INTRODUCTION:
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE WORK OF BRUCE LINCOLN

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The following papers were originally presented at the annual meetings of the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion and the Southeastern region of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta on Mar. 5-7, 2004. Two sessions were convened to engage in critical reflection on the career and work of Bruce Lincoln. Four respected scholars from different fields in the study of religion came to ask their own specific set of questions of Professor Lincoln and to engage him in conversation about the current state of the study of religion and its future. Professor Lincoln offered a series of oral remarks in response, and later composed a written response that follows these papers in this volume. Lincoln’s “Theses on Method,” first published in this journal in 1996 and summarizing his main methodological principles, are also here reprinted.

Lincoln’s work was chosen for special consideration at these meetings because his career has both mirrored and led important developments in the study of religion over the last three decades. Fairly dramatic shifts in how scholars as well as the public regard and think critically about religion have taken place since the 1970s. Some of these shifts have been the result of changes in the concerns and interests in the academic community; some have emerged as the inevitable consequences of still more dramatic geopolitical developments. The declining hegemony of phenomenology and theology in the study of religion and the rise of critical methodologies in the wake of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism have contributed to a discipline that is far more attuned to the production of knowledge and the authorization of power. Advancing tides of religious nationalism, terrorism, and fundamentalism have made religion a potent force in national politics across the globe and moved religion to the very center of public debate and policy decisions.

Bruce Lincoln has addressed these changes with a sense of their historical import more publicly, more prolifically, and perhaps more passionately than many of his colleagues. In addition, his contributions to our collective body of knowledge about religious regimes from a wide
range of human societies in these turbulent years have displayed an impulse for self-criticism rare in the academy. Lincoln has shown a willingness to take on the most pressing and fundamental questions about the role of religion in both contemporary and ancient societies, but, more significantly, to subject his earlier work to strenuous reevaluation and to correct his own missteps in blunt terms. His response to these papers attests as much. For these reasons and others, the contributors to this issue see his work as an especially fruitful resource for engaging the study of religion at this stage of history.

Bruce Lincoln, currently Caroline E. Haskell Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, received his B.A. from Haverford College and was granted his Ph.D. by the University of Chicago in 1976. His dissertation, written under the direction of Mircea Eliade and later appearing as Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions (1981), bears the imprint of his mentor. It epitomizes the style and method of scholarship pioneered by Eliade and long regnant in the study of religion. Concerned with the origins and diffusion of Indo-European religious ideas, Lincoln’s early work accepts without comment or apparent discomfort the comparative efforts of Eliadean analysis to reconstruct a lost civilization. This method, which Lincoln came to repudiate, he has characterized as an effort “to reverse historic processes and to recapture a primordial (and ahistoric) moment of unity, harmony, and univocal perfection” (1991: 123). In his response to these papers, he claims not to have been seduced at that time by another defining feature of Eliadean analysis that he now also strenuously rejects, that is, the examination of the irruption of the sacred into human societies. Similar assumptions about originary narratives and similar comparative approaches are operative in two other books Lincoln published in the 1980s: the first edition of Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women’s Initiation (1981) and Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction (1986). Lincoln has amply documented his own rising unease with the ideologies of power and domination embedded in both the religious practices he had studied and in the methods of scholarship that he and his mentors, including Georges Dumézil, had employed to uncover them. In a series of articles reprinted in Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice (1991), Lincoln began to question the nostalgia and naiveté of Eliadean comparative analysis and the political sympathies of similar phenomenological treatments of religion. With the publication of Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies in Myth, Ritual, and Classification (1989), Lincoln was openly espousing a new set of