

MIRCEA ELIADE THROUGH THE EYES OF SLOVAK THEOLOGY PAVOL ŽIDEK

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The answer to the question "how does contemporary Slovak theology reflect the work of Mircea Eliade?", is quite simple: "it doesn't". To be more poignant we might say that it behaves as if it knows nothing about Eliade or even refuse to know anything. An informed observer must wonder why this is so considering that Eliade is one of the most captivating and well known scholars in studies of religions. If we look back to the beginning of religious studies in the 18th century, it was originally to a great extent intended as one of theology's auxiliary disciplines. This did not continue and religious studies represents an independent discipline. Yet considering the relatively similar focus and subject (I stress only relatively similar) covering the meaning of words like "religion", "belief", "cult", etc, we should expect that theology would meticulously follow what is happening in the relatively and thematically most closely related discipline. This should also be true in reverse for religious studies.

Contemporary theology and religious studies in general did realize their mutual dependency considering today's global multicultural and multi-religious condition it is essential to transform the theoretical foundation and functions of both disciplines and in mutual completion create "study centres". Theology from a position of the theology of religion and religious studies from the position of multicultural hermeneutics establish a mutually acceptable platform where an avid exchange of experience takes place and together they aim to create a theory of interdisciplinary dialogue. Slovak theology not only failed to take an active part in this effort but, officially, it rejects any attempt to take part in a dialogue with religious studies, views with suspicion any individual initiative to have a dialogue and almost instantaneously calls any such attempt blasphemous and regards it as the spread of liberalism, which is still viewed with great distrust.

One must add that it would not be entirely just to view the position of Slovak theology towards religious studies as a result of an inexcusable gap in scholarship, even cultural backwardness or sheer blindness towards the problems of the period in which we live. This attitude has a rather explainable history and the blame is not only on the side of theology. Even during a time of great euphoria, we should not lose our memory and we should remind ourselves under what conditions Slovak theology struggled during the past several decades and we have to take into consideration this tormented period. Otherwise, we are not able to comprehend the potential impact Eliade's work might have in this sphere.

Let us thus remind ourselves of some important historical factors. Both for Slovak theology and religious studies the term "world" or "Western" by and large meant German theology or religious studies. A specific trait of religious studies in the German speaking countries was that basically from its beginning it evolved in two directions: apologetic (based on work by Schleiermacher and Hegel and positive towards religion) and critical (evolved from Feuerbach and Marx and views religion clearly negatively). Within the realm of German religious studies the two currents ran parallel to each other, yet eventually the majority of religious scholars has lent towards the former apologetic school. In the countries of Eastern Europe, in the former Soviet bloc, religious studies exclusively appropriated the latter, the negative tradition which was critical towards religion. The Marxist philosophy turned into an ideology and created an "upside-down" religion and implicit anti-religion. Religionist Jacques Waardenburg appropriately conveys this: "Ideologies like religion have a capacity to fascinate their disciples, especially if their doctrines are absolutist, their messages veiled in mystery or when they divert towards suggestive, emotionally loaded terms like "earth", "blood", "the people", "fatherland", "proletariat", "nation" or "race" which all have the function of meta-reality." Everything that was formerly in any way associated with religious studies (views about the emergence and evolution of religion, expression of true belief, meaning of a cult, signs and symbols) ceased to be part of that discipline and was appropriated solely as an ideological tool of this new socio-political religion, or rather, anti-religion and which as a priority aimed to eradicate all other religions.

If we remind ourselves of the effective information barrier erected by the system, we have to concede that under such circumstances, theology had no other option but similarly to lock itself up and to a great extent ideologize itself. Any slight openness of its religious system meant fatal danger from infiltration by the ideologically antagonistic "last word of Truth". Under these conditions, for several decades, "belief" did not stand against "general lack of belief", or "sacral" against "profane", that is the basis on which most of the world opened its eyes to the reality of the variety of religions, or Christian confessions (if we are talking about the still surviving Eurocentric and Christian-centric perceptions of Western Europe and North America). These existing opposites forced theologians, concerned with solving the global problems of humanity, to actively seek partners for dialogue and cooperation. In Slovakia, the religiously grounded Christian ideology was facing an ideology that was an implicitly religious form of "scientific atheism". During this ruthless struggle for survival, the research in religious studies was wholly censored and the filtered results were used exclusively as an ideological weapon against

theology. Not surprisingly, Slovak theology narrowed its focus to fight for its own survival and rejected religious studies as a whole, for it could not help theology in its struggle.

The socio-political condition after 1989 were equally inhospitable for the advancement of Slovak theology. It has been offered the possibility of preserving its ideological status with only minute corrections if we compare it with its status during the Communist era. It has absorbed into its system the national principle (this was a return considering the status of Slovak theology in the interwar period and during the war), and transformed itself from an ideologizing theology struggling for survival into a ruling ideologizing theology. The temptation is too great and the tradition too deep. A theology of this type does not need a partner for dialogue or cooperation. Therefore it does not turn even to its relatively closest partner, religious studies, which could help it to gain a better understanding of its own place and mission in the world, as happened for example in the Czech Republic and Poland.

Therefore, we have before our eyes, the still continuing image and state of a Slovak theology, which cannot free itself from the feeling that its identity is threatened by everything which comes from outside, a theology which survived by closing itself into the fundamentals of its own tradition. Therefore, we can among other things also understand its aversion towards religious studies, which was in its eyes for decades the ideological lackey of its chief enemy. But, at the same time, we can understand why precisely Mircea Eliade could be the sort of expert on religion, who could gain its confidence, and on at least two levels.

The first level is the fact that the work of Mircea Eliade and especially his *History of Religious Ideas*, leave no-one in any doubt that his work contains an immense quantity of precise encyclopedic work. We do not find in it, inaccuracies from the point of view of secular or ecclesiastical history. This obvious trustworthiness arouses respect for the author. We never get a feeling of the forced and deliberate arrangement of events and facts, or of facts created by the "rampant subjective fantasy" of the author, which was a typical feature of the hated ideologizing pseudo-historians of religion. In addition "on the basis of clarification of the logic of thought, which coordinates the life of the individual religious person, and the specific religious culture with what they perceive as its transcendental reach, it brings a synthetic interpretation of the meaning of the permanent correlation of man and religion."³ Such an approach is attractive to theology, since the theological view of history is not the mechanical positivist arrangement of historical fact, but a search for a meaningful "history of salvation".

The second level, which could be attractive to a traditionalist and fundamentalist inclined theology, is the method by which Mircea Eliade finds in the apparent chaos of heterogeneous religious phenomena, a constant from which he develops a definition of religion in general. He speaks of the generally known category of hierophany. He himself expresses this category with the words: "It is possible to say that the history of religion, from the most primitive to the most highly developed is a sort of accumulation of hierophanies, revelations of sacred realities. From the most elementary hierophany, such as the revelation of the sacred in a stone or tree, to the highest hierophany, which, for Christians, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, there is no interruption of continuity. It is impossible to over-emphasize the paradox, represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By being revealed as sacred, any object can become something different, but without ceasing to be itself. The sacred stone remains a stone. However, for those to whom its sanctity is revealed, its ordinary reality is transformed into a supernatural reality."⁴ "Eliade turns to religious history with the idea that hierophanies give history a specifically religious quality, by which shifts of the boundary between the sacred and the profane cannot be judged from extra-religious causes."⁵ Such formulations evoke the theological division of the realities of the world into changeable objects and constant meanings. For the theologian, this is a Biblical message about the world. All things and events of this world are only created, and only by intentional communication between God and man, does it acquire meaning, in which the historically unchanging and divine can be revealed to man in some historically conditioned object or event. The expert on religion sensitive to the scientific rational understanding of a fact, may not be pleased with such an implication, but for a distrustful theologian, they could be attractive and act as a challenge to dialogue.

In conclusion, it is necessary to note, that I am aware of an inappropriate reductionism, but in an article limited in space and time, it is impossible to approach things differently. However I hope that at least I indicated this essential feature of the given situation to the reader. On one side is Mircea Eliade, one of the most important and discussed experts on religion, and on the other side theology, which so far has not publicly devoted even the slightest attention to him and his works. Perhaps this is the result of concern with other, more urgent local problems. But can urgent local problems in any area of human activity, including theology, be solved satisfactorily without allowing ourselves to be inspired by people who show the ability to see and think globally?

(Translated by Martin Styan)

Literature: ¹ Horyna B.: *Úvod do religionistiky (Introduction to Religious Studies)*, Oikoymenh, Prague 1994, s. 121. ² Waardenburg J.: *Bohové zblízka (The Gods from close by)*, Georgetown, Brno 1997, s. 128. ³ Horyna B.: *Úvod do religionistiky (Introduction to Religious Studies)*, Oikoymenh, Prague 1994, s. 109. ⁴ Eliade M.: *Posvátné a profánní (The sacred and the profane)*, Česká křesťanská akademie, Praha 1994, s. 10. ⁵ Horyna B.: *Úvod do religionistiky (Introduction to Religious Studies)*, Oikoymenh, Prague 1994, s. 111