

BOOK REVIEW

Mircea Eliade (Editor-in-Chief), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York (McMillan), London (Collier Macmillan) 1987, 16 volumes. (The 16th. volume with indices).

Anything worth doing is worth doing, even if not perfectly. This is perhaps the genius of the prevalent mentality of the Northamerican Continent: to set up doing something, disregarding the obstacles one may meet on the way and the shortcomings of the outcome. While Indians dream of a project, and Europeans think of it, Northamericans are already on the way of doing it. And yet the conception of this *Encyclopedia* owes a great deal to a first rang scholar, who settled for long years in the University of Chicago, did not lose his European spirit nor his Rumanian soul. Unfortunately, Mircea Eliade, the leading spirit of the young Science of *History of Religions* for decades all over the world, did not survive to see the publication of this *magnum opus*, and I assume that he could not put much of his imprint on the implementation of this gigantic task.

It is indeed a stupendous achievement. Fifteen volumes of roughly 600 pages each. In sum, an Encyclopedia of 9000 pages covering the state of the present day scholarship on the most central of human phenomenona (for good and for ill): Religion. There is an excellent Italian Encyclopedia which has been brought up to date in recent editions, the Tacchi Venturi, which I know, Eliade used, and admired all the more because it is on the whole the work of one single scholar. There are also other works in many languages, and excellent philosophical Encyclopedias like the *Historisches Wörterbuch der philosophie*, edited by Ritter, which begun in 1971, and it is still in course of publication. The sixth, and so far last volume reaching to letter O dates from 1984. There is another ambitious project of *World Spirituality* in 25 volumes, of which six are already published. But Eliade's Encyclopedia was a need and it promises to become an almost necessary tool for the contemporary study of religions. The *Encyclopaedia of Religions and Ethics* edited by Hastings in 1908 which its 13 volumes is still all the more useful because it provides a point of reference and contrast with the new *Encyclopedia*. To be frank, the *Encyclopaedia* of 1908 remains more impressive than the *Encyclopedia* of 1987. No general work, however, can replace the more specialized works like *Die Religionen der Menschheit* for instance, edited by Dh. M. Schröder and some others. Yet, I repeat, Eliade's Encyclopedia was a felt need in the world

of Religion and his team of ten editors, associate and assistant editors plus a number of collaborators of Macmillan deserve appreciation and thanks.

A book review of a work of this magnitude cannot focus on single articles. The variety of entries and contributors would allow for any comment. Why the article on Zeus is so short and on Violence so one-sided? We may ask any kind of questions. There would be meaningless to review over 2,700 articles. This book review instead will concentrate on practically one single point.

It is the important issue about the general tone of the work. Its atmosphere is all too irenic, detached, and historiographic. I make distinctions between irenic and peaceful, detached and non-attached, historiographical and historical. Any scholarly enterprise should possess the latter qualities, but not necessarily the former ones – unless explicitly wanted. To be sure, the gamut of contributors is amazing, and there are excellent articles, I insist. There are over thousand authors, and we have articles translated from Japanese, Russian, and many other European languages. Yet the overall and dominating feature is the prevalent Northamerican underlying worldview and perspective, I am not referring, of course to the English language or idioms, although the University of Chicago Press Manual of Style implies and requires already a particular form of thought. Form and content are not altogether independent. I am not referring either to the nationality of the scholars. It is proper that the majority should be from the Northamerican scene, which provides probably today the widest range of cultivators of the Science of Religion. I am having in mind something more subtle which I call the prevalent myth, the underlying horizon, the general atmosphere, the meta-cosmology as it were. I should not be misunderstood.

First of all, this is visible in the choice and comparative length of articles. I am neither suggesting another choice nor proposing a different perspective. I am simply drawing the attention to the spiritual and intellectual boundaries of the work. I am trying to say more than the obvious thing that any human work has limitations. I am intending to convey the for me fascinating discovery of a prevalent, and on the whole unconscious, myth of what religion is and should be, because we see the world in a particular way.

Glancing through those volumes one comes to know as much about our age as about religion. It is probably as it should be. We have to do here with an *Encyclopedia of Modern Ideas about Religions*, and it is therefore an important document of a certain contemporary prevalent ideology. It certainly does not reflect the religion of the oppressed – to use religio-political language. It does not defend either – it must be said – the religion of the oppressors. It does present, however – inevitably? – the religion of the victors, of the experts, the ‘professors’. And this is all the more interesting, and important, because unlike “*L’Encyclopédie*” of centuries past, or fundamentalistic works of the right and of the left, there is no hidden agenda or dogmatic spirit behind the scene. It is a genuinely scholarly and thus free enterprise. It is an authentic work of scholarship.

Put it another way. The authors of the articles were absolutely free to write their contributions. Yet – and this is my point – the organization of the work conditions the work as much as the choice of the writers. Even more, the reader conditions the writer. And in this case the readership is mainly the student of a modern university interested in Religious Studies. In point of fact the *Encyclopedia* aspires explicitly at becoming “the basic reference book for religious studies.” It is more an *Encyclopedia of Religious Studies* than an *Encyclopedia of Religion*. The issues are more directed to the ‘student’ of religion than to the person existentially interested in one particular religious problem. I am not questioning that such a type of work requires an academic approach to religion. This is obvious. I am simply underscoring the particular academic approach that the *Encyclopedia* takes, and the underlying assumption that ‘academic’ means what is today taught in Colleges and Universities, mainly of the Northamerican type. I am not entering either into the discussion of the meaning of the academic study of religion (about which there are several entries). I am simply detecting some general features of the work – which go beyond the fact that all of the writers are contemporary. I am sensing not only a *Zeitgeist*, but an *esprit de corps* as well, a *Raumgeist*, as it were, the Space being here the myth I am trying to hint at.

It may be interesting to compare this work with the already mentioned *Encyclopaedia* of 1908. Some articles of the Hastings are irritatingly ‘Christian’ as understood in those times. They remain a witness of the prevalent mentality of the epoch without in many cases diminishing the undoubted scholarship of the authors. Really the best minds of the

Anglosaxon world did collaborate on that enterprise. What I am saying is that 'we' are not better off and that 'our' attempts at overcoming biases and prejudices have shifted and in some ways improved, but on the whole remained, almost at the same level. Many of the articles of the new *Encyclopedia* are equally irritatingly 'Scientific' for instance, others take the stance to be above confessional dogmatisms, unaware of their own sense of superiority.

A small but telling example of trying to be 'neutral' is the effort at replacing the abbreviation BC (before Christ) for BCE (before the Common Era) for temporal locations of events. I wonder if to assume that a Muslim, a Tamilian, a Chinese, and a Jew will feel more comfortable in replacing the name of Christ, which at least is a univocal historical event (whatever importance we may give to that event which did not even occur in the year 1) with the value statement that this new time-reckoning is the "Common Era", and all the others, "anno Hegirae", Chinese years, etc., unimportant, not common, local. Christ does not need to be common to all. The "Common Era" forces us to enter into a particular history - and Christian history for that matter, paradoxically enough.

Putting it again differently. *The Encyclopedia* represents an impressive consensus of academicians who by and large 'teach' religion or do 'research' on religion in the teaching establishments of the world today. What the next generation will say about this effort remains to be seen. I wonder if they will not feel the lack of prophetic spirit, or religious life, if they will not classify the *Encyclopedia* as a historiographical book of the past and not as a Source-book of what religion is about. I am not pleading for Christian apologetics, Marxist critique of religion, or any sort of partisan approach. I am simply detecting a certain spirit prevalent in the entire work: an unconscious autobiography of 'professors of Religion' in the academic *koine* of the teaching establishment in modern universities. An interesting document indeed.

I may add some points of secondary importance. The character of the *Encyclopedia* prevents footnotes and scholarly references. One has to take the word of the authors for what they say, and sometimes the information is not accurate, besides some slipped misprints in foreign words. The Little Brothers of Jesus with whom Maritain was connected are not Dominicans. Simone Weil had leanings towards Christianity, but it is difficult to sustain (against herself even) that she became a Christian.

But it is not my intend to multiply this list, which I am sure other reviewers will indulge in doing for the benefit of other editions of course.

As editor of the forthcoming *Dictionary of Spirituality* of the mentioned Series on *World Spirituality* I have liked many entries, enjoyed always the reading, and learnt immensely. It represents a gigantic step towards the knowledge of Religion - and of ourselves.

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