

# **ELEMENTS TOWARDS A CREATIVE HERMENEUTICS: METHODOLOGICAL PRECAUTIONS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

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## **Abstract**

The study aims at a revision and a re-appraisal of Eliade's allusive theory regarding the prerequisites and the necessity of reconfiguring the study of religion as a new integrative research area relevant for the understanding of human mind. Special emphasis will be laid on highlighting, in a critical manner, the methodological framework envisaged by Eliade for the development of this new 'Phenomenology of the Mind', with a special focus on his approach indicating towards a 'creative hermeneutics'.

Terms and concepts such as 'perspectivism', 'creativity', 'scientific discourse' are revisited in the light of the new methodological framework under discussion.

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**Keywords:** Study of religion, methodology, creative hermeneutics, perspectivism, phenomenology of mind

## **Introduction**

### **Preamble**

Before setting underway, we need to lay down a number of guidelines aimed at indicating, in a critical way, the *limits* of our approach, as a preliminary and necessary step towards *delimiting* the horizon of understanding and theorization opened by this study.

Just as an object is distinguished from other objects through that which it is, but also through that which it is not, so too the outlines of any academic approach need to be carefully examined, inasmuch as it would be a mistake, on the one hand, to suggest that an approach, however academic it might be, has universal validity and absolute objectivity thanks to its rigor and, on the other hand, by virtue of the same attitude, to suggest that it is the only valid

and justified approach, superior to all other existing or possible approaches. Nothing of the sort.

For this reason, precisely in order to lend scholarly objectivity to a work, we need to recognize and specify from the outset that it cannot be absolute or unique in the sense of imposing a standard of objectivity and rigor.

What I therefore understand by a “critical” attitude is the reflexive gesture of questioning with regard to the possibilities of understanding provided by any approach that bears a personalized imprint and is ineluctably the unique inheritance of the context from which it springs. The nuance is obviously Kantian.

In order to illustrate suggestively and vividly the impossibility of breaking away from one’s own context in the approach to the religious phenomenon and therefore the necessity of the critical gesture, I shall begin by quoting the words of Xenophanes (fr. 16, Clement, *Strom.* VII, 22, 1, and fr. 15 Clement, *Strom.* V, 109, 3):

“The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. [...] But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.” (Kirk and Raven eds., pp. 168-169)

The two methodological precautions to which I would like to draw attention in regard to the study of religion are as follows:

1. Any approach that makes reference to religious traditions from spaces outside Europe and to languages other than those with which we are familiar via the Indo-European inheritance will be “contaminated” by a *Europeanized* use of terms, through the language chosen and the horizon it opens, and the context and premises of the research will inevitably be formulated proceeding from *Europeanized* reference points, perspectives and preconceptions. Insofar as it is possible, the researcher is indebted to try not to impose involuntary preconceptions and prejudices with regard to the other spaces and traditions under discussion, while knowing that any attempt at translation and familiarization is in a way doomed to failure.
2. The second precaution draws attention to the utopian desideratum of the possibility of the uniform understanding and employment, whether conceptually or not, of the terms and language belonging to one’s own tradition of thought and interpretation. In other

words, however many conceptual delimitations and conceptualizing pre-definitions might be operative, a term will always have a single meaning depending on its context. This will not necessarily lead to the impossibility of communicating, as might be believed, but rather to the affirmation and recognition of the *conventionality of language and specialized languages*, which cannot fix language in place, but can at most function as *vehicles* for its appropriate and nuanced transmission.

Both precautions spring from the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual context, on the one hand, and the impossibility of perfect translation precisely by virtue of this uniqueness, which will also be found at the level of language, on the other hand.

### **Main Text**

#### **Discourse on the method: creative hermeneutics and perspectivism**

The three formulas chosen to make up this sub-heading (“discourse and method”, “creative hermeneutics” and “perspectivism”) are each key-concepts that are theorized at a profound or secondary level in the thought of three authors.

I have juxtaposed them here inasmuch as that together they can provide a nuanced and composite suggestion of the premises of the methodological framework that will be set forth and developed below.

The novelty of an approach derives in the first instance from its uniqueness as a message and form, a uniqueness that is not delimited only as non-replication or non-repetition, but also, above all, as a creative gesture.

The juxtaposition of the three formulas is not sequential, but synchronous, as together they can throw light on relevant aspects of a new methodology put forward as an approach to the religious phenomenon.

#### **“Discourse on the method”**

As is well known, this formula is also the title of a landmark work by René Descartes: *Discours de la méthode* (1637).

The Cartesian exercise is one of “purgation” at the level of thought, in order that we might set aside everything that might contaminate us through tradition and reach that which is proper to us and constitutes us in an absolute way, without the distorting, manipulative and relative intervention of the environment in which we come into the world.

In a somewhat similar manner, the primary and fundamental intention of a researcher of religions, in regard to the method of research and its framing in discourse, ought to be to purify the approach through methodical and systematic elimination of any preconception or

prejudice that might from the outset block the act of placing multiple traditions face to face, the understanding of their juxtaposition and the appropriate conveyance of the message.

The difficulty resides in allowing the message and therefore the approach itself to come into being without creating a ragdoll from other authors, other systems of thought or traditions, cutting out and stitching back together the same “patches”. It is the creative dimension that gives life and an individual face to a message and an approach or work. The body is born of the body, but not the soul. The act of giving birth to the soul is concomitant with the act of embracing without contamination the visible and the familiar, represented by the academic, intellectual and cultural heritage. The acceptance and deepening of the traditions of thought on which we are nurtured and through which we ultimately describe and identify ourselves constitute a bridge that connects and allows communication, without which any expression at the level of discourse is inadequate and therefore ineffectual.

An approach is alive only if the message is allowed to configure itself in its own uniqueness, unchanged by redundant adaptations or compositions. It is the organic which, in a fertile way, in-corporates tradition, at the same time giving birth to the living soul.

A highly suggestive image to illustrate the birth of an authentic approach can be found in the register of children’s stories: let us think for a moment about the transformation of Pinocchio, in Collodi’s tale (1989), from a wooden puppet, worked by strings, into a “real boy” after he manages to make for himself the decision to act according to *his own* “conscience” (initially depicted as external to himself, in the form of Jiminy Cricket).

### **“Creative hermeneutics”**

This expression is used by Eliade and can be found alluded to or briefly theorized in a number of his works (1959, pp. 86-92; 1969, pp. 57-71; 1978, p. 313).

I shall provide a schema of the main points of the new methodology, whose theory was only outlined by Eliade, although he applied it in his work. As I have said, he seldom theorized the methodology, but when he did so it was in a visionary way, which revealed the new direction that had opened for an authentic, creative approach to the religious phenomenon.

For this reason, in the following I shall bring together the relevant passages from Eliade’s work, and these will provide us with a picture of what he glimpsed to be the new, wide-ranging direction in the study of religion, as well as the field’s potential for failure and the risks of such a failure in terms of the unique contribution that the study of religion can bring to the humanities more generally.

In Eliade's view, "creative hermeneutics" or "total hermeneutics" represents the next desirable step in the development of the history of religions as a discipline and the study of religion as an area of research.

As my first and, I think, given its literary register, strongest illustration, I have chosen Eliade's diary entry for 24 June, 1968:

"24 June. [...] I emphasized this: hierophanies and religious symbols constitute a prereflective language. As it is a case of a special language, *sui generis*, it necessitates a proper hermeneutics. In my work, I have tried to elaborate this hermeneutics; but I have illustrated it in a practical way on the basis of documents. It now remains for me or for another to systematize this hermeneutics." (Eliade, 1978, p. 313).

The birth of this new approach is conditional upon the openness of the researcher in the field of religious studies to comparative and integrating perspectives, transcending the level of philological or historical specialization, as well as that of the accumulation of data that do not undergo an interpretation aimed at discovering new human and cultural values:

"The history of religions is not merely a historical discipline, as, for example, are archeology or numismatics. It is equally a *total hermeneutics*, being called to decipher and explicate every kind of encounter of man with the sacred, from prehistory to our day." (Eliade, 1969, p. 58)

"For the history of religions, as for every other humanist discipline, the road toward synthesis passes through hermeneutics" (Eliade, 1969, p. 60)

"[...] we do not doubt that the 'creative hermeneutics' will finally be recognized as the royal road of the history of religions." (Eliade, 1969, p. 62)

Such a hermeneutics will lead to the birth of a new consciousness through the discovery of meanings and significations, which will re-structure human knowledge and bring considerable modifications in regard to the way in which we perceive and understand mankind:

"In the end, the creative hermeneutics changes man; it is more than instruction, it is also a spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself." (Eliade, 1969, p. 62)

Eliade will liken the contribution of such an approach within the humanities to scientific discoveries:

"The fact that a hermeneutics leads to the creation of new cultural values does not imply that it is not 'objective.' From a certain point of view, one can compare the

hermeneutics to a scientific or technological ‘discovery.’ Before the discovery, the reality that one came to discover was there, only one did not see it, or did not understand it, or did not know how to use it.” (Eliade, 1969, p. 61)

Here, discovery refers not to a fragmentary register relating to the makeup of the world and/or man, but to the mechanisms of the mind, knowledge and understanding, as an expression of human consciousness. For this reason, Eliade will link the discovery of this hermeneutic dimension to the concomitant development of a “phenomenology of mind”:

“From a certain point of view, one could say that a new *Phenomenology of the Mind* awaits elaboration by taking account of that the history of religions is capable of revealing to us.” (Eliade, 1969, p. 64)

Important elements in this pre-figuration of the future phenomenology are to be found in the works and vision of Coulianu (1991; 1987). Dadosky (2004, pp. 1-2) explicitly emphasizes the relevance of Eliade’s allusive approach highlighting the prerequisites, as well as the necessity of developing a new integrative research area meant to reveal, in a creative manner, the structures of human mind.

The historian of religions is called upon to go beyond mere historical-philological investigation and niche over-specialization, in order to achieve an overall view and, as a result, in order to reveal, in unique, creative ways, deeper, more relevant meanings for us as humans.

Therefore, a real contribution cannot be reduced merely to a particular field of specialization, but presupposes the development of the researcher’s abilities as a hermeneutist and the openness to multiple perspectives, beyond the own area of specialization, which offer the tools and methods necessary to create a suitable approach to research:

“One is a historian of religions not by virtue of mastering a certain number of philologies, but because one is able to integrate religious data into a general perspective. The historian of religions does not act as a philologist, but as a hermeneutist.” (Eliade, 1959, p. 91)

In Eliade’s view, the multiplicity of perspectives inclusively presupposes the integration of cultural dimensions that do not necessarily belong to the academic register. Privileged attention is granted to the artistic phenomenon, for example. The interpreter will find new modes of expression for innovative messages, revealed through the re-interpretation of the same content, contexts and situations provided by mono-specialized research into the religious phenomenon.

The atomization of religious studies into disciplines and specialities that become incommunicable will eventually lead to such sub-fields shifting into the custody of the disciplines from which they claim to have descended in terms of their method and therefore to the disappearance of the study of religion as a discrete field with its own voice and contribution to make among the humanist disciplines:

“Thus, in one or two generations, we shall have some Latinist ‘specialists’ in the history of Roman religion, Indianist ‘specialists’ in one of the Indian religions, and so on. In other words, the history of religions will be endlessly fragmented and the fragments reabsorbed in the different ‘philologies,’ which today still serve it as documentary sources nourishing its own hermeneutics.” (Eliade, 1969, p. 71)

As an interpreter, the researcher of religions will creatively make the transition from the descriptive dimension in the study of the religious phenomenon to the normative dimension, achieving the goal of putting forward and providing to today’s man a guide to the self:

“In brief, the history of religions affirms itself as both a ‘pedagogy,’ in the strong sense of that term, for it is susceptible of changing man, and a source of creation of ‘cultural values,’ whatever may be the expression of these values, historiographic, philosophic or artistic. [...] the history of religions envisages, in the end, cultural *creation* and the *modification* of man.” (Eliade, 1969, pp. 66-67)

A significant contribution in the field of humanist studies will not manifest itself only at the level of mono-specialities, remaining relevant only within the academic sphere, but will lead, through new methods and meanings, to the emergence of a “new humanism” (Eliade, 1969, pp. 1-11).

Having made an excursus into the thought of Eliade, I shall now return to the manner in which this theorization of the new methodology provides arguments and reference points within which the researcher’s approach may be situated, taking Eliade’s idea further and lending nuance to those aspects that relate to the concretization of the new approach in the current academic and cultural context.

To be more precise, I have chosen the expression “creative hermeneutics” to describe the framework and intentions of such an approach, but also to specify and point to, through my own work, elements that might constitute points of departure for this innovative vision with regard to the aim of research into the religious phenomenon, the methods of research presupposed by the new approach and modes of expression appropriate to the efficient and unshackled transmission of the message.

In the following, I shall summarize those aspects that define the new methodology for research in the field of humanist studies in general and study of the religious phenomenon in particular:

### ***Creativity***

Every *work* is born through a *creative* act. It occurs as an inner voice that brings together and transfigures successive accumulations, in a synthesis that re-establishes the clarity and purity of seeing, beyond the polychromatic memory and sequential recording of facts. This emergence of the message relates to the register of spontaneity, of the unpredictable, and is authentic through the bringing together of all our inner dimensions, as an integrality and act that express us completely.

The creative act presupposes going beyond one's own partial registers, beyond fragmented seeing, through a concentration that is revelatory for us, inasmuch as we *are*. This liberation of the inner sight from the rule of fragmentary concerns will re-situate the parts within a new horizon of understanding. Not by chance, I have preferred to employ here terms that have a particular semantic charge thanks to the resonance and depths of meaning that Blaga (1969) conferred upon them. Speaking about creation as man's privileged mode of being "within the horizon of mystery and for revelation" (p. 394), Blaga introduces the *abyssal categories of spontaneity as stylistic matrix* at the level of the unconscious, which constitutes the precondition for the possibility of any genuine creative act (a concept that has not hitherto been appreciated in the light of its true value):

"The complexly structured human spirit possesses two kinds of *complete categorical garnitures*: the categories of cognitive receptivity and the categories of inventive spontaneity. [...] The categories of receptivity belong in the highest degree to the consciousness, and it through them that knowledge is established. [...] Contrariwise, the categories of spontaneity belong to the abyssal unconscious: thence they determine the style of spiritual inventions." (p. 335; translated by Alistair Blyth)

The creative act is the only one capable of providing an innovative synthesis, without reproducing (or plagiarizing) already existing content.

On the one hand, it involves a valorization of all the previous accumulations, and on the other hand, the bringing together of all the registers of Being in a concentration that gives birth to a new view, as a new horizon of understanding and interpretation. Thus, the creative act is implicitly a hermeneutic act, through the re-evaluation, re-valorization and re-nascence of one's own vision. It will always involve an effort of concentration that transcends mere

academic limitations, crystallizing all that is relevant, in every dimension, in terms of personal history and not just narrow academic specialization.

In other words, works that do not have a creative onus and privilege cumulative specialized (philological, historical, sociological etc.) analyses obviously have their own role to play and their own importance. However, they are not works, but working instruments whose purpose is to systemize, classify and inventory the materials that are to be assimilated, understood and interpreted. Without this final step in the creative synthesis, the accumulations end up being a burden, incapable of being efficient and relevant at the level of human transformation.

The creative act will sublimate the multiplicity of accumulations in the transfiguring unity of “seeing”. The expression of the new understanding will therefore be achieved through new modes of expression, which can lend a body suited to the message. For this reason, expression does not have to be academic in the manner of an epigone, but rather authentic, putting forward new, more complex and personalized forms, which will ultimately bring innovation to the academic language. What is important is to convey the message, rather than to perpetuate the empty forms of a language that has become a jargon.

### ***Communication***

The proposed methodology does not discriminate against (over-)specialization, on the contrary: only a very good knowledge of one’s own field can guarantee maturity and rigour of sight. The monologue, however, without serious openness towards the other registers that define us as humans and which, in one way or another, are to be found expressed in academic forms (as distinct fields and disciplines) or cultural forms (as different modes of expression), risks being repetitive at best, without managing to awaken the dimensions of being or involve them in their integrality, in order to concentrate them within a creative act.

This need to communicate is increasingly making itself felt in the academic field, evidence for which are the newly created fields of interface (such as consciousness studies, contemplative studies, cognitive studies, cultural studies etc.). Furthermore, it is increasingly obvious that there is a need for communication between humanist disciplines and science (with reference to the natural sciences in particular). The new scientific theories and visions elaborated via *experiment* cannot remain indifferent to the humanist researcher who wishes to understand man and his world. Equally, scientists have reached the conclusion that the subjective factor, in the form of *experience*, cannot be overlooked in the “objective” research of phenomena. Subjective experience is becoming a reference point for “objective” research. Thus, the encounter between *experiment* and subjective *experience* enables an encounter and

collaboration between two areas of research, that of the humanist disciplines and that of the exact sciences, in order to understand visible phenomena, measurable through their connection with that which is unpredictable, but defines us as humans. A genuine contribution are, in this respect, the guiding dialogues edited by Zajonc (2004), which underline the limits of scientific discourse and the essential correlation between objectivity and subjectivity in scientific approaches.

### ***Development of the human being***

The supposed integrality of the creative act demands, at the level of research, that we go beyond our own specialization and achieve a synthesis that is not merely generalizing or summarizing, but brings with it a new mode of understanding and interpreting the world and what we are.

A shift of emphasis is required in regard to priorities: the humanist disciplines are not called upon to develop different specializations, but to provide all the resources and tools to achieve creative syntheses whose goal is development of the human being.

The relevance of a contribution is verified at the level of our understanding and transformation. Through over-specialization and the atomization of research, the results obtained will modify man and the environment only externally, without achieving the crystallisation of a formative vision. Of course, partial and external transformations are necessary, but not to the detriment of the development of the human being as a whole, *as a human being*. The creative act is what is capable of revitalising multiple partial accumulations and assimilating them in a fertile way.

### ***Responsibility***

If development of the human being is not reinstated as the goal of the development of knowledge and research, as it is presented in the slogan of educational systems in developed societies, then it loses its meaning and purpose.

Furthermore, if we do not take the responsibility of involving ourselves in the reform of educational systems with a view to the harmonious development of the multiple registers that define us, then education will end up producing monsters.

The assimilation of results from specialized fields ought to be carried out in a creative way, at the level of shared mentalities, which only in this way will be transformed. The goal of the educative process is also to provide humanity today with a complex vision of reality in the light of current research. However, the transfer of knowledge and the popularization of science are precarious at this level. A real paradigm shift cannot come about by itself or within a restricted group of “specialists” who produce technological “miracles”.

What is therefore required is to translate over-specialized theories into simple terms and to bring them to the attention of ordinary people. This approach is not at all encouraged in academic circles, and a specialist who abandons over-specialized language is regarded as having betrayed his speciality, thereby earning the immediate opprobrium of his peers.

The responsibility of the specialist ought to be to share the results of his research generously, so that the seeds of the fruit he has received will bear fruit for others.

### **“Perspectivism”**

Since Nietzsche, the term “perspectivism” has had its own conceptual history, having been re-defined and re-interpreted differently in different contexts.

I shall employ the term not in its strong philosophical sense, but setting out from the significant re-formulation put forward by Moshe Idel (2005, p. 11):

“By this concept [perspectivism] I designate the possibility of interrogating a certain religious literature from the perspective of acquaintance with another religious literature. This is neither a matter of comparison [...], nor a case of historical filiation between two bodies of writing or thought. It is rather an attempt to better understand the logic of systems by comparing substantially different ones and learning about one from the other.”

The reference seems to be of secondary importance in Idel’s work and is not theorized at length. I believe, however, that the pointer, no matter how brief, is extremely valuable and underlines the methodological and therefore scientific importance of the researcher’s intentionally aleatory familiarization with spaces of thought other than the one that he has permanently in view thanks to his own speciality.

Monologue is infertile and redundant. The field of religious studies has the privilege, thanks to the comparative perspective, of producing a fertile dislocation, making the transition towards deeper and more widely relevant understandings. The highlighting of structures specific to the human can be carried out not only at the level of perception and the analysis of differences, a necessary step in any integrative approach, but also at the level of what joins us together after the differences are reinterpreted and placed in harmony. This unity cannot be deduced or understood setting out from a single context of research, given that it will privilege certain features or dimensions to the detriment of others, being able to impose as a final stage a register that depends only on specific difference. However, specific difference can be adequately grasped only through comparison, or in other words through the encounter with *something else*.

The study of religions proposes this encounter from the outset, with the inevitable risk of not being able to communicate fully at the level of what is different. The specific difference is and must remain unique, untranslatable. Otherwise, we would be dealing with endless “duplicates” or multiplicity (of “copies”).

Consequently, the recourse to similar or corresponding illustrations from other traditions or from other systems of thought and (philosophical or scientific) theorization is relevant through the critical exercise of transgressing one’s own field and the limits inherent within it. In this sense, it becomes fruitful to compare two systems or traditions by setting out from not only the criterion of similarity, but also, to an equal extent, that of discontinuity and difference.

Openness to other fields or traditions is an act of courage: difference may be so radical that it “blocks” the researcher, on first contact at least. The next immediate risk is that of “domesticating” difference through mistaken familiarization, consisting in systematically reducing it to the matrix and interpretive grid of one’s own field. Forced translation will therefore erase the differences, and what is unique will become, due to the inability to accept the different as different, similar or supposedly identical with the similar register from the reference tradition or system. Such aggression produces unwelcome uniformities, and discourse may very easily slide into the area of apology and reinstatement of one’s own system as absolute reference.

The skilled researcher of religions will arrive at an understanding of what is different only if he succeeds in preserving what is different *as different*, cherishing what is untranslatable, unrepeatable and therefore unique.

### **Conclusion**

The study of religions can provide a complex vision regarding the phenomenology of religious experience as a general human, meaningful experience. The contribution will be real only if the specialist in the field of religious studies is open enough to familiarize himself with traditions other than the one in which he is regarded as a specialist and with recent scientific theories and contemporary cultural manifestations, which express in other modes, through verbal and non-verbal languages, the visions and understandings of humanity today.

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