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Citation for the published article:

Horst Junginger

"Religion, Myth and Ideology"

Method and Theory in the Study of Religion /Journal of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, 2013, Vol. 25, Issue 2:161-167

URL:<https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341277>

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UNIVERSITÄT
TÜBINGEN



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RELIGION, MYTH AND IDEOLOGY

HORST JUNGINGER

Already three decades ago, Bruce Lincoln addressed in an article for a German anthology the danger of an ideological use of religious myths (Lincoln 1983). Based on a lecture given at the 14th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Winnipeg in 1980, he distinguished in it between a more reactionary cosmogonic and a more progressive eschatological dimension. Hans Peter Duerr, a German anthropologist and the editor of the volume titled *alcheringa*, used its preface to problematize criticism of Mircea Eliade apparent in Lincoln's contribution to the attentive reader. In that time Duerr edited to other volumes reminiscent of Eliade's legacy becoming widely known at least in the German context (Duerr 1983 and 1984). With the Aboriginal notion *alcheringa* (Engl. dreamtime or dreaming) Duerr referred to a state of creative consciousness atypical of ordinary scholarship but, particularly in the case of the study of religion, being characterized instead by the lack of an inner nexus with the sacredness of its subjects. It is not the place here to criticize Duerr's naive application of the object language for a time and world *ab origine* by changing its presumed meaning from primitive to pristine. Yet it may be helpful for a better understanding of the potency of religious and other myths to mention with Werner Müller (1907–1990) a common reference point of both Duerr and Eliade who tried to adapt the idea of primeval authenticity to the structures of modern societies in a similar way.

As a specialist for American Indians Müller developed considerable influence among the rebellious youth in Germany in the 1970s and 80s. For Duerr's anarchist cultural journal *Unter dem Pflaster liegt der Strand*, that appeared in fifteen volumes between 1974–85 with the aim to unearth the cobbled beaches of modern Capitalist societies, Müller contributed to five issues. Volume 11 from 1982 was dedicated to himself and contained an article of Eliade on Werner Müller and the general study of religion (Eliade 1982). Among the contra-"isms" Duerr, Müller and Eliade shared, positivism, rationalism, cultural materialism and such like rank up front. Vice versa, a certain longing for cosmic structures, holy orders, for symbols and myths, generally for compounds with the German prefix "ur" (which refer to primal states, beings and

forces) have a prominent place in positive regard. All three rejected not only the negative meaning of the term irrationalism but transformed it into a polemic against what they considered to be the rationalist parochialism of a narrow-minded enlightenment scholarship that would always denigrate man's relationship with the sacred and the transcendental. In his dealing with Eliade and Müller, Duerr unfortunately thrusts aside their involvement in European fascism in the 1930s and 1940s. That is not to say that Duerr, the leftist German intellectual, was unaware of the ideological engagement of both. Rather, he disregards it consciously due to the positive nature attributed to the myth as such. The acknowledgment of a fascist mythology as part and parcel of their legacy most probably would have endangered what could be called the true meaning theory of myths prior to their aberration.

Werner Müller's post-war occupation with the indigenous peoples of America continued his former Indo-Germanic and Indo-Aryan studies undertaken under National Socialist premises. The new fascinations of the "Indians" resumed the old of the "Indo-Germans" in new guise. After his dissertation under the surveillance of Carl Clemen (1865–1940) at the University of Bonn in 1930, Müller added a teacher training and worked as a librarian but did not hesitate to quickly grab the chances offered by the National Socialist seizure of power in 1933. He joined the NSDAP and later the SS attaching himself to its intellectual think tank, the Ahnenerbe of the SS. In 1937 Müller became head of an Ahnenerbe division dedicated to geolocation and landscape research. Supported by the SS, he further on obtained his habilitation degree at the Reich University of Strasbourg in 1942 where he was appointed tenured lecturer for the study of religion (Religionswissenschaft) in 1944. After the war Müller continued to work as librarian in Berlin and from 1965 until his retirement in 1972 at the university library in Tübingen (Simon 2005).

With a mixture of gloating and consent a German right wing author recently underlined the fact that both Müller and Eliade had obfuscated their political past in order to perpetuate their influence as public intellectuals (Weißmann 2007, 15). Weißmann, a key figure of Germany's New Right, belonged to the founders of like-minded institutions such as the periodical *Sezession* and the *Edition Antaios*, a publishing house in the tradition of the Conservative Revolutionary movement and Ernst Jünger's journal *Antaios* that appeared from 1959–71. In Greek mythology the half-giant Antaeus or Antaios was defeated by Hercules during a wrestling match.

Because Antaeus knew of his opponent's weakness when deprived from his connection with the soil, he lifted him up and crushed him in a bear hug. This famous mythological narrative tells the story of spiritual power accruing from one's rootedness and grounding vanquishable only by a dirty trick. It was recounted in the mentioned issue of the journal *Sezession* that was devoted to the memory of Mircea Eliade (Pschera 2007, 21) and repeated in a review of it with the political turn that intellectual giants like Eliade and Jünger had been these kind of heroes beaten in likewise manner after 1945 (N.N. 2007). A further enhancement was given by Hans Thomas Hakl who combined the *Antaios* with the Eranos narrative emphasizing the congeniality of both (Hakl 2009). Hakl provides interesting, though sympathetic, evidence for the elective affinity of both enterprises from the correspondence between Jünger and Eliade that primarily focused on Eliade's journal *Zalmoxis* and the way how its intellectual impetus could be transferred from the 1930s and 40s to the 1950s and 60s. Their communication demonstrates a clear will to again position the myth against the intellect and to tap the elementary powers of life by re-transgressing from the logos back to the pre-cognitive, to the "Urgrund," the primal ground of time and being (Pschera 2007, 19). As if to substantiate Lincoln's aforementioned distinction, the traditionalism and perennialism discernible here displayed an open affinity with revolutionary neo-conservatism although Eliade in particular was careful not to lean out too far of the window in political regard (Hakl 2009, 216-218).

At the current state of research it is unclear how deep Eliade's relationship with National Socialist intellectuals really went. But there is evidence to suggest a closer connection than assumed thus far, for instance with persons working for the SS Ahnenerbe like Werner Müller, Walther Wüst and others. Eliade seemed to have been part of a broader web of European right-wing intellectuals fighting against the supposed "Judaeo-Bolshevist" threat. Beyond his campaigning for the Legionary Movement in Romania he helped organizing a meeting of the Italian fascist Julius Evola with the Iron Guard leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu in Bucharest in 1938 in that context of a pan-European resistance front against the spread of communism. Evola was also supported by Walther Wüst, the scientific director of the Ahnenerbe, who invited Eliade a few years later to the opening ceremony of the new Ahnenerbe "Institute for Inner Asia and Expeditions" that took place in Munich in January 1943 (Junginger 2008a, 38-42 and 2008b, 137-43). It would be interesting and useful for the

academic study of religion to address the preference for a mythological interpretation of the world through the trials and tribulations of the 20th century. Eschewing a mere accusatory stance against the liaison of prominent scholars of religion with one sort of fascism or another, a thorough analysis of the way how myths generally function ought to gain ground. This is a difficult task to undertake because the historian has to have a sound grasp not only of the mythological contents at stake but also of their re-narrations on the meta level of academic scholarship. In the study of religion that mission is further complicated by the antagonism of Christianity and Paganism finding resonance in the life and work of many academics either directly in their religious views or indirectly in their scientific agendas. The thirteen chapters of *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* argue convincingly in favor of such a religiously and scholarly critical approach. Moreover, Lincoln declares a self-critical mindset to be indispensable for the academic study of religion separating it not only from in- but also from undiscipline (chapter 13, *The (Un)Discipline of Religious Studies*).

Roughly twenty years ago I had a personal encounter with Otto Huth (1906–1998), another department head of the SS Ahnenerbe, who, like Werner Müller, had been a specialist for the interpretation, rather the invention of the Aryan and Indo-Germanic race who also belonged to the authors of Jünger's journal *Antaios* after the war. Just as Müller Huth had completed a dissertation under Carl Clemen in Bonn and advanced to a leading position in the SS Ahnenerbe. Equally supported by the SS, Huth was appointed to a new chair of Religionswissenschaft at the Reich University of Strasbourg in 1942. Without the chance to return to an academic teaching position after the war, Huth and his friend Müller eventually landed up at the university library in Tübingen. Since Huth refused to answer my questions openly, the meeting with him did not lead to any noteworthy information about the Ahnenerbe and its cooperation with representatives of the academic study of religion. However, the unpleasant discussion with Huth gave me a strong impulse to organize an international conference at the University of Tübingen on the European study of religion under the impact of fascism ten years later. Here I had the opportunity to get together with Bruce Lincoln from the University of Chicago for the first time and to hear a splendid lecture on the Heidelberg linguist Hermann Güntert (Lincoln 2008).

There exists a Latin proverb saying that the misuse of something does not speak against its use, rather confirms it substantially: *Abusus non tollit usum sed confirmat*

substantiam. Applied to fascist mythology, the functionalist implication of this maxim ought to become apparent. But its essentialism is deeply rooted in the study of religion, for instance when it comes to religious violence (Sanctified Violence, 86). It originates from the acknowledged or unacknowledged belief that religions are not only good to think but are good in reality or in principle. Only the maltreatment of bad people would mislead them. The typical reductionism of that approach scales the history of religions down to a history of mythologies and religious narratives in which gods and demons dominate the setting. Qui bono questions of cause and effect, of agency and interest (Theses on Method, 1; How to Read a Religious Text, 5; Between History and Myth, 55) are regularly kept off or restricted to the misuse of religion. In order to delineate the proper and distinguish the improper knowledge provided by myths and religions, a certain scholarship and a particular class of intellectuals are required. While Christian theologians have played this role in earlier times, the decrease of Christianity brought scholars of religion in the position to take over their task. But it would be far too easy to suppose a clear consciousness and a developed agenda among them how to mediate between religion and power structures. Therefore priesthood, non-confessional or non-Christian most likely, remains always an option for religious studies scholars. In *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* Lincoln locates the crucial relationship between the objects of the academic study of religion and the ordinary world in the concrete history of religions putting particular emphasis on theories of religion and their distinction from religious theories.

Most examples are taken from Old Iranian and Old Norse religion and mythology (chapters 3-6 and 12), others from Hinduism (chapter 2), Classical Antiquity (chapter 7) and twentieth-century Guatemala (chapter 10). Even in those cases where no particular tradition but a set of comparative religious elements is addressed (chapters 8, 9, 11, 13), the articles are generally structured in a scheme that combines theoretical reasoning with historical data. The only exception is chapter one, Lincoln's famous "Theses on Method," which start with the conjunction *of* and its function to connect object and method in the history *of* religions. Since the relationship between the study of religion and its subject matters is far from being uncomplicated, a particular competence for analytical differentiation has to be worked out and given a prominent place in its academic curriculum. Accordingly, the Theses resolutely renounce the popular desire for a synthetic blending of science *and* religion. If the

study of religion really warrants the designation critical, it has to better relate religions to their secular background and to improve its conceptual efforts how both dimensions of life hang together. Rightly put at the beginning, the Theses on Method frame the whole book in theoretical regard. The following articles realize in practice what they sketch out in theory. We in Munich employ Lincoln's Theses on Method very beneficially to guide our students towards a self-critical assessment of their undertaking. It is not only their clearness and brevity but also their correspondence with the German *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* that accounts for their positive reception. Regrettably not translated into English, the impact of the HrWG has been widely limited to German reading scholars. Thus it is fascinating to see how old European and new American erudition arrives at the same or similar results when systematically focusing on the worldly aspects of the history of religions.

Especially in the context of the ongoing discussion on the status of *Religionsgeschichte* in the study of religions, Lincoln's well-chosen collection of eight previously published and five newly written texts (chapters 1, 2, 5, 7-11 and chapters 3, 4, 6, 12-13) are a meaningful input to clear up the misunderstanding as if the history and the study of religions would oppose each other. The danger of overstating or oversimplifying theory in relation to history and data notwithstanding, it basically makes clear that both parts must not be neglected in their mutual dependency. Lincoln's book is a magnificent specimen that a combination of both is not only possible but can lead to outstanding results. Like all excellent scholarship its prerequisites noticeably include in-depth and in detail knowledge of a great variety of religious traditions including their languages and historical, cultural and other circumstances. Particularly the sections dealing with the Nordic deity Ullr (Nature and Genesis of Pantheons, chapter 3) and specifiable apotropaic functions of demonization processes in pre-Islamic Iran (The Cosmo-logic of Persian Demonology, chapter 4) display Lincoln's profound scholarly expertise. Therefore I have some doubts if an audience without training in the general or particular history of religions will profit very much from reading the book in spite of its author's articulated and thought-provoking style of writing. Yet the gain for the interested student or scholar of religion will be as great as the time he or she is ready to invest. At any rate, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* remind us of our task to thoroughly analyze religions and myths

instead of just re-narrating or, even worse, re-conceptualizing them by means of academic scholarship for ideological purposes.

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The thirteen articles collected in Bruce Lincoln's *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* are a persuasive plea for an appropriate contextualization of religious phenomena in their mundane circumstances. Starting with the well-known Theses on Method that structure the book in methodological regard, each of the following texts is divided in a thorough historical research introduced or accompanied by extensive theoretical considerations. Particularly the case studies addressing problems of the Old Norse and Old Iranian history of religions are in-depth examinations of their own. Lincoln's general interest is directed towards the analytical differentiation between the objects of the academic study of religion and their scholarly investigation. Only on the basis of a reflected distinction between both, the study of religion will achieve a deeper understanding of the attractiveness of religions and myths along with their capacity to adapt themselves to changing worldly conditions.