

# ARCHÆVS

ÉTUDES D'HISTOIRE  
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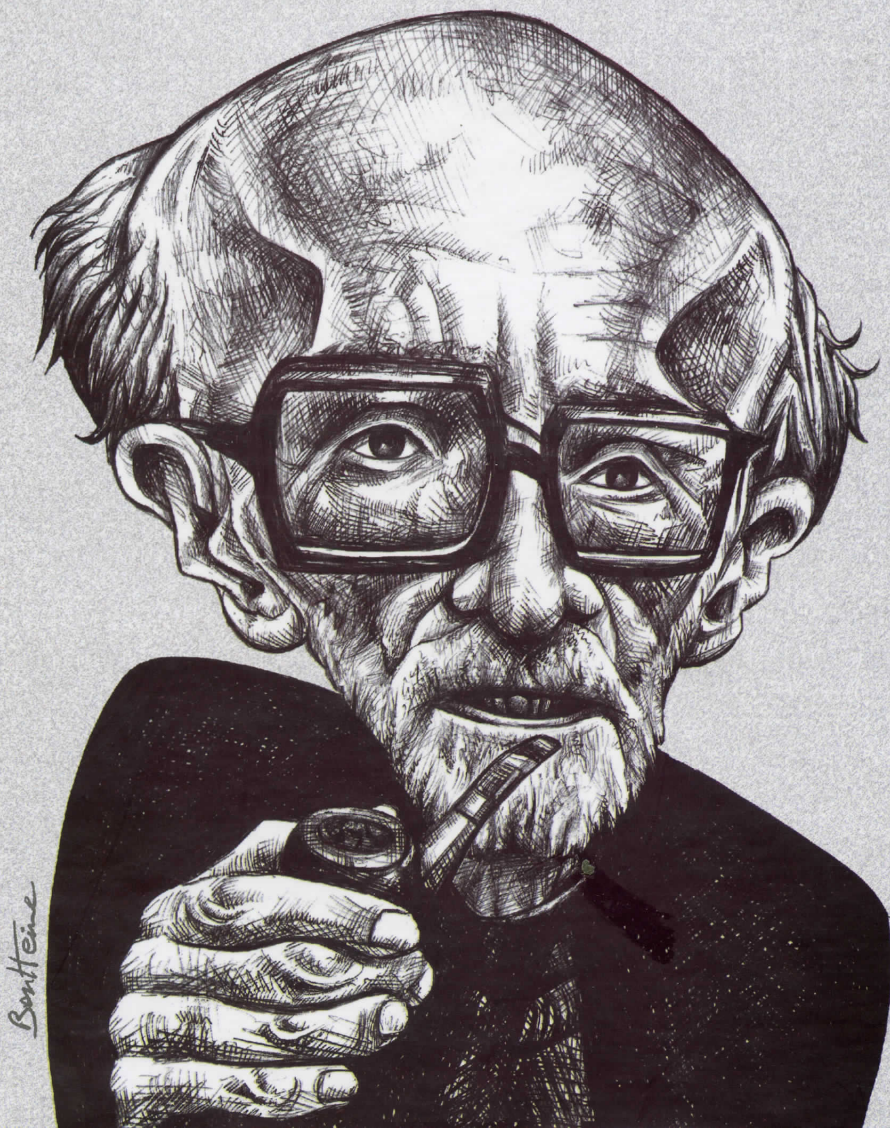
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INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS  
ROMANIAN ACADEMY, BUCHAREST

**XV (2011)**

**Norman GIRARDOT & Bryan RENNIE** (*Guest Editors*)

*Remembering | Reimagining | Revalorizing Mircea Eliade*



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*Études d'Histoire des Religions | Studies in the History of Religions*

**XV (2011), fasc. 1-2**

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## REVALORIZING MIRCEA ELIADE'S NOTION OF REVALORIZATION: REFLECTIONS ON THE PRESENT-DAY RE-USES OF MESOAMERICA'S PRE-COLUMBIAN SITES AND ARCHITECTURE

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[T]he “creative variations,” the reinterpretations and revalorizations of a given symbolism, merit a greater attention than they have attracted until now [...] If the history of Western literature from the Renaissance to Goethe is, ultimately, a series of creative reinterpretations of the classical and Biblical heritage, the ‘history’ of ‘primitive’ and traditional cultures is constituted by their selective assimilation and creative revalorization of the primordial symbolism.<sup>1</sup>

AS ONE MOVES FORWARD in an academic career, and then backward, sideways and maybe forward again, the honest acknowledgement of intellectual debts becomes harder and harder. Nonetheless, as a participant in the last five seminars that Mircea Eliade taught at the University of Chicago prior to his death in 1986, I have to concede to being part of that generation of students that prompted him to this entry in the fourth and last volume of his journal: “I held the first seminar yesterday. Depressed at how little the new students know *in general*, not just in the history of religions! If I’d found such ignorance in my students of 1956-1957, probably I wouldn’t have stayed in Chicago.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea ELIADE, “Notes on the Symbolism of the Arrow,” *Religions in Antiquity*, edited by Jacob NEUSNER (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 475; reprinted in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader*, edited by Bryan RENNIE (London: Equinox, 2006), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Journal IV, 1979-1985*, translated by Mac Linscott RICKETTS (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 56; italics his. The entry is dated October 17, 1981.

As becomes clear in that autobiographical work, Mr. Eliade was in that final stretch of his peerless career, suitably enough, more preoccupied with completing a host of self-imposed writing assignments than with teaching. Though his classes continued to inspire, on the teacher's side there were, it seems, some doubts as to whether his last generation of students would be able or willing to keep the hermeneutical faith, as it were; and, on the part of career-minded graduate students of that era, there was a mounting sense that Eliade's approach was more prudently positioned as an imposing past rather as a model for their futures. Some misgivings on both sides notwithstanding, reviewers have found enough of his influence in my work on sacred architecture to describe it as "neo-Eliadean," an ascription I am content to accept.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, I do not have at this point a strong interest in demonstrating my faithfulness to Eliade's vision of religion and its study, but even less am I inclined to pretend a rejection of the tradition of religious studies that initially drew me to the field and that has played both foundational and on-going roles in my own ways of proceeding.

I. *Revalorization in the Work of Mircea Eliade:  
The Rescue, Resuscitation, and Recycling of Religious Ideas*

Aspiring, then, neither to replicate the Eliadean tradition nor to run from it, I instead mine from that enormous body of work the term that both describes my chosen relationship to Mircea Eliade's version of the history of religions and the principal topic of this essay – namely, "revalorization."<sup>4</sup> I notice that some on-line language police feel compelled to reject this as "a made-up word," unworthy of credit in a game of Scrabble; and, in the world of accounting and finance, where the term may enjoy its greatest currency (or least obscurity), revalorization apparently means "to change the valuation of assets" or "to replace one

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<sup>3</sup> Peter W. WILLIAMS, "Sacred Space in North America," review essay in *JAAR* 70 (2002), no. 3, 598, uses that term with reference to Lindsay JONES, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, two volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> I should acknowledge (maybe blame) Norman Girardot who, in the wake of a presentation that I gave April 12, 2011, at Lafayette College entitled "New Years Celebrations at the Cross of Miracles: Zapotec Catholic Devotion and Tourism in Southern in Mexico," observed that, despite the fact that I'd made just one passing reference to Eliade, in a sense, the whole project was grounded in a kind of revalorization of Eliade's notion of revalorization. It is certain that, without Professor Girardot's urging, I would not have written this essay.

currency unit by another.”<sup>5</sup> A somewhat more generic and thus germane dictionary definition is “a reevaluation of the value of something;” and the listing of viable synonyms ranges from appreciation, reappraisal, reassessment, revaluation to review. Eliade himself uses, seemingly interchangeably, both “valorization” and “revalorization”. In the opening Preface to *A History of Religious Ideas*, for instance, he writes that, “[s]ometimes the importance of a religious creation is revealed by its later valorizations;”<sup>6</sup> but in the third volume of the same work, he explains how, “[c]onversion to Christianity gave rise to many reinterpretations and revalorizations of [...] ancestral traditions.”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the term may verge on the self-redundant.

Granted, neither “valorization” nor “revalorization” appears very frequently in Eliade’s writings; but when they do, the valence is always positive insofar as these are processes that entail a kind of rescue and resuscitation mission, a means of breathing life back into a languishing practice or tradition. In his work, the penchant for “revalorization,” which characterizes the full depth and breadth of the history of religions, is perhaps the surest testament to the creativity and imagination of persons who are asserting their *homo religiosus* character, usually against some sort of obstacle or resistance. If, as Eliade contends, humans exist with an innate need for meaning and “access to the sacred,” revalorization, often glossed as “creative revalorization,” is a, perhaps *the*, prime means of attaining those aspirations.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in the very broad strokes, the

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<sup>5</sup> *Collins English Dictionary*, Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition 2009 © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009

<sup>6</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, translated from the French by Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 3, *From Muhammad to the Age of Reforms*, translated from the French by Alf HILTEBEITEL and Diana APOSTOLOS-CAPPADONA (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 92; italics added.

<sup>8</sup> A careful look at the ways that Eliade describes the processes whereby older religious themes reappear in subsequent contexts presents some disconcerting ambiguity, which may or may not be deliberate. An instructive example comes in his account of the ways in which pre-Christian symbols and ideas were utilized in the “universalization” of the Christian message that eventuated in a widely appealing “cosmic Christianity”; see *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 2: *From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 396-407. At points, he uses formulations that seem to imply a very deliberate and strategic process in which Christian human actors retrieved or harvested older, more generically “archaic” religious ideas, and then redeployed those ideas with the express purpose of

narrative theme that sustains all three volumes of *A History of Religious Ideas* is a cycle of decline and crisis that is invariably followed by revalorization, then another decline, which precipitates yet more ingenious revalorization.<sup>9</sup> Quoting again from the Preface to that grand historical synthesis, “[...] for it is because of crises in depth and *the creations that result from them* that religious traditions are able to renew themselves.”<sup>10</sup> So-termed crises in depth and meaning beget creative revalorizations.

Eliade’s notion of revalorization depends, then, on his assertion that the history of religions displays ample measures of both imitation and innovation. Prone, on the one hand, to stress “the *fundamental unity* of religious phenomena,” he is, on the other hand, equally insistent on demonstrating “the *inexhaustible newness* of their expressions.”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, “revalorization” – conceived as a process wherein flagging old traditions are not wholly jettisoned or dismissed, but rather rejuvenated and equipped with fresh legs, if you will – provides the ideal means of acknowledging his dual commitments to the continuity and to the innovativeness of religious ideas.

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“universalizing” the Christian message. He describes, for instance, how Christian authors “took over,” “rehandled,” “elaborated” and “employed” archaic scenarios and images, which subsequently enjoyed an unparalleled success in the religious folklore of Europe (*ibid.*, 397, 402, 404). In those moments, revalorization, crudely put, could be construed as a kind of politically astute means of repackaging and marketing Christianity to wider audiences. At other points, however, Eliade uses passive formulations, which suggest that revalorization is a “continual process of assimilation” (*ibid.*, 403), which operates with a lack of deliberate self-consciousness and perhaps even without human agency. He writes, for instance, that “More and more archaic themes *became integrated* into the scenario of the Crucifixion” (*ibid.*, 402; italics added); and, at some points, for instance in his discussion of the identification of the Christian cross with “the Cosmic Tree,” he goes so far as to argue that, “*the image of the Center imposed itself naturally* on the Christian imagination” (*ibid.*, 402; italics his). Those moments – in which the mechanisms of revalorization are apparently located in the collective “religious imagination” rather than in the conscious mind of human individuals of communities – are probably more consistent with Eliade’s broader project (but arguably less consistent with the way in which I will be appropriating his notion of “revalorization”).

<sup>9</sup> With respect to kind of spiraling processes of revalorization, ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 2, 404, explains how, for instance, “[...] the Christian mythological imagination borrows and develops motifs and scenarios that belong to cosmic religiosity but that have already undergone a reinterpretation in the biblical context.”

<sup>10</sup> ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, xiv; italics added.

<sup>11</sup> *IBID.*, xv; his italics.

In more colloquial terms, Eliade's notion of revalorization is a kind of recycling, a "cooking with leftovers," as it were, insofar as it invariably involves, whether knowingly or inadvertently, salvaging worn out and worn down beliefs, practices and, as we'll see, symbols, which are then cobbled together in imaginative, if not altogether historically accurate ways. Instead of stiff and static blueprints, previous concepts and conventions are – as in his discussion of the many Christian "reinterpretations and revalorizations of ancestral traditions"<sup>12</sup> – treated as resources, raw materials that are warped and wedged into quite different new shapes and contexts. Revalorative appropriations can be variously misinformed, tendentious and naïve, and to that extent perhaps self-delusionary; but Eliade never, it seems, assesses any revalorization as evil, wrong or even untoward. Empirically speaking, "assimilating," reshuffling and reshaping religious ideas are simply what people in pursuit of a satisfying orientation, or perhaps a reprieve from the "terror of history," do. Accordingly, irrespective of the inevitable distortions and discontinuities with past practices, for Eliade, these exercises in revalorization are, so it would seem, an always healthy, sometimes even heroic, means of recovering meaning. Revalorization is, as I understand him, a pragmatic rather than critical undertaking, which ought therefore be assessed on the merits of its serviceability in meaning-making rather than its historical or conceptual correctness.

## II. *Revalorizing the Work of Mircea Eliade:* *Combining Exotic Resources and Homegrown Resourcefulness*

If, for Eliade, revalorization describes a kind of historical process wherein religious communities strategically reinterpret and appropriate from previous traditions, the notion could be extended, moreover, to describe an academic method wherein scholars strategically reinterpret and appropriate the theories and methods of their predecessors. Here again there is a tension between continuity and novelty, between the derivative and the innovative. Academic revalorizations (at least those of the responsibly self-conscious sort), require, on the one hand, acknowledgement of one's theoretical debts and thus admissions of unoriginality; yet, on the other hand, revalorizing methods claim an entitlement to manipulate, extend, twist, and finagle the theoretical formulations on which they build. These efforts built on (and with) earlier theories and methods instead of simply applying them. When, for instance, my approach to sacred architecture is generously assessed as

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<sup>12</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 3, 92; italics added.



“inspired by, but not enslaved to, Eliade,”<sup>13</sup> I can claim, albeit with all due modesty and lots of qualifications, that my scholarly work is a revalorization of his – and that is, in fact, the stance with which I would like to position myself relative to Eliade’s theoretical legacy.

Arguably, this blend of continuity and connivance is at work in virtually all instances in which an author appeals to scholarly predecessors; and indeed there may be a danger here of simply endorsing a kind of sloppiness wherein one invokes the authority of a previous scholarship without the concomitant understandings or abilities to represent that position in full and fair ways. Cherry picking, mimicking, paraphrasing, plagiarizing, and even outright misrepresentation are all, one must concede, subspecies of academic revalorization. Moreover, as R. J. Zwi Werblowsky observed more than two decades ago, Eliade’s work, owing to its exceptionally wide distribution and popular appeal, has been especially susceptible to the misrepresentations of ill-informed enthusiasts.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, irrespective of what Werblowsky bemoans as “the immense hiatus between Eliade’s rich, almost highbred and overdeveloped central European origins and the abysmal ignorance and primitiveness of many of his disciples,” the Eliade-inspired distortions of these self-appointed mis-spokespersons must, albeit lamentably, be labeled as “creative revalorizations.”<sup>15</sup> As just noted, revalorization is always pragmatic and only occasionally critical.

Be that as it may, there are reasons why turning this term back on Eliade’s own work may be in the spirit of rather than at odds with his project. In a much-debated feature of his work, he blurs the boundaries, or at least points to important parallels, between the initiatives of religious actors and scholars of religion insofar as he describes both as creative interpreters or, in his term, “hermeneuts.”<sup>16</sup> In his description of the synergetic loops of “crisis and renewal” that characterize both the history of religions and its study, the most salient interpretive efforts of scholars, not unlike the revalorative efforts of religious thinkers and communities, invariably emerge as responses to existential anxieties and/or eras of

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald L. GRIMES, *Rite out of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 168, n. 108, provides this assessment of Lindsay JONES, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, 2 volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, “In Nostro Tempore: On Mircea Eliade,” *Religion* 19 (1989): 129-136, reprinted in *Mircea Eliade: A Critical Reader* (*supra* n. 1), \*-\*.

<sup>15</sup> *IBID.*, 135.

<sup>16</sup> Eliade’s two most notable articles in this respect are “A New Humanism” (originally 1961) and “Crisis and Renewal” (originally 1965), both of which appeared in revised forms in Mircea ELIADE, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

listlessness. Rather than abstract speculation, creative hermeneutics, whether as a religious or scholarly undertaking, is crisis-driven problem-solving and meaning-making. Moreover, just as religious traditions invariably find the inspiration and the "raw materials" for their replenishing innovations in "other" contexts, including contexts to which they may not have any direct historical connections, the modern West can, according to Eliade, find the most effective means of redressing its present condition of "cultural provincialism" via an engagement with – and then, presumably, the revalorization of – "the spiritualities of Asia and the archaic world."<sup>17</sup>

Yet, to gain access to the insights of Asian and archaic contexts, something that even Eliade himself achieves largely via primary and secondary texts rather than first-hand experience, requires the scholar, "by his hermeneutical endeavor to 'relive' a multitude of existential situations,"<sup>18</sup> a phenomenological gesture that depends upon an exercise of empathetic imagination. Understanding the other is, of necessity, a creative activity; and then to translate those evocative but explicitly "foreign" insights into an idiom apprehensible to the contemporary West will require another large measure of creativity, likely in the form of academic (or perhaps fictional) writing. In other words, the scholarly approach that Eliade promotes, not unlike the more explicitly religious forms of revalorization that he describes, requires, it seems, redoubled acts of creativity and imagination. Revalorization, whether practiced in religious or academic domains, is part imitation but much larger part ingenuity and resourcefulness. Moreover, though he never phrases it in quite this way, Eliade suggests that it is the proper role of historians of religions to act as something like purveyors of revalorization insofar as they retrieve insights from other cultures and religious universes, which are then imaginatively re-interpreted and re-presented in ways that contribute to "the widening of the Western cultural horizon."<sup>19</sup>

In sum, then, Eliade's extensive methodological recommendations for historians of religions push us in two quite different directions – and, in my interpretations of Mesoamerican architectures, I make efforts to move in both. In one direction, perhaps defensive about frequent accusations that his scholarly style is more poetical than historically rigorous, Eliade regularly reminds us that the phenomenological history of religions, unlike philosophy or theology, must always take the empirical facts of history as its foundational point of departure. Accordingly, though routinely accused of avoiding his own

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<sup>17</sup> *IBID.*, 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> *IBID.*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *IBID.*, 57.

advice in this respect, Eliade does cue us to take very careful consideration of the particularities of religious circumstances, including the rough-edged economic and political entanglements that he himself usually managed to avoid. This is, as we'll see, very well-taken advice for one who is interested in the variously exoticizing, commodifying, nationalistic, and otherwise manipulative appropriations of Mexico's ancient monuments.

In more distinctively Eliadean moments, however, and especially in his attempts to rally scholars of religion to fulfill what he regards as the unique potential of their field, he champions imagination and creativity as the essential antidotes to a "defeatist attitude" and "spiritual timidity" that have thus far forestalled a realization of "the limitless possibilities open to historians of religions."<sup>20</sup> Eliade acknowledges that academic credibility, of course, requires philological and historical rigor; but he is much more vehement in lamenting how, in the wake of the tendency toward highly specialized research, "one notices a progressive loss of creativity and an accompanying loss of interpretive cultural syntheses in favor of fragmented, analytical research."<sup>21</sup> In his oft-quoted view, "the history of religions is destined to play an important role in contemporary cultural life"<sup>22</sup> – *but only if its practitioners can summon the necessary verve and creativity*. For Eliade, who is never content to locate the study of religion fully within the social sciences, imagination and innovativeness – tempered by the Chicago School mantra of "methodological clarity and self-consciousness" – are the historian of religions' most valued assets.<sup>23</sup>

Thus while investments in his terminology and formulations are often depicted, especially by detractors, as signs of allegiance to a romanticizing version of religious studies that disrespects history and ignores politics, it seems to me yet another serious distortion of that legacy to treat Eliade's field-building, context-bound methodological recommendations as dogmatic, and to that extent stultifying, rules about how to study religion. One needn't embrace wholesale his 1960s exuberances about "the royal road of the history of religion,"<sup>24</sup> which can lead to "a new humanism, on a world-wide scale,"<sup>25</sup> in order to capitalize

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<sup>20</sup> *IBID.*, 59, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *IBID.*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> *IBID.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Arguably, and I think consistent with Eliade's methodological bent, the most important criterion for "legitimate" or academically credible revalorizations would not be faithful adherence to one's theoretical precedents but rather clarity and self-consciousness about both the presuppositions and the consequences of approaches to the study of religion that one opts to pursue.

<sup>24</sup> *IBID.*, 62.

<sup>25</sup> *IBID.*, 3.

on Eliade's reams of writing. Alternatively, though not unmindful of Werblowsky's apt discontent with fast and loose appropriations, I will nevertheless wager that one makes the most effective use of the Eliade catalogue not by replicating his method per se – and certainly not by, say, pointing here to a *hierophany* and there to an *axis mundi* – but instead by treating it heuristically, that is, as a pluripotent resource that can be mined and “revalorized” in any number of creative ways. To pronounce Eliade as outdated or somehow tainted, and thus entirely unusable, reflects, I'd say, the reification of a complex and not always consistent body of ideas and, moreover, a failure of imagination on the part of the critics who make that charge. Old saws, when in the hands of skilled and innovative carpenters, can certainly be the instruments of fine and fully contemporary furniture.

### III. *Revalorization as an Approach to Mesoamerican Architecture: Composing Architectural Reception Histories*

I turn now to a more applied engagement of Mircea Eliade's work. Having conceded that the notion of revalorization can open the way to an irritatingly undisciplined aping and overreaching of his ideas, I nonetheless propose that the same notion can also guide us toward a rigorously empirical, even highly skeptical, study of the pre-Columbian architectural monuments of Mesoamerica. More specifically, my concern is with the interpretation – and especially the present-day re-utilization – of the large pyramids and palaces at five-star archaeological-tourist sites like Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, Palenque, and Monte Albán. All of these once-grand urban centers of population were, on the one hand, fully abandoned well in advance of the sixteenth-century Spaniards' arrival in the region; that is to say, European-derived visitors have never encountered these sites as other than “ruins.” Yet, on the other hand, while all of these formerly splendid cities endured centuries of overgrowth and neglect, presently each stands as a very high-profile, much-visited, much-revered, and much-debated travel destination. All of these are, at present, sites of both intense interest and intensifying controversy. That these pre-Hispanic structures are hundreds of years past their primes, so to speak, has by no means put an end to their allure and meaningfulness. To the contrary, these long-vacant cities, most especially in the past few decades, have been and are continually reinvested with new and different meanings – which is to say, these former capitals are, even now, subject to vigorous and on-going “revalorizations.”

Having written at some length on various means of respecting the complex, continual and invariably contentious careers of this sort of

long-enduring “sacred architecture,” I settle here for a very brief synopsis of the logic of what I’ve termed “architectural reception histories,” an approach to the study of pre-Columbian architecture that is, in large part, grounded in an appreciation of the notion of revalorization.<sup>26</sup>

That approach, to begin with, puts in doubt the usually taken-for-granted assumption that buildings – these sorts of ruined monuments included – have meanings, and thus that it is a plausible and worthy goal to try and retrieve the “true meaning” or the “real significance” of these old constructions. Self-evident as that aspiration may seem, numerous factors have led me to the alternative, seemingly petulant starting point that buildings, in and of themselves, do *not* mean anything; or, to frame the same premise in a more affirmative way, built forms do not have any intrinsic or stable meaning. Alternatively, I maintain that the meanings of buildings are situational or “eventful,” which is to say, meanings emerge from buildings in different situations, especially different ritual occasions, and to different audiences; but there is no single or secure meaning, or even set of meanings, that is somehow intrinsically implanted in the built forms. In short, any claim to have retrieved “the true meaning” of a pre-Columbian pyramid or palace – irrespective of archaeologists,’ art historians,’ and tour guides’ incessant claims to have done just that – is, from this perspective, based on a fundamental error with respect to the way in which works of art and architecture participate in transactions of meaning.<sup>27</sup>

If the root problem is, then, an untoward tendency to reify, or to imagine as stable and unified, the meanings of buildings, I will argue that a way out, a kind of interpretive solution, if you will, is the composition of so-termed architectural reception histories. This quite straightforward notion, which explicitly draws on the by-now-wavering vogue for “reception theory” or “reader-response criticism” in literary studies,<sup>28</sup> has large ramifications – and, I would maintain, estimable empirical merits – insofar as it provides a means of acknowledging the transient and diverse meanings that a prominent structure engenders both (a) over time and (b) during any single era or occasion.

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, JONES, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chapter 12, “Multifarious Revalorizations: The Composition of Ritual-Architectural Reception Histories.”

<sup>27</sup> For a fuller exposition of these ideas as about built forms and meanings, see *IBID.*, part I.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, the essays assembled in Jane P. TOMPKINS (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980); and JONES, *Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chapter 12 (*supra* n. 26).

Diachronically, then, an architectural reception history, say, of a very long-lasting site like the once-great Zapotec capital of Monte Albán in southern Mexico, entails composing a kind of timeline, in a sense a biography of the built forms' very eventful "lives," which, in this case, run some 2500 years from the origin of the settlement through to the present. To that end, one would work to recover the intended meanings of the Great Plaza's configuration around 500 BCE, when the mountaintop city was originally conceived and built; but then one would also want to consider how both the layout of the city and the meanings of its structures were elaborated and transformed during the "Classic era," between roughly 200-700 CE, when Monte Albán was up and running as the dominant capital of a Zapotec state that controlled most of the Oaxaca region. Subsequently the capital city declined until, eventually, its once-manicured plaza was abandoned and fully overgrown; and this is, therefore, where most archeological accounts of the meanings and significance of the Monte Albán's sacred architecture end.

Nonetheless, in the more exhaustive, in a sense, more fully democratic, sort of architectural reception history that I have in mind, one needs to consider as well the status of the crumbling and entirely unkempt monuments during the colonial era, that is, the three centuries after the arrival of Spaniards in 1521 until Mexican Independence, a largely uneventful stretch in Monte Albán's history of response during which the site lay dormant, with no population and only a few visitors. Furthermore, one would need to consider also all of the antiquarian-born meanings that have emerged from the ruins in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a span punctuated by Alfonso Caso's 1931 discovery of sumptuous Tomb 7, "the richest archaeological find in America,"<sup>29</sup> which catapulted the obscure mountaintop site to international fame, and thus set a stage for the snarl of competing "revalorizations" that make Monte Albán today one of Mexico's most frequently visited and also most hotly contested tourist attractions.

As a necessary complement to recording the diachronic succession of revalorizations over the site's long lifespan, a thorough architectural reception history of Monte Albán would require acknowledging as well, in a more synchronic vein, the plurality of meanings that the buildings engender among the variegated audiences of any single era. For instance, in the Classic-era context, when Monte Albán was enjoying its florescence as the region's pre-eminent capital, one constituency was, of course, the Zapotec elite who presumably conceived, designed and built (or had built) the pyramids and platforms of

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<sup>29</sup> See Alfonso CASO, "Monte Albán, Richest Archaeological Find in America," *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. LXII (October 1932), 487-512.

the city; and there is, predictably enough, a very widespread, if usually tacit, tendency to imagine that it is the deliberative, albeit idealized, understandings of these elite leaders and architects that constitute “the real meaning” of the built forms. To be sure, serious archaeologists and casual tourists alike usually conceive their goal as recovering the original vision of these pre-Columbian city planners.

We have to imagine, however, that, even from the very earliest eras, there would have been alternate constituencies that were seeing the world, and thus the city’s grand architecture, from very different perspectives. The non-elite laborers charged with the actual construction, for instance, would have experienced and perceived the spaces and rituals of Monte Albán in ways that, not infrequently, resisted and subverted the expectations of the elite choreographers of those very same forms and events. Likewise, outsiders from surrounding indigenous communities, be they adversaries, allies, vassals, or visiting dignitaries, would have apprehended the Zapotecs’ Grand Plaza and its meanings in ways very different from the resident population. That is to say, the idealized aspirations of the city’s ancient architects, even if one could lay secure hold of those hopeful drawing-board expectations, are by no means an accurate rendering of the diversity of ways that people actually engaged and responded to their monumental creations.

Consequently – particularly if our goal is the sort of empirical historical accuracy that Eliade regularly touts – we must acknowledge that these sorts of urban centers were, even in their pre-Columbian primes, what David Chidester has aptly termed “contested places,”<sup>30</sup> and thus what I might describe as “loci of revalorizations.” Likewise, at present – now more than a millennium since Monte Albán has taken on the status of a ruin and two decades since its designation as an UNESCO World Heritage Site – this place attracts ever-increasing numbers of visitors with ever more heterogeneous motives and investments. As we’ll note in the final portions of this essay, the slew of contemporary stakeholders includes increasingly well organized indigenous peoples, professionalized scholars of numerous stripes, a gaggle of governmental and commercial interests, along with a tourists whose respective dispositions range from nonchalant day-trippers, to very well-read autodidacts, to those who fashion themselves more as pilgrims than vacationers insofar as they approach the ancient Zapotec monuments as cosmo-magical resources for their own spiritual advancement.

In sum, then, the interpretive ruminations of all these constituencies, whether historically informed or not at all, constitute

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<sup>30</sup> See the Introduction to *American Sacred Space*, edited by David CHIDESTER and Edward T. LINENTHAL (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1995), 16-20.

“architectural revalorizations,” which I can define for the present purposes as *the creative and interested use (or misuse) of pre-existing architectural forms*.<sup>31</sup> While one can anticipate no consensus as to which of those new usages and apprehensions of the old built forms qualify as “correct” or even noteworthy, it is nonetheless the methodological desideratum of an “architectural reception history” to chronicle, in a more-or-less exhaustive fashion, all of the revalorizations that an architectural configuration engenders over the course of its lifespan.

On the one hand, assessing all of the entries to this motley mix of derivative usages and apprehensions as “revalorizations” seems to risk an inordinate generosity; it sets the bar so low that any way of engaging the ruins – however idiosyncratic, aggrandizing, romantic, or racist – can qualify as an exercise in creative hermeneutics. Nevertheless, on the other hand, a tourist-season weekend in one these Mesoamerican ruins will reconfirm that these sorts of wildly uneven engagements with the old buildings are indeed happening; and thus for one who aspires to empirical accuracy and completeness, Eliade’s seemingly romantic magnanimity in assessing no revalorization as wrong or even untoward, ironically enough, provides a worthy model for rigorously critical, even skeptical, inquiries into on-going meaning-making processes in which these pre-Columbian monuments are involved. That variously naïve, exoticizing, commodifying, and self-serving reutilizations of the ruins are the order of the day reminds us yet again that revalorization is an always pragmatic, only sometimes critical undertaking, which is therefore better assessed on the merits of its serviceability rather than its historical or conceptual accuracy. Misunderstandings too can qualify as rewarding and noteworthy exercises in reinterpretation. In fact, at the risk of overstressing the notion, *every* meaningful experience of a work of architecture is, in an important sense, a revalorization; and because the great majority of those revalorizations involve the “discovery” of meanings that are at odds with the intended aspirations of the architects, most architectural reception histories are, in very large part, records of a succession of *mis*-understandings.

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<sup>31</sup> By defining revalorization as both “creative and interested,” I want, on the one hand, to reecho Eliade’s suggestion that these interpretive initiatives demonstrate the imaginative lengths to which people go in recovering a sense of meaning; but, on the other hand, I want also to direct attention to the more politically self-interested (which is not to say critically self-conscious) dimensions of revalorization.



IV. *Eliadean Points of Departure: Non-literary Texts,  
Popular Religiosity, and Religious Symbols*

How, then, does Mircea Eliade's perspective support this project? Though he makes only scant allusions to Mesoamerica, usually to the Aztecs and seldom to architecture, three recurrent themes – of which, as we'll see, the last is by far most consequential – position him as an apt inspiration for the composition of what I term the “on-going reception histories” of pre-Columbian architectures.

For one, Eliade, the quintessential library scholar and textual exegete, nonetheless was also a great advocate for the interpretation of *non-literary* resources for the study of religion. Inquiries into ancient Mesoamerican religions present special challenges insofar as there is a wealth of architectural and archaeological remains, yet, aside from the hieroglyphic carvings and a handful of pre-Hispanic codices, almost no extent texts *per se*; and, as evidenced in the very small numbers of historians of religions who have embraced this as a research area, for most religionists, the absence of written texts essentially eliminates the prospect of any critically reliable recovery of those traditions. In most eyes, without coeval texts, ancient religions remain hopelessly elusive. Though Eliade joins the chorus of cautionings about “the poverty and opaqueness” of non-alphabetical sources, and he specifically warns us about “the particular modality of archaeological documents that limits and impoverishes the ‘messages’ that they can transmit,”<sup>32</sup> he nonetheless also argues that these are resources that historians of religions cannot afford to ignore:

[W]e must recall a methodological presupposition which underlies all of these studies; our conviction, namely, that the ‘documents’ collected and studied by ethnologists, archaeologists, and folklorists exercise the same claims within the study of the history of the human mind as do the written texts of the poets, the mystics, the theologians, and the philosophers of the Great Traditions.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, providing an *apropos* segue to my next point, Eliade reminds us that, “the creativity of ‘primitive,’ ‘traditional,’ and ‘popular’ spiritualities,” all of which especially interest him – and all of which are especially germane to my current project – are accessible primarily

<sup>32</sup> ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, 12-13. Later in the same work (*ibid.*, 50), Eliade warns that, “the archaeological documents present us with a fragmentary, and indeed mutilated, vision of religious life and thought.”

<sup>33</sup> ELIADE, “Notes on the Symbolism of the Arrow,” 474.

through “epiphanic *œuvres*” other than written documents;<sup>34</sup> and thus a reliance strictly on written sources is certain to lead one to a distortingly incomplete picture of the history of religions. In short, though not very specific about how to manage wordless sources, Eliade urges us toward due consideration of the sorts of “non-literary vehicles of intelligibility” that archaeological ruins present.<sup>35</sup>

For two, Eliade, by conceiving of religion as a “mode of being in the world” rather than an institutional affiliation, widens the purview of historians of religions to include all sorts of behaviors that more narrow designations would tend to preclude. As we’ll see momentarily, some of the present-day revalorizations of pre-Columbian monuments – notably, those wherein contemporary indigenous people re-utilize the ruined monuments as sites for their propitiatory rituals – fall within the bounds of nearly everyone’s definition of religion. Yet, lots of the revalorative activities – say, the gentrification of ruined cities as outdoor museums and theaters for the promulgation of a story of Mexican national identity – would strike most commentators as decidedly “non-religious.” For Eliade, however, religion is part and parcel of the human condition, a universally relevant means of bringing meaning to life, especially via periodically escaping the humdrum passage of time, which therefore shows itself in an ever-widening constellation of non-churchly contexts.<sup>36</sup> Assuredly, then, from his frame, the full range of the re-conceptualizations and re-utilizations of the ancient cities, including seemingly irreverent and economically driven re-uses, is, for scholarly purposes, profitably construed as arising from “religious” motivations and urges.

Moreover, where more narrow, and to that extent more elitist, approaches to religion and culture would lead us to evaluate the “New Age” incentives<sup>37</sup> – which presently account for, by far, the largest

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<sup>34</sup> *IBID.*, 475.

<sup>35</sup> I borrow this term from the Eliade-informed discussion in Lawrence E. SULLIVAN, “‘Seeking an End to the Primary Text’ or ‘Putting an End to the Text as Primary,’” in *Beyond the Classics? Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education*, edited by Frank E. REYNOLDS and Sheryl L. BURKHALTER (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 41-59.

<sup>36</sup> For a helpful assemblage of Eliade’s ideas about the status of religion in the contemporary world, see chapter 16, “The Religious Creativity of Modern Humanity: Some Observations on Eliade’s Unfinished Thought,” in Bryan S. RENNIE, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 215ff.

<sup>37</sup> I am neither pleased with the term “New Age” nor able to summon a more suitable term to direct attention to the wide mix of activities undertaken by those Mexicans, American and Europeans who visit the ruins with primarily “spiritual” rather than historical or recreational interests.

crowds in the ruins of Chichén Itzá, Teotihuacán, Monte Albán, and their counterparts, especially on spring equinoxes – as insidiously wrong-headed or perhaps simply silly, Eliade encourages us to a more charitable and, for that matter, more empirically thoroughgoing stance. Though harsh in his characterization of the modern world as provincial and spiritually atrophied, that disapprobation works rhetorically as the bleak background against which he can highlight and celebrate the irrepressible creativity with which “modern man” confronts the dilemma of “desacralization.” Accordingly, instead of dismissal or condescension, Eliade prompts us to error of the side of generosity by evaluating the not-infrequently exoticizing and goofy expressions of metaphysically-minded visitors to the ruins as imaginative strategies of recuperation against the “camouflage of the sacred,” viable, indeed inevitable, expressions of “popular spirituality.” In short, then, perhaps ironically, since Eliade’s infamous insistence on “the irreducibility of religion” has often led to accusations that he was narrowing the field, his outlook actually spurs us toward a very widely inclusive consideration of the variously devotional, educational, nationalistic, and commercialized reutilizations that Mesoamerican ruins evoke.

Third and even more helpfully evocative are Eliade’s ideas with respect to “religious symbols,” a set of concerns sufficiently important to deserve its own subsection.

#### *V. Mesoamerican Ruins as Religious Symbols: Eliadean Clues to the Appraisal of Superabundant Pyramids and Palaces*

Eliade’s 1959 contention that, “[a]s frequently noted, there has been for some time now a vogue for symbolism”<sup>38</sup> is, at this point, decidedly outdated. Others in this issue are commenting on symbols’ precipitous if somewhat puzzling fall from prominence in contemporary religious studies, a decline that I’ll opine owes largely to the (mis)perception that preoccupations with “the meanings of symbols,” of necessity, pulls one away from more fashionable concerns for the socio-economic and political dimensions of religion. Nevertheless, Eliade’s insights into “religious symbols”<sup>39</sup> – and the privileged place that he

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<sup>38</sup> Mircea ELIADE, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” in *History of Religions: Problems of Methodology*, edited by Mircea ELIADE and Joseph M. KITAGAWA (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 86.

<sup>39</sup> In an arguably circular definition, ELIADE, *ibid.*, 88, defines “religious symbols” as “those that are bound up with a religious experience or a religious conception

affords to symbolism in both the enactment of religion and thus the study of religion – remain, for my present purposes, instructive and useful in the extreme. Indeed, though we could arrive at very similar insights from numerous other theoretical points of departure (for instance, via the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer),<sup>40</sup> I will venture that we reap very large heuristic rewards by conceiving of pre-Columbian monuments, including those that have stood as ruins for a thousand years, as so-termed religious symbols. Or, to nuance that proposition slightly, I argue that Mesoamerican pyramids and palaces, not unlike Gothic cathedrals and Ottoman mosques, *participate in the character of* what Eliade terms religious symbols.

In his most high-profile discussion of the topic, too widely known to require much elaboration,<sup>41</sup> Eliade enumerates six interrelated aspects that variously qualify and embellish his basic contention that, “[t]he [religious] symbol is not a mere reflection of objective reality. It reveals something more profound and more basic.”<sup>42</sup> With respect to appreciation of the on-going careers of pre-Columbian monuments, it is the third of those aspects that is most salient, and thus most deserving of elaboration; but I will nonetheless quickly inventory the relevance of all six.

In his first point, Eliade lays a foundation for his reiterative claim that religious symbols are far more than a shorthand means of communicating insights that could be transacted in some alternate way. To the contrary, for him, such symbols serve a crucial and unique purpose insofar as they are “capable of revealing a modality of the real or a structure of the World that is not evident on the level of experience.”<sup>43</sup> Eliade then appeals to the cross-culturally pervasive symbolism of water in order to illustrate the sense in which religious symbols aim at “a

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of the world.” Given my goal of considering all sorts of revalorizations of Mesoamerican ruins, Eliade’s ambiguity and lack of persuasively differentiating religious symbols from a larger class of symbolism are actually virtues.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, JONES, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chapter 2, “Dancing Menhirs: The Superabundance and Autonomy of Architecture.”

<sup>41</sup> ELIADE, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 86-107. For a concise summary both of Eliade’s conception of religious symbols and some of the more notable criticisms of that exposition, see RENNIE, *Reconstructing Eliade*, chapter 6, “Symbols and Symbolism.”

<sup>42</sup> ELIADE, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” 98.

<sup>43</sup> *IBID.* I thought that I had learned from Eliade (and I will argue momentarily) that, rather than *thinking about* symbols, people *experience* symbols, which leaves me somewhat puzzled by his suggestions here that symbols operate beneath or somehow outside of “the level of experience.”

modality of the real which is inaccessible to human experience.”<sup>44</sup> He insists, in other words, that symbols, while perhaps (or maybe not) thoroughly human creations, neither arise nor are subsequently utilized and apprehended via rational or self-conscious processes of thinking: “rather does the living consciousness *grasp reality* through the symbol, anterior to reflection.”<sup>45</sup>

While one may feel some slippage with respect to Eliade’s stances on both (a) the connection, or perhaps lack thereof, between “religious symbols” and “human experience” and (b) the processes that give rise to religious symbols, I find here a very important lesson for the study of architecture. His comments suggest to me that religious symbols – symbolic works of art and architecture included – once encountered out there in the world, irrespective of the means their original creation, are not simply objects of thoughtful attention, but instead are impactful upon people in pre-cognitive or maybe trans-cognitive ways. That is to say, Eliade’s first point prompts me to believe that people *experience* rather than *think about*, or even *with*, symbols – and this notion is especially apropos to encounters with sacred architecture, which invariably entail ambulatory, bodily, and multi-sensory engagements with built environments (as opposed, for instance, to simply looking at and thinking about buildings). For instance, as pre-Columbian or, for that matter, present-day visitors move through the Great Plaza of Monte Albán, the ceremonial space, to the extent that it is a symbolic context, *works on* them in ways that those patrons themselves can not fully control, understand, nor articulate.

Eliade’s second contention about religious symbols likewise accentuates the sense in which they, on the one hand, operate at some fundamental level that lies beneath, or perhaps in advance of, deliberative conceptualization, yet, on the other hand, symbols direct attention to matters of the most profound or “sacred” significance. According to Eliade, “for the primitive, *symbols are always religious* because they point to something *real* or to a *structure of the world*.”<sup>46</sup> Where our study of Mesoamerican architecture is concerned, suggestions that “primitives” have unique investments in symbolism that may be absent in modern populations pose an untoward obstacle; and the status of “the sacred,” which Eliade defines here as equivalent to “the *real* – that is, the powerful, the meaningful, the living,”<sup>47</sup> presents an infamously unwieldy problem. But there is nonetheless great heuristic utility in the contention

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<sup>44</sup> IBID. 98.

<sup>45</sup> IBID., 98; italics added.

<sup>46</sup> IBID., 98; italics his.

<sup>47</sup> IBID. , 99; italics his.

that, say, an impressive built form, or perhaps even a fully natural waterfall or mountain, to the extent that those features are "symbolic," can engender profound awarenesses that constitute truly exceptional departures from the commonplaces of prosaic (profane) life.

Eliade's second assertion about symbols thereby lends credence, for instance, to Abbot Suger's seemingly extravagant contention that Gothic cathedrals can facilitate a kind of "anagogical illumination" wherein (an experience of) the splendid architectural forms and stained glass transports worshippers from the material world to the realm of the immaterial or transcendent, to what Suger termed a "strange region" of ethereal bliss<sup>48</sup> – a prospect that, therefore, deserves consideration with respect to the sorts of religiously uplifting encounters one might have with Mesoamerican architecture. This point, in other words, compels us to consider that the fully prosaic bricks and mortar of religious structures in Mexico or elsewhere indeed can and do "point to something *real*," which might prove otherwise inaccessible. By that logic, New Age enthusiasts' contentions that ruins provide them unique access to the transcendent insights and energies become rather more plausible.

Third and especially important for the present project, Eliade maintains that, "[a]n essential characteristic of religious symbolism is its *multivalence*, its capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings, whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience."<sup>49</sup> To illustrate this point, Eliade notes how the widespread and invariably multidimensional symbolism of the moon provides people a means of acknowledging and sharing – albeit without explicitly understanding or rationalizing – the "connatural solidarity between the lunar rhythms, temporal becoming, water, growth of plants, the female principle, death and resurrection, human destiny, weaving, and so forth."<sup>50</sup> Once again then, Eliade is accentuating that the specialness of symbols is consequent of their ability to operate at a kind of pre-reflective, almost automatic level, *to strike a chord*, as it were, or maybe *engender a profound and rewarding sensibility*, about the nature of the world and humans' integral place within it, that comes to consciousness beneath (or outside) the level of critical reflection.

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<sup>48</sup> See Abbot Suger, *On the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasures*, ed. and trans. by Erwin PANOFKY (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); or, for a summary discussion of Suger's conception of anagogical illumination, see JONES, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. 2, chapter 22, "Contemplation: Props for Devotion."

<sup>49</sup> ELIADE, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," 98; italics his.

<sup>50</sup> *IBID.*, 99.

Moreover, this stress on the multivalence of symbols – a theme that is both relentlessly instantiated in Eliade’s work and absolutely crucial to my notion of architectural reception history – has profound methodological ramifications insofar as it eliminates the possibility that either religious actors or scholars of religion can ever fully decipher or decode a religious symbol. He forces us to remember that there is never a one-to-one correlation between a symbol and its meaning. To the contrary, the so-termed multivalence of symbols, architectural symbols again included, likewise insures what others have termed the “inexhaustibility” and “autonomy” of symbols insofar as symbolic forms have the rare capability to evoke a succession of meanings that is both widely variant and highly unpredictable.<sup>51</sup> That 1500-year-old pyramids can continue to call forth new and different meanings among present-day audiences, including a raft of fresh meanings that never occurred to the original architects, is, among other things, a testament to the multivalence of those sturdy monuments.

The extreme relevance of this observation – which adds substance to metaphors about the autonomous “lives” and “personalities” of buildings – should become more clear in the final portions of this essay; but for the moment it is worth noting that Eliade’s stress on multivalence prompts us to appreciate how enduring constructions stand as provocatively polyvalent resources that assert themselves both synchronically and diachronically. That is, on the one hand, synchronically – say, in one well-attended ceremonial occasion, be it a pre-Columbian coronation or a present-day equinox celebration – the various constituencies within a diversified audience of worshippers (rich versus poor, male versus female, young versus old, educated versus naïve, etc.) will, in all likelihood ascertain significantly different components of plurivocal possibilities that reside within a Mesoamerican pyramid. Likewise, diachronically – say, in the succession of ceremonial occasions that such an enduring structure hosts over time – again, significantly different components of the multivalent symbolism, including components that were never conceived by the original builders, will invariably emerge. In short, though Eliade is by no means alone in accentuating the multivocality of religious symbols, and thus of all weighty works of sacred architecture (and while there may be some danger here in shifting agency from human actors to stone buildings), his

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<sup>51</sup> For discussion of ways in which Hans-Georg Gadamer, Henri Lefebvre, Bernard Tschumi, and others have addressed the “inexhaustibility” and “autonomy” of architectural forms, see JONES, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, volume 1, chapter 2, “Dancing Menhirs: The Superabundance and Autonomy of Architecture.”

stress on that theme coaxes us to a methodological conviction that the meanings of Mesoamerican monuments are invariably plural, transient, and therefore intriguingly unpredictable.

Eliade's last three points likewise address consequences of the multivalence of symbols. In the fourth he observes that "this capacity of religious symbolism to reveal a multitude of structurally coherent meanings" thus enables symbols "to reveal a perspective in which heterogeneous realities are susceptible of articulation into a whole or even of integration into a 'system.'"<sup>52</sup> Again invoking as an example the symbolism of the moon, Eliade explains that,

the different meanings of lunar symbols form a sort of "system" [...] Owing to the symbolism of the moon, the World no longer appears as an arbitrary assemblage of heterogeneous and divergent realities. The diverse cosmic levels communicate with each other; they are 'bound together' by the same lunar rhythm, just as human life also is "woven together" by the moon and is predestined by the "spinning" goddesses."<sup>53</sup>

Via their multivalence, symbols can, then, express a host of meanings that are highly diversified but also "structurally coherent" insofar in they apprise, or "tip one off" that beneath the seemingly disconnected and chaotic world there is, after all, a kind of orderliness, "structural solidarity," or "homologization," which unites cosmological, anthropological, and "spiritual" realms in a way that makes life meaningful. As Eliade explains it, "the religious symbol allows man to discover a certain unity of the World and, at the same time, to disclose to himself his proper destiny as an integrating part of the World."<sup>54</sup>

His fifth point refers to yet another way in which religious symbols are able to accomplish something that rational thought cannot: "[p]erhaps the most important function of religious symbolism – important above all because of the role which it will play in later philosophical speculations – is its capacity for expressing paradoxical situation, or certain structures of ultimate reality, otherwise quite inexpressible."<sup>55</sup> Here, as in numerous of his writings, Eliade connects "the capacity of symbols to express the contradictory aspects of ultimate reality" to the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*, that is, an awareness of the paradoxical coexistence of polar and antagonistic principles; and here again Eliade stresses that while "the concepts of polarity and of

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<sup>52</sup> ELIADE, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," 99-100.

<sup>53</sup> IBID., 100.

<sup>54</sup> IBID., 100.

<sup>55</sup> IBID., 101.



*coincidentia oppositorum* have been used in a systematic fashion since the beginnings of philosophical speculation, the symbols that dimly revealed them were not the result of critical reflection, but of an existential tension.<sup>56</sup> This special capacity of symbols to carry the freight of existential insights that are, in a sense, “too heavy” to be subsumed within rational thinking, moreover, helps to explain the endurance of symbols – as exemplified, perhaps, in the continuing appeal of centuries-old pyramids – which, unlike more straightforward philosophical formulations, prove illimitable over time.

Sixth and finally, Eliade maintains that, “it is necessary to underline the *existential value* of religious symbolism, that is, the fact that a symbol always aims at a *reality or situation in which human existence is engaged*.”<sup>57</sup> Once more positioning symbols at the very core of the human engagement with the world, Eliade stresses, in other words, that where ideas and concepts, even those that deal with rarified and profound matters, may belong to an arena of speculation and abstraction, symbols, by contrast, invariably traffic in concerns and insights that are of the most practical, down-to-earth sort: “It is above all this existential dimension that marks off and distinguishes symbols from concepts.”<sup>58</sup> That is to say yet again, people appeal to symbols not simply as a consequence of curiosity or speculative cogitation, but rather because, according to Eliade, symbols are the most apposite, perhaps the only, resources through which people bring “a meaning into human existence. This is why even symbols aiming at ultimate reality constitute existential revelations for the man who deciphers their message.”<sup>59</sup>

Moreover – and this too is a notion very germane to the present discussion of the highly diversified, if often eccentric, revalorizations of pre-Columbian monuments – instead of construing the interpretation of religious symbols as the exclusive province of religious specialists or academics, Eliade’s sixth point, albeit somewhat obliquely, suggests (to me) that such symbols are the resources with which even the most unsophisticated people can transform quotidian, “profane” lives into meaningful ones. By leaving the impression that life-enhancing engagements with symbols require very little in the way of intellectual acuity – in his depiction, the interpretation and thus revalorization of symbols seem to be innately human capacities rather than acquired skills – he again encourages us to a generously inclusive view and helps us to appreciate how it is that largely misinformed sight-seers, and even

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<sup>56</sup> IBID., 102.

<sup>57</sup> IBID., 102; italics his.

<sup>58</sup> IBID., 102.

<sup>59</sup> IBID., 102-3; italics his.

children, can find something of value in a visit to archaeological-tourist sites like Teotihuacán and Chichén Itzá. Though the meanings that symbols evoke may be profound in the extreme, those insights are, so he implies, available to any who participate in the human condition.

In sum, then, critics have exceptionally strong grounds on which to complain that Eliade's analysis of religious symbols is, in very large part, an overexuberant celebration of their supposed virtues. For him, symbols provide a kind of extra- or super-language whereby people, even without really thinking, "grasp reality" and become aware of the meaningfulness and unity of the worlds in which they live; via symbols alone, awarenesses "too deep and fundamental" for concepts to manage come to light.<sup>60</sup> For better or worse, symbols emerge from this discussion as no less than the premier instruments whereby otherwise prosaic life is made "sacred" and significant.

Attributing to religious symbols such a uniquely lofty role makes Eliade inspiring but also very vulnerable. For detractors who accuse him of perpetrating the inordinately rosy view that "religion is good and good for you,"<sup>61</sup> Eliade's nearly complete avoidance of a darker side of symbolism – that is, his inarguable neglect of the ways in which religious symbols might work to variously dominate, oppress, and mystify socio-economic disparities (which assuredly they do) – is enough to jettison his entire discussion. In fact, this seeming lack of suspicion about the purposes to which symbols work accounts, one has to suppose, for the ebbing interest in the topic during the past couple decades.

As an antidote to that disinterest, however, here again I seize doubly upon the notion of revalorization as a description of both (a) what religious people invariably do and (b) how scholars might capitalize on their academic predecessors. At the first level, Eliade's famed discussion of symbols undermines the disturbingly prevalent assumption that buildings have intrinsic and stable meanings, and thus opens the way to appreciation the sorts of revalorative usages of Mesoamerica ruins that I will inventory in the remainder of this essay. That much ought to be clear at this point. But at the second level, I make the perhaps less obvious proposal that Eliade's huge corpus itself stands as a kind of multivalent symbol. That is to say, the same literary, metaphor-rich writing style that draws accusations of vagueness and imprecision likewise opens the possibility that Eliade's vast body of writing is useful to us now less as a programmatic model for how twenty-first-century scholars of religion

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<sup>60</sup> *IBID.*, 98.

<sup>61</sup> Neil McMULLIN, "The *Encyclopedia of Religion*: A Critique from the Perspective of the History of the Japanese Religious Traditions;" *MTSR* 1 (1989), no. 1, 89-90.

ought to proceed than as a richly polyvalent resource from which we can build our own ways of studying religion.

Though there are, of course, serious limits to an analogy between the once-grand Mesoamerican ruins and the fabulously influential writings of Mircea Eliade, there is, I'd maintain, a kind of symbolic quality to his discussion of religious symbols and, arguably, to his entire oeuvre. Thus to treat Eliade's work as though it were stable, one-dimensional, and thoroughly consistent can make it a much easier target to attack; but that reifying reading also, in a sense, commits the same error as those interpreters who claim to have laid hold of "the true meaning" of a particular religious symbol or, for that matter, "the once-and-for-all meaning" of some specific Mesoamerican pyramid. In short, though the tall edifice of Eliade's method has, by now, been condemned by many as irrevocably cracked and worn – perhaps consigned to the status of a ruin in its own right – the sort of pluripotent reflections that he provides about, for instance, non-literary texts, "popular spirituality," and religious symbols continue, I contend, to provide befitting building blocks, and thus highly provocative points of departure, for the sort of inventory of revalorative uses of Mesoamerican ruins to which I now turn.

#### VI. *The Revalorization of Mesoamerican Ruins: A Sampling of New Usages of Old Buildings*

I've argued, then, if Mesoamerican ruins – not unlike other age-old theological ideas, dogmas, beliefs, rituals, and religious institutions – are subject to, or available for, revalorization, it is because those sturdy monuments have the character of what Mircea Eliade terms "religious symbols." Because the range of revalorative usages is stupendously wide, varied, and thus worthy of much more extensive treatment than I can provide here, I simply present a brief four-part sampling, a provisional typology of the sorts of new usages and apprehensions that these old monuments have enjoyed and/or endured. Not uninterested in those original, idealized meanings that continue to provide the principal target of most archaeological and art historical interpreters, I'll nonetheless pay special attention to the kinds of re-uses that occurred after these places – essentially all of which were, in their heydays, true cities with tens of thousands of residences – had been abandoned and over-grown. In fact, in order to make my broader points about revalorization, I particularly accentuate the sorts of juxtapositions of new usages and old buildings that one is liable to encounter right now, revivifications that mainstream Mesoamericanists tend, for the most part, to disregard as simply quirky,

incidental and, therefore, unworthy objects for serious scholarship. Eliade's lead, however, gives us pause to think otherwise.

A. *Mesoamerican Ruins as Religious Resources:  
 Indigenous and New Age Revalorizations*

First, there are numerous instances in which these ancient cities, long after their respective abandonments, have been – and currently are being – revalorized in ways that are, by nearly any criteria, “religious.” Three very different variations on that broad theme deserve quick note.

For one, even well in advance of the arrival of Spaniards in the region there are many instances in which pre-Columbian peoples embraced long-deserted sites – in most cases, sites about which they really had no reliable historical knowledge and no direct genealogical links – as places of great significance and power. The Aztecs, desperately in search of a pedigree that would authorize their meteoric rise to political power, provide two of the most prominent examples: in the case of Teotihuacán, the Aztecs' complete lack of knowledge of, or connectedness to, the builders of these gigantic pyramids did nothing to prevent them from designating this great Classic-era site, by that time simply an assemblage of ruined monuments, as “the city of the gods” and the site of all sorts of crucial mythological episodes, including the self-sacrifice of the gods that had eventuated in the Fifth Sun. By the same token, the Aztecs, seemingly both as an act of reverence and a cagey strategy to fabricate a fictive genealogical connection between themselves and the revered Toltecs (to whom they really had no historical connection), not only modeled their own capital city of Tenochtitlán after the by-then vacant Toltec capital of Tula; they, moreover, made regular pilgrimages to the former capital and then hauled back to their growing Mexica capital as much statuary as they could carry.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the old ruins of Teotihuacán and Tula – despite the lack of direct historical links in either case – served the prime resources, the raw materials, if you will, that the Aztecs “revalorized” as part of their painstaking efforts to construct a new guise of legitimacy.

Monte Albán's famed Tomb 7 provides a similarly high-profile example of pre-Columbian “religious” revalorization wherein a later

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<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, Leonardo LÓPEZ LUJÁN and Alfredo LÓPEZ AUSTIN, “The Mexica in Tula and Tula in Mexico-Tenochtitlan,” in *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, edited by William L. FASH and Leonardo LÓPEZ LUJÁN (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2009), 384-422.

group co-opted the pedigreed architecture of earlier group to whom they had no bona fide historical link. In this case, so-termed Tomb 7 was originally built by Zapotecs during the Classic period; but then in the Postclassic era, again several hundred years following the abandonment of the once-great city, Mixtec visitors – of perhaps “pilgrims” – re-entered the tomb, raked out most of the Zapotec bones and funerary accouterments, after which they deposited the remains of their own revered rulers along with sumptuous gold ornaments that Alfonso Caso would eventually recover in 1931.<sup>63</sup> That is to say, for the Mixtecs, the waterless mountaintop site of Monte Albán, while lacking appeal as a site of habitation, was assessed as an ideal place to bury their most honored leaders. In this instance, then, the Mixtecs “revalorized” the Zapotecs’ former political capital as a necropolis.

Likewise, even at present – actually, increasingly at present – contemporary indigenous peoples, to the extent that they are afforded access, frequently undertake devotional activities in what are now archaeological ruins. For instance, at a very large and intensely commercialized site like Chichén Itzá the main portion of the ruins is filled with tourists, guides and concessions, and thus closely monitored; but in the more remote parts of the site one will routinely encounter signs of contemporary, small-scaled ritual activity. The copal offerings that present-day visitors find at the base of the ancient statuary, which is strewn around the jungle surrounding the site, provides sure evidence that at least some of the local Yucatec Maya are still regarding these ruins as a particularly efficacious site at which to offer their prayers and propitiations. Also at Guatemalan sites, where regulations of access can be much looser, one frequently encounters quintessential scenes of revalorization wherein local Maya people will first cover a pre-Columbian mound with fresh pine needles, and then construct a temporary altar – complete with candles, flowers and, invariably, crosses and images of Catholic saints – whereupon they perform their sacrifices, usually of chickens. In other words, while such practices demonstrate the impressive endurance of an ancient Mesoamerican *cosmovision* and a continued investment in the ceremonial centers of their Maya ancestors, they are notable as well for the creative integration of abundant Christian elements. Moreover, at the mid-sized Maya site of Iximché, for example, this sort of ritualizing re-utilization of the ruins takes an even more ironically eclectic turn in the wake of the Guatemalan government custodians’ seemingly hospitable gesture of cordoning off a portion of the

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<sup>63</sup> All overview treatments of Monte Albán address the famed Tomb 7, but the classic discussion of the tomb appears in Alfonso CASO, *El tesoro de Monte Albán* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1969).

archaeological-tourist site so that the local Maya could proceed unmolested with their rites, only to have those syncretic practices become Iximché's premier tourist attraction. In a sense, devotional revalorizations are being revalorized yet again as money-making opportunities.

A third, very different and even more conspicuous variation also under the rubric of "ruins as religious resources" involves the ways in which these ancient sites presently – and again increasingly – serve as hosts to what I label, for lack of a better term, "New Age" devotional practices. At the major Epiclassic site of Xochicalco, for instance, back in 1987, I encountered a group of some 30 people, all Mexicans, who were dancing around a white tunic-clad man on the top of the famous Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl; when queried about their enthusiasm for the ruins, they produced a Spanish version of Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods*, and, so it seemed, had fully embraced the author's view that the monuments ought to be attributed to extra-terrestrials, who had had the foresight to select a locale that remains today intrinsically powerful. In this sort of quirky revalorative activity, then, the balance of continuity with original intentions and innovative departures from them swings far in favor of the latter; but the intrusion of space men into the story of the ancient city also comports with the sorts of "myths of the modern world" that Eliade presents as widespread and largely predictable.<sup>64</sup> Thus where ridicule and dismissal are tempting scholarly responses to the von Däniken followers, he prompts us to give them a bit more patient consideration.

Equally quirky but much more striking than the modest-sized groups of dancers and chanters that frequent various ruins year round are the enormous crowds that congregate at all of the major sites each spring equinox. Again instantiating the weird mix of forces that coalesce in revalorative devotions, attendance at these equinox events is much enhanced by the fact their timing corresponds with annual three-day weekend celebrations of the birthday of Mexico's revered Indian president, Benito Juarez. Most notable, at least in American eyes, is the highly publicized "Serpent of Light" phenomenon at Chichén Itzá wherein, late in the afternoon on the day of the equinox, the great Castillo pyramid casts a shadow on itself so that these seven triangles along with the head of serpent are illuminated in the bright sun while the rest of the pyramid falls into shade; thus, according to interpretations that some embrace and others reject, this pattern of light and shadow depicts

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<sup>64</sup> See, for instance, Mircea ELIADE, "The Myths of the Modern World," in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, translated by Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1960).

Quetzalcoatl, the mythical flying snake that descends from the sky, down the pyramid, along this wide avenue and into the Sacred Cenote. Owing to its proximity to the beach resorts of the so-termed Maya Riviera, the more than 30,000 people that this annual event attracts are largely foreign tourists, though with very widely varying dispositions and expectations. Some are remarkably well-versed in Maya studies, while more operate with a *National Geographic* base of knowledge; many are content to celebrate the supposed technical and religious sophistication of the ancient Maya, while others have grander hopes of using the equinox event as opportunity for their own spiritual growth.

The same-day events at Teotihuacán, which is just an hour's drive north of Mexico City, are currently attracting more than 80,000 visitors, the great majority of whom are Mexican nationals, though again of very widely varying mindsets. Tula, Xochicalco, and Monte Albán, as well as Palenque and numerous other sites in the Maya region, all attract, by far, their largest audiences of the year on the spring equinox. The fact that these sites, unlike Chichén Itzá, there is absolutely nothing special that visitors can see on March 20 is further testament to nimble imaginations that drive these increasingly well attended annual celebrations; that is to say, any thread of continuity linking these present-day equinox festivities to their pre-Columbian counterparts is thin in the extreme. Moreover, for historians of religions, it is both worrisome and fascinating that, at present, the most serious threat to the structural stability of Mesoamerica's ancient monuments is not earthquakes, erosion nor urban sprawl, and nor is it looters or treasure hunters; instead, it is the huge and still-growing popularity of revalorative ritual activities, which bring tens of thousands of people tromping into these sites each spring.

*B. Mesoamerican Ruins as Historical and Cultural Resources:  
Amateur, Professional, and Artistic Revalorizations*

Along with these sorts of spiritually motivated re-uses of the ruins, is a second even broader set of revalorizations wherein ruins have been – and are – used as historical, cultural, literary, and/or artistic resources. With respect to this wide set of options, it is important to note that scholarly, or maybe pseudo-scholarly, interest in these old buildings is both much older and also considerably wider than the bounds of professionalized archaeology. In any case, again I settle for a staccato presentation of three very different, but also overlapping variations on the theme.

One exceptionally diversified set of re-uses and re-interpretations emerges from amateur or lay commentators on the ruins,

that is, persons with deep investments and strong opinions about the meanings of Mesoamerica's ancient monuments who, either by default or design, find themselves outside the academic mainstream. Odd bedfellows linked only by their non-participation in the academic establishment, arguably the most noteworthy representatives of this alternative are those mainly European-born antiquarian explorers who, beginning especially in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated expeditions to numerous of the large sites, none of which had been systematically excavated or even mapped at that point. Unconfined by expectations of objectivity, the commentaries of these intrepid pioneers, often racist and rambunctious but also refreshingly unguarded, routinely re-use the ruins as resources with which to advance pet theories about world history, human nature, the transition from savagery to civilization, or whatever. Of innumerable relevant exemplars, French explorer Augustus Le Plongeon (1826-1908) provides an especially colorful and telling illustration insofar as he came from France to Mexico with the bizarre conviction that the Maya were responsible for essentially the whole of world civilization; and then he and his wife, Alice, spent their lifetimes fleshing out the frame of that wild proposition by arguing, for instance, that the Maya Queen M'oo had been forced to flee Chichén Itzá and then settled in Egypt, which, the French couple argue, explains the uncanny similarities between Maya and Egyptian art and architecture.<sup>65</sup>

While the Le Plongeon may be extreme representatives of the genre, the list of self-appointed, largely self-trained Mesoamericanists who offer similarly venturesome ideas about the ruins and their builders is tantalizingly long.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, though this free-wheeling style of speculation is, to a significant measure, supplanted by the early-twentieth-century emergence of more professionalized approaches to anthropology and archaeology, it is important to note that, particularly where the ancient Maya are concerned, a strain of non-conventional, even anti-conventional, "scholarly" commentary persists. On occasion providing the "sacred texts" for the sorts of aficionados described in the previous section, books like José Argüelles' *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology*; Hunbatz Men's *Secrets of Mayan Science/Religion*; or Adalberto Rivera's *The Mysteries of Chichen Itza: The First Guide to the*

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<sup>65</sup> See Lawrence Gustave DESMOND and Phyllis Mauch MESSENGER, *A Dream of Maya: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in Nineteenth-Century Yucatan* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Robert WAUCHOPE, *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents: Myth and Method in the Study of American Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). On these early commentators on the ruins, also see Lindsay JONES, *Twin City Tales: A Hermeneutical Reassessment of Tula and Chichén Itzá* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995), chapters 1-2.



*Esoteric Function of the Temples and Pyramids of Ancient Chichen Itza*, albeit every different among themselves, win popular audiences in large part by presenting re-interpretations of the ruins that, these authors claim, have been either missed or, for more sinister reasons, deliberately suppressed by “establishment scholarship.”<sup>67</sup>

Though fifty years ago, Robert Wauchope’s *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents* urged Mesoamericanists toward more serious consideration of the wider forces that account for the startling abundance of incautiously adventurous ideas about these ruins and their builders,<sup>68</sup> mainstream archaeologists, predictably, persist in their inclination to dispense with most of these nineteenth-century figures as pre-scientific dreamers and cranks, and thus invoke names like the Le Plongeons largely for comic relief. And, just as we hope they would, professional Mesoamericanists feel an even stronger sense of obligation to reject the undisciplined efforts of those contemporary authors who purport to have recovered from the ruins esoteric significances that have escaped the attention of more conventional interpreters. Nevertheless, historians of religions intent on composing critical and empirically thoroughgoing archaeological reception histories cannot afford to exempt that lay literature from inclusion. Indeed, careful consideration of temerarious ruminations that emerge from that span between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1920’s, that is, prior to the establishment of a solidly scientific archaeology, provides among the most rich and revealing segments in the respective architectural reception histories of all these sites. In my experience, every one of those early excursionists opens the way to a fascinating and far-reaching story. Additionally, while it can prove tougher to summon an empathetic hermeneutical attitude toward the Le Plongeons’ more contemporary heirs, that too is a challenge that a neo-Eliadean is compelled to accept. To be sure, their efforts, however heretical, also qualify as “creative revalorizations.”

Be that as it may, professionalized Mesoamericanists, the second group within this very broad set, do, of course, commit themselves to different and much higher standards of scientific rigor; and, consequently, they do have strong grounds for imagining radical differences between their carefully substantiated theories and those of either their antiquarian

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<sup>67</sup> José ARGÜELLES, *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology* (Inner Traditions/Bear & Company, 1987); Hunbatz MEN, *Secrets of Mayan Science/Religion* (Bear & Company, 1989); and Adalberto RIVERA A., *The Mysteries of Chichen Itza: The First Guide to the Esoteric Function of the Temples and Pyramids of Ancient Chichen Itza* (Universal Image Enterprise Inc., 1995).

<sup>68</sup> WAUCHOPE, *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents*.

predecessors or lay contemporaries. Nevertheless, even the most staid and carefully documented archaeological reconstructions of, say, Monte Albán, qualify too as creative revalorizations and, therefore, necessary entries to a reception history of that site. Moreover, here again, a review of the literature immediately reminds us of the superabundance of the old Zapotec monuments insofar as it reveals a wide diversity of competing and evolving archaeological accounts even among the field's most pedigreed spokespersons. For example, beginning in the 1930's, Mexico's premier archaeologist, Alfonso Caso delivered the first comprehensive "history" of the site by arranging the emerging excavationary data into a five-stage story of the Zapotec capital's rise and fall;<sup>69</sup> in the 1960's, Caso's successor, Ignacio Bernal retained the five stages but reworked the story in ways attribute Monte Albán's success to the virtues of inter-cultural admixing;<sup>70</sup> shortly thereafter, American archaeologist John Paddock crafted a version that downplayed the admixing theme in favor of an emphasis on the distinctiveness and cultural continuity of the Zapotecs;<sup>71</sup> in 1978, Richard Blanton appealed to the notion of a "disembedded capital" along with an abundance of new archaeological data in order to rework Monte Albán's history into a very different tale of regional cooperation, ethnic integration, and religious tolerance;<sup>72</sup> and, more recently, though relying on much of the same data, Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery have (re)built a synthesis of Monte Albán that depends upon an "action theory" approach to Oaxacan social evolution.<sup>73</sup>

Not infrequently archaeologists claim to be delivering the authoritative renditions of the past; and thus one can anticipate resistance and resentfulness to repositioning these carefully wrought archaeological syntheses as mere moments within the on-going reception history of Monte Albán, especially if that positioning implies that these data-based accounts are not "truer" than the much less well informed speculations of

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<sup>69</sup> Of numerous relevant works by the same author, see Alfonso CASO, *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca*, El Libro de la Cultura (Barcelona: Editorial González Porto, 1936).

<sup>70</sup> See Ignacio BERNAL, "Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, volume 3, "Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica," volume editor, Gordon R. WILLEY; general editor, Robert WAUCHOPE (London: University of Texas Press, 1965), 788-813.

<sup>71</sup> See John PADDOCK, "Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica"; part II in *Ancient Oaxaca: Discoveries in Mexican Archeology and History*, ed. John PADDOCK (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), originally 1966.

<sup>72</sup> Richard E. BLANTON, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

<sup>73</sup> Joyce MARCUS and Kent V. FLANNERY, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

their antiquarian predecessors. Nevertheless, even positivistic, processual archeologists are, to a substantial degree, storytellers who, as befits revalorization, exercise considerable imagination on the materials that they recover from the past.<sup>74</sup> Though some are more creative than others, professionalized archaeological (or art historical) interpretations are, to be sure, “revalorizations.”

In any case, a third and last entry to this motley mix of those who re-use ruins as historical and cultural resources is composed of artists, broadly conceived, that is, audiences and individuals who make less pretence to be “scientific” in their approach to the ruins, and instead enlist the pre-Columbian buildings and sculptures as sources of literary or artistic inspiration. Novels by D.H. Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry, and Italo Calvino, among many, incorporate and re-utilize Mexico’s ruins in ways that make no pretense to solid historical knowledge of those places.<sup>75</sup> And even more intriguing is the raft of instances assembled in Barbara Braun’s *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art*, wherein twentieth-century artists and architects have relied explicitly on pre-Columbian models or inspirations for their own work without, however, feeling any requirement for accurate replication of the ancient forms, and even less for preservation of their original functions.

For example, Chichén Itzá’s famous eleventh-century *chacmool* statue, a reclining figure holding a bowl on in his stomach into which, according to most interpretations, the hearts from human sacrifice were deposited (a statue that was, by the way, discovered and named by Augustus Le Plongeon), served as a model for a whole series of “Reclining Woman” statues by English sculptor, Henry Moore.<sup>76</sup> Again vintage revalorization insofar as Moore retrieved the ancient *chacmool* as his inspiration, but then fully feminized the ostensibly male figure and, moreover, disconnected it entirely from its original uses and connotations

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<sup>74</sup> By contrast, “post-processual archaeologists,” who take cues from Ian HODDER, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), revised 1991 and, with Scott HUSTON, 2003, would likely be more at ease with the notion that their interpretations constitute, among other things, moments within architectural reception histories.

<sup>75</sup> D. H. LAWRENCE, *The Plumed Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), first edition 1926; Malcolm LOWRY, *Under the Volcano* (New York: New American Library, 1971), first edition 1947; and Italo CALVINO, *Under the Jaguar Sun* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), first published 1983.

<sup>76</sup> See Barbara BRAUN, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 92, 112-115, and 118-120.

in relation to human sacrifice. Similarly indifferent to historical veracity – but in a more strictly architectural realm – Frank Lloyd Wright looked to the ruins of Mesoamerica as the informing resource for so-termed “Maya revival” architecture. Like Moore, Wright, on the one hand, made direct and explicit use of ancient precedents, in this case, structures like the Temple of the Sun at the Classic Maya site of Palenque, as formal models; yet, on the other hand, he was neither knowledgeable about, nor seemingly much interested in, the original functions of those buildings, and thus did not hesitate to redeploy the Maya temple forms in southern California residential structures.<sup>77</sup> There is, in other words, absolutely no pretense to continuity between the original uses of the building and the re-uses of the latter-day copies.

Annoyingly loose and uninformed in some Mesoamericanists' eyes, this is, in other words, an artistic version of revalorization that completely de-contextualizes pre-Columbian elements, which are then re-contextualized in entirely unrelated frames. Nevertheless, these too are “creative and interested (mis)uses of preexisting architectural forms,” which, therefore, qualify as entries to the pertinent architectural receptions histories.<sup>78</sup>

### *C. Mesoamerican Ruins as Economic Resources: Treasure Troves and Tourist Traps*

While Eliade's ceaseless protestations against “the reduction of religion” may seem to direct us away from the relevant financial forces and profit-making motivations, I've argued that other strains in his work actually challenge us to serious consideration of those factors. Accordingly, I note next a couple of very different and asymmetrical variations on the re-utilization of Mesoamerican ruins as economic resources.

The first and flatly blunt variation on the theme locates the foremost appeal of the ancient monuments in the prospect that they mark sites of booty and buried treasure. A tendency almost too obvious to deserve note, from the infamous gold-mongering of Spanish

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<sup>77</sup> *IBID.*, 151-174.

<sup>78</sup> Though the incentive to non-elitist inclusion puts one on a slippery slope, authors of thoroughgoing architectural histories ought not, in principle, exclude such campy entries as, for instance, the “artistic” re-utilization of Teotihuacan's pyramids as the backdrop to the sacrifice of young women and an encounter with a undead mummy in the Lon CHANEY JR. movie, “Face of the Screaming Werewolf” (1959), or, more recently, the re-use of Monte Albán's Great Plaza as the settling for the final scenes of “Nacho Libre,” a 2006 comedy starring Jack Black.

Conquistadors forward, there are constituencies for whom the historical, artistic, cultural, and religious dimensions of the ruins are entirely incidental compared to the prospect that the old structures may contain valuable mineral wealth. For example, that the extensive ruins of Monte Albán sat largely undisturbed for centuries owes, in a big way, to the early realization that its Zapotec builders, though great ceramic and stone artisans, had no metalwork; and that the site was later launched to world prominence with the 1931 discovery of Tomb 7 depended overwhelmingly on the abundance of (Mixtec-made) gold jewelry that Caso found there. The archaeological community may have been thrilled with the historical payoffs of that discovery, but every announcement designed to enhance public interest, wisely enough, put front and center the supposedly stupendous cash value of Caso's find.

Likewise explorers' intense fascination with Chichén Itzá's Sacred Cenote owed, in part, to imagined human sacrifices wherein virgin maidens had been regularly thrown into the huge natural well (a set of traditions that turned out to be largely untrue), but, in much larger part, to hopeful suspicions that an abundance of gold jewelry, jade ornaments, and other valuables had also been thrown into this well (a portion of the legends that actually proved to be more accurate).<sup>79</sup> The intrigue surrounding the precious objects that were dredged from the Sacred Cenote in 1907 by American Edward Herbert Thompson – some of which made their way to the Peabody Museum but many of which were the smuggled out of the country, presumably into private collections and ostensibly for “safe keeping” – reminds us of the enduring existence of a black market wherein the value pre-Columbian objects is calculated largely on the prices that they can fetch.<sup>80</sup> In short, the looting of ruins, a practice that remains very much alive, whether perpetrated by outsiders or locals – to the extent that it entails recovering ancient spoils that are subsequently leveraged into present-day profits – qualifies as yet one more version of creative revalorization.

Treasure hunting notwithstanding, of far larger economic consequence than the trafficking of artifacts is the tourist industry. Indeed, though I'll only touch on it here, the transformation of these ancient cities into tourist destinations is assuredly the most impactful of

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<sup>79</sup> See *Cenote of Sacrifice: Maya Treasures from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá*, edited by Clemency Chase COGGINS and Orin C. SHANE III (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

<sup>80</sup> For the account of a British illustrator who was at Chichén Itzá at the time of dredging of the Sacred Cenote, see Mary F. McVICKER, *Adela Breton: A Victorian Artist Amid Mexico's Ruins* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 127-130.

all species of revalorization.<sup>81</sup> In Mexico especially, the history of archaeology has been inseparable from the history of tourism. Irrespective of a seemingly irresolvable tension between the urge to bring widespread attention to these ancient wonders and the obligation to protect them from the wear and tear of heavy traffic, the selection of sites that would be explored and developed has depended, in nearly every case, on the potential of those venues as tourist destinations; and, by now, essentially every major "archaeological ruin" in Mexico has been extensively commodified as an attraction for foreign and domestic tourists.

At this point, then, a visit to any prominent ruin requires one not only to buy a ticket in order to enter a neatly packaged and strategically choreographed exhibitionary space, but also to run a gauntlet of tour guides competing for your attention. Taxi and bus drivers, restaurateurs, and travel agents likewise vie for their shares of your tourist dollars, as do the overabundant artisans and vendors who are ready to sell you every imaginable souvenir and trinket. Especially in the Yucatan, where several major ruins lie within easy reach of Cancun and other beach resorts, the ancient monuments are marketed alongside – and thus oddly parallel with – scuba diving and snorkeling, swimming with dolphins, flamingo gazing, spicy nightlife and cuisine. To be sure, a visit to the Maya ruins is, at present, a near-mandatory component of any vacation to these Caribbean resorts. Whether one is inclined to assess all this entrepreneurial activity as quaintly kitschy or just trashy, there is no question that all of these major ruins are, nowadays, highly commercialized.

Moreover, in the wake of economic challenges and the neo-liberal responses of the Mexican government since the mid-1990's, attendance at all of the major sites, numerous of which are located in the poorest regions of the country, has increased dramatically. There is no question that Mexicans have never been more aggressive – and more successful – in attracting foreign tourists to these large sites than they are right now; and never have more people's livelihood depended on the dollars that these visitor attractions generate. Accordingly, yet again exemplifying the multivalence of the ancient sites and monuments, archaeological tourism constitutes not one but instead a whole cluster of creative and interested revalorizations, especially since, as I'll note momentarily, the motives driving tourist development are by no means strictly financial.

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<sup>81</sup> For somewhat fuller comments on archaeological tourism in Mexico, see Lindsay JONES, "Zapotec Sacred Places, Enduring and/or Ephemeral: Reverence, Realignment and Commodification at an Archaeological-Tourist Site in Southern Mexico", *Culture and Religion*, vol. 11, no. 4 (December 2010): 345-393.

*D. Mesoamerican Ruins as Political Resources: Colonialist Appropriations, Mexican Nationalism, and Indigenous Self-Awareness*

Finally, besides serving as religious, historical, artistic, and economic resources, Mesoamerican ruins additionally are subject to a host of more explicitly political revalorizations. Accordingly, though perhaps looking to another set of issues that Eliade himself might decline to address, his lead nonetheless points to quick consideration of three ways, each very different, in which the long-abandoned cities of this region have been – and are being – re-utilized as fortuitous contexts in which to construct, manipulate, disseminate, rediscover, and/or contest various political identities and affiliations.

If we again move from the blunt to the more nuanced, it is worth noting, first, how often pre-Columbian buildings and sites of worship were, in the colonial era, appropriated by the Spanish in order to provide very clear visual statements of the way in which Spanish Catholic religion and authority had superseded its indigenous counterparts. In that respect, the enormous pyramid at Cholula – notable both as a long-revered indigenous pilgrimage destination and as the site of one Hernán Cortés' most significant military victories – provides perhaps the most infamous of countless cases in which Spaniards seized control of a pre-Columbian site or structure, then destroyed the indigenous temple that originally sat atop a huge pyramidal base and replaced it with a Catholic church. The result of this violently strategic revalorization of the cherished monument was an unmistakably clear architectural statement of colonial domination, which remains powerful today; the old allure of the giant pyramid has been re-directed to new proselytizing purposes. Albeit on a much more modest scale, the so-called Calvary at Mitla is another piquant instance in which a new Catholic structure was strategically built on top of an old pre-Columbian pyramid mound;<sup>82</sup> and, indeed, each of those thousands of instances in which crosses have been mounted atop sites of indigenous devotion – a Christian claims-staking practice that remains very much alive in present-day Mexico – qualifies as an occasion of religio-political revalorization.

In any case, a second, more subtle re-utilization of ruins as political resources involves the ways in which these pre-Columbian cities have been reconfigured as something akin to outdoor museums, that is, pedagogical contexts in which to educate visitors not only as to the “facts” of the past but, even more, as to one’s current circumstances and

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<sup>82</sup> See William R. ARFMAN, *Visiting the Calvario at Mitla, Oaxaca: A Critical Look at the Continuity of a Religious Practice* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2008).

obligations. More specifically, the museumification of Mesoamerican ruins is, for my present purposes, especially noteworthy for its role in the construction and dissemination of a unifying national story, a civic creation myth of sorts. Improbable harbinger of today's cultural tourism, Porfirio Díaz, strong-arm president of Mexico for three decades leading into the twentieth century (an era termed the Porfiriato), was, it seems, the first to seize in a large way on this untapped resource for the promulgation of a suitably inspiring Mexican national identity. To that end, in 1885, Díaz created the post of General Inspector of Archaeological Monuments, to which he appointed his comrade-in-arms, Leopoldo Batres, a notorious character whose subsequent activities would have large and still-lasting impacts on the visual aspects of all of Mexico's top-tier sites.<sup>83</sup>

Only modestly trained in archaeology, and thus despised by his more rigorously scientific contemporaries – even now, Batres is routinely derided as the antihero of Mesoamerican archaeology – he was fully prepared to make himself the robust supporter both of Díaz's version of nationalism and the president's grand aspirations for the modernization of Mexico.<sup>84</sup> Given his commitments to modernity, Díaz was, on the one hand, infamously impatient and intolerant of contemporary Indians, who emerged for him as among the foremost, and most embarrassingly visible, obstacles to the version of "progress" toward modernity to which he aspired.<sup>85</sup> Yet, on the other hand, pursuant of their dual modernizing-nationalizing initiative, Díaz and Batres were committed to celebrating in all possible ways Mexico's pre-Columbian indigenous past. They wanted to bring into the spotlight – and to claim as the rightful heritage of modern Mexico – the great cultural accomplishments of the Toltecs, Aztecs, Mayas, and Zapotecs; and they recognized that archaeological sites, along with museums, provided the preeminent contexts in which to showcase those ancient achievements and to knit them into a more current Mexican national consciousness.

During the Porfiriato, ruins were, then, re-used as repositories of materials that could be exhibited in public museums – Batres, for

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<sup>83</sup> For a usefully critical assessment of Leopoldo Batres' approach, see Luis VÁZQUES LEÓN, "Mexico: The Institutionalization of Archaeology, 1885-1942," in *History of Latin American Archaeology*, edited by Augusto OYUELA-CAYCEDO, Worldwide Archaeology Series 15 (Aldershot, Hampshire, England and Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1994), 69-89.

<sup>84</sup> See JONES, "Zapotec Sacred Places, Enduring and/or Ephemeral," 357ff.

<sup>85</sup> On Porfirio Díaz's plans for the modernization of Mexico in general and Oaxaca in particular, see Mark OVERMEYER-VELÁZQUEZ, *Visions of the Emerald City: Modernity, Tradition, and the Formation of Porfirian Oaxaca, Mexico* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).



instance, hauled all of Monte Albán's most impressive stele to Mexico City's National Museum, which Diaz had commandeered to his patriotic purposes<sup>86</sup> – but even more pertinent is the way in which the ancient city sites were themselves transformed into museums.<sup>87</sup> Instead of exploration in pursuit of recovering historical information, Batres' style of archaeology endeavored to transform Teotihuacán, Xochicalco, Mitla, and other sites into open-air forums of public instruction wherein the Mexican government could strut the accomplishments of pre-Columbian culture, which were then explicitly construed as among the deep roots of mestizo identity. Presumably assuming that lay visitors, who were the prime targets of these initiatives, would have neither the patience nor imagination to appreciate the original magnificence of these places unless the dilapidated old structures were rebuilt, Batres undertook notoriously incautious rebuilding strategies that included, for instance, the insertion of heavy metal reinforcements at Mitla, which remain conspicuously visible today. But, in light of their overbearing political agenda, accuracy and attention to historical detail mattered much less than the re-creation of the sort of grandiose general effect – and affect – that would impress visitors not so much with the specifics of ancient history as with the magnitude of Mexico's ancestors' achievements in art and engineering, a lesson that Diaz and Batres aspired to share both with their countrymen and foreigner visitors to revamped ruin sites.<sup>88</sup> At their hands, then, the ancient buildings were appropriated and recast as a propagandistic portend of the republic of Mexico's hopefully bright future.

In any case, consider one last, nearly antithetical, sort of highly politicized appropriation of the ruins, an eventuality that demonstrates yet again not only multivalent symbolic quality of Mesoamerica's ancient monuments, but also the unpredictability of their receptions. While Batres' initiative was designed to exclude and even oppress the region's native peoples, his rambunctious recuperation of numerous sites, many of which had been largely ignored prior to his reconstruction efforts,

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<sup>86</sup> Regarding the exercise of Diaz's nationalistic agenda in the expansion and reorganization of Mexico's national museum, see Felipe SOLIS, "El Museo Nacional de Antropología y su historia," in *Alquimia*, vol. 4, no. 12 (May-August 2001), 33; and Ricardo PÉREZ MONTFORT, "El Museo Nacional como un expression del nacionalism mexicano," in *Alquimia*, vol. 4, no. 12 (May-August 2001), 27.

<sup>87</sup> Regarding the ongoing "museumification" of Mesoamerican archaeological sites, see Quetzil E. CASTAÑEDA, *In the Museum of Maya Culture: Touring Chichén Itzá* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>88</sup> It is worth noting with respect to the style of tourism promoted by Diaz and Batres that, perhaps surprisingly, it is much easier to ascertain their nationalist political motives than any more directly financial motives.

ironically enough, set in motion processes that have precisely the opposite effect insofar as these archaeological-tourist sites would eventually emerge as leading impetuses for resurgent pride and self-awareness among contemporary indigenous communities.

Keeping in mind that nearly all of these major sites had been abandoned well in advance of the arrival of Spaniards, it is perhaps not so surprising that, even through most of the twentieth century, investigators invariably encounter indigenous populations that are unable to provide any reliable historical information about their local ruins. In the 1930's, the Zapotecs of Mitla, for instance, despite living literally amidst one of Mesoamerica's premier ruins, explain to ethnographer Elsie Clews Parsons that the ancient structures had been built in a long-ago epoch prior to the emergence of the sun and the moon, a "Golden Age" in which the huge stones were light as feathers and thus easily moved in position.<sup>89</sup> In other words, instead of purporting and celebrating their direct historical connection to the builders of the monuments (which in the case of Mitla they probably have), and thereby claiming some proprietary ownership and control of the ruins, the Mitleyeno Zapotecs were content to espouse a mythical account that exempted them from any privileged possession. In that era, they seemingly squandered their special access to this potentially rich resource. Only later, in the wake of the growing tourist traffic prompted by Batres' reckless rebuilding of the crumbling structures, did the resident Indians begin to awaken to both the economic and cultural value of their neighborhood monuments.

By stark contrast to that earlier indifference, more recently – now that the archaeological-tourist sites of Mitla, Monte Albán, Palenque, and others that lay in areas with large indigenous populations have emerged not only as the region's primary economic engines, but also, just as Diaz and Batres had recognized, as the surest signs of the greatness of native Mesoamerican civilization – indigenous communities are increasingly prone to make claims about their birthright connections and thus entitlements to these places. As always, religio-cultural, economic, and political factors are tightly interwoven; and, in cases, like those Maya communities that have organized and demanded a cut of the tourist revenues that Palenque brings into Mexico's poorest state of Chiapas, the

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<sup>89</sup> On her Zapotec informants' contention that the pre-Columbian monuments in their village had been built prior to the emergence of the sun and the moon, see Elsie Clews PARSONS, *Mitla: Town of the Souls and Other Zapoteco-Speaking Pueblos of Oaxaca, Mexico*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 1, 220-221, 289, 327, and 454-455. With respect to all of the references made to Mitla in this paragraph, also see JONES, "Zapotec Sacred Places, Enduring and/or Ephemeral," 350ff.

incentives would appear to be preponderantly financial. But there is also lots of evidence of native people, especially younger generations, for whom the ruins, however gentrified and despoiled at this point, do evoke, or perhaps reawaken, a sense of pride in their native heritage. Accordingly, recast in yet another new political role, the ancient edifices are now functioning as focusing lens for dissent against the status quo, highly visible sites of contestation at which increasingly well organized and “radicalized” native groups and their supporters can express their resentments with present-day inequities and make their demands for indigenous rights and services.

In short with respect to this last set of re-uses, one may be more impressed by the vigorous commitment of contemporary indigenous communities, and by the compelling nature of their demands for social justice, than by either the veracity of their historical claims to descent from the centuries-past builders of the ruins or their rhetoric about the intrinsically “sacred” status of these sites.<sup>90</sup> Be that as it may, the creative initiative of these activist groups demonstrates yet again, not only a timeworn Mesoamerican pattern but also the characteristic mechanism of revalorization wherein the ancient buildings stand as a kind of multivalent symbolic resource, which is, therefore, available to all manner of strategic (mis)interpretation. Profoundly different in so many ways, the Aztecs, then Spanish Conquistadors, then Porfiriato nationalists, and now Mexico’s indigenous activists all face very distinct political challenges; and yet, they all find ways to appeal to the very same pre-Columbian ruins as resources with which to address their eminently practical problems. In Eliade’s terms, though none are scholars per se, all qualify as “creative hermeneuts” insofar as they respond to some sort of “crisis in depth and meaning” via innovative and interested “revalorizations.”

In brief conclusion, then, this quick inventory of re-uses of pre-Columbian ruins demonstrates that, owing to their apparently inexhaustible superabundance, any claim to deliver the authoritative, once-and-for all interpretation of a 2000-year-old Mesoamerican pyramid or palace is precariously vulnerable. Moreover, as Eliade persuades us by repeatedly invoking his favorite example of Christian appropriations of

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<sup>90</sup> Regarding the widely-circulated objection that Oaxaca ruins are “sacred places,” a status that, some argue, ought to supersede their development as touristic destinations (and a claim that owes at least, in indirect ways, to Eliade’s ample comments on sacred space), see, for example, Victor DE LA CRUZ, “Monte Alban, ¿espacio sagrado Zapoteco o solo sitio turístico?”; in Nelly M. ROBLES GARCIA, ed., *Sociedad y patrimonio arqueológico en el valle de Oaxaca: Memoria de la Segunda Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002), 145-156.

pagan practices, revalorization is always pragmatic and only occasionally critical. Success in redressing crises, making meaning, and resuscitating a flagging tradition does not depend upon faithfulness to, or even reliable knowledge of, the precedents that one retrieves and then puts to service. Accordingly, rigorously empirical architectural reception histories will include carefully substantiated interpretations of the ruins, but they also have to acknowledge abundant re-uses that are misinformed, tendentious, and naïve. Less sanguine than Eliade about the operations of the "religious imagination," critical historians of religions have to accept that virtually all revalorizations of Mesoamerica's architecture are self-serving, many self-delusional, and none definitive.

By the same token, all claims to provide a controversy-settling assessment of Eliade's huge body of work are similarly precarious. All appraisals of that far-famed corpus – a fund of ideas that has fueled the careers of more defenders, detractors, and "reconstructors" than any other – be they glowing or condemnatory evaluations, are contingent. What I, like all the other students, learned from Eliade may be quite at odds with what he was endeavoring to teach; and I find in his *œuvre* due warnings that my re-utilizations are, like the rest, provisional and very limited. But, more importantly, I am also persuaded that, as noted before, revalorization, whether practiced in religious or academic domains, is part imitation but much larger part ingenuity and resourcefulness; and, consequently, each re-reading of his work, each return to the well, as it were, continues to replenish. Via my creative and interested manipulations, I have, on the one hand, found ways to keep the writings of Mircea Eliade relevant, challenging, useful, and even inspiring in the extreme; but then again, on the other hand, I was among that set of students that had him ruing his decision ever to have come to Chicago.