A RESPONSE TO CARL OLSON'S "MIRCEA ELIADE, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF REPRESENTATIONAL THINKING"

BRYAN S. RENNIE

"Archaic, Modern, Postmodern," the penultimate chapter of my monograph, Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion (SUNY 1996), is in many ways the conclusion of the book's argument. If refuted, the entire book is seriously weakened. However, Carl Olson's argument (MTSR 11/4 [1999]: 357-385) has grave shortcomings. He responds vigorously to this one chapter, but neglects the foregoing chapters, which are its premises. For example, he calls the recognition that history is not an empirical category but requires socially constructed models to give it meaning one of the "minor agreements" between Eliade and Foucault (360). For Eliade, historical existence is meaningless until some artifact of human culture be employed to render it meaningful. Olson, however, claims that "the history passed down to us is not a body of facts like Eliade thinks" (360). Yet the whole of my chapter 9 argues that in Eliade's work we find a complex understanding of history as something other than a "body of facts." Failing to consider the complexity of history for Eliade, Olson has already refused that which is postmodern about him. Accepting this complexity, the similarities between Eliade's and Foucault's attitudes to history (even as described by Olson) is immediately apparent.

Olson similarly neglects my analysis of Eliade's equation of the sacred and the real (chapter 2 in Reconstructing Eliade). Although he recognizes that "Eliade is convinced that when a religious object comes into being it also becomes real" (363), Olson ignores the dialectic of the sacred and the profane in which religious objects do not "come into being" ex nihilo, but by the transformation of the apprehension of the perceiver. Again, to argue that Eliade continues "to hold out the possibility of finding absolutes because all knowledge is not as relative as Foucault claims" (363), is to ignore completely my analysis of Eliade and relativism (chapter 11). Olson's case consistently fails to consider arguments elsewhere in my book. He never quotes from anywhere other than chapter 17, although I make comments about Eliade's affinities with postmodernism elsewhere.

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Ignoring my analysis of Eliade, it is easy to say that he is "in sharp contrast to Foucault" (364). Considering my analysis, Eliade can be seen to agree with Foucault that there is a plurality of real and meaningful worlds. Ignoring my analysis, it is easy to write that "[w]hen Eliade writes about Being he presupposes its presence, . . . whereas Derrida . . . calls into question the presence of Being" (367). Considering my analysis, it can be seen that the apprehension of Being (i.e., the sacred/real) is relative to the cultural conditioning of the perceiver (Reconstructing Eliade, 19, 210). It requires argumentation, then, to substantiate Olson’s claim that “the radical relativity of Being for Derrida is anathema to Eliade” (368). Olson realizes that Being is related to reality in Eliade’s works but he assumes that this implies that “Being is not a human construct for Eliade” (368). This ignores the Kantian identification of reality as a category of the understanding, which I take to be fundamental to Eliade’s work. “Reality” is a human construct insofar as the attribution of reality can be made or withheld relative to cultural conditioning (Reconstructing Eliade, 22). This does not mean, however, that I make Eliade into a skeptic, as Olson insists (371), but that I make him into a species of relativist as I explicitly state in the book: “Eliade manifests the primary characteristics of the relativist in seeing alternative worldviews as each true” (127).

Olson sees Derrida as convinced of “the total relativity of meaning” but insists that Eliade cannot share this conviction “because he cannot imagine how it is possible for human beings to function without an assurance that there is something irreducibly real and meaningful” (364 [quoting Ordeal by Labyrinth, 153]). Again, Olson ignores my interpretation of Eliade as arguing that human beings fabricate out of their own cultural conditioning the factors that determine what we perceive to be real. In fact, Eliade can be compared to Derrida in many particulars. Where Derrida identifies a longing for a center, Eliade has his symbolism of the center, the desire to live in close proximity to the sacred. Where this leads Derrida to his critique of binary opposition, Eliade analyses the coincidentia oppositorum. Derrida considers the longing for the center to spawn a “centering” or privileging of one of the binary pair and to give rise to the play of

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1 The following is adapted from Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade, Bryan Rennie (ed.), Albany: NY, SUNY Press, forthcoming. Even here, however, the treatment of this topic is all too brief. Much remains to be done and I have but made some suggestive comments.