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Biographical Metamorphoses in the History of Religion

Moshe Idel and Three Aspects of Mircea Eliade

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Moshe Idel and Three Aspects of Mircea Eliade

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ABSTRACT This paper includes an extended review of Moshe Idel's *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014) through a triple analysis of Eliade's early literary, epistolary, and academic texts. The paper examines Idel's analysis of some important themes in Eliade's research, such as his shift from understanding religion as magic to its interpretation as myth; the conception of the camouflage of sacred; the notions of androgyny and restoration; and also young Eliade's theories of death. The paper also discusses Idel's evaluation of Eliade's programmatic misunderstanding of Judaism and Kabbalah, and also of Eliade's moral and professional abdication regarding the political and religious aspect of the Iron Guard, a Romanian nationalist extremist and anti-Semitic group he was affiliated with in 1930s.

KEY WORDS Mircea Eliade; Moshe Idel; history of religion; magic; myth; sacred and profane; the Iron Guard

Gershom Scholem sent Mircea Eliade a rather personal letter on June 6, 1972. The two famous historians of religion met with a certain regularity, between 1950 and 1967, at various summer *Eranos* meetings in Ascona, Switzerland, for interdisciplinary conferences initially organized under the guidance of Carl G. Jung (Wasserstrom 1999).

Both Scholem and Eliade were bound by mutual respect and professional interests, connected by a European scholarly genealogy, and to a certain

degree, they had read each other's works. A few years earlier, Scholem, a specialist in Kabbalah, contributed with a piece "On Sin and Punishment: Some Remarks concerning Biblical and Rabbinical Ethics," to one of the earliest volumes dedicated to Eliade and edited by two of his colleagues at the University of Chicago Divinity School. (Kitagawa and Long 1969) On June 6, 1972, Gershom Scholem wrote to Eliade a letter from Jerusalem, asking him details about his involvement with the Iron Guard and his alleged anti-Semitism, detailed by Theodor Lowenstein, a Jewish historian from Romania, in the sole issue of the journal *Toladot*. Lowenstein took a critical position mostly of Eliade's past but also, to a lesser degree, of Scholem's participation to the 1969 Eliade *Festschrift*. Scholem's levelheadedness and his calm epistolary tone sought to isolate Eliade's from Theodor Lowenstein's accusations and, at the same time, to preserve his personal friendship with the Romanian-American historian of religion:

In those long years I have known you I had no reason whatsoever to believe you to have been an anti-Semite, and even more so, an anti-Semite leader. I consider you a sincere and upright man whom I regard with great respect. [...] When we first met I regarded you as a close colleague and later even as a friend to whom I could speak unreservedly. (Gershom Scholem 1971-1982, 30¹)

Eliade's rather emotional and not very precise answer, on June 25, 1972, did not fully satisfy Scholem who wrote again to him, a few months later,

1 See Eliade's answer on the pages 279-81.

stating, in the same warm and friendly tone, that this debate could be easily clarified if Eliade agreed to a visit to Jerusalem. (*Ibid.*, 63)

Over the past few decades, scholars of religion and historians dedicated a great deal of books to the life and work of Mircea Eliade. To name just a few of the most important contributions: Ioan Petru Culianu offered the first analytic review of Eliade's phenomenological studies of religion. (Culianu 1978; for the extended Romanian edition, see *Idem.*, 2004.) Dan Dana explored Eliade's interest in the Geto-Dacian religious traditions and its relevance for his theory of religion. (Dana 2012) Mac Linscott Ricketts published an impressively thorough two-volume reconstruction of Eliade's Romanian years; this opened the way to what could be considered as Eliade's definitive biography, Florin Țurcanu's *Mircea Eliade: Le prisonnier de l'histoire*. (Linscott Ricketts 1988; Țurcanu 2003; for the enlarged Romanian edition see *Idem.* 2005) Although Țurcanu's remained the most detailed and best researched writing on this topic, scholars also addressed in detail the matter of Eliade's connections to the Iron Guard, and raised the question of how this ideological allegiance influenced his studies of religion.² What makes Moshe Idel's recent *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth* (New York, 2014) a valuable addition to the above prestigious constellation of scholarship? (Idel 2014, 284 ff.; Romanian translation: *Idem.* 2014.)

Moshe Idel, a Romanian-born Israeli professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Gershom Scholem's student, and world authority in the study of Kabbalah, sketches the development of Eliade's early conceptions of religion, with special attention to his treatment of Judaism, and, relatedly, to Eliade's failure to condemn the Romanian extremist movement the Iron Guard. The major methodological contribution of Idel's book resides in

2 See, besides the above mentioned two-volume book by Linscott Ricketts 1993, Manea 1991; Borgeaud 1993; Oisteanu 2014; and, most recently, the valuable essays included in Wedemeyer and Doniger 2010.

its conjoined analysis of Eliade's earlier literary, epistolary, and academic texts. Idel posits three levels of significance for the cultural entity "Eliade"; these further enable him to conjure three complementary angles of analysis for Eliade's work. First, there is Eliade's personal biography, as it appears from his journals, especially the diaries written in Portugal (1941-1945), the only ones left unedited by their own author, from his travel accounts in India (1928-1931), and from Eliade's later memoirs (Idel calls this body of work *personalia*). Second, there is Eliade's extended literary oeuvre, including novels and journalistic pieces, written exclusively in Romanian, with a special focus on the pre-1945 production (*literaria*). Finally, Idel continuously keeps under scrutiny Eliade's academic works, published in Romanian and French (his *academica*).

What is the gain of a method that refuses to segregate Eliade's academic work from his personal biography and from the socio-political contexts in which he produced it? Idel follows the parallel development of Eliade's topics in the triple register (*personalia, literaria, academia*) over a few decades. He is thus able to discern thematic coherence and circulation of ideas between the three perspectives. His analysis highlights unexpected connections in the work of Eliade, and proposes new interpretations on its development over years. Idel grants equal attention to the historical, political, and social contexts of the 1920s and 1930s, the formative years of the young Eliade, and also to the writings of Eliade's mentor, Nae Ionescu, professor at Bucharest University in that period. With this approach, Idel engages in a process of thick literary, social, and political re-contextualizations of that era, making a special point that the young Eliade remains virtually incomprehensible without these highly useful historical footnotes to his academic writings.

There are two main series of themes in Idel's book. The first one reconstructs the ways in which Eliade created his most enduring concepts

in the study of religion. Idel posits that these concepts present deep roots in Eliade's life: his academic development from understanding religion as magic to its interpretation as myth; the conception of the camouflage of sacred; the notions of androgyny and restoration; and also young Eliade's theories of death. Idel presents the second series of themes as directly connected to the above topics. The second collection of themes deals with Eliade's programmatic misunderstanding of Judaism and Kabbalah, but also with his moral and professional abdication regarding the political and religious aspect of the Iron Guard, a Romanian nationalist extremist and anti-Semitic group he was affiliated with as a young scholar of religion.

Moshe Idel justifies the subtitle of his book by presenting Eliade's major concepts in the study of religion as a passage from his early conception of a fluid, magical universe, which can be altered through rituals performed by specialists of the sacred, such as yogis and shamans, to Eliade's later position, consisting of a mythical reconstruction of reality. Once he establishes these two stages in Eliade's *oeuvre*, an earlier, "stronger emphasis on ritual and techniques," followed by a later accent on "symbol and myth," Idel finds that the Eliade's "ritual period" coincides with Eliade's Romanian years (including the first exile years 1940-1945), being characterized by his interest in ritual power and in non-European and non-Romanian religious symbols. The "symbol period" covers Eliade's French and American academic life, which is "concerned much more with deciphering and understanding" myths and symbols, and it drew its sources from Romanian folklore and world mythology (18-19).

Idel tackles first the notion of the "camouflage of the sacred," central in Eliade's thinking, according to which the sacred remains hidden behind the curtain of the profane, from where it manifests itself through meaningful signs and revelations. He characterizes this conception as Eliade's personal insertion of subjective analysis into the field of history of religion, articulated

by the supposition of a mystery or a secret at the core of his exploration. For reasons of space, I will leave aside the elaborated critiques scholars leveled, in the past decades, against Eliade's non-politic generalizing dichotomy, and mention only the most recent of them by William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon. (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013) Relevant here are the ways in which, in his treatment of the camouflage of the sacred, Idel uncovers the tight connections between Eliade's personal understanding of life and his notion of religion. Eliade admitted the existence of secrets, or puzzles, in his own life, and advanced special interpretations to decipher them, derived from mythologies and stories. Idel labels Eliade's theory of the sacred camouflaged by the profane as one of the most impressive scholarly attempts to re-enchant reality in a non-Copernican worldview. Yet Idel himself remains critical towards this magical perspective "in a world that opted dramatically for disenchantment," and does not accept a place for the mysterious and the value of secrets in a scholarly process which develops from "a discourse that can be shared with others in as transparent a manner as possible" and which should be "verifiable by other scholars who do not share the life experience of a certain scholar." (50-52)

Idel's treatment of the theme of lost androgyny and its restoration, another central notion in Eliade's phenomenological analysis of religion, also highlights Eliade's methodological weaknesses. Eliade developed the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* as an exploration of the theme of the reintegration into totality, an effort to retrieve, through the repetition of ritual acts, a certain lost perfection, characteristic to a primordial religion of a prehistoric archaic moment. In doing so, Eliade makes use of a technique which Idel dubs "the oblique analysis," a scholarly technique which disregards the particular in the favor of the universal. Idel's objection is that this is a universal defined ultimately by Eliade's own personal beliefs and religious experiences, and that this method leads inevitably to an

“overreading of the [religious] documents on Eliade’s part and a creation, through overinterpretation, of a personal, perennial philosophy.” (85)

The methodological weaknesses of Eliade’s work had been closely scrutinized by North-American scholars well before Idel’s book. Yet, Idel’s novelty consists in connecting them to Eliade’s early obsessions with death as sacrifice and martyrdom, expressed within the context of the cult of the death practiced by the extremist Romanian movement, the Iron Guard. This approach represents perhaps the most original chapter in Idel’s book. The early versions of Eliade’s “theories of death and thanatology,” produced even before Eliade’s adherence to Iron Guard ultranationalist ideology, 1937, included the glorification of death, which is seen as opening the way to new experiences and fresh perceptions. They also present the interpretation of death in Romanian and Balkan folklore as an instrument of cognition, with special attention to the topics of “sacrificial death as creative” and of “death as marriage.” Following his encompassing method, Idel identifies next the relevance of death, as transition to immortality and an experience of togetherness, in Eliade’s Romanian novels (*The Return from Paradise*, *The Hooligans*, and *The Forbidden Forrest*), and also, in his academic work on yoga (the theme of death as leading to renewal in yoga) and alchemy (death as a principle of transformation in ancient and medieval alchemy).³ The above review of death themes in young Eliade’s work enables Idel to distinguish between the general, humanistic sense of death as a “potential experience of plenitude,” position adopted in Eliade’s studies on yoga and alchemy, and the more political version of death, namely sacrificial death for a collective religious case, which refers to the Iron Guard thanatology (123).

3 See e.g. Eliade 2006; *Idem*. 2006a (German translation as *idem*. 1993); *Idem*. 1978; *Idem*. 1991; *Idem*. 1936.

Central in Moshe Idel's book, the chapter on "Thanatologies" leads the author to explore another favorite scholarly metaphor of Eliade, "the terror of history." Idel places its origins in Eliade's discussion of linear time as characteristic of antithetic Judaism, and of Kabbalah as cosmic rural religion, and connects it to Eliade's notion of "desacralization" (135). Idel criticizes Eliade's notion that time in Judaism is linear, and while he allows it for biblical times, he provides a great deal of counter-examples, or examples of circular time in Medieval Judaism and Kabbalah. Eliade's idealization and interpretation of Judaism as the "significant other," a forceful fitting of various religious facts into preexisting mental formulas, Idel argues, made Eliade miss the contemporary relevance of Hasidism, active in interwar Romania, as a Jewish "mystical revival movement that re-enchanted the natural world by spreading some forms of pantheistic ways of thought [...] in a manner reminiscent of Eliade's archaic mentality" (170). Idel's conclusion is nothing short of radical: Eliade built his phenomenological theories in the study of religion out of his misunderstanding of Judaism, in its particular interwar Romanian embodiment. Beyond the irony of this oversight, one can still hear, in Idel's pages, echoes of sadness about Eliade's misplaced scholarly judgments on cosmic religion: Eliade

looked for inspiration in geographically remote India, and in the Carpathian mountains in the archaic times, when he could have learned something about a cosmic Judaism by being open to other religious communities in his own lifetime (171).

This leads the reader to the most personal section of Idel's book, on Eliade's moral abdication and intellectual failure. Idel's chapter 7 ("Eliade, the Iron Guard, and some Vampires") sketches some of the answers Scholem was probably expecting from Eliade, few decades earlier. Idel discusses Eliade's

lack of self-reflexivity as a young professional historian of religion: Eliade did not hesitate to describe the anti-Semitic and xenophobic movement of the Iron Guard as spiritual, religious, mystical, which adopted a sacrificial understanding of death, especially as applied to the very members of the Iron Guard. Idel finds that Eliade could have not possibly misunderstood the “murderous intentions of the Iron Guard,” since none of his close colleagues and friends did it, but that he willingly chose to ignore it. For Idel, Eliade failed as a professional historian of religion in its evaluations of the Iron Guard. In judging Eliade’s own abdication from common, critical, and scholarly sense, Idel’s tone becomes harsh and unforgiving. This is his own *J’accuse* manifesto, a letter of personal disappointment from one student of history of religion to another:

In my opinion, as a scholar of religion, Eliade failed by not discerning the dangerous combination of national fanaticism and extreme anti-Semitic hatred on the one hand, and the disciplined paramilitary structures that characterized the Iron Guard from its very inception, on the other hand. (212).

Idel does not adopt Eliade’s assumptions in the study of religion. Yet, he shows himself to be highly appreciative of young Eliade’s methodological inventiveness, as well as of his early ingenuous interest in the magical construction of reality and in the strong support specialists of the sacred offered for understanding and overcoming the limits of human condition. Equally, however, Idel does not hesitate to distance himself, in a severe and highly ethical tone, from the self-mystification, and from the mythological subjectivity the later Eliade introduces in his writings. Eliade’s biographer will find in Idel’s book the portrait of a morally confused young scholar of religion, lacking the ability to be self-critical and, as a young person, unable

to take a moral stance against Romanian contemporary anti-Semitism. Moreover, Idel dismantles Eliade's conceptual apparatus and shows it to consist of recurring notions, personal experiences, and idiosyncratic, or at best Romanian, cultural perceptions, into which the older historian of religion attempted to fit more than he could reasonably justify. Severe in tone and radical in its final judgment, Idel's re-evaluation comes as one of the sharpest recent critiques of Eliade's work:

Eliade's oeuvre consists, in its vast majority, in his interpretation of the interpretations of other scholars, a reading of mostly secondary literature. This reading is guided by essentialist presuppositions, which are highly selective. His belief in some form of primordial universalism that embraces all the archaic religions was crucial. This is, at the same time, the true alternative to the fallen later religions of modern man as a modern form of *prisca theologia* or a *philosophia perennis*. (164)

Idel's book stands as a testimony of the radical and profound changes that occurred in the landscape of the study of religion in the last three decades. It also speaks of its growing methodological sophistication and attention to detailed historical reconstruction. At the same time, Idel's book remains a moral and democratic manifesto: It provides a clear idea of how much Eliade misunderstood Judaism, and how his generalizations evolved, in the troubled Romanian cultural landscapes of 1930s–1940s, into a moral dilemma that Eliade never addressed directly.

There are few issues one could take up with this book. First, the methodological distinction between Eliade's early "magic" frame of studying religion and the later, "mythic" perspective, vanishes in the second part of the book, leaving the reader waiting for more clarifications about how this dichotomy applies to Eliade's *personalia*. Second, readers who are not

closely familiar with the Romanian historical and cultural interwar scene might find themselves in need of more information, especially in the last, dense chapters of Idel's book. Finally, the English version of Idel's text would have deserved a better book editor: the 2014 Peter Lang edition abounds in typos and awkward stylistic formulations. (The 2014 Romanian edition by Polirom stands in much better shape.) These quibbles aside, Moshe Idel's comprehensive methodology provides excellent new perspectives for understanding Mircea Eliade's life and work.

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