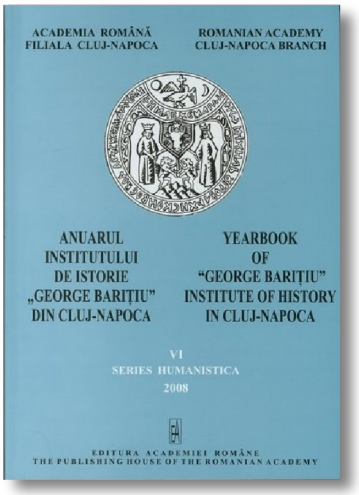

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Mihaela Gligor

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MIRCEA ELIADE, PROFESSOR OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

Mihaela Gligor

Institutul de Istorie „George Barițˮ din Cluj-Napoca

Abstract. *Mircea Eliade's political past and his supposed influence of this past upon his scientific work has represented during the last years the starting point of many controversies; many researchers worldwide have dealt with the analysis of these aspects. Although the suspicions and accusations brought to Eliade have become more numerous, his life and work should not be interpreted based on his political options, on simple sympathies from his youth and without taking into account the historical context which generated these sympathies.*

The orientation towards the right extreme of some important Romanian intellectuals from the interwar period has been and is still a subject much discussed in Romania and in the cultural *milieus* from abroad. Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, Nae Ionescu and others have been carefully analyzed during the last years due to this "sliding towards the right extreme". Yet, their moral guilt cannot be doubted. It was as big as that of other contemporary *hommes des lettres* who, from different reasons, have let themselves be convinced by an extremist, antidemocratic ideology.

We will insist next upon Mircea Eliade's "Romanian past" and we will analyze his intellectual evolution during the period 1934–1938, focusing especially on the constants which have marked his religious development.

We analyze first the intellectual activity developed by Eliade during these years and we focus upon the relationship he had with Nae Ionescu during the above mentioned period. The first significant element is that Mircea Eliade occupied from 1934 until middle of 1938, the job of honorary assistant of the metaphysics and logics "professor" from the Bucharest University.

For Eliade, this interval was, as Mac Linscott Ricketts noticed, "a period of maturation and success [...], in his position of literature writer and historian of religions"[1]. It was a very intense period for Mircea Eliade, regarding both his

[1] Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Mircea Eliade. The Romanian Roots*, *1907–1945 (Rădăcinile româneşti ale lui Mircea Eliade)*, Virginia Stănescu, Mihaela Gligor, Irina Petraş, Olimpia Iacob and Horia Ion Groza (trad.), Bucharest, Criterion Publishing, 2004, vol. 2, chap. 18, p. 5.

An. Inst. de Ist. „G. Barițiuˮ din Cluj-Napoca, Series Humanistica, tom. VI, 2008, p. 409–414

literary activity, as during this period he […] wrote his most important novel up to that moment, *The Hooligans* (1934), and his scientific activity: he revised and published his PhD thesis, *Yoga* (1936) and worked very much for the completion of the Hasdeu edition[2].

Also, in the courses and seminars he held during this period, Eliade set the basis of many of his later books of history of religions, works which will bring him international acknowledgement after the war. Beside his literary and scientific activity, during all this period, Eliade continued to write regularly for the periodicals in Bucharest and the cultural journals from all over the country, keeping thus the "leader" position of the "young generation" in Romania. "From this key position he continued to support the priority of the spiritual over the political and economic and, at the same time, he called upon his generation to the development of its cultural creativity and its renewal, on behalf of an ardent nationalism which will become more and more obvious during these years"[3].

As Florin Țurcanu states, "Eliade's academic carrier begins very ambiguously in November 1933. The university does not remunerate his job as Nae Ionescu's *locum tenens* and the latter will pay him a part of his own lecturer salary for four and a half years. Eliade is thus more and more bound to his former professor"[4].

He had the responsibility to lecture a course and a seminar. For the course he chose, as he remembers in *Memoirs*, the subject *The issue of evil in the history of religions,* and for the seminar *Dissolution of causality in medieval Buddhist logic*. They were subjects which he had long studied, and the related Bibliography was pretty familiar to him.

Many years later, remembering that period, Eliade would describe it to Claude-Henri Rocquet with the following words: "[Nae Ionescu] gave me the metaphysics history course and a seminar of history of logic, inviting me to make a course of history of religions at the beginning of the metaphysics history course"[5]. Also, in a letter from 1966, addressed to Arion Roşu, Eliade stated that "around 1934–1935, when I was already Nae Ionescu's *locum tenens* at the metaphysics chair [...], I treated more the history of religions"[6].

Eliade was appreciated by the professors, especially by Nae Ionescu. Ionescu not only took him as his assistant, but, in 1938 proceeded to the dean of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, obviously thinking of his young *protégé*, with the following request: "Mr. Dean, I propose the establishment of a lectureship in the history and philosophy of religions, connected to the logic and metaphysics chair.

[2] B. P. Hasdeu, *Scrieri literare, morale şi politice,* Bucharest, Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă Regele Carol II, 1937, 2 volumes.

[3] *Ibidem.*

[4] Florin Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade. Prisoner of history (Mircea Eliade. Prizonierul istoriei)*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2005, p. 261.

[5] Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet (Încercarea labirintului. Conversații cu Claude-Henri Rocquet),* Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 1990, p. 68.

[6] Mircea Eliade, *Europe, Asia, America*, *Correspondence (Europa, Asia, America. Corespondență)*, II, I-P, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2004, p. 103.

Sincerely, Nae Ionescu"[7]. In this intercession, "the philosopher had beside him some of the most distinguished academic colleagues, whose signatures were put on his request [...]: Al. Rosetti, then Al. Marcu, P. P. Panaitescu and C. C. Giurescu"[8]. Although it received support, Nae Ionescu's request was not approved, and after only a few meetings of the Faculty Council, Nae Ionescu was removed from the Philosophy collective.

Although Eliade did not have much experience as professor, he was captivating. As one of Eliade's favourite students, Mihai Şora remembers that the young tutor had already an important group of auditors, although he entered "into competition" with Nae Ionescu: "During the university years, I had two great masters: Nae Ionescu and Mircea Eliade […]. I remember the course held by Eliade in 1935, with specific references to the Indian domain. The problem of 'to be', and of 'being'. Practically, it was also a course of metaphysics, of comparative metaphysics. […] Mircea Eliade had a rare eloquence. He framed the objective, he did not have the patience to wait, and he rushed, used all the words family covering the bombing area and then directed the firing of his speech towards the target […]. Eliade's seminar developed in a completely different manner than those of other professors. He did not ask for papers, but for text interpretation. One would read a fragment (the XIIth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Thomas Aquinas) sentence by sentence and would comment on it word by word. As compared to the course, frequented by several hundreds students, the seminar only gathered 10–12 participants, always the same people. Then there were free discussions"[9].

Another student focuses upon the impression Eliade made on her by his readings. She compares listening to Eliade with watching a play. "The dramaturgy" of the lectures held by Eliade, she writes, comes partly from his "ritual gestures" and from the "word falls", but, the most important thing, from the way in which he seems to *live* the representative part of religions whose issue he was treating. In the course *The issue of evil* (1934–1935?) Eliade represented the "Indian man" as caught in the grip of Karma. He made somehow this experience *alive* to students; it seemed that he *experienced* it himself[10].

In November 1935, Mircea Eliade started his third year at the University as Nae Ionescu's assistant. The topic of his course for this year was uncertain; maybe it was *The Upanishads and Buddhism*; maybe *The Religious Symbol*[11]. Besides the editing of some index for *Yoga,* that the editor seems to have asked for at the last

[7] According to the request recorded by Dora Mezdrea in *Nae Ionescu. Biography (Nae Ionescu. Biografia)*, Istros Publishing House – Museum of Brăila, vol. 4, 2005, p. 195–196. See also note 25, p. 586.

[8] *Ibidem*.

[9] Mircea Handoca, *Dialogues with and about Mircea Eliade (Convorbiri cu şi despre Mircea Eliade)*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1998, p. 308 (in *Dialogue with Mihai Şora*); *ibidem*, second edition, Bucharest, Criterion Publishing, 2006, p. 319.

[10] Alice Botez, *Students about Mircea Eliade* (*Studenţii despre Mircea Eliade*), "Vremea", 20 June 1937, p. 9.

[11] The real title of the course could have been *Introduction in Religious Phenomenology*. [See C. Noica, *"Yoga" and its author (Yoga şi autorul său)*, "Revista Fundaţiilor Regale" (Royal Foundation Journal), February 1937, p. 203].

moment, Eliade was free of the "burden" of this book[12] and could work on the editing of the volume on Hasdeu. He continued to write regularly for "Vremea", of course, and in 1936 he contributed for almost one month to the *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* (*Royal Foundations Journal)* and often spoke on the Radio Bucharest.

The titles of the courses held by Mircea Eliade during the five years he taught at the University in Bucharest are controversial, as Mac Linscott Ricketts notices very well in a note: "in his memoirs[13], Eliade says that the first course he taught (1933–1934) was «The Issue of Evil and Salvation», and that during the following year he taught «Metaphysics and Mysticism». The course for 1935–1936, as well as he remembers, was about the religious symbolism. These titles do not match those given in Allen's and Doeing's «Chronology» (in their *Bibliography*; resumed in the volume *l'Herne*). Here the courses are: 1933-34: «The Issue of Evil in Indian Philosophy»; 1934–1935: «Salvation and Oriental Religions», and in 1935–1936: «The Upanishads and Buddhism». Probably, Eliade was the source of information for Allen and Doeing, although his memory of the titles was different in different times"[14].

The courses lasted sometimes even two semesters and sometimes just one. Beside the courses he also conducted seminars, as we have seen.

The notes of a student for 1934–1935 seem to describe the course Eliade mentioned in *Memoirs* as held in 1933–1934. Things are complicated even more when Eliade remembers many years later about his inaugural course in the *Journal* on 2nd August 1962: "A young man asks me about my first course, in 1933–1934, which I had entitled "The Issue of Evil and Salvation in the Indian Philosophy" (unpublished passage from the manuscript of the *Journal* found at the Regenstein Library, Chicago)."[15]

In his courses on religions, Eliade made comparisons and brought into discussion similar problems approached in the courses of history of religions from the university centres with tradition in this field. In the notes of a course held by Eliade in the academic year 1934-1935, notes found by Mircea Handoca[16] and found in his archive in Bucharest, we find surprising information on Eliade's double debut: both as a historian of religions and as a professor.

[12] In a letter to Argintescu, from 21 April 1936, Eliade wrote: "My book [*Yoga*] is about to be printed these days. I worked as a fool for the index. I finally freed myself of a great burden" (See Mircea Eliade, *Europe, Asia, America*, *Correspondence*, I, A–H, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1999, p. 29).

[13] Mircea Eliade, *Memoirs (Memorii)*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1997, p. 281.

[14] This list does not coincide totally with that belonging to Handoca on Eliade: *Mircea Eliade's Life (Viața lui Mircea Eliade)*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 2000, p. 70–71

[15] According to Mac Linscott Ricketts, *op. cit*., vol. 2, chap. 19, note 36, p. 125.

[16] See M. Handoca*, Mircea Eliade, professor at the University in Bucharest*, "Steaua", October 1985, p. 26. See also Mircea Handoca, *Mircea Eliade's Life*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 2000, p. 70.

The notes are made by Romul Grecu, who indicates also the name of the course during that year as being *The Issue of Evil at the Birth of the Christianity*. According to professor Ricketts' analysis, "the course is a tour de force, approaching the religions of the "primitives", India, China, Japan, Iran, Israel, Greece and the Roman Empire, before the birth of Christianity. It can not be inferred from the student's notes how many lessons had Eliade taught during one year, but the student set up his notes with sixteen titles; one of them was a "continuation" (to the precedent subject), suggesting that each title represented a single lesson. Even if we imagine the sentences extended to paragraphs, we are still surprised by the quantity of materials Eliade included as individual titles: "The Primitives", "Shintoism", "Zarathustrianism", "Judaism" etc. – they all seem to be subjects of separate lessons. Eliade was already studying *phenomenology* and *hermeneutics.* He was interested in the cultural sense of the beliefs of peoples whose religions he presented. His interpretations are yet based upon a limited number of categories, as compared to what we discover in his writings only several years later."[17]

Most certainly, the ideas in these first courses, improved and completed, will set the basis of many works of history of religions elaborated by Eliade along the years and maybe the basis of the courses in the American period.

Regarding his first course, "it is focused on the «issue of evil» and its solution, the «salvation». It is difficult to specify what Eliade meant by «evil». The definitions in the student's notes are confused, but reading the entire course, one may see that Eliade was concerned mainly in that evil which is a «problem» to the individual – that is sin and anything else stops man from living «in harmony with God». The issue of Evil, he says at the beginning of the course, «is not a problem of theology or ethics, but a matter of life». The problem which does not occur (he says) in social religions, emerges from the conscience of the sin and is solved by the conciliation with God. The metaphysical solutions of the evil problem are «abstract» and do not satisfy the need for a «concrete» solution: that is, salvation. Salvation is provided only by the individual religions (therefore universal) – which give «techniques» and «personal experiences». Eliade seems to look the issue of evil (or of sin) and salvation as a central matter, focal point of religion. Taking it as a centre – rather than the concept of God, or cosmology, or ethics, for example – Eliade makes an «existential» closeness, one might say, of religion. This is in agreement with the «existential» philosophy of that time. […]

Judging by the student's notes, Eliade's lessons must have been taught in a rather informal manner, without a rigid structure."[18]

As he confesses in *Memoirs*, "in the autumn of 1937, I had announced a special course on the religious symbolism, in which I intended to study especially the aquatic symbolism and of the Cosmic Tree […]. Such issues captivated only a

[17] According to Mac L. Ricketts, *op. cit*., vol. 2, p. 96–97.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 98.

small group of students, whom I got to know better during the seminars on *De docta ignorantia* and the Xth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics.* I had announced them for the following year, 1938–1939, a course on myth. But I did not get to teach it"[19]. In fact, it was about the XIIth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which was confirmed by an announcement in "Vremea" saying that: "Mircea Eliade teaches this year, at the Faculty of Philosophy, a course on *Elements of metaphysics in the Folklore,* and during the logics seminar it is studied the 12th book from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*", signed by "Ar. A.", probably Arşavir Acterian[20].

Eliade would make lectures for five years at the University in Bucharest before he would be swept away by the wave that had already begun when he first stepped into Titu Maiorescu amphitheatre hall for the first time.

Famous and appreciated on all meridians, Mircea Eliade – the scientist and the writer – has created an *oeuvre* characterized by a profound humanism. Historian of religions, orientalist, ethnologist, sociologist, folklorist, essayist, short story writer, novelist, dramatist, memorialist – here are just a few of his multiple sides of his activity.

And if life carried his steps on a road not always easy – his biographical and cultural trajectory including, among others, cities like Bucharest, Calcutta, London, Lisbon, Paris, Chicago – Eliade always found the strength, for himself and his work, to carry on, to create, to think and write. All these for a larger and larger public and from a universal perspective. That is why, even today, Mircea Eliade is read, re-read, studied; he becomes an example and a model. And now, when we celebrate 100 years since his birth, we should remember first the good things he has done, the heritage he left us. We should remember Eliade the man, who changed lives and who, from "the after-world" continues to do so.

[19] Mircea Eliade, *Memoirs*, ..., p. 339.
[20] See "Vremea", year XI, no. 524, February 6, 1938.