit/body dualism than other forms of Christianity.

5 Green, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

6 J. E. Michaels, *Anarchy and Eros: Otto Gross' Impact on German Expressionist Writers*, New York, 1983, p. 49.

regeneration; a sexuality transcending the couple to create a seemingly religious otherness out of their merging.

Into what seemed destined to become an intellectual cul de sac entered two sisters, both married, both about to become Gross' lovers, and both destined to be entangled in the lives of great interpreters of religion. To Gross, the elder sister was beautiful but lacked the soul, the aristocracy, to fully embrace a religious eroticism and he was therefore not totally surprised when she went on to become the great love and mistress of Max Weber, a man of whom he wholeheartedly disapproved. The younger, however, was the very embodiment of everything he taught. Writing to her he said:

> In the past all the paralysing doubts had attacked my vision of a future, of all mankind's future. But now these doubts have no longer any point of attack. Now I know.... I know it through you, the only living human being today that has remained free of all the false shame and sham of Christianity and false democracy.... How did you accomplish this, you golden child, with your laughter and your love, banishing from your soul all the curse and dirt of two thousand sombre years?[1]

The great influence upon Lawrence's ideas was, of corse, not Freud nor Jung, not even *Die Kosmische Runde* and Otto Gross but Gross' lover who we now know as Frieda Lawrence. Jennifer Michaels states

> The impact of her affair with Otto Gross stayed with Frieda all her life. She passed Gross' ideas on to D. H. Lawrence, and in fact all that Lawrence first knew about Freud came from Otto Gross by way of Frieda. The stress that Lawrence places on the healing nature of the sexual experience, evident in many of his novels, but perhaps most clearly in *The Man Who Died,* and his emphasis on the relationship between men and women can be traced to Gross' influence.[2]

It is not an exaggeration to say, as it has been said, that she was often his co-author[3] while Bertrand Russell would add, just a little too quickly, that 'he had the eloquence, but she had the ideas'.[4]

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1 In R. Jackson, *Frieda Lawrence,* London, 1994, p. 214.
2 Michaels, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-8.
3 Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 362-5.
4 B. Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, London, 1967, p. 246.

She and Lawrence had a shared faith in the consciousness of connection where 'religion', in her words, was 'the prime nourisher... that feeds us and connects us to the whole',[1] and it was she who allowed Lawrence to develop his theology a raw connection akin to the sexual experience.

Upon this lived awareness of the sacred body Lawrence's reading began to confirm the *historical* presence of a consciousness quite independent of the intellect and spirit. Frazer's and Tylor's books[2] nourished in Lawrence an anthropology their authors had clearly not intended.[3] 'Animism' is no longer Tylor's doctrine of the erroneous postulation of spirits but a genuine and cardinal principle of life. 'Sympathetic magic' does not establish false sympathies, as Frazer contended, but rather rests upon an awareness of the essential connectedness of life. The paired inversion of these two theorists, the new animism and sympathetic contact, is evident in the following observation.

> In the oldest religion, everything was alive, not supernaturally alive, but naturally alive. There were only deeper and deeper streams of life, vibrations of life more and more vast.... The whole life-effort of man was to get his life into direct contact with the elemental life of the cosmos.[4]

The embodied sympathetic consciousness he found in anthropological texts perfectly confirmed his doctrine of sexual understanding. In an young, impassioned and important letter to Bertrand Russell, Lawrence wrote.

> I have been reading Frazer's *Golden Bough* and *Totemism and Exogamy*. Now I am convinced of what I believed when I was about twenty - that there is another seat of consciousness than the brain and the nerve system: there is a blood consciousness which exists in us independently of the ordinary mental consciousness, which depends on the eye as its source or connector. There is the blood-consciousness, with the sexual

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1 F. Lawrence, *The Memoirs and Correspondence*, ed. E. W. Tedlock, London, 1961, p. 16.

2 'Tylor's *Primitive culture*... is a *most* interesting book, better than *The Golden Bough*, I think'. *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 628, to Catherine Carswell 9/7/1916.

3 'Scholastic works don't release the imagination: at the best, they satisfy the intellect, and leave the body an unleavened lump'. 'Introduction' to *The Dragon of the Apocalypse*, by Frederick Carter in McDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

4 McDonald, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-7.

> connection, holding the same relation as the eye, in seeing, holds to the mental consciousness. One lives, knows, and has one's being in the blood, without any reference to nerves or brain.[1]

Not surprisingly, Russell dismissed the idea of blood consciousness as utter nonsense,[2] but the very affrontery of the notion that bodies think captivated Lawrence, refusing, as it did, to pay homage to that great Western dualism of mind and body.

What was most evidently unparalleled in his time was Lawrence's sensitivity to somatic aspects of religion. In particular, and for all the apparent similarities, this places him at the antipode of Jung's neo-Gnostic creed. For Jung the world ultimately functions as a cipher, a symbolic repository for a reality whose true locus lies within. Religiosity is not relational but inward, the domain of forms and archetypes, and the collective unconscious serves to reduce existence to a vast and singular meta-mind. Even Jung's famed statement concerning God's existence -'I don't believe, I know'- meant, as *Answer to Job* makes quite clear, that he knew the presence of God's existence within a mind quite independent of the physical world.[3]

Lawrence's radically contrasting anti-Gnostic stance is clearly evident in some of his *Last Poems,* such as the appropriately titled 'Demiurge'.

> They say that reality exists only in the spirit
> that corporal existence is a kind of death
> that pure being is bodiless
> that the idea of the form precedes the form substantial
>
> But what nonsense it is!
> as if any mind could have imagined a lobster
> dozing in the under-deeps, then reaching out a savage and iron claw!
>
> Even the mind of God can only imagine
> those things that have become themselves:
> bodies and presences, here and now, creatures with a foothold in

1 *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 470, to Bertrand Russell 8/12/1915.
2 B. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
3 C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, London, 1954, esp. pp. xi-xviii.

creation
even if it is only a lobster on tip-toe.[1]

While Jung and Lawrence are both very sensitive and sympathetic to religion, Lawrence's understanding is in many ways closer to Freud's; not the Freud who wrote the absurdly un-Freudian *Totem and Taboo,*[2] but the man of unparalleled insight into the bodily and sexual core of our spiritual being, the Freud whose legacy (along with Lawrence's) has been extolled by writers like Norman O. Brown.[3] Lawrence's genius, however, was his ability to develop a 'psychoanalytic' view of religion which renounced neither the sacred nor the body and in so doing he surpassed both his famed predecessors.[4]

Because Lawrence's sacrality is somatic it follows it is equally pluralistic. For while it is an easy thing to postulate a Spirit behind all spirits matter tends to remain determinedly specific; bodies and places and things. Of Hopi religion, with which Lawrence clearly identifies, he writes very perceptively and in refreshing opposition to the High God theorists who so distort Native American traditions:

> The animistic religion, as we call it, is not the religion of the Spirit. A religion of spirits, yes. But not of Spirit. There is no one Spirit. There is no one God. There is no Creator. There is strictly no God at all: because all is alive.... There is no oneness, no sympathetic identifying oneself with the rest. The law of isolation is heavy on every creature.[5]

There can be no loss of individuality or fusion for it is only between discrete beings that the vital energy from relatedness and connection can occur.

Lawrence predicted may of the concerns of contemporary research and despite his dismissive views on academic study, would

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1 *Selected Poems*, ed. K Sagar, Harmondsworth, 1972.

2 *Totem and Taboo* is 'un-Freudian' in that it postulates a phylogenetic explanation when his theories are staunchly ontogenetic. Unlike Jung, his main paradigm has no place for collective memory and the thesis that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' instantly collapses through the lack of a theoretical foundation.

3 N. O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, Middletown, Conn., 1959; and *Love's Body*, New York, 1966.

4 See Schneider, *D. H. Lawrence: The Artist as Psychologist,* Kansas, 1984, ch. 10.

5 *Mornings in Mexico, op. cit.*, p. 74.

nonetheless believe he had something to say to scholars. Richard Aldington once observed that Lawrence was a philosopher lacking the language of philosophy[1] and he might be equally said to have been a student of religion without feeling the need for the language of that field of investigation.

This is not to say he was not 'empirical'. He was quick to round on 'the creeping note of sentimentality' amongst 'anthropologists and myth-transcribers and all'[2] and he was equally unreserved in highlighting the lack of objectivity of historians dealing with ancient religions, noting: 'All that can be attributed to the 'barbarian' beyond Greek pale: that is, the Minoans, Etruscans, Egyptians, Chaldeans, Persians, and Hindus, is, in the famous phrase of a famous german professor: *Urdummheit'*.[3] Again, he did not hesitate to reject the bias of articles in the then recently published *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.*[4] But his empiricism is not object-ive but what he calls an object-centred religious focus.

In the field of Religious Studies we have had a dominant tradition that was antithetical to Lawrence's. I stressed the differences between Jung and Lawrence earlier and hinted at the lineage from Jung through Eliade to a wide-spread distortion in a discipline. There has been an insistent privileging of texts and institutions and the spirit at the expense of places, lived reality and the body. Following this, there has lingered that dreadful distortion of traditions that has 'rolled the universe into a ball', has pulled each body and place towards a single spiritual principle, has insisted on the universality of the High God and the *axis mundi,* and which has blithely ignored each voice insisting 'no, that is not it at all, that is not it at all'.[5]

How modern, then, how refreshingly pre-post-modern, Lawrence's concerns seem as his voice rises above others of his time:

> Myself, I am sick of the farce of cosmic unity, or world unison.... The spirit of place ultimately always triumphs.... To tell the truth, I am sick to death of the ... monotheistic string. It has become monomaniac. I prefer the pagan many gods, and the animistic vision. Here on this ranch at the foot of the

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1 'Inroduction' to *Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth, 1950, p. 9.

2 *Mornings in Mexico, op. cit.*, p. 54.

3 *Apocalypse*, Harmondsworth, 1974 [1931], p. 42.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

5 For an excellent critique of this see J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago, 1987.

Rockies, looking west over the desert, one just *knows* that all our... monotheistic insistence is a dead letter - the soul won't answer any more.... I have known many things, that may never be unified: Ceylon, the Buddha temples, Australian bush, Mexico and Teotihuacan, Sicily, London, New York, Paris, Munich - don't talk to me of unison.... As for 'willing' the world into shape - better chaos a thousand times than a 'perfect' world.... To me, chaos doesn't matter so much as the abstract, which is mechanical, order. To me, it is life to feel the white ideas and the 'oneness' crumbling into a thousand pieces, and all sorts of wonder coming through.... I know there has to be a return to the older vision of life. But not for the sake of unison. And not done from the *will.* It needs some welling up of religious sources that have been shut down in us: a great *yielding,* rather than an act of will: a yielding to the darker, older unknown, and a reconciliation. Nothing bossy. Yet the natural mystery of power.[1]

[1] *Letters*, vol. 5, pp. 67-8, to Rolf Gardiner 4/7/1924.