



Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*
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The Journal of Religion

LINCOLN, BRUCE. *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. xii+228 pp. \$90.00 (cloth); \$27.50 (paper).

Bruce Lincoln is one of the most distinguished, most productive, widely read, and widely quoted North American historians of religion. Lincoln's development as a scholar has been remarkable also because he has undergone several transformations. Well known is his turn away from the field of comparative-reconstructive Indo-European religions that resulted from his break with Georges Dumézil—the man and his work, which seemed like two faces of the same coin to Lincoln. Having sought to uncover the political subtext of Dumézil's work, Lincoln later moved on to lay bare the religious rhetoric of contemporary politicians and attempted to illustrate the religious dimensions of the construction of an ancient empire. Does his new book indicate the appearance of a next stage in Lincoln's academic trajectory?

After two monographic studies of the ancient Persian Achaemenian Empire, with the present work Lincoln returns to the structure familiar from his earlier books: collected and selected articles. Besides a preface, this volume comprises thirteen essays, among them four original publications, one coauthored with Lincoln's long-term companion, the recently deceased Italian historian of religions Cristiano Grottanelli. The volume starts with yet another reprint of his (thirteen) "Theses on Method" (which actually do not deal with method in any technical sense) and ends with "Theses on Comparison" (written with Grottanelli) and a chapter on "The (Un)discipline of Religious Studies," where he argues (with respect to the case of North America, it seems) that critical theories and approaches in the study of religions have remained minority positions. Rather than supporting benign, irenic, and edifying accounts of religion, Lincoln sees "the need for a rigorous, uninhibited, unintimidated, theoretically and empirically informed, wide-ranging, irreverent, and appropriately critical study of the same" (135).

These chapters provide the framework for ten essays that make the bulk of the volume. Two of these essays are different from the rest: "Ancient and Post-ancient Religions" (originally published in 2004) and "Sanctified Violence." While these two essays are synthetic and typological—the first describing dimensions of the religious transition in the ancient Mediterranean world that yielded Christianity, the second distinguishing four recurrent forms in which violence is valorized in religions of the ancient Mediterranean—the remaining eight essays adopt a different strategy and structure. With the exception of "The Cosmo-Logic of Persian Demonology" and "Religious and Other Conflicts in Twentieth-Century Guatemala" (originally published in 2004), all titles bear rather general titles (e.g., "Nature and Genesis of Pantheons," "Anomaly, Science, and Religion") or rather enigmatic ones ("In Praise of the Chaotic").

At the outset, the essays outline a topic of general interest, but, as Lincoln explains at one point in "Between History and Myth," given "the subtleties, complexities, and variables" of history and religion in addition to "the particularities relevant to any concrete situation" (56), he tries to stay clear of any "presumptuous and inadequate attempt at sweeping generalization"; instead he narrows down his focus to a more manageable (for him) and "limited query," taking "a given historic moment" (56) as an example, or a string of examples, for the problem at hand. In a final section, he reconnects the example(s) to the main topic, either claiming that it has substantiated (and nuanced) a general claim made at the outset, or that it has thrown new light on a complex issue: "Progress comes from identifying these particularities and probing their significance, then revising our general model to take account of them" (110), as he puts it in "In Praise of the Chaotic." Most readers

will probably appreciate the introductions and conclusions of these essays but, while admiring Lincoln's command over his sources, jump over the discussion of the details (unless they fall into their area of professional interest).

With the exception of the essay on Guatemala, all essays are concerned with ancient religions. The geographical horizon spans from Iceland to ancient India. Later Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other Asian religions are never mentioned. The examples are taken from a range of mainly written sources in Indo-European languages, preferably from early periods. (To his discussion of the Nordic god Ullr Lincoln adds some iconographic materials.) One cannot fail to be impressed by Lincoln's analytical, linguistic, and philological skills and versatility, the breadth of his repertoire, and his knowledge of both of primary sources and the relevant secondary literature (witness the extensive endnotes). His translations from the variety of languages are original, and the original sources are consistently cited in the notes. The present volume showcases Lincoln as a model scholar of a historian of religions: his impressive repertoire transcends that of philologists and specialists of specific cultural or linguistic areas, without needing to fear being branded as unreliable, superficial, or outdated; contrary, however, to the specialists, his interest in the sources is ostensibly governed by key issues and problems in the study of religion(s), such as production, reproduction, dissemination, and interpretation of religious texts; the development and functions of pantheons; the *modus operandi* of demonologies; the intricate relationships between religion and science, religion and violence, history and myth, power and resistance, and order and chaos.

All chapters proceed comparatively, but his comparisons, as spelled out in the "Theses on Comparison," are such "that (a) focus on a relatively small number of comparanda that the researcher can study closely; (b) are equally attentive to relations of similarity and those of difference; (c) grant equal dignity and intelligence to all parties considered; and (d) are attentive to the social, historical, and political contexts and subtexts of religious and literary texts" (123). Wide-ranging comparisons risk misrecognition and the production of fictive entities; the universal level of comparison is to be avoided because "there are no true universals, save at a level of generalization so high as to yield only banalities" (122). It is unclear to which extent Lincoln's tactics are able to avoid exactly this problem. Despite the sheer beauty of the textual analyzes, one wonders what we have actually learned from the essays, generally speaking; as fine-tuned and sharp the textual analyzes are, there invariably remains a gap with regard to the general points Lincoln makes at the end. His reflections on when the Nordic narrators venture from history into myth, for example, presupposes an implicit theory of myth, which as such is not warranted by the analysis.

The selection of the cases is rarely argued for; they are mostly produced out of the magician's hat. Even if Lincoln's analysis of the Zoroastrian materials, in chapter 5, is admirable, one remains puzzled by his suggestion that these texts could be taken to say something meaningful about scientific and religious cosmologies in general; to this reader, the case seems rather far-fetched and stretched; why would anybody draw a line from Zoroastrian priests to Brahe and Kepler? How does the insight into the "profoundly serious and profoundly original vision" of Zoroastrian demonology, which is supposed to "challenge our most fundamental ideas about the nature of being itself" (42), contribute to a "critical" exploration or approach to religion? The distinction between implicit and explicit pantheons—and among the latter, those that are "produced by indigenous theorists" versus those that were "worked out by scholars of a later era" (19)—and the recognition that "an indigenous pantheon is not just a system or a structure but an instrument for the relatively stable repro-

The Journal of Religion

duction of the divine order, which exercises its potent effects by establishing the parameters within which imagination, devotion, experimentation, and debate will be conducted thereafter" (29) seem plausible, but none of this derives its plausibility from the sophisticated case study of Nordic mythology. Likewise, the extremely learned critical analysis of some texts from the Upaniṣads arrives at results that are not unexpected, namely, that the nature of the speculation advanced by religious texts "is informed and inflected by their situation of interest, which has always already been normalized and naturalized by the prior speculations of others like them" (15). Why would that be surprising?

In his preface, Lincoln states that "religion is not the sphere permeated by gods, demons, or spirits of whatever kinds. Rather, it is the sphere of people who discuss and ponder such matters. . . . Whether or not gods fill the cosmos, they populate a good many conversations" (xi). No (European) scholar of religion(s) would disagree with this statement or with other aspects of Lincoln's "critical" agenda for that matter. The exact nature of the critical dimension of the explorations, beyond the more trivial principle that "scholarly discourse ought not uncritically reproduce the self-representations and self-perceptions of those it purports to study" (94), remains somewhat opaque to this reader.

The question therefore imposes itself whether this book makes any progress in our understanding of the discipline. In general terms, at this point of my reading my tentative answer would be No, even though it gives one a sense of relief that there are scholars of religion(s) with Lincoln's analytical-philological mastery out there. His immense learning and versatility are once again impressively demonstrated, but whereas some of his earlier works stimulated scholarly inquiry by drawing attention to topics such as authority and ridicule, construction and discourse, power and protest, ideology and mythology, scholarship and politics, structure and reversal, classification and taxonomy, body and society, I cannot see any new and strong perspectives like this emerging from *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* beyond the richness and sophistication of the analyses that provide a model of scholarship in the history of religions. Last but not least, Lincoln does not engage in a self-critical discussion of his key notion of the "critical," which therefore remains somewhat opaque even if and where the notion is engaged emphatically.

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PLANTINGA, ALVIN. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi+359 pp. \$27.95 (cloth).

Alvin Plantinga argues that there is superficial conflict (but real and deep concord) between science and religion, and superficial concord (but real and deep conflict) between science and naturalism. The first section, "Alleged Conflict," includes chapters 1–4. Plantinga identifies six strands in the theory of evolution and argues (contra Dawkins, Dennett, Kitcher, et al.) that the theory does not rule out guidance by intelligence. He also argues that science does not show that God cannot intervene in nature (he calls this "hands-off theology"); opinions to the contrary appear to be based on confused readings of Newton and Laplace, leading to the view that nature is deterministic and causally closed. Science itself must be neutral on this question, since it is a philosophical one—if the God of classical theism exists, then nature is not like this. To show that nothing in contemporary physics implies that God cannot intervene in the world, Plantinga proposes a clever account of divine intervention based upon the Ghirardi-Rimini-Weber collapse approach to quantum