

## Introduction

Ioan Petru Culianu (1950-1991), who so tragically died during his rising career as a global historian of religions, left behind an unfinished work. His research in wide-ranging fields, from Gnosticism and ecstatic voyages of the soul to Renaissance culture, had reached a major turning point. Both through his last books, some of which being published soon after his death, and especially through the programmatic articles included in the journal he founded in 1990, *Incognita*<sup>1</sup>, Culianu assumed and projected an innovative approach to religions from a cognitivist perspective. This sharp methodological caesura drove him towards the conclusion that history is nothing more than a foldable mental map. Beyond the changing outlook of the history of religions, it also expresses a unity of depth in Culianu's interests in knowledge, whether it is the theory of knowledge through phantasms and the role of magic in the interpretation of the Renaissance and the emergence of modern science, or the cognitive unity of Gnostic myths and doctrines.

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<sup>1</sup> *Incognita. International Journal for Cognitive Studies in the Humanities* (1990-1991, E.J. Brill).

In his first major book, *Éros et magie à la Renaissance* (1984), the historical hermeneutics, although at odds with the traditional vision of the Renaissance, is in dialogue with the research carried out by Francis A. Yeats or Paolo Rossi, but in the last part of his academic work, especially in *Recherches sur les dualismes d'Occident: Analyse de leurs principaux mythes* (1986), *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (1991) and *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (1992), one can notice a radical shift towards epistemology, which illustrates the pre-eminence of the question of the unity of the forms of manifestation of the Mind over the “history of religious ideas and beliefs”. The reactions of his contemporary scholars to this new approach were rather reserved, sensing epistemic difficulties and perhaps waiting for the author to deliver what he announced. Starting 1991 and until today, the interest in Culianu's work has been continued mainly in Romania and Italy, if we consider the project of publishing his complete works in the collection *Biblioteca “Ioan Petru Culianu”* (Polirom Publishing House, Iași), coordinated by Tereza Culianu-Petrescu, collective and monographic volumes, articles, and translations. It has been a period in which an attempt was made both to keep an unfinished work up to date and to offer possible interpretations of it.

Among the initiatives aimed at stimulating reflection on the contribution of Ioan Petru Culianu as historian of religions was the colloquium *Ioan Petru Culianu - 65 anni dalla nascita*, organized in 2015 at the *Accademia di Romania* in Rome, in collaboration with the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, which was attended

by a number of friends and colleagues of the Romanian scholar: Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, Grazia Marchianò, Maria Vittoria Cerutti, Giovanni Casadio, Roberto Scagno, Natale Spineto. On that occasion, the monographic section coordinated by Professor Maria Vittoria Cerutti, *U. Bianchi e I.P. Culianu. Una Stagione "milanese" della Storia delle religioni*, as part of the international journal *Annali di Scienze Religiose* 6 (2013), was presented. We consider it noteworthy – and in a way part of Culianu's posthumous destiny – that some of those who knew and accompanied him in Italy were able to gather in Rome in the very month when he would have been turned 65: it was an act of affectionate friendship beyond time, a token of cordial fidelity and appreciation of his intellectual legacy.

This volume includes only a selection of the papers presented at the colloquium in Rome and is, at least in the intention of its editors, a continuation of the monographic section of *Annali di Scienze Religiose*. This nucleus of articles has been supplemented by contributions made on various other occasions or published in the meantime in different academic journals. We are honoured to open this volume with “un ricordo di Ioan Petru Culianu tra Milano e Messina” by Professor Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, President of the Italian Society for the History of Religions. We also thank Professors Giovanni Casadio and Moshe Idel for the generous permission to include in this collective volume their respective articles, which mark an important momentum in the analysis of Culianu's work.

The first section of this volume, devoted to the core issues in the history of religions, is structured around three major contributions. Moshe Idel's article argues for

understanding the adoption of the cognitivist approach by the “American Couliano” from the perspective of deep continuities in his research interests. The Lullian *Ars Combinatoria* constitutes such a link between the two major parts of Culianu’s work, as emphasized by one of his last book proposals, *Memories of the Future: The Computing Machine of Raymond Lullus as a System of Magical Memory*. Identifying also in Raymond Lullus an epistemic insignnia, Giovanni Casadio investigates the stages and the reasons of that “systematic demolition” applied by Culianu with regard to the definition of dualism and the historical-religious method proposed by his Milanese master, Ugo Bianchi, as well as the role played by Eliade’s model of comparative religion. Maria Victoria Cerutti’s article is in dialogue and complementarity with Giovanni Casadio’s, exploring the subject of religious dualism as a space of “maximum continuity and at the same time of discontinuity” between Ugo Bianchi and Ioan Petru Culianu.

The section dedicated to the Renaissance, the favourite area of Culianu’s early scientific endeavours, is illustrated by articles which, on the one hand, set out to put Culianu’s approach to work and, on the other, to evaluate his interpretation in detail. Thus, Dana Jalobeanu applies Culianu’s method to understand the epistemic function of “early modern emblems”, practicing “a perspectival contextualism”. Starting from the historical background, represented by scholars such as Ernst Cassirer, Aby Warburg and Edgar Wind, of Culianu’s investigation in *Eros and Magic*, Pietro Daniel Omodeo and Sasha Freyberg make a connection between the interpretation of Brunian magic as an art of political manipulation and Laclau’s post-Gramscian

theory of hegemony and populist reason. Arianna Migliorini studies in detail the exegesis of Giordano Bruno, a central figure for Culianu's hermeneutics of Renaissance culture. Bruno was to retain a special relevance also in the new paradigm, which makes the historical research from *Eros and Magic* contain certain premises for the later cognitivist-computational method.

The final section is engaged in the epistemological project of the American period of Culianu's life, focusing on the theme of the relationship between the humanities and the "hard" sciences. Edward Kanterian critically analyses, from a philosophical perspective, the sources and scientific instrumentation of Culianu's morphodynamics. He notes the reductionism of the new approach, which ends up subordinating the history of religions to the methods of mathematics, physics and biology. From this angle, Culianu's intellectual legacy should be explored by setting aside the "superstructure" that he wanted to impose on research built, in its substance, with philological-historical methods. Gregory Spinner offers, based on extremely eloquent biographical data, possible avenues for the continuation of Culianu's investigations, but on other methodological bases, relevant to the relationship between religion and anthropology. His contribution also adds significant elements to an intellectual genealogy of Culianu's vision of the mind. Roberta Moretti, following a detailed and empathetic analysis of the evolution of Culianu's thought, aims to deepen the insights of his last works in the sense of a universal ethics, and Laura Teodora David and Dorin David consider that, although Culianu's views on fractals were wrong,

there are now scientific models that can be applied in the study of religions in the sense Culianu was aiming at.

As is evident from the sequence of contributions above, the present volume aims to be a multifaceted investigation and assessment of the potential that Culianu's oeuvre still holds, including through what it has only announced. There is a constant dialogue with previous analyses of his works and laboratory, illustrated by Sorin Antohi, Eduard Iricinschi, Andrei Oişteanu, and Horia-Roman Patapievici, just as there are radical differences of perspective, situated between the rejection of Culianu's methodology and its creative overcoming. What we are witnessing as progress in our knowledge of an author, three decades after his premature death, is an understanding of the inner dynamic of his thought and his major intentions. It remains for future research to explore further the ways in which Culianu's findings can be put to work for a better understanding of the phenomena studied.

We would like to thank Accademia di Romania in Rome and its former director, professor Mihai Bărbulescu, member of the Romanian Academy, professor Dana Jalobeanu for having joined our project, Mr Mihail Banciu, former minister-councillor of the Romanian Embassy to the Holy See and Culianu's colleague during their Italian studies in Bucharest, and Badische Landesbibliothek for the kind permission to use St. Peter perg. 92, fol. 5r as cover illustration. We express once again our gratitude to all those who have agreed to be part of this volume, for their fidelity to a brilliant, original, restless spirit who tragically began his journey out of this world.

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