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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### **Reconceptualizing Religion: Orientation and/or Cosmivision as That Which Matters Most**

“Western scholars who study religion develop some understanding of what is meant by religion in their society long before they become scholars. This observation is so unremarkable, so obvious and seemingly trite, that I would be embarrassed to voice it were it not important. But it is important... In large measure, indeed, their scholarly efforts to define or characterize religion are efforts to refine and deepen the folk category that they began to use as children, and to foreground what they deem most salient or important about religion.”

Benson Saler, 1997<sup>1</sup>

“Orientation—taking one’s place in the world—is conceived of in many religious traditions as the first act of fully human beings living in habitable space. By symbolically assuming one’s proper position in the world, one communicates with significant powers at work in the cosmos and gains a sense of one’s unique significance in relation to all else.”

Mircea Eliade and Lawrence E. Sullivan, 2005<sup>2</sup>

“Over centuries, a complex of fundamental ideas was integrated to form the core of common body of thought share by many different ethnic groups. This complex of ideas, quite resistant to historical change, can be called the “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmivision.”

Alfredo López Austin, 2001<sup>3</sup>

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\* Note that I have managed the footnotes in ways that respect “the first citation” (which is thus a full bibliographical citation) *in this Introduction*, irrespective of whether that work was cited previously in this book. Also, to avoid confusion in this typescript, I have retained the quotation marks on all quotes, including those that are formatted as block quotations.

<sup>1</sup> Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologies, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade and Lawrence E. Sullivan, “Orientation,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA), vol. 10, 6887.

<sup>3</sup> Alfredo López Austin, “Cosmivision,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vol. 1, 268.

As we are frequently and fittingly reminded, there is no Zapotec word for religion.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I am persuaded by the argument that, prior to those circumstances in which Mesoamerican peoples were compelled to explain and validate their traditional ways of thinking and acting to European intruders—and thus, at that point, they had to articulate a kind of systemic theology and coherent creed—in the Western sense of the term, “there was no religion.”<sup>5</sup> And therefore a book on the religion(s) of the great Zapotec capital begins, inevitably, with some ruminations on the status and standing of that most conspicuous of terms.

Starting with a dive into this infamous quagmire, I am certain that whatever theoretical contrivance I build in order to extricate myself will strike some as too flimsy and others as too bulky. Moreover, in a work aimed simultaneously at the very different audiences of Oaxacanists and comparative religionists, I am sure to rehearse intermittently ideas that are painfully obvious to one of those groups or the other. But on the grounds that uninterested readers can skip over this Introduction, I error on the side of loquacity, sometimes mixing the colloquial and academically highfalutin, and thereby occasionally reiterate the self-evident, in my efforts to explain the presuppositions on which this project is based. For instance, more interested in being understood than averting criticism, I lay on the table at the very outset the four-word definition of religion that informs this entire work: *that which matters most*. I will, however, make a somewhat wide loop on my way back that select stipulation of the chronically contested term.

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<sup>4</sup> Víctor de la Cruz, “Introducción a la religión de los Binnigula’sa’,” in *La religión de los Binnigula’sa’*, eds. Víctor de la Cruz and Marcus Winter (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial IEEPO, 2002), xxix, for instance, makes the point that while there is no Zapotec word for religion, the concept of the “sacred” does exist.

<sup>5</sup> John D. Monaghan, “Theology and History in the Study of Mesoamerican Religions,” in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 6, Ethnology, vol. ed. John D. Monaghan, gen. ed., Victoria Reifler Bricker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 25, makes this important point and notes, moreover, that, “Indeed, Mesoamerican people have produced the most recognizably theological works in the sixteenth century, during their initial encounter with Christianity, and more recently, as they confront aggressive Catholic and protestant movements.”

**I. DILEMMAS IN DEFINING RELIGION:  
THE NON-OPTION OF NEUTRALITY AND THE SELECTION OF  
A HEURISTIC STIPULATION SUITABLE TO OUR PRESENT PURPOSES**

Indeed, few questions generate more debate and less consensus than *What is religion?* By no means the sole preserve of academics, religion is a “folk category” about which nearly everyone feels entitled to a strong opinion.<sup>6</sup> In lay circles, religion is frequently linked to the best and most high-minded of human inclinations—ethical propriety, caring, contemplation, compassion and the courage of one’s convictions; and yet, not frequently, religion is correlated with precisely the opposite—exploitation, indoctrination, muddle-mindedness, make-believe and manipulation. Many revere religion and thus hope to be saved *by* it, while an unequal number disdain religion and therefore are determined to be saved *from* it. Religion thereby sometimes wins praise as conscientious people rising to their noblest callings, an exercise of moral responsibility and the attainment of full human potential; from that view, it was, in large part, religious sensibilities that account for the sublime art and architecture of Mesoamerica’s ancient cities. And then again, almost as often, religion draws aspersions as evidence of the gullible and desperate succumbing to a rueful compensatory charade; and from that perspective, pre-Columbian cities were monumental theaters of religio-political propaganda and deliberately induced illusion. Is religion the primary means toward meaningful life? Or is religion the most efficient weapon with which cagey elites whip credulous commoners into compliance? Do people, ancient Zapotecs included, find themselves or lose themselves in religion? To be sure, almost no word inspires more contrastive and contradictory assessments.

When professional scholars of religion intervene, the definitional dilemma is made more, not less, difficult. The quip that ten well-schooled religionists, unable to sustain confidence even in their very own formulations, are liable to provide twenty definitions of religion is actually an accurate observation of the extent to which discerning scholars deploy different definitions—each invariably predicated on a supporting but debatable theory of human nature—depending on

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<sup>6</sup> Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, 21-22, in a sub-section entitled “Religion as Folk Category in the Contemporary U.S.,” discusses the non-technical but not inconsequential way in which private citizens and public agencies tend to define religion.

their present purposes. Whether prized or despised, religion is invariably imagined as an abiding predilection of the human condition, a serious not trivial matter. How one conceives of religion, therefore, always depends on how one assesses the status and essential motivations of people in general; and while scholars can avoid explicit discussion of these large matters, they cannot evade committing themselves to some options and thereby rejecting others. As I maintained and then demonstrate in detail with respect to all of the major archaeologist-authored syntheses of the great Zapotec capital in *Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of the Great Zapotec Capital of Monte Albán* (2015), every investigator interested in even tangentially religion-related topics—including, for instance, a purportedly “sacred site” like Monte Albán—operates with crucial presuppositions about human nature, and thus presumptions about the broader role of religion in life and culture.<sup>7</sup> Even, sometimes especially, scholars who plead indifference about religion harbor very strong opinions. Neutrality in one’s ideas and comments about religion is not an option.

Nevertheless, even the most attenuated roundup of the still-influential “usual suspects” reminds us that the range of viable theories of religion—each paired with a correlative theory of human nature—is immense and highly variegated. Purported “founder of cultural anthropology,” E.B. Tylor’s famous formulation of religion, for instance, as “belief in spiritual beings [that do not actually exist]” is predicated on the notion that humans are rational beings, or “savage philosophers,” in search of explanations.<sup>8</sup> For Karl Marx, religion, the quintessential

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<sup>7</sup> The observation that every scholar, whether acknowledging it or not (and while honestly committed to respecting the empirical data), is operating with a very full load of presuppositions about human nature and human motivations is a basic premise of Lindsay Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of The Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico* (2015). In that work I demonstrate how the extreme differences between each of the seven major (re)construction narratives of Monte Albán’s founding, florescence and collapse—written respectively by Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal, John Paddock, Richard Blanton, Marcus Winter, co-authors Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, and Arthur Joyce—depend far less on the emergence of new data than on the fundamentally different presuppositions about human nature, and thus about the primary factors in Oaxaca social evolution, with which the respective author-archaeologists begin. Though none of them (with the possible exceptions of Marcus-Flannery and Joyce) has an *explicit* theory of religion, each of them also has an *implicit* theory of religion that influences how they tell the story of Monte Albán.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950 [originally 1871]).

example of privilege-perpetuating ideology, arises from a pan-human need for consolation from “alienation.”<sup>9</sup> For Emile Durkheim, religion emerges in response to people’s innate status as “homo duplex,” who are therefore challenged to resolve their dual inclinations to exist as both social beings and individual beings.<sup>10</sup> Max Weber presents religious ideas as a consequence of the ostensibly pan-human “drive for meaning,” which arises from a felt discrepancy between “the way things are” and “the way things ought to be.”<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud attributes the endurance of religion to “wishful people” who replace hard realities with God-loves-me illusions in order to compensate for feelings of helplessness and insignificance.<sup>12</sup> More sanguine about human nature, Carl Jung argues alternatively that people have a “natural religious inclination” so that religion derives from the healthy pursuit of psychic and spiritual completeness.<sup>13</sup> And faith-based phenomenologist Rudolf Otto famously attributes “religion” to the apparently innate human receptivity for encounters with “the Numinous” or “the Holy,” which does indeed exist.<sup>14</sup>

The rapid-fire juxtaposition of these classic alternatives—academic options that also describe the respective views of many people-in-the-street who have never heard the celebrated scholars’ names—demonstrates that all conceptions of “religion” are both delivered from some point of view and designed to some purpose. In conversation with students and non-scholars about religion, one discovers the world is filled with accidental Durkheimians, Marxists and Freudians; and in academic circles, one watches these perspectives cycle in and out fashion.

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<sup>9</sup> See “Religion as Alienation: Karl Marx,” in Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 124-57.

<sup>10</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965 [originally 1915]).

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [originally 1922]).

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961 [originally 1927]).

<sup>13</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1938).

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950 [originally 1923]).

Though few people give the definitional matter much self-conscious thought, everyone has an opinion about what "religion" is and what it does. But these always-prejudicial scholarly and inexpert views are by no means interchangeable; the fundamental assumptions on which they depend are drastically different; and thus none is remotely neutral or unbiased. Positively, the notion of an "objective" view of religion is anathema. Moreover, each of these timeworn approaches has an ongoing legacy as post-processual archaeologists and postcolonial anthropologists continue, like Durkheim, to explain religion in terms of socio-cultural and political processes; neo-Marxists continue to advocate for economic root causes; psychologists persist in favoring the sort of emotional and affective forces that Freud found so revealing of religion; and the currently blossoming array of cognitive approaches underscores similar psychological factors but attributes religion and belief in gods to innate neurobiology.

In short, the range of viable theories of religion is vast; and, yes, I consider all of these viable and legitimate ways of approaching religion. These are all definitional options that have won continuing support among both academics and amateur metaphysicians. But none of these definitions comes without the heavy freight of a corresponding theory of human nature, and thus a weighty set of presuppositions about why people, in general, do what they do. Consequently, if one is making observations, assertions and interpretations concerning religion, already a specific stand has been taken. There are self-consciously, carefully selected stands on religion (like the one I am working to present); and there are—especially among scholars of ancient Oaxaca—casual, inadvertent and unacknowledged perspectives. Scholars and non-scholars not infrequently change their outlooks on these issues; and most are oblivious to the inherent contradictions among the competing conceptions of religion that they simultaneously hold. But any claim to deliver comments on religion from an "objective," disinterested, simply matter-of-fact standpoint is either deliberately or, more often, unknowingly disingenuous. And furthermore, as should become unmistakably clear in the present project, the judicious conceptions and definitions that work quite well to sustain well-intentioned American commitments to "freedom of religion," or to present-day determinations about the tax-free status of ostensibly "faith-based organizations," are simply *not* workable as formulations that can undergird the critical inquiry of a historical situation like pre-Columbian Oaxaca. But, also as

we'll see, those sorts of legal and lay ideas about religion invariably intrude, almost always in unhelpful ways, on interpretations of "the religion(s) of Monte Albán."

#### **A. THE EXTREME IMBALANCE OF OAXACANIST STUDIES: A WEALTH OF RELIGION-RELATED DATA BUT A PAUCITY OF THEORIZING ABOUT RELIGION**

Largely avoiding any explicit discussion of these methodological matters concerning what religion is and is not, the ample academic literature on Monte Albán presents an extreme contradiction for us scholars of religion. On the one hand, archaeologists provide literally mountains of religion-related information, which could be illuminated by any of the vintage or *au courant* theories that I have just mentioned. Countless cardboard boxes of ceramic data collected from the mountain site, stored on shelves at the Oaxaca Regional Center of the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in the nearby Ex Convento de Cuilapam de Guerrero until at some point they be fully processed, provide a kind of metaphor for the wealth of available "raw data." The wealth of material remains in a context so heavily populated in pre-Columbian times is a kind of astounding embarrassment of riches.

On the other hand, for a scholar of religions looking in on Oaxacanist studies, explicit theorizing about religion is, by contrast, most conspicuous by its absence. Here the incautious, seat-of-the-pants fiction that one can talk about "religion" with no underlying theory and no particular point of view remains distressingly common. In the course of this work, we will encounter vigorous debate between scholars who assess Zapotec religion as "polytheistic" versus those that object vehemently to the notion that pre-Columbian Mesoamericans worshipped anything remotely like a "pantheon" of Greco-Roman "gods," and thus insist that the religion of Monte Albán was a kind of "animatism" focused on "a vital force that made all living things move," which Zapotec termed *pè* and scholars translate variously "wind," "breath" or "spirit."<sup>15</sup> And while that explicit difference of opinion leads some to maintain that "there have been

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<sup>15</sup> Joyce Marcus, "Archaeology and Religion: A Comparison of the Zapotec and Maya," *World Archaeology*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1978), 299. In chapter 5 on "the divinity priority (II-A)," I will explore at length Marcus's very high-profile advocacy for rejecting conventional presumptions that Zapotec religion was "polytheistic" in favor characterizing it as "animatistic."

basically two different approaches to Zapotec religion,”<sup>16</sup> my deeper dive into the history of ideas concerning Zapotec conceptions of divinity (in chapter 4) will reveal a far wider array of options in which ancient Oaxacan religion has been characterized, or maybe mischaracterized, not only as polytheism and/or animatism, but also as a some sort of monotheism, monolatry, monistic-pantheism, animism (which is notably different from animatism) and/or royal ancestor worship.<sup>17</sup>

Very few Oaxacanists, however, affirm any explicit theory of religion, and fewer still imagine that, by that indifference, they are missing something of consequence. But if, as I maintain, essentially all interpretive scholarship depends upon the creative and critical synergy between broadly theoretical conceptions and rigorously empirical specifics, then one cannot help but see Oaxacanist studies as an exceptionally unhealthy imbalance of the two. On the empirical and specific side, my sincere respect, not infrequently awe, for the dedication and skill with which Oaxacanist archaeologists and epigraphers have managed to educe chronologies and information about pre-Columbian life from age-old material remains is immense. But on the theoretical side, my frustration, and again sometimes amazement, at the near total absence of clarity about “religion” is nearly as intense.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 6. Earlier Michael Lind, “La religión estatal de Monte Albán y los sacerdotes de Cociyo de Lambityeco,” en *Monte Albán en la encrucijada regional y disciplinaria: Memoria de la Quinta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, eds. Nelly M. Robles García y Ángel I. Rivera Guzmán (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2011), 20-21, made the same case, with reference to the same scholars, that “Two different interpretations of the Zapotec gods have been set forth.”

<sup>17</sup> Again, in chapter 5 relative to “the divinity priority (II-A),” I will provide a lengthy inventory scholars and non-scholars who purport each of these notably different characterizations of Zapotec religion.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in the Preface, and here again completely apropos, is the distressing but accurate observation of Kent V. Flannery, “Interregional Religious Networks,” in *The Early Mesoamerican Village: Updated Version*, ed. Kent V. Flannery (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2009 [originally 1976]), 331, that: “[Mesoamerican archaeology has] absolutely no coherent and consistent theoretical framework by means of which ritual or religion can be analyzed and interpreted [and therefore] it’s every man for himself, and [one archaeologist’s] guesses are as good as anyone’s.”

And thus, as noted in the Preface, it is a candid if harsh observation that, aside from my occasionally strong affirmations of some aspects of the work of some ethnographers, no Oaxacanist scholar past or present conceptualizes "religion" in ways that I, as a historian of religions, find satisfactory or even very promising.<sup>19</sup> None. When arguably the leading spokesman on the religion(s) of Monte Albán appeals to the Merriam-Webster dictionary for his operative definition of religion,<sup>20</sup> when the most vigorous reinterpretation of Monte Albán as a "sacred space" and "*axis mundi*" deploys those terms without any acknowledgement of the phenomenological tradition from which they emerge,<sup>21</sup> and when the most sustained recent work

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<sup>19</sup> Regarding exceptions, as I will note at numerous points going forward, ethnographer Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, among Oaxacanists, presents perhaps the most nuanced and sustained conception of "religion." Of special import in that regard is Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, "Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca," en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 601-42.

<sup>20</sup> Here I refer to two different, somewhat complementary articles in which the author begins by drawing the same definition of religion from the Merriam-Webster dictionary: Marcus Winter, "Religión de los *Binnigula'sa'*: la evidencia arqueológica," in *Religión de los Binnigula'sa'*, coords. Víctor de la Cruz y Marcus Winter (Oaxaca, México: Fondo Editorial, IEEPO, 2002), 45-88; and Marcus Winter, "La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica," en *Bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca: Memoria de la Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Monte Albán*, ed. Nelly M. Robles García (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 503-27. Though Winter's comments on the religion of Monte Albán (and on topics that I consider to be relevant to religion) are scattered across many publications, he has probably written more than anyone else on the topic.

<sup>21</sup> Here I refer to unprecedented attention of "sacred space" as a factor in the founding and history of Monte Albán that appears in Arthur Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and in numerous articles including Arthur A. Joyce, "Sacred Space and Social Relations in the Valley of Oaxaca;" in *Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, eds. Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 192-216; and Arthur A. Joyce, "The Main Plaza of Monte Albán: A Life History of Place," in *The Archaeology of Meaningful Places*, eds. Brenda J. Bowser and María Nieves Zedeño (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), 32-52. Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7, "Arthur Joyce's Poststructural Rereading of Oaxacan Social History: A Story of Sacred Spaces, Rituals and the Agency of Commoners," explains both why I find this work a seminal advance in the study of Monte Albán and why I find it very perplexing that Joyce, among those who makes strong recommendation about being explicit about one's methods and theories, completely ignores the phenomenological tradition,

on ancient Zapotec religion proceeds without any apparent awareness of any version of the professionalized study of religion,<sup>22</sup> one has to conclude that Oaxacanists are largely oblivious to the giant and lively field of academic Religious Studies.<sup>23</sup> There are, I suppose, more grievous omissions; and, in the other direction, I concede that very few comparative religionists could even locate Oaxaca on a map. But for scholars of religion, the both distressing and exhilarating fact-of-the-matter is that Oaxacanist studies presents a wide-open field—a sumptuous feast of empirical information pertinent to religion and a famine with respect to theoretical refecation. As noted earlier, few contexts demonstrate better the old adage about scholars not knowing what they do not know.

Accordingly, my work, like that of any methodologically inclined religionist who is willing to devote a few years to engaging the relevant literature on ancient Oaxaca, is certain to be a quite fully unprecedented in this field. Indeed, I dare say, for better or worse, that no other previous article or book evidences anything remotely similar to the sort of “methodological

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specifically Mircea Eliade, from which the categories of “sacred space,” “*axis mundi*,” etc. derive.

<sup>22</sup> Here I refer to Michael Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion: An Ethnohistorical and Archaeological Perspective* (2015). At innumerable places in my work I express my ambivalence about a work that I regard as, on the one hand, extraordinarily meticulous in its engagement of Zapotec source materials, especially the colonial-era ethnographic sources, but, on the other hand, completely absent of any theoretical self-consciousness or nuance with respect to the category of religion. In that respect, this book, arguably the fullest discussion of ancient Zapotec religion to date, is a kind of caricature of the imbalance between empirical rigor and theoretical naivety to which I refer in this paragraph.

<sup>23</sup> Another way of phrasing the same complaint is to note that, if, as Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, 1, contends, “religion” is, in its wider non-academic usage, a “folk category,” it remains only that in the work of Oaxacanists—i.e., a term that lacks any of the clarification and self-conscious nuance that Saler says is required to transform “religion” into “an analytically useful category which is able to facilitate transcultural research and understanding.” Also note, by the way, I capitalize “Religious Studies” when referring to the professionalized academic field but not when referring to the more generic study of things generally considered to be “religious.” That same logic requires me also to capitalize, in some instances, History of Religions, Mesoamerican Studies, Oaxaca Studies and Anthropology.

clarity and self-consciousness" about what qualifies as "religion" that I endeavor to exercise in the present project.<sup>24</sup>

## **B. THE CONTINGENCY OF EVERY DEFINITION OF RELIGION: METHODOLOGICAL CLARITY AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT WHAT QUALIFIES AS "RELIGIOUS"**

By contrast to the general avoidance of theorizing about religion in Mesoamerican Studies, it is, predictably, topic of incessant discussion among scholars of religion. And while there is no sign of impending unanimity about which theories of religion are most advantageous, there have been wholesale critical changes in how those in my field approach the thorny definitional matter. Especially since the 1980s, there has been mounting awareness among religionists—and thus increasing angst—that the timeworn conceptions that have sustained the academic study of religion are "Western constructions," which thereby implicate their users in a slew of untoward, potentially egregious assumptions, prejudices, distortions and abuses.<sup>25</sup> In the wake of this increasing self-scrutiny, by now, virtually all professionalized scholars of religion accept that always there are entanglements between conceptualizations of religion and the underlying purposes, either implicit or explicit, for which those general concepts have been formulated.

Particularly germane to this Oaxaca project is the growing realization that the supposedly scientific categories on which scholars of religion have relied for so long were, in large part, born

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<sup>24</sup> Momentarily I elaborate on this formulaic phrase "methodological clarity and self-consciousness" about what qualifies as "religion," terminology that I attribute to my many conversations with historian of religions, Charles H. Long.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding a small sample of the abundance of fairly recent works contesting the ethnocentric and problematic status of the category of "religion, see, for instance, Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion* (1993); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "the Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); or Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

of colonialist adventuring in which Christian Europeans worked to manage their affairs with—and assert their superiority over—indigenous populations in Asia, Africa and the New World.<sup>26</sup> Dubious that they can ever extricate themselves from the ethnocentrism of theorizing about “religion in general,” more and more scholars, instead of arguing for alternate definitions, have embraced the view of anthropologist Talal Asad that,

“there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”<sup>27</sup>

Archaeologists too have grown dubious that “religion,” when conceived by analogy to the great “religions of the Book” (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) as “a distinguishable, and in some senses separable, field of human activity,”<sup>28</sup> actually has any heuristic relevance in relation to indigenous contexts, especially those that we come to know largely on the basis of material remains. Colin Renfrew, for instance, warns that,

“The very term ‘religion,’ conceived as separate dimension or sub-system of the society, could thus prove to be something of a misconception, even among those communities where the supernatural plays a significant role in shaping the thoughts and actions of its individuals.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Of numerous relevant works by this leading post-colonial theorist of religion, see Charles H. Long, “Conquest and Cultural Contact in the New World,” in his *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 97-113; Charles H. Long, “Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning,” in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, ed. Jennifer I.M. Reid (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), 167-80; and Charles H. Long, *The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long: Ellipse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Renfrew, “The Archaeology of Religion,” in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, eds. Colin Renfrew and Erza B.W. Zubrow (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47.

<sup>29</sup> Renfrew, “The Archaeology of Religion,” 47.

At present, therefore, the prevailing view, at least among progressive scholars of religion—an outlook with which I wholeheartedly agree—is that, rather than aspire to all-purpose conceptualizations, the first priority in adopting any definition of religion ought to be, so my oft-repeated mantra goes, *methodological clarity and self-consciousness* as to the limited utility of any definitional alternative. In historian of religions Gregory Alles's adept phrasing, which reechoes my position,

"... definitions are specific to contexts and purposes, and there is no reason religion should be any different. Specific conceptualizations of religion need to meet certain formal criteria, including the criterion of suitability."<sup>30</sup>

That is to say, we know now that general definitions of religion, like the temporary scaffolding that is erected in order to facilitate more permanent architectural constructions, are, in other words, provisional and contingent to the specific initiatives for which they have been designed. Alternate theories are, at most, heuristic tools that both reveal and hide various elements of the historical circumstances they are designed to interpret. Though still, in practice, very few scholars of religion are willing to concede that their theoretical formulations are simply provisional rather than plainly correct, I work to avoid that hubris. I do not, for instance, contend that my forthcoming appeal to a notion of religion as "that which matters most" provides the sort of fixed and final designation that is serviceable in every context. Far more modestly, I contend only that this is a means of construing what qualifies as "religious" that will guide me to that which I, if perhaps not others, regard as most interesting and significant in the context of ancient Monte Albán.

In other words, rather than posing any definition of religion as globally correct, and then putting that premise to service in the interpretation of Monte Albán, I aspire in this work to the sorts of provisional formulations that are "suitable" in advancing a thoroughgoing interpretation of the mindsets, monuments and ritual machinations one encounters in the great capital of the

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<sup>30</sup> Gregory D. Alles, "Religion [Further Considerations]," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Jones, vol. 11, 7706. As Alles, *ibid.*, 7702 (*italics his*), observes, "In the past several decades... scholarly attention has increasingly turned away from trying to conceptualize religion to reflecting on the act of conceptualization itself. One might say that it has turned away from treating *religion* as a thing to treating it as a word, concept, or category."

Zapotecs. General definitions, in the end, cede to specific heuristic purposes. And thus, on those grounds, I will—in my efforts to describe the religion(s) of Monte Albán without falling prey to the very present errors of essentialism and reification—eventually make the case that all of the timeworn characterizations of Zapotec religion variously as polytheism, monotheism, monistic-panteism, animism, animatism and royal ancestor worship are not wrong, but rather limited. Each of those categorical definitions does, I will wager, shed some light on the multidimensional, but never fully systematic and contradiction-free, religious orientations that coexisted quite comfortably in the ancient Zapotec capital.<sup>31</sup>

### **C. EMBRACING ONE WORKING STIPULATION OF RELIGION: THOMAS CARLYLE ON “THAT WHICH MATTERS MOST” TO A PERSON OR PEOPLE**

In any case, if acknowledging the contingent and thus very limited status of every definition of religion, I discover that the formulations that most appeal to me—perhaps because they do most to countenance and embolden our work as historians of religions—come in those four words to which I have alluded: *that which matters most*. It is, I think, important and rewarding for me to learn what is important and rewarding for others. In terminology that will become important as I move ahead, I aim to discern the “priorities” with which ancient Oaxacans organized the spaces and activities of their lives. And thus it is on that simple formulation—more properly a working stipulation than a pat definition of religion—that I will rely throughout the present project. Accordingly, as I quest after the “religion(s)” of Monte Albán, I will be less concerned to ascertain what gods the Zapotecs worshipped, how they framed those worship practices, or how they organized their priestly hierarchy—three questions that, as we’ll see, are nonetheless of major interest to me—than to identify that which was most concerning, urgent

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<sup>31</sup> I will flesh out this idea about “the multidimensional, but never fully systematic and contradiction-free, religious orientations that coexisted quite comfortably in the ancient Zapotec capital” in chapter 4, “The Ritual-Architectural Commemoration of Divinity: Contentious Academic Theories but Consentient Supernaturalist Conceptions.” The most direct remarks on this possibility of appealing simultaneously to numerous theories of religion appear in the set of sub-sections entitled “Summary Thoughts and Methodological Cautions on the Study of Ancient Zapotec Divinity Conceptions: Idealization, Reification and False Systematization.”

and exhilarating to the elite and non-elite constituents of the ancient Zapotec capital. Simply put, I care most about ascertaining that about which Zapotecs cared most.

In opting for this plainspoken stipulation of religion I appeal to a very old rather than edgy formulation, which finds a capable spokesperson, in nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle. A perhaps unlikely touchstone for a query into ancient Mesoamerica, Carlyle opined in 1841 that, rather than a church-creed or articles of faith that one will endorse, "a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him":

"[Religion is] the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough without asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. That is his religion."<sup>32</sup>

In a mundane sense, then, were we interested to know the "religion" of a personal acquaintance, and she replied to our query by explaining that she was a member of the Methodist church, that would be of some interest, but it would in no way qualify as a revelation of that which she, in Carlyle's terms, "practically lays to heart." Though he uses the language of "belief" (with which I will quarrel in a moment), Carlyle—like Mircea Eliade and Alfredo López Austin, the two principal perspectives on which I rely to flesh out his simple proposal—locates religious investments in a more experiential realm, below deliberate choices and endorsements of various propositions and ideas. In this sense, religious commitments, in the main, are *not* the

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, lecture I, "The Hero as Divinity" (London: James Frazier, Regent Street, 1841), 3. Note, by the way, that historian of religion Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 383, for instance, ends his classic study by quoting Carlyle's definition of religion, which Wach precedes with this comment: "The mistake must be avoided of defining 'religion' in arbitrary fashion, in identifying it exclusively with ideas, rites, or institutions which are subject to change and transformation, instead of conceiving it as that profoundest source from which all human existence is nourished and upon which it depends in all its aspects: man's communion with God." The first part of Wach's remark resonates with what appeals to me about Carlyle's definition—namely, a view of religion not confined to ideas and/or institutions. But especially the last four words of Wach's comment is, I think, very much at odds with what Carlyle (once a Christian, who lost his faith while attending the University of Edinburgh and later adopted a form of deism) has in mind. Belief in "God" or any form of supernatural agent is, for the stipulation of religion that I (and, I think, Carlyle) have in mind, optional rather than mandatory.

result of deliberative decisions; neither contemporary Americans nor ancient Mesoamericans, in the main, choose or decide how it is they will be “religious.” By the same token, were we to somehow succeed in recovering the circumspect theological principles to which the well-schooled Zapotec priesthood adhered, that would in no way qualify as a reliable description of what, again in Carlyle’s phrasing, “creatively determines all the rest” for the general populace of ancient Monte Albán. Rather than canonical ideas about divinity or the elite-sponsored rules and regulations that governed Zapotec devotional life—issues that are, to be sure, of considerable concern in the present project—it is the even more elusive discernment of “that which matters most” to those ancient Oaxacans that is the target of my inquiry.

**D. AVOIDING TWO UNTOWARD PRESUPPOSITIONS ABOUT RELIGION: *NOT* A COHERENT SYSTEM OF BELIEFS AND *NOT* AN APOLITICAL SPHERE OF CULTURE**

Endorsing, for the purposes of this project, one very broad conception of religion necessarily requires rejecting, or at least holding in abeyance, other operative presuppositions about religion.<sup>33</sup> My atypical choice of Carlyle’s concern for that which “creatively determines all the rest” as a starting point, will, for instance, on the one hand, lead me to reflect on numerous aspects of the layout and configuration of Monte Albán that many previous commentators may not have imagined as “religious.” This broad conception, especially when given a much finer point by the work of Eliade and López Austin, encourages the casting of an unusually wide net as to what qualifies as “religious.” But, on the other hand, though I will finetune my conceptual choice throughout this Introduction, that starting point also compels me to flag here at the onset two of the most persistent, particularly insidious assumptions about religion that have informed nearly all of the scholarly commentary on ancient Oaxaca.

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<sup>33</sup> As noted, my embrace of one very broad, overarching conception of religion—i.e., “that which matters most”—does not preclude my occasional and provisional endorsement of other, more conventional characterizations of indigenous Zapotec religion variously as polytheistic, monotheistic, monistic-pantheistic, animistic, animatistic and/or as royal ancestor worship—all of which I maintain (in chapter 4) do shed light on various aspects of the “multidimensional, but never fully systematic and contradiction-free, religious orientations” that obtained at Monte Albán.

Rather than well-considered academic postulates, both these presumptions are ostensibly “commonsensical” aspects of what anthropologist Benson Saler terms the “folk category of religion.”<sup>34</sup> Both are, Saler maintains, typical components of an amateurish and unreflective understanding of religion that is usually acquired in childhood and then eventually, to his disappointment and even embarrassment, seeps into the scholarly study of religion. Or, in the critical assessment of advocate for “materialist approaches”—and for the “unchurching” of academic Religious Studies and Anthropology—Birgit Meyer, both of these problematic presuppositions derive from the modernist, especially liberal Protestant, “mentalist approach” that has dominated both those fields since their nineteenth-century inception.<sup>35</sup> Neither of these taken-for-granted prejudices is, therefore, by any means unique to Oaxacan Studies; but both find quintessential exemplification in scholarly interpretations of the role, or lack thereof, of “religion” in the history of Monte Albán. And both are, therefore, serious obstructions to my much broader search are that which mattered most to ancient Zapotecs.

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<sup>34</sup> Recall the epigraph at the opening of this Introduction in which Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, ix, writes, with admitted discomfort and even embarrassment about the community of cultural anthropologists of which he is part, “In large measure, indeed, their scholarly efforts to define or characterize religion are efforts to refine and deepen the folk category that they began to use as children, and to foreground what they deem most salient or important about religion.” For more on religion as a “folk category,” see *ibid.*, 1, 21-23.

<sup>35</sup> Though there are many viable alternatives, here I draw on the vigorous critique of “taken-for-granted, modernist understandings of religion as being, in principle, an ‘inward,’ ‘private,’ and even ‘invisible’ phenomenon” offered by Birgit Meyer, “An Author Meets her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer’s ‘Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion,’” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, vol. 5 (2014): 205–54. On the one hand, I largely share Meyer’s concerns about the limitedness and distortions of the especially Protestant-derived “mentalist approach” to religion that has dominated the academic fields of anthropology and comparative religion since their nineteenth-century origins, and that Meyer would prefer to replace with a (non-Marxist) “materialist approach” (see *ibid.*, 207-15). (Note, by the way, that I will address the applicability of this “materialist approach” to ancient Oaxaca in chapter 10 relative to what I term the propitiation priority, III-C.) On the other hand, I reject the implication that the mentalist approach is *the wrong way* to conceptualize religion and Meyer’s materialist approach is *the correct way*. Instead, I take the more fully hermeneutical view that the so-termed “mentalist approach” was a conceptualization that served the purposes of nineteenth-century liberal Protestants and the heirs, while the “materialist approach” better serves both Meyer’s interpretations of contemporary African religious and my interpretations of ancient Oaxacan religion. But, as I stress in this Introduction, no one definition or conceptualization of religion is adequate to all purposes.

## 1. Problems with Presuming that Zapotec Religion is a Coherent System of Beliefs and Supernaturals: Acknowledging a "Religion without Theology"

First is the seldom questioned, but highly prejudicial, notion that the religion of ancient Zapotecs, or for that matter any group, is a coherent, contradiction-free "system of beliefs"—most notably, beliefs about gods and other supernatural entities.<sup>36</sup> Though one encounters a range of technical and homespun hypotheses as to whether one's belief system is individually chosen or somehow socially ascribed, frequently this first presupposition is made more tendentiously modern and Eurocentric by the highly questionable corollary that the particular collection of beliefs and supernaturals a person embraces is a matter of personal, even private, choice.<sup>37</sup> While this seemingly benign and tolerant equation of different religions with alternate, freely-chosen "systems of belief in god(s)" may be helpful in navigating interfaith interactions in religiously pluralist contexts—say, present-day America—it creates a host of untoward skews when utilized as a means of making sense of indigenous Mesoamerican religion. Note especially three interrelated distortions.

For one, most obviously, this modernist conception of religion as "a system of supernaturalist beliefs" leads scholars to assume that, if they could adduce a reliable list of "the gods" in which Mesoamerican peoples believed, then they will have laid hold of the essence of

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<sup>36</sup> Seler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, 21-22, likewise flags "belief in a Supreme Being or God(s)" as the most commonplace "folk" definition of religion. I agree with the suggestion of Alles, "Religion [Further Considerations]," 7703ff., that the currency of this notion of religion as "a bounded set of beliefs, discrete from other belief systems," has such a long history and wide reach, in all likelihood, because that view has proven so serviceable as a means of negotiating the diversity of various faith communities.

<sup>37</sup> Meyer, "An Author Meets her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer's 'Mediation and the Genesis of Presence,'" 206-7, for instance, is among many to comment critically on the modernist, usually-taken-for-granted, but actually strongly Protestant-influenced, tendency to see religion as belonging to "the private sphere of personal belief" or "in principle, an 'inward,' 'private,' and even 'invisible' phenomenon."

their “religion;”<sup>38</sup> and that timeworn presumption, as I will explore at length in chapter 4 on Zapotec conceptions of divinity (priority II-A), provides the rationale for a relentless 500-year snipe hunt after New World counterparts to a Greco-Roman pantheon of deities, which in all likelihood never existed.<sup>39</sup> For two and not less problematic, this clichéd conception of religion is the ground of the frequent idealization of pre-Hispanic religion, prior to Christianizing corruptions, as a completely “pure,” stable and internally consistent schema of metaphysical principles.<sup>40</sup> This presumption, which at first seems a strong affirmation of indigenous sophistication in spiritual matters, leads us straight into what might be termed “the fallacies of purity and typicality,” a pair of reifying distortions that I will venture (again in chapter 4) constitute the two most egregious errors that reappear time and again in the scholarly literature on Zapotec religion.<sup>41</sup> That old-school, but still-active, essentializing assumption that all religions are built on something like “systematic theologies” could not, however, be more at odds with contemporary realizations that it is the ragged, imperfectly-synthesized, situational and pragmatic renditions of indigenous priorities—sometimes termed “religion without theology”—

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<sup>38</sup> I will explore this question of equating the supposed “deity lists” extracted from colonial-era Dominican writings with the “religion” of ancient Zapotecs at length in chapter 4, “The Ritual-Architectural Commemoration of Divinity: Contentious Academic Theories but Consentient Supernaturalist Conceptions (*Priority II-A*).” Though he has abundant company in this regard, Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, chaps. 2-3, provides the most recent high-profile example of that long-running but untoward tendency.

<sup>39</sup> I will explore this question of equating the supposed “deity lists” extracted from colonial-era Dominican writings with the “religion” of ancient Zapotecs at length in chapter 4, “The Ritual-Architectural Commemoration of Divinity: Contentious Academic Theories but Consentient Supernaturalist Conceptions (*Priority II-A*).” Though he has abundant company in this regard, Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, chaps. 2-3, provides the most recent high-profile example of that long-running but untoward tendency.

<sup>40</sup> The corollary of idealizing pre-Columbian religion as “pure” and fully consistent is the degrading of colonial-era Mesoamerican religion as a “corrupted” and broken system that only faintly resembles its pristine pre-Hispanic counterpart. On the inadequacies of both those (mis)characterizations, see in chapter 4 the sub-section entitled, “Summary Thoughts and Methodological Cautions on the Study of Ancient Zapotec Divinity Conceptions: Idealization, Reification and False Systematization.”

<sup>41</sup> In chapter 4, see especially the sub-section entitled “Summary Thoughts and Methodological Cautions on the Study of Ancient Zapotec Divinity Conceptions: Idealization, Reification and False Systematization.”

that are far more likely to be empirically accurate descriptions of pre-Columbian and well as present-day Oaxacan contexts.<sup>42</sup>

And for three, conceptualizations of religion as first and foremost “belief systems” are even more fundamentally distorting in yet another way. Embedded in the only-seemingly innocuous “mentalist” assumption that, just as Protestant critiques of Catholicism presuppose, that conceptualization positions the cognitive and intellectualist aspects of the religion—in short, faith-based beliefs—as the heart of the matter (or “the essence” of one’s religion), while the ritual, institutional and practical aspects of religion are thereby consigned to a kind of secondary and derivative status.<sup>43</sup> Though, even now, asking “*In what did the Zapotecs believe?*” is routinely considered essentially interchangeable with “*What was their religion?*”, that is, as we’ll see, a very far cry from the elaborate pattern of hermeneutical questioning that I employ in my efforts to discern “what mattered most” among the ancient capital’s rulers and residents.

## **2. Problems with Presuming that Zapotec Religion is a Domain Distinct from Politics: Reconnecting that which was Never Separate**

Second and closely related to inordinate preoccupations with “systems of belief” is the similarly ubiquitous and unexamined assumption that “religion” refers to the other-than-political aspects of socio-cultural life.<sup>44</sup> Here again we confront a global problem—another presumed

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<sup>42</sup> On the notion of “religion without theology,” as evidenced in contemporary indigenous Oaxacan communities’ pragmatic and situational embrace of what he terms “multiple experiences of the sacred,” I am especially indebted to Bartolomé, “Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca,” 601-42. I discuss and rely on Bartolomé at some length in chapter 4 relative to the divinity priority (II-A), but elsewhere as well.

<sup>43</sup> Again, see, for example, Meyer, “An Author Meets her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer’s ‘Mediation and the Genesis of Presence,’” 210, on what she sees as the insidiousness of “meaning-centered, mentalistic understandings of religion,” which are directly at odds with the “materialist approaches” for which she is advocating.

<sup>44</sup> The means and motives for separating “the religious” from “the political” are, of course, complex in the extreme. But nearly always that contradistinction reflects a double-edged paradox wherein religion, on the one hand, is elevated to the sphere of the idealized, immaterial, abstract and supernatural and, at the same time, religion’s role in the practical workings of society, where political forces dominate, is seriously diminished. I will, however, especially in

distinction that many would trace to the post-Enlightenment, especially Protestant roots of modernist imaginations of religion—which is, therefore, not at all confined to Oaxacanist studies. And yet, here again, the history of ideas about Monte Albán provides a quintessential demonstration of both the appeal and the distortions consequent of the again-only-seemingly innocuous claim that “the religious” is a distinct sphere of social life that stands alongside, but apart from, a similarly distinct domain of “the political.” Constantly in the literature on Monte Albán, we encounter “politics” conceived as the hard cold facts of owning, controlling and exercising self-interest, while “religion,” almost oppositely, is imagined as loftier but softer and more speculative, “an immaterial affair, located at some distance from the mundane material realm of the world.”<sup>45</sup>

That ostensible bifurcation of lofty religious or “spiritual” concerns from baser political ones provides a kind of double-edged formulation, first, for exoticizing ancient Mesoamericans as profoundly different from irreligious modern Westerners, and then later, as a kind of over-corrective, for demystifying Mesoamericans as social actors with priorities very similar to those of present-day entrepreneurial and self-interested politicians. It is this distinction that, for instance, enabled commentators during most of the early twentieth century to assess the great pre-Columbian centers, especially Maya sites but also Monte Albán, as “sacred cities,” whose scale and splendor could be attributed to “the deep religiosity” of their pre-Columbian builders, a mindset that stood in stark contrast to the shallower and more pragmatic priorities of contemporary Europeans and Americans.<sup>46</sup> But then, by the 1970s—presumably in an effort to provide more suitably skeptical readings of the evidence and more realistic depictions of ancient Oaxacans as typically egotistical human agents—the majority of scholars rely on the same

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chapter 6 relative to the politics priority (II-C), be arguing for conceptualizations in which the religion is a highly important factor in the practical functioning of Monte Albán society.

<sup>45</sup> Meyer, “An Author Meets her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer’s ‘Mediation and the Genesis of Presence,’” 207.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, my enumeration of early twentieth-century assessments of Monte Albán as a “sacred city” in the section of chapter 1 on the homology priority (I-A) entitled “Monte Albán as ‘Sacred Space’ Par Excellence: Accolades, Affirming Assumptions and Occasional Skepticism.”

supposed contradistinction to argue explicitly that it was, after all, “the political” rather than “the religious” that accounted for the formation, flourishing and eventual failure of Monte Albán.<sup>47</sup>

Though in one sense diametrically opposed, those two views—the exoticizing and the demystifying—share an adulatory, if somewhat ambivalent, conceptualization of “religion” that is reinforced by its purported contrast to the indelicacy of pragmatic politics. In fact, this specious contrariety between the appealing idealism but lamentable impracticality of “religion” versus the rougher but more realistic workings of “politics” is supported by the still very active modernist assumption that alternate religions constitute culturally-distinct means of encouraging people to be respectful and “nice” to one another. In its bluntest guise, “religion” is imagined as an expression of people’s highest and most moral nature, while “politics” reveals the more selfish and egoistic motives that actually drive social evolution. By those problematic standards, human sacrifice, for instance, may be a “political strategy,” or perhaps a “perversion of religion,” but never a genuinely “religious practice.” And while these value-judgments are so much a part of colloquial understandings of the category that they can be very difficult to escape, this idealization of religion as “the non-political” is another untoward tendency that I will be working hard to avoid.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In Maya studies, there is a more unmistakable and frequently discussed shift from early and mid-twentieth-century theories that picture the Classic Mayas as “deeply religious” to theories, especially in the 1980s, that see Maya priorities as overwhelmingly militaristic and “political.” See, for instance, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York: George Braziller, Inc. and Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), 9-33. But for a roughly parallel trajectory in Oaxacan studies, compare the religion-affirming Monte Albán (re)construction narratives of Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal and John Paddock (summarized respectively in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chaps. 1-3) with the historical (re)construction of Richard Blanton and the co-authored work of Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery (summarized in *ibid.*, chaps. 4 and 6), which explicitly accentuate the political, not religious, factors that account for the great capital. Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978 [Percheron reprint, 2004]), for instance, is, remarkably enough, able to tell a compelling story of Monte Albán’s entire founding, flourishing and collapse in which political priorities so fully supersede religious ones that he does not even mention the latter.

<sup>48</sup> Regarding colloquial notions that religion is about “being nice,” telling the truth, respecting others, etc., this is another area in which “folk” assumptions intrude on academic assessments. Because most Mesoamerican scholars, it seems, share the lay assumption that “true religion” is, by nature, a force for moral propriety, piety and upright behavior (issues that definitely are *not*

At any rate, to reiterate and summarize these preemptory cautionings, I adopt, solely for the purposes of this project, a working definition of religion focused on those abiding principles of doing and deciding that a people “practically lays to heart”—and that starting point requires me to doubt rather than simply perpetuate two of the most entrenched assumptions about “religion in general,” and thus about ancient Zapotec religion. Firstly, my select stipulation will not allow me to accept as authoritative the sorts of elitist answers about well-honed beliefs and metaphysical ideas that religious leaders tend to give; I reject the purported truism that the essential truth of a religion lies in its institutionally-sanctioned system of beliefs or even in its “sacred texts.” Consequently, in the case of the ancient Zapotecs, I reject the notion that the tidy deity lists that scholars extract from colonial-era Dominican writers such as Juan de Córdova or Gonzalo de Balsalobre (both of whom will be discussed at length in chapter 4), even if some priestly elite did endorse such a pantheon of gods, really tell us much about the more operative “religious” priorities at work in Monte Albán. Ancient Zapotec religion, we can be sure, was far messier and more variegated than that.

And, secondly, even more difficult to evade, that select stipulation requires me to be on guard against incessant, seldom challenged intimations that “the religious” aspects of the ancient Zapotec capital were those abstract ideals that somehow escaped the direct influence of “the political”—a distortion of “what matter most” that is as severe as it common. In the hyphenated “religio-political,” I recombine concerns that were, at Monte Albán, never separated.

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part of my stipulation of religion), they feel compelled, for instance, to gloss human sacrifice as something like “religious fanaticism” or “religion-gone-wrong,” as though it were a kind of paradoxically irreligious religious behavior. Of many Mesoamericanists who present complexly conflicted views on these matters, the oeuvres of Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal both display highly ambivalent assessments wherein religion is, on the one hand, the uniquely positive force that stimulates Mesoamerica’s greatest cultural achievements, Monte Albán and Tenochtitlan included; but, on the other hand, religion is also, in Caso’s term, “the fatal flaw” that invariably leads rulers away from the astute political decision-making that had led to their success; and in that sense, religion is a prime factor of the downfall of Aztecs, Zapotecs and others. Regarding ways in which Caso’s and Bernal’s mixed and ambivalent assessments of the role of religion is reflected in their historical (re)constructions of Monte Albán, see the respective “Closing Thoughts” in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 1 (on Caso) and chap. 2 (on Bernal).

## **E. THE AGENDA OF THE INTRODUCTION: PAIRED APPEALS TO COMPARATIVE RELIGIONISTS ON ORIENTATION AND MESOAMERICANISTS ON COSMOVISION**

On notice concerning these two endemic but unhelpful assumptions of Zapotec religion, this project engages two very different, infrequently interacting academic fields—Comparative Religion and Mesoamerican Studies—which thereby constitute the two acutely different audiences to whom the discussion is directed. In order to advance the very broad notion of religion as that which “a people practically lays to heart, concerning their vital relations to this mysterious universe, and their duty and destiny therein,”<sup>49</sup> and thereby determined to mark a methodological pathway that avoids the two pitfalls I have just identified, this Introduction has a dual-pronged agenda, which I undertake in five steps.<sup>50</sup>

The first set of sub-sections reviews reconceptualizations of the category of religion undertaken by hermeneutically-inclined scholars of religion, most notably Mircea Eliade and Charles H. Long, both of whom focus on the notion of *religion as a means of orientation*. The very basic comments about Eliade’s approach, which are intended primarily for Oaxacanists not familiar with that material, may be tedious for religionists; but this discussion also accentuates the point, which scholars of religion usually overlook, that Eliade’s work anticipates the current vogue for “materialist approaches” and is, therefore, especially well suited for the exploration of religion in archaeological contexts like Monte Albán. The second set of sub-sections reviews quite independent reconceptualizations of “religion” undertaken among Mesoamericanists by outlining three stages in their shifting attitudes about pre-Columbian religion, which lead, in the 1980s, to the emergence of the so-termed “cosmovision approach.” And the third set of sub-sections addresses the singularly influential work of Aztec specialist Alfredo López Austin in persuading Mesoamericanists, Oaxacanists included, of an enduring and region-wide “hard

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<sup>49</sup> This is a close paraphrase of Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Note also that, instead of the shortest route to my methodological recommendations, these remarks exemplify a deep interest in the history of ideas, which, as I will explain later in the Introduction, is characteristic of the entire project. Some readers will welcome the departures into the respective intellectual histories of religious studies and Mesoamerican studies, while others (especially those fixed solely on queries about “what really happened” at Monte Albán) are certain to find them tiresome.

nucleus” of Mesoamerican epistemological investments and ideas, which emerges in the Formative era and remains intact in contemporary indigenous communities. If more familiar ground for Oaxacanists, those second and third sections challenge comparative religion scholars to consider insights into religion-related matters from a disciplinary perspective other than their own.

A fourth set of sub-sections makes explicit my basic premise and observation that, though Comparative Religion and Mesoamerican Studies have, as a rule, had despairingly little interaction, there is a highly felicitous coincidence between relatively recent trends in the two fields. More specifically, the respective emphases on orientation and on cosmovision, in my view, direct us away from conceiving of ancient Zapotec religion either as a contradiction-free “system of beliefs” or as a socio-cultural sphere that is largely insulated from worldly politics; and, moreover, instead, both of those reconfigured views of religion guide us toward the heartfelt priorities that “creatively determines all the rest” at pre-Columbian Monte Albán. I wager, in other words, that these seldom paired intellectual traditions, better than any other approach to religion that I can summon, can lead us to appreciate what, for ancient Oaxacans, mattered most. The fifth section is a brief summary that enumerates the three conceptual correctives, and three concomitant interpretative challenges, on which I base that optimistic embrace of this way of (re)conceptualizing “religion.”

Finally, the very last portion of this long Introduction—“The Organization of the Work”—is more programmatic than theoretical insofar as it outlines the structure or “architecture” of the entire book, which mirrors the layout of my two-volume *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (2000).<sup>51</sup> Only in my dreams do

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<sup>51</sup> Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, originally published by Harvard University Press (2000) as two volumes: vol. I: *Monumental Occasions: Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture*; and vol. II: *Hermeneutical Calisthenics: A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities*. The work was reissued by ABC International Group (2016) as seven slim volumes: vol. I.1: *The Experience of Architecture*; vol. I.2: *The Mechanism of Architecture*; vol. I.3: *The Interpretation of Architecture*; vol. I.4: *The Comparison of Architecture*; vol. II.1: *Architecture as Orientation*; vol. II.2: *Architecture as Commemoration*; and vol. II.3: *Architecture as Ritual Context*. Note

readers actually engage that earlier theoretical work before coming to this one. Nonetheless, having devoted that former project entirely to general reflections on the nature of “sacred architecture” and its roles in ritual and religious life, I can settle in this collection of essays for some concise reminders about the generalities that open the way to a much fuller exposition of the specific beliefs, practices and institutions of pre-Columbian Monte Albán, which are, on this occasion, my primary concern. Also, note that I set a precedent for all subsequent chapters by providing a very detailed Table of Contents that can guide selective readers to sections that either comport or depart from their particular interests. Indeed, well aware of the overlong and winding character of this work, I have labored hard to provide a carefully considered, outline-like Table of Contents, which can serve as a map that pinpoints precisely where one stands within the meandering project. Please make regular use of it! While reading the manuscript from front-to-back is my idealized expectation, the more realistic protocol of discriminating, here-and-there reading is encouraged rather than forestalled.

**II. RECONCEPTUALIZING RELIGION:  
INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE CROSS-CULTURALLY COMPARATIVE  
HISTORY OF RELIGIONS AND MESOAMERICAN STUDIES**

I begin, then, with consideration of the reconceptualizations of “religion” undertaken within the cross-culturally comparative History of Religions, which I will follow with remarks on roughly parallel developments within more narrowly focused Mesoamerican Studies. Largely independent academic trajectories, these respective re-visionings of what is at issue in utilizing the category of religion in a context where it matches no indigenous concept or term intersect in ways that are, it seems, more the consequence of serendipity—and perhaps shared discontents—than systematic scholarly interactions. Here I plant theoretical seeds whose shoots and blooms will reappear throughout the project.

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that all of the citations to this work in *The Religion of Monte Albán* come from the original edition.

**A. RELIGIONISTS' RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS: RELIGION AS ORIENTATION AND A STUDY OF RELIGION BASED FOREMOST ON MATERIAL (NON-LITERARY) EVIDENCE**

Beginning especially in the 1980s, post-modern, post-structuralist, post-colonial and materialist critics, not without good reason, all launched sweeping indictments of the full field of Religious Studies, and perhaps Anthropology too, for their insidious role in the perpetuation of Eurocentric, strongly Protestant-informed conceptions of religion. Informed by their critical efforts, I have identified two very broad sorts of prejudicial biases that are especially widespread and, I think, especially at odds with my present efforts to make sense of the most important and urgent ritual-architectural priorities that obtained in the ancient Zapotec capital of Monte Albán. To reiterate, first is the seemingly obvious assumption—frequently imagined as a liberal-minded means of respecting the diversified outlooks of “others”—that different religions constitute different, but largely coherent “systems of belief.” And second is the even more embedded assumption—likewise imagined as a means validating religion by lifting it above the fray of everyday life—that “the religious” is a distinct socio-cultural sphere preoccupied with speculation on otherworldly matters, which can therefore be understood as the near antithesis of the similarly distinct domain of “the political.”

I now search, therefore, after (re)conceptualizations of “religion” that avoid this endemic modernist tendency to see different religions as alternate apolitical systems of belief. And while an appeal to the work of hermeneutically-inclined historian of religions Mircea Eliade may strike many as an unlikely antidote to foundational problems in a field with which he was singularly identified from the 1960s through the 1980s, I am making the case that he provides precisely that; and I am furthermore stressing that Eliade’s outlook is perfectly matched to investigation of a so-termed archaeological site like Monte Albán. Accordingly, in the forthcoming sections I work to explain my perhaps unfashionable contention that Eliade, especially when paired with Mesoamericans’ mounting reliance on the category of cosmovision, remains a uniquely rich source of constructive suggestions and solutions for the present project.<sup>52</sup> Scholars of religion

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<sup>52</sup> While I do not want to overstate the extent of my personal relationship with Mircea Eliade, and, as noted, I certain do not want to occupy the stance of an apologist for Eliade. But it does seem suitable to note, for one, that I was a graduate student in the last five courses that Eliade

will, I hope, forgive my trafficking yet again across such heavily-trodden terrain; but Mesoamericanists may, I also hope, find something fresh in this well-worked ground.

### **1. Mircea Eliade’s Point of Departure: “Being Religious” and Finding Orientation as Constitutive of the Human Condition**

As just noted, the endlessly debated, frequently polarizing work of historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) will seem to many religionists an improbable place to appeal for a forward-looking remedy to untoward tendencies in the mainstream modernist conceptualization of religion; and Mesoamericanists too are likely dubious that a scholar who wrote so sparingly about Mesoamerica, and not at all about Oaxaca, can play a lead role in the present project. Predictable wariness notwithstanding, I maintain that Eliade’s terminology and approach remain—especially when dealing with an archaeological context, rich in material rather than literary sources—an excellent place to begin. It is, however, absolutely crucial to appreciate—as will become more apparent in chapter 1, which is in large part an Eliadean reading of Monte Albán—that I rely on his highly influential model of religion and “sacred space” not as an iron-clad theory that one needs either to endorse or reject, but rather as a heuristic scheme, a “suitable” set of provisional propositions to be utilized rather than defended.<sup>53</sup> That is to say, rather than summational answers, Eliade’s work provides me here, just as it did in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, one important contribution to a much broader pattern of interpretive questioning.

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taught at the University of Chicago Divinity School in the 1980s, the final of which was a seminar on “Mythical Time” co-taught with Paul Ricoeur. Also, I eventually spent several years in my work as editor-in-chief of a very heavily revised second edition of the 16-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005) for which Eliade was the original editor-in-chief (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987). During that project, I accumulated countless letters and anecdotes from former colleagues of Eliade, from around the globe, which thereby enriched my reading of his published work.

<sup>53</sup> As noted, chapter 1, “Allurement via Homologized Architecture: Monte Albán as Cosmic Mountain, Microcosm and Sacred Center,” which explores what I term “the homology priority (I-A),” is largely an Eliadean reading of Monte Albán, a site that he himself does not engage but that, I contend, demonstrates many of this themes as well or better than his own examples. But as I explain here and will reiterate there, Eliade’s perspective provides this project a heuristic point of departure rather than a methodological template or final solution.

In any case, Eliade and his close associates, always determined to be explicit about these methodological matters, make a signal and, in many respects, prescient contribution to the dilemma of defining religion. Already by the 1970s, numerous historians of religions, most taking their cue directly or indirectly from Eliade's hermeneutical phenomenological approach, had begun to anticipate post-colonial and materialist critiques of modernist conceptualizations by explicitly rejecting presumptions both that "religion" was foremost about "systemic beliefs in gods" or about fidelity to institutionalized moral-ethical rules; and, instead, they proposed something more resemblant to Carlyle's contention that religion is that which matters most, which "creatively determines all the rest."<sup>54</sup> For these scholars, "orientation" and "finding one's place in the world" emerged as the most serviceable ways of conceiving of religion.<sup>55</sup>

Reiterating many of Eliade's basic concerns, Charles Long, for instance, in some oft-quoted lines, wrote that, for his purposes, "religion will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world."<sup>56</sup> For Long, like Eliade, the single best one-word gloss for religion *is* orientation. Historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, at odds with Long and Eliade on many other fronts, afforded a similar priority to place and orientation in space for the study of religion by maintaining that,

"the question of the character of the place on which one stands is the fundamental symbolic and social question. Once an individual or culture has expressed its vision of its place, a whole language of symbols and social structure will follow."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> For similar and fuller comments on religion as orientation, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, 26-32. Or see, in the present work, "Introduction to Part I: Orientation and Allurement: The Instigation of Ritual-Architectural Events at Monte Albán."

<sup>56</sup> Long, *Significations*, 7. On religion as "cosmic orientation," also see Charles H. Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1963), 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Influence of Symbols upon Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand," *Worship* 44 (October 1970): 472; reprinted as chapter 6 of Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 129-46. David Carrasco has repeatedly quoted and embellished this line, for instance, in

Likewise Lawrence Sullivan, in his *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religion* (1998), opted for orientation as the umbrella term that encompasses South Americans' meaningful positioning in relation not only to space and time but also to conceptions about the beginnings of the world, of people, of ritual practices and social institutions; about the human body, the soul, leaders and organizations; and about the endings associated with death, funerary rites and eschatology.<sup>58</sup> For Sullivan too, a so-termed “religious orientation” and “sense of place” are informing not simply of a privileged slice of life, but all of life. And when historian of religions David Carrasco organized his widely-read *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers* (1990) around the tripartite themes of “religion as worldmaking, worldcentering, and worldrenewing”—that is to say, “a pattern of order/collapse/recentering/order/collapse and so on”—he implied that nothing is quite so important to the history of the region as an ongoing process of finding, losing and recovering orientation.<sup>59</sup> Consistent with my own emphases on sacred architecture and place-making, all these religionists' views maintain that a people's understanding of *who* they are is heavily contingent on *where* they are. For these scholars (and for me), a clear sense of orientation, particularly in relation to specific places, is paramount for a gratifying and felicitous life.

If, as I contend, every theory of religion is contingent on a matching theory of human nature, those of Eliade and his colleagues are no exception. The ground for his preoccupation with visions of place and orientation lies in a posit that the cross-cultural ubiquity of religion is a consequence of the fact that all people are, by nature, *homo religiosus*; for him, to be human is concomitant with “being religious,” that is, endowed with an inclination, indeed a deep thirst, to

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his *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies of the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 104.

<sup>58</sup> Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988).

<sup>59</sup> David Carrasco, *The Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2014 [originally HarperSanFrancisco, 1990]).

interact with “the sacred,” a term better translated here as “the exceptional” than as God.<sup>60</sup> Where many scholars attribute religion to negative factors like fear, confusion, alienation or unwarranted optimism—recall, for instance, Alfonso Caso’s endorsement of the shibboleth that “fear and hope are parents of the gods”<sup>61</sup>—for Eliade, by extreme contrast, religion arises from the experience of something positive and life-affirming, that which transforms human existence from the mundane, ordinary or “profane” into the special, extra-ordinary and “sacred.” Neither delusion nor illusion, to be “religious” is, in Eliade’s view, a condition of intellectual acuity, psychological health and ontological fullness; and that depends upon some clarity about one’s place in the natural environment as well as “an orientation to sacred reality,” without which aspirations to a full and rewarding life are certain to be frustrated.<sup>62</sup> Unwilling to exist simply in a profane world, the *homo religiosus*’s quest for participation in the exceptional entails a robust embrace of reality—even Reality—rather than a frightened or confused means of simply “getting by.” In short, Eliade proposes that historians like himself (and me) benefit by imagining that people in all contexts are by nature “religious,” and, therefore, that the essential challenge of human life is to find and maintain the sort of religious orientation that enables ongoing “access to the sacred.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See, among many relevant works, Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 15-18. (Note that, going forward, I will use “*homo religiosi*” as the plural of “*homo religiosus*.”)

<sup>61</sup> Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun*, trans. Lowell Dunham (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 3. Note also that this book is an expanded version of Alfonso Caso, *La religión de los aztecas* (México: Imprenta Mundial, 1936), which is to say, this is a view to which the highly influential Caso presumably adhered throughout his entire career.

<sup>62</sup> Eliade and Sullivan, “Orientation,” 6887.

<sup>63</sup> As an opening to his multi-volume *History of Religious Ideas*, Eliade goes so far, in fact, as to suggest that the first occasion of *homo erectus* standing upright, and thereby constituting oneself as a center with respect to the four cardinal directions—that is to say, finding a meaningful orientation in the world and thereby a means of “access to the sacred”—constitutes a kind of metaphorical “origin of religion.” In his words, “It is from this original and originating experience [of man’s vertical posture]... that the different methods of *orientatio* are developed; for it is impossible to survive for any length of time in the vertigo brought on by disorientation.” Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, vol. 1, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3. That is to say, for Eliade, to be human requires attaining a meaningful orientation and that is, in itself, a religious act.

Importantly, however, we need to appreciate that Eliade's highly affirming view of the *homo religiosus*, and thus of religion in general, is useful to us, not as a doctrinaire proposition about what religion "really is," but rather as a procedural and strategically heuristic starting point for understanding the primary motivations of others, say, ancient Zapotecs. His academic goal (like mine) is empirically accurate history not normative theology. Though occasionally mischaracterized as such, Eliade is not an apologist for something like perennial religion. That is to say, Eliade's perspective, frequently criticized as inordinately generous, and therefore insufficiently skeptical, is predicated on the pragmatic, not absolutist, view that our scholarly prospects of understanding the most urgent existential concerns operating various historical contexts, say, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, are best served by conceptualizing "religion" as something positive, healthy and even natural rather than as based on fear, confusion or coercion. Eliade's conceptualization of religion is, by my reading, a heuristic stipulation rather than the sort of fixed and final definition about which scholars are presently so suitably suspicious.<sup>64</sup>

Eliade and Long, then, wager that our most promising point of scholarly departure is to conceive of "religion" as intelligent and invigorating not, as so many scholars presume, misguided and deleterious. Instead of assuming that ancients were saddled by naivety and baseless superstitions, these scholars accentuate, as a heuristic presupposition, the perspicacity and skill at living that is characteristic of peoples in pre-modern contexts. For Eliade and Long, the most prudent academic strategy is to imagine religion as a valued and valuable feature of human life, an asset rather than an onus, not because, as folk catchphrases about the category purport, religion encourages good moral-ethical behavior, but because a "religious orientation" is that which can bring meaning and significance to all of one's otherwise tedious and mundane activities.

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<sup>64</sup> Note, then, that the presently relevant question is not so much how did Eliade himself regard the status of his definition of religion (which is highly debatable matter) than how will we put to service that definition. And, to reiterate, here I am making the case that we can and should regard Eliade's formulations as heuristic stipulations rather than a fixed and final definition of religion.

As a rhetorical strategy to make his point, Eliade presents two idealized possibilities: The fully functioning *homo religiosus* characteristic of the "*archaic consciousness*"—a condition best observed in traditional Hindu contexts, in the "peasant communities" of eastern Europe, and especially in indigenous contexts like those of Australian aborigines or ancient Mesoamericans—versus the "*modern consciousness*," which obtains in present-day Western societies where the inclinations of the *homo religiosus* persist, but encounter many obstacles to their smooth operation.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in direct contradistinction to still-live evolutionary biases, Eliade assesses the "archaic ontology" as clearly superior, rather than inferior, to more modern responses to the challenge of being human. His view is "de-evolutionary" inasmuch as moderns exist with nostalgia rather than disdain for their sagacious "archaic" forbearers.

In Eliade's nomenclature, therefore, rather than connoting credulousness in religious matters, the loaded terms "archaic" and even "primitive" signal a sophistication and adeptness at living that "modern man" has lost. In his view, we benefit by imagining ancient Zapotecs as more not less astute than ourselves. In other words, according to his heuristic bifurcation, the "irreligious condition" of contemporary people, which is more of a rhetorical device than an empirical reality (because everyone has an immutably *homo religiosus* nature), entails, on the one hand, living in a simply "natural" or "desacralized" environment; linear conceptions of time prevail so that modern people find themselves entrapped in "history," and therefore moving ever farther away from the paradigmatic origins of their ancestors. Consigned to this sort strictly "profane experience," Eliade says, "no *true* orientation is possible..." and thus full engagements with the sacred are forestalled.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, however, the less encumbered and more

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<sup>65</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 70ff. If one specific tradition exercises a special influence on Eliade's conception of religion in general, it is not Protestant Christianity (about whose inordinate influence I complain repeatedly in this Introduction) but Hinduism.

<sup>66</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 23; italics his. Beware that, for Eliade, references to the "irreligious condition of modern man" are more of a rhetorical strategy than an empirical description insofar as, in his view, present-day people remain *homo religiosus* in their essential nature, but the persistent "mythical consciousness" and the urge to "escape from Time" that operate smoothly in "archaic contexts" are now discernable primarily in the realms of entertainment, distractions, leisure reading and the unconscious psychic activity of dreams, fantasies, nostalgias, etc. On this topic, see, for instance, Mircea Eliade, "The Myths of the Modern World," in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 37ff.

fortunate *homo religiosi* of non-modern contexts—and ancient Oaxaca would certainly qualify as such a context—according to Eliade, adopt strategies that allow them to “live in a sacralized cosmos,”<sup>67</sup> a world in which “the supernatural is indissolubly connected with the natural, that nature always expresses something that transcends it.”<sup>68</sup> By living in a “cosmos” rather than in history per se—and thereby finding “a true orientation”—those with an “archaic consciousness,” more not less astute than their modern counterparts, are able to transcend a “profane” or merely mundane existence by enjoying “the access to the sacred” that comes with ongoing participation in the archetypal patterns of their ancestors. In fact, according to Eliade, via “the perspective adopted by the man of archaic societies... the whole of life is capable of being sanctified”:

“The means by which its sanctification is brought about are various, but the result is always the same: life is lived on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods.”<sup>69</sup>

In short, the very antithesis of a discrete, apolitical sphere of speculation on otherworldly matters, the “religion” of Eliade’s conception is an essential, permanent and eminently practical feature of the human condition that allows one to live a fully “sanctified life.”<sup>70</sup> For him (though keep in mind that this is a heuristic stipulation rather than a theological premise), religion is that which enables a rewarding “mode of being in world”—or a meaningful *orientation* to one’s ambient surroundings—without which life cannot be completely gratifying.

## **2. Eliade and Materiality: Anticipating the “Material Turn” and Shifting Attention from “Sacred Texts” to Material Culture**

Mircea Eliade’s suitability as an informing point of departure for this project depends furthermore, I contend, on his very strong preoccupations with “materiality” and material culture, something he, not inconsequentially, shares with the archaeologists who have, thus far,

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<sup>67</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 17.

<sup>68</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 118.

<sup>69</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 167.

<sup>70</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 14-16.

controlled the interpretation of Monte Albán. Indeed, Eliade's work, though too seldom referenced in the presently vigorous exchanges about religion and materiality, resonates in all sorts of ways with the so-termed "material turn," a recent shift in academic emphases that I regard as a very positive, if somewhat overhyped, development.<sup>71</sup> Ostensibly emerging in the 1990s, the material turn (or "materialist turn") is a major and multidimensional movement with large ripples across the social sciences and humanities, and thus scholars in numerous fields present their own genealogies of the most significant foundational sources.<sup>72</sup> While this debate is not easily summarized, I am, for present purposes, especially informed by those analyses that construe the material turn as a reaction against the so-called "linguistic turn" (or "discursive turn"), which, beginning especially in the 1970s, focused attention on the unique power of language and discourse. The "new materialists," studying socio-cultural phenomena from numerous different disciplinary frames, though not unmindful of the immense power of language, want to refocus attention on non-literary components of culture, especially "things," broadly construed.<sup>73</sup>

In Religious Studies, which have always focused overwhelmingly on the exegesis of "sacred texts," there is a kind of exploding interest, and thus escalating bibliography, in support

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<sup>71</sup> I describe the "material turn" of the 1990s as "somewhat overhyped" because, as I work to demonstrate in this section, many of the fundamental concerns had been anticipated considerably earlier, for instance, by historians of religions Mircea Eliade and Charles H. Long. For a set of essays informed by those two thinkers, and trained specifically on Mesoamerica, that anticipates the current flurry of interest in material approaches, see, for instance, *The Imagination of Matter: Religion and Ecology in Mesoamerican Traditions*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford: B.A.R. International Series, 1989).

<sup>72</sup> Multifarious accounts of the "material turn" perhaps appeal most often to the work of Bruno Latour—e.g., his "Can We Get our Materialism Back, Please?," *Isis*, vol. 98, no. 1 (2007): 138-142—but it is striking and telling that scholars in different fields, in a sense taking ownership of the material turn, provide very different authorities and genealogies for the movement.

<sup>73</sup> See, among many possibilities, Jennifer L. Roberts, "Things: Material Turn, Transnational Turn," *American Art*, vol. 3, no. 2 (summer 2017): 64-69. Roberts, *ibid.*, 64, directs attention to one notable benchmark in this renewed interest in understanding culture and society on the basis of non-literary "things" comes in English professor Bill Brown's coining of the term "thing theory" as the impetus for a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, issue 1 (winter 2001), entitled "Things," which announced that "literary criticism, with all its prestige and theoretical firepower, was now going to take up the challenge of topics like gloves and coffeemakers."

of these broadly materialist trends.<sup>74</sup> As noted earlier, Birgit Meyer and other advocates for (non-Marxist) materialist approaches see them as a crucial corrective to the one-sided “mentalist” overemphasis on intellectualized beliefs and “sacred scripture,” which have influenced the comparative study of religions since its late-nineteenth-century emergence.<sup>75</sup> Proponents of the material turn—in recommendations that are quintessentially relevant to the study of an archaeological context like ancient Monte Albán—urge us to conduct the study of religion not solely, or even primarily, on the basis of textual sources, as has been the prevailing convention, but rather on at least three other non-literary spheres of concern: (1) objects like relics, amulets, dress codes, painted or sculpted images and architectural spaces; (2) feelings and sensory experiences such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching; and (3) bodily performances in specific gestures, rituals, ceremonies and festivals.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> As noted, the recent bibliography on materialist approaches to the study of religion is enormous, fast growing and too readily available to require rehearsal here. An early, still much-cited salvo for materialist approaches is David Chidester, “Material Terms for the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2000): 367-79. Manuel Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), provides another much-discussed offering. Also, with respect to the rationale for a journal dedicated to these important issues, see S. Brent Plate, Birgit Meyer, David Morgan and Crispin Paine, “Editorial Statement,” in *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2005): 4-9. And for specific applications of notions of materiality to Mesoamerican contexts, see, for example, Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Cradling the Sacred: Image, Ritual, and Affect in Mexico and Mesoamerican Material Religion,” *History of Religions* 56, no. 1 (August 2016): 55-107; and David Carrasco, “The Imagination of Matter: Mesoamerican Trees, Cities, and Human Sacrifice,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Material Religion*, eds. Manuel Vásquez and Vasudha Narayanan (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

<sup>75</sup> See both Meyer, “An Author Meets her Critics: Around Birgit Meyer’s ‘Mediation and the Genesis of Presence,’” 208-22, which I cited earlier, and *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (Fordham University Press, New York, 2012).

<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, the editors’ “Introduction: Material Religion—How Things Matter,” in Houtman and Meyer, eds., *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, 1-23. Regarding the second of these three emphases, i.e., feelings and sensory experiences like seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, note that the “material turn” is frequently and suitably connected to the “sensorial turn,” which has its own presently escalating bibliography. With respect to early works in that ark, see, for instance, Constance Classen, *Worlds of the Senses: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993); David Howes, *Sensory Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of

All these are apt suggestions for which I need very little prompting; and in chapter 10 on “the propitiation priority (III-C),” I will engage directly the question of the material turn in relation to the logic of obligatory reciprocity—or the ritualized exchange of material things—that governs many indigenous Oaxacan interactions both among people and with supernatural entities.<sup>77</sup> But here I want simply to remind readers that these presently cutting-edge materialist reconstitutions of what religion is, and therefore how we ought to study it, find fulsome precedents in the work of Eliade, antecedents that account in large part for the continued utility of his perspective. Like most vanguard movements, the “new materialism” has deeper roots and more notable precedents than are usually acknowledged, and Eliade is certainly one among them.<sup>78</sup>

In fact, Eliade’s working suppositions prefigure those of the new materialists in several important respects. Given his emphasis on existential and ontological questions of “being” (and “Being”) rather than systematic theologies, he is *not* implicated in materialists’ complaints about misconstruing religion as primarily an “immaterial” issue of intellectualized beliefs and ideas. Never does Eliade imply that “being religious” requires endorsing particular doctrines about divinity, for instance, signing onto a canonical pantheon of gods; and he is even less inclined to repeat entrenched notions that religiosity depends upon compliance with prescribed moral-ethical agendas, which play a perhaps surprisingly small role in his analysis.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, and even

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Michigan Press, 2003); and *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

<sup>77</sup> When I return to these issues in chapter 10 relative to the propitiation priority (III-C) and the importance of obligatory ritualized exchange of material things among indigenous Oaxacans, I will rely especially on Alicia M. Barabas, *Dones, duenos y santos: Ensayos sobre religiones en Oaxaca* (México: Porrúa/Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2006).

<sup>78</sup> In all likelihood, advocates for the new materialism judge that their efforts to present their alternative as a fresh and novel approach to the study of religion would be undermined or perhaps stigmatized by linking it to the timeworn, heavily contested work of Mircea Eliade. That may be an accurate judgment. But, as I am arguing here, the substance of Eliade’s work is very much in line with the priorities of these new materialists.

<sup>79</sup> Besides Eliade’s unwillingness to equate “religion” with the intellectualizing activities of theology, it is notable that his comments on religion (sometimes to the chagrin of critics) very

more directly relevant both to materialist approaches and to my special interests in architecture, Eliade's devolutionary affirmation of "primitives," and thus his location of the most effectual religious outlooks among non-literate peoples, insures that he, as I will stress again momentarily, never presumes that proficiency in religious consciousness depends on writing; and, therefore, Eliade, from the outset, undermines the presumption that exegesis of "sacred scriptures" is the be-all and end-all of Religious Studies scholarship. Absolutely not confined to the realm of the immaterial, cerebral or even literary, for Eliade, just as the new materialists insist, religious sensibilities present themselves in all sorts of cultural productions—what I'll refer to shortly as "non-literary vehicles of intelligibility"—which all thereby become prime resources for understanding religious actions and investments.

### **3. Eliade and Material Manifestations of the Sacred: Religious Experience of Natural and Humanly-Constructed Physical Forms**

Mircea Eliade's relentless attentiveness to the materiality of each the natural and humanly-constructed world is evident in his atypical (re)conceptualizations of both "religious experience" and "religious expression." Regarding the former, Eliade is not nearly so concerned with dramatic, one-time conversion experiences like Paul's transformative confrontation with Jesus on the Road to Damascus than with ongoing existential apprehensions of one's world, especially its material elements. For him, the ways in which people, in the course of their daily lives, say, within the pre-Columbian capital of Monte Albán, come to terms with the physical features and phenomena of their environment—for instance, the vault of the sky, the waxing and waning of the moon, the processes of human bodies, the formlessness of water, the growth of vegetation and trees, and the substantiality of mountains and stones—are all religiously informed circumstances. For Eliade, "religious experience" refers less to presumably transcendental or "immaterial" encounters between people and gods (though he does not rule out those sorts of direct engagements with supernaturals), than with meaningful ways of engaging the materiality

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seldom address matters of ethics and morality. That is to say, Eliade does not perpetuate the modernist, folk-Protestant presumption that all different religions are, in large part, alternative systems of belief that encourage people to behave themselves and be nice to one and other.

of the physical world—or, actually, the fully integrated cosmos—in which people find themselves living.

Charles Long, who works to bring to the fore Eliade’s underestimated concerns for materiality, summarizes his colleague’s position his way:

“[In Eliade’s view] it is the universality of matter itself in all of its several forms, rather than simply the inner workings of human consciousness epistemologically or psychologically which is the source of the religious consciousness. Mind and phenomena go together... For Eliade the very structure of the religious consciousness is predicated on a form of the world which is present as a concrete form of matter.”<sup>80</sup>

Accordingly, by drastic contrast, for instance, to Caso’s surmise that people in traditional societies were frightened and overwhelmed by “natural forces that they neither understood nor were able to control but whose evil or propitious effects they suffered,” and thus they experienced a profound sense of “inadequacy,”<sup>81</sup> Eliade stresses the archaic appreciation of the ecological rhythms and processes of which they were a part. In his view, the moon, water, plants and stones were not experienced simply as natural phenomena, but additionally as “hierophanies,” or material manifestations of the sacred, and thus evidences of the interconnected order that obtains among all aspects of the material world and cosmos.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Charles H. Long, “Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter,” <http://www.jcrt.org/jcrt/archives/01.2/long.shtml>; accessed on 11-8-2017, p. 2. This article provides the best and most thorough discussion of the underestimated extent to which Eliade’s work really is preoccupied with materiality.

<sup>81</sup> Elaborating on his view that “fear and hope are the parents of the gods,” Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun*, 3, maintains (by extreme contrast to Eliade) that, “Man, confronting nature, which frightens and overwhelms him, sensing his own inadequacy before forces that he neither understands nor is able to control but whose evil or propitious effects he suffers, projects his wonder, his fright, and his fear beyond himself, and sense he can neither understand nor command, he fears and loves—in short, he worships.”

<sup>82</sup> Regarding these four prominent examples in his work, see, for example, Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), on the moon experienced as a hierophany (pp. 93, 125, 157-8, 182, 388, 390 and 448-49), on water experienced as a hierophany (pp. 188-215 passim), on plants experienced as hierophanies (pp. 8, 12, 323-25, 363, 390), and on stones experienced as hierophanies (pp. 11, 13, 19, 25-26, 216-38, 367, 370 and 437). Eliade uses the same examples in numerous other works.

Accordingly, Eliade helps us to see how, for ancient Oaxacans, hunting, harvesting and other quotidian interactions with biological species and ecological features, not just special ceremonial occasions, are venues for “religious experience.”<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, in addition to his emphasis on the innately religious apprehension of *the natural world*, Eliade’s work also urges us to appreciate that people engage the material features of *the humanly-constructed world* in religious, and thus meaning-producing, ways. Most importantly for our purposes, he shows time and again how people in traditional contexts engage the built architecture—shrines, temples and whole cities—also as hierophanies or material manifestations of the sacred.<sup>84</sup> As I will stress repeatedly in relation to the monumental constructions of Monte Albán, once built, man-made structures acquire an autonomy and exert an influence not less profound than that of the natural world. Not only the natural phenomena of the moon, water, plants and stones, but also constructed objects or “things” such as pyramids, stele and statuary prompt the sort of orientating religious experience with which he, Long and myself are so concerned. And that emphasis will allow us to appreciate, for instance, as I explain at some length in chapter 1 relative to “the homology priority (I-A),” the myriad ways in which ancient Oaxacans experienced the cosmogramatically designed built features of Monte Albán as not just human constructions, but also manifestations of the sacred.

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<sup>83</sup> Regarding two of his most oft-reiterated examples of the ways in which, in indigenous contexts, “forms of matter” and elements of nature evoke modes of consciousness and then creative solutions to the life’s most daunting dilemmas, Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 154, explains how the experience of the waxing, waning, disappearance and reemergence of the moon—a celestial body that, “has a career, involving tragedy, for its failing, like man’s, ends in death”—provides the model for those rituals that transform the otherwise grim mortal life cycle into a meaningful reiteration of those cosmic lunar rhythms. Or, in another favorite example, Eliade, *ibid.*, 188, maintains that water, from an archaic perspective, even more than the substance crucial to the nurturance of plants, “symbolizes the whole of potentiality: it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence...”, an insight that is expressed in the use of water as a key element in ritual reenactments of a reversion to chaos out of which order can (re)emerge. This general insight will be important for the specific interpretation of Monte Albán, for instance, with respect to notion of an *altépetl* or “water mountain,” which I discuss in chapter 1 and again numerous later chapters.

<sup>84</sup> On many possibilities, see Mircea Eliade, “Sacred Architecture and Symbolism,” in Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroads, 1988), 105-29. This article was originally published as “Architecture sacrée et symbolisme,” in *Mircea Eliade*, ed. Constantin Tacou (Paris: L’Herne, 1978), 141-56.

#### **4. Eliade and Archaeology: Religious Expression in Material Culture and the Appreciation of “Non-Literary Vehicles of Intelligibility”**

In addition to Eliade’s concern for the “religious experience” of material objects, his complementary approach to “religious expression” does even more to bolster his helpfulness in making sense of an archaeological context such as Monte Albán—namely, a circumstance for which there is stupendously abundant material evidence, but quite limited contemporaneous textual or literary evidence.<sup>85</sup> If, for Eliade, so-termed religious experience most often involves meaningful apprehensions of material objects and phenomena, then the human responses to those experiential encounters also most often come in the creation and manipulation of material things. That is to say, apprehensions of a hierophanically-charged material world issue not simply in altered beliefs and ideas, but, even more significantly, in the design and construction of physical forms—in other words, in the “material culture” of pottery, textile and basket weaving, pictorial art and monumental architecture as well as the layout of houses, villages and cities. The

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<sup>85</sup> Repeatedly I should strongly qualify my intimation that there is, for Monte Albán, only very limited textual and literary evidence, especially in two respects. First, in chapter 4, with respect to the divinity priority (II-A), I will allude to the general agreement that Zapotecs did have pre-Columbian codices on the order of those of the Mixtecs, but that, in the case of the Zapotecs, all of these books were destroyed during the colonial era. A sub-section in that chapter entitled “The Gods of Fray G. de Balsalobre’s Inquisition Records (1656): Esoteric Deity Lists and a Pretense of Systematic Coherence,” for instance, describes the very thorough Zapotec codice-burning efforts of Dominican friar Gonzales de Balsalobre, destructive efforts that also demonstrates how many of these codices (perhaps a couple dozen) were still in circulation in seventh-century Oaxaca. Regarding a second and even more important qualification to the suggestion that Monte Albán is without contemporaneous written sources, in chapter 5 relative to the sacred history priority (II-B), I will address at length epigrapher Javier Urcid’s path-breaking work on Zapotec writing. Though Urcid concurs that there are presently no extant Zapotec codices, he manages to locate and then comment on nearly 600 pre-Columbian inscribed stones from the central Oaxaca region, many of which are several-ton carved monoliths. In Urcid’s view, the large majority of these carved orthostats were originally positioned within “narrative compositions” in and around Monte Albán’s Main Plaza. Javier Urcid Serrano, *Zapotec Hieroglyphic Writing*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, no. 34 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), is only one of the earliest of Urcid’s countless—and singularly important—works on this remarkable fund of Monte Albán stone inscriptions. In chapter 5, I will address in detail both earlier works on these stone inscriptions as well as numerous of Urcid’s remarkable works, which invariably present radically different interpretations of these carved stones.

religious experience of "things" results in the religiously-informed making of "things." And all of these material creations—or "non-literary vehicles of intelligibility"<sup>86</sup>—thereby join, or often exceed written texts, as the most pregnant resources for the study of religion in traditional contexts.

The example of preeminent relevance to Monte Albán comes in Eliade's extended comments on "the manifesting power" of stones, which is first experienced in relation to natural stone features such as mountains and caves, and then replicated in human responses to the sorts of stone constructions that remain our most extensive extant evidence of the Zapotec capital. Of the unique time-suppressing power of rocks and stones, Eliade explains:

"The hardness, ruggedness, and permanence of matter was in itself a hierophany in the religious consciousness of the primitive. And nothing was more direct and autonomous in the completeness of its strength, nothing more noble or more awe-inspiring, than a majestic rock, or a boldly-standing block of granite. Above all, stone *is*... Rock shows [people in traditional contexts] something that transcends the precariousness of their humanity; an absolute mode of being."<sup>87</sup>

Consequently, having experienced in natural mountains, outcrops and caves the singular resiliency of stone, indigenous peoples, Eliade maintains, express and extend that insight by undertaking to build stone domiciles, pyramids, temples and tombs; and by doing so, they are able to participate in the rewarding sense of timeless permanence—an escape from the precariousness of history—engendered by the encounter with rock-hard matter. In that sense, then, the enduring monumental human constructions of Monte Albán are, in addition to whatever utilitarian functions they serve, "religious expressions" that help us to appreciate, yes, *that which mattered most* to Zapotecs.

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<sup>86</sup> I borrow the apt term "non-literary vehicles of intelligibility" from 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*, eds. Frank E. Reynolds and Sheryl L. Burkhalter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 41-59, who builds his compelling case for fuller attention to the religious import of the material culture South Americans with explicit reference to Eliade's work.

<sup>87</sup> Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 216; italics his.

It is in this doubled attention to materiality—first in *the natural phenomena* that evoke religious experiences and then as *the built material expressions* that result from those experiential encounters—that Eliade’s interests merge closely with those of archaeologists, who likewise prize the interpretation of material culture over textual exegesis. Given Eliade’s prescience with respect to increasingly fashionable “materialist approaches,” together with his very strong endorsements of material culture as primary evidence for understanding the religio-cultural priorities of ancient peoples, it is, then, disappointing—a kind of missed opportunity—that mainstream archaeologists, including those working in Oaxaca, very seldom appeal to his work.<sup>88</sup> In fact, ironically, while it is his classic *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, originally written in French in 1949, that best demonstrates how his broadened conception of religious experience and expression has immense relevance and promise for the study of religion in archaeological contexts such as Monte Albán, it is that book, among all of his works, that, so it seems, “most frustrates, irritates, and leads anthropologists and other social scientists to fits of anger.”<sup>89</sup> Apparently—though regrettably—along with their deep skepticism about the sorts of broadly cross-cultural claims that Eliade ventures, social scientific archaeologists find his focus on the ontology and creativity of the “archaic consciousness” unduly “philosophical,” and thus too abstract to be of much use in advancing their more positivistic interpretations of the “material evidence.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> In the course of chapter 1 (sometimes in the footnotes) I will direct attention to roughly ten Oaxacanists who make explicit, if often just passing, use of Eliade’s work. But nearly all of those, a high percentage of whom are native scholars, are ethnographers rather than archaeologists. Also as we’ll see in chapter 1, of Oaxacan archaeologists, Arthur Joyce uses by far the most Eliade-derived concepts and terms such as “sacred space,” “cosmic mountain” and *axis mundi* in relation to Monte Albán; but since Joyce never once provides any citation to Eliade, his relationship to the work of the Romanian historian of religions remains a puzzlement.

<sup>89</sup> Long, “Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter,” 1. In his spirited defense of Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Long suggests that social scientists, very few of whom he suspects have ever read the work in its entirety, dismiss this book both because of its abundance of sweepingly cross-cultural observations and its seemingly overgenerous approach to religion. But, by the preemptory dismissal, social scientists have failed to appreciate all that Eliade has to say about religion and materiality, i.e., topics that are of great relevance to archaeologists, which Long considers the book’s most salient contribution.

<sup>90</sup> Arthur Andrew Demarest, “Archaeology and Religion,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005 [originally 1997]), vol. 1, 451-57, provides a synopsis of the twentieth century’s “close but uneasy relationship” between

But, irrespective of social scientists' nearly complete neglect of Eliade, his work is, arguably, an ideal theoretical authority for archaeologists insofar as he presents a conception of "religion" that finds expression in myths, rituals and sometimes written texts, but most prominently in material culture. By contrast to models of religion predicated on circumstances like Moses's encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai or Muhammad's reception of the revelations of Allah—that is, circumstances that issue in authoritative, or revealed, "sacred scripture" such as the Hebrew Bible or Quran—Eliade builds his scheme largely on "the long-standing creativity of unlettered peoples," which thereby reminds us that "acquaintance with literacy in most cultures is rather recent."<sup>91</sup> And Lawrence Sullivan, for example, echoes Eliade by cautioning us to remember that the Native American communities across both continents, and therefore in Oaxaca, are among those contexts in which, "For the most part, the problems of meaning, understanding, communication and interpretation have been thrashed out without reference to texts and with resort to text as a primary metaphor."<sup>92</sup>

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archaeology and the study of religion (in Mesoamerica and elsewhere) that is somewhat different from the trajectory that I describe in the forthcoming sub-sections. Be that as it may, Demarest, *ibid.*, 453-4, concurs that, during the 1940s and 1950s, "Religion, unfortunately, was initially ignored by these progressive developments in archaeology. The growing theoretical and methodological sophistication of archaeology had its roots firmly in culture ecology and other materialist approaches. Some influential thinkers, such as Leslie White, explicitly argued that religion was of no importance in cultural evolution, that it was 'epiphenomenal.' Others, such as [Julian] Steward, felt that while religion was essential to the core of cultural behavior, it was, unfortunately, inscrutable to archaeological analysis. While many archaeologists believed all aspects of culture left patterns in the archaeological record, they also felt that the patterning in religious behavior was too complex, idiosyncratic, or obscure to be accurately perceived." Nonetheless, Demarest, *ibid.*, 453-4, also suggests that the premise of Mircea Eliade and Paul Wheatley that "ceremonial center was the nucleus of the early city" (ideas I will discuss in chapter 1) was influential in 1970s Mesoamerican archaeologists' interests renewed interest in the role of religion cultural evolution; and Demarest, *ibid.*, 454, provides some examples to make that case.

<sup>91</sup> Sullivan, "'Seeking an End to the Primary Text' or 'Putting an End to the Text as Primary,'" 41.

<sup>92</sup> Sullivan, "'Seeking an End to the Primary Text' or 'Putting an End to the Text as Primary,'" 41.

From Eliade’s perspective, therefore, in a case like Monte Albán, the “data” of built forms and material objects enjoy a priority not simply as a practical consequence of limited availability of contemporaneous literary sources,<sup>93</sup> but because he rejects the common presumption that texts are really “the most exemplary vehicle of intelligibility” either with which ancient Oaxacans expressed their religious sensibilities or, for that matter, on the basis of which we can recover those sensibilities. Pre-Columbian material remains of both small-scale objects like pipes, urns and jewelry, along with large-scale built forms and urban layouts—all of which emerged in advance of the second-order honing of written texts that express more rarified versions of those same sensibilities—are not simply “mute texts” but primary resources.<sup>94</sup> And in this (re)ordering of the relative importance of respective evidences, there is a surprising point of agreement between Eliade and Oaxacanist archaeologist Marcus Winter, who at times expresses grave doubts about retrieving religious beliefs from the archaeological remains,<sup>95</sup> but who nonetheless maintains that, “While the ethnographic and ethnohistorical data help us to build models for interpreting the past, it is only through the archaeological evidence that we can trace the origins and follow changes in the religion.”<sup>96</sup> In that sense, the “literary evidence” is evocative but secondary, while the “archaeological record” is primary and more reliable, a

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<sup>93</sup> This is another moment at which it is very important to qualify “the general absence of contemporary literary sources” at Monte Albán by noting that there is remarkably rich corpus of several hundred extant stones carved with glyphic and pictographic writing, which I will discuss most directly and fully in chapter 5 relative to the sacred history priority, II-B, and especially in relation to the prolific work of epigrapher Javier Urcid.

<sup>94</sup> Regarding the somewhat ambivalent conception of elements of material culture as “mute texts,” see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 8, “Architecture as ‘Mute Text’? Literary and Nonliterary Vehicles of Intelligibility.”

<sup>95</sup> For instance, in Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Carteles editors, P.G.O., 1992 [originally 1989]), he intimates that “religion” and “religious beliefs” are seldom visible in the extant archaeological record, and thus an area of speculation that an archaeologist of his ilk is not inclined to enter. But as I note elsewhere and will demonstrate at length, Winter may be the Oaxacanist archaeologist who writes the most about religion at Monte Albán.

<sup>96</sup> Winter, “La religión, el poder y las bases de la complejidad social en Oaxaca Prehispánica,” 506; my translation.

reversal that comports both with Eliade’s outlook and with Sullivan’s aspiration to “put and end to the text as primary.”<sup>97</sup>

To reiterate and conclude, then, before moving to more Mesoamerican-specific points of departure, Eliade, perhaps surprisingly to many, provides us both with a forward-looking iconoclastic stipulation of “religion” as orientation, or a “mode of being in the world,” and, moreover, with a too-frequently-overlooked recommendation to rely first and foremost on material (not literary) resources to reach an understanding of that non-modern means of existing in the world. And by those paired emphases, Eliade’s approach, though largely ignored by both the new materialists and by archaeologists of every era, is, I maintain, ideally suited to assist in the interpretation of the religion and architecture of Monte Albán. According to his view, in this sort of traditional context, the experience of the materiality of the world eventuates not simply in the beliefs and ideas—that is to say, matters of the mind—but, even more importantly, in the design and construction of practices and material forms that replicate (super)natural phenomena and rhythms. In this respect, Eliade anticipates the current flurry of anthropological and Religious Studies responses to “the material turn”—as discussed in recent books with titles like *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (2011) and *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (2012)—wherein we are encouraged to appreciate objects and built forms as even fuller and more accurate expressions of religious priorities than are “sacred texts.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, as I will explain more fully in chapter 1, Eliade guides us to see pre-Columbian architectural forms, not less than hieroglyphs and iconography, as profoundly religious expressions.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> For an excellent and optimistic overview archaeologists and religionists finding a meeting of the minds on the question of materiality, see Julian Droogan, *Religion, Material Culture and Archaeology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>98</sup> Previously I cited Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*; and Houtman and Meyer, eds., *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*.

<sup>99</sup> The question of the present status of Mircea Eliade’s work is matter of voluminous and intense debate, to say the least; and, as noted earlier, while I continue to find his work enormously useful as a point departure for this project, I have no interest in positioning myself as an apologist for Eliade. Be that as it may, a concise but quite thorough overview of the main criticisms of his work appears in Bryan S. Rennie, “Eliade, Mircea [Further Considerations],” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA), vol. 4, 2753-63; that

## B. MESOAMERICANISTS’ RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS: SHIFTING ATTITUDES ABOUT PRE-COLUMBIAN RELIGION AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE NOTION OF “COSMOVISION”

I shift attention now to those methodological developments within Mesoamerican Studies that can be specially useful in launching an investigation into “that which mattered most” in the ancient Zapotec capital of Monte Albán. Though largely uninformed by theoretical wrangling in Religious Studies, reconsiderations of the nature and importance of “religion” by Mesoamericanist scholars—both Mexican nationals and North Americans—since the 1930s and 1940s, take a very different path that nonetheless leads eventually to insights that converge with the conception of “religion,” not as a “system of beliefs” nor as an institutional affiliation, but rather as existential orientation or “a mode of being in the world.” Eventually, beginning in the 1980s, the doubly-informed perspective of historian of religions and Aztec specialist David Carrasco provides an explicit, if uncommon, bridge between the two academic fields by basing his entire inquiry into Mesoamerican urbanism on the Eliadean premise that the quest for orientation was a causative agent of first importance; in Carrasco’s view, “the story of ancient Mexico is the story of places and symbols of places.”<sup>100</sup> And from time to time in the 1980s and 1990s, a handful of Mexico-based Mesoamericanists likewise make direct use of Eliadean frames in their interpretation of pre-Columbian beliefs and practices.<sup>101</sup>

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short article summarizes issues that are discussed at greater length in Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albány: State University of New York Press, 1996). While the literature attacking Eliade is probably larger at this point, regarding collections of essays that are largely (not wholly) affirming of his work and approaches, see, for example: *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective*, revised edition, eds. David Carrasco and Jane Marie Law (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 2009 [originally Boulder: Westview Press, 1985]); *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Mircea Eliade*, ed. Bryan Rennie (Albány: State University of New York Press, 2001); *Remembering/Reimagining/Revalorizing Mircea Eliade*, eds. Norman Girardot and Bryan Rennie, a Special Issue of *Archaevs: Studies in the History of Religions XV* (Bucharest: Romanian Association for the History of Religions, 2011); and *Mircea Eliade between the History of Religions and the Fall into History*, ed. Mihaela Gligor (Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Presa Universitara Clujeana, 2012).

<sup>100</sup> Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> For example, among numerous works in which Eduardo Matos Moctezuma makes explicit use of Eliade’s work, see his *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de

The seeds for thinking about the religions of ancient Mesoamerica as ongoing exercises in orientation had, however, been laid much earlier. More than a half century previous, historian Paul Kirchhoff, for instance, about whom I will have more to say momentarily, observed a set of orientational preoccupations that, in his assessment, informed every dimension of ancient Mesoamerican culture, art and religion. In Kirchhoff's view:

"Ancient Mexico is a world of order, in which everything and everybody has a place... Everything has its perfect place, there is a formula for everything... One discovers things that appear to be disorder according to our judgment, but afterwards one discovers a much more fantastic order... the orderly structure can be seen in everything..."<sup>102</sup>

And in the same vein, art historian George Kubler, in the 1950s, accentuated the extraordinary "monumentality" of Mesoamerican architecture, by which he meant not bigness, but dexterousness in overriding disorientation and "inscribing some meaning upon the inhuman and hostile wastes of nature."<sup>103</sup>

If long impressed by the pervasive orderliness of the pre-Hispanic world and always vexed by the quandary of defining "religion," it is, as I'll explain, not until the 1980s that Mesoamericanists, particularly those based in Mexico, come to find their most promising—and by now most widespread—solution in the notion of "*cosmovisión*," a conceptualization of religion that resonates in many ways with historian of religions' appeal to "orientation." USA-based Mesoamericanists will be slower to embrace this alternative. Nevertheless, the three-stage

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Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995). Another who makes explicit use of Eliade's categories and approach is Doris Heyden, "Caves, Gods, and Myths: World-View and Planning in Teotihuacan," in *Mesoamerican Sites and World-Views*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1981), 1-39. As noted, in chapter 1, I will bring attention to about a dozen scholars of Oaxaca who make specific use of Eliade's work.

<sup>102</sup>Johanna Broda, "Astronomy, *Cosmovision* and Ideology in Pre-Hispanic Mexico," in *Ethnoastronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the American Tropics*, eds. Anthony F. Aveni and Gary Urton (New York: New York Academy of the Sciences, 1982), 103, quotes and translates Paul Kirchhoff's unpublished notebooks.

<sup>103</sup>George Kubler, "The Design of Space in Maya Architecture," in *Miscellanea Paul Rivot, octogenario dicata* (Mexico, 1958), 516.

trajectory in Mexican anthropology and archaeology charted by Maya ethnologist and student of the field, Andrés Medina Hernández—whereby “the paradigm of Mesoamerican cosmivision” emerges and then wins very wide dissemination, at least among Mexican scholars—certainly does have counterparts among North American Mesoamericanists’ shifting attitudes about the role of religion in pre-Columbian society.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, all three of these stages are very well represented in the history of academic approaches to Oaxaca and Monte Albán.<sup>105</sup> Consider each in turn.<sup>106</sup>

### **1. Stage One—Vigorous and Vague Affirmations of “Intense Religiosity”: Mexican Nationalist Discourses and Euro-American Imaginings**

The first phase in Medina Hernández’s three-part scheme (1940-1970)—roughly parallel to the era of Alfonso Caso’s investigations at Monte Albán—while diversified within itself, reflects the perspective of a “nationalist Creole discourse.”<sup>107</sup> Mexican scholars operating with this view affirmed and celebrated ancient pre-Hispanic civilizations as the primogenitors of a

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<sup>104</sup> Andrés Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” en *Comovisión mesoamericana: Reflexiones, polémicas y etnografías*, coords. Alejandra Gámez Espinosa and Alfredo López Austin (México: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 2015), 53ff. Medina Hernández does not really share my preoccupations with religion and nor does he make any specific reference to Oaxaca or Oaxacan studies.

<sup>105</sup> Though these are only rough correlations, with respect to the seven most prominent versions of Monte Albán’s history that are reviewed in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, the (re)construction scenarios presented respectively by Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal and John Paddock belong to Medina Hernández’s first stage; those presented by Richard Blanton, Marcus Winter and co-authored by Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery belong to Medina Hernández’s second stage; and that presented by Arthur Joyce is the nearest representative of his third stage. Substantiation for those rough correlations is forthcoming in this introduction.

<sup>106</sup> For a very different and helpful account of the history of the study of Mesoamerican religions (which does mention the term “cosmovision”), see Yolotl González Torres, “Mesoamerican Religions: History of Study,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA), vol. 9, 5939-46

<sup>107</sup> Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 53, 59ff.

mestizo national identity while, at the same time, disconnecting those grand pre-Columbian accomplishments from the cultures of contemporaneous Indian peoples, who were considered to be in a process of serious decline and inevitable disappearance, a kind of inevitable casualty of an increasingly modern Mexico.<sup>108</sup> From this view, the exploration of monumental archaeological sites like Monte Albán, Teotihuacan and Palenque was an object of intense national pride and thus major expenditures; and, moreover, while there was very little precision in defining the term, there was also little doubt during this era that the builders of Mexico's great archaeological sites had been "deeply religious."

Caso, for instance, made the stock assessment that the Aztecs, not unlike Zapotecs and other Mesoamerican groups, were "a people who were fundamentally religious and whose worship of gods was essential to their way of life."<sup>109</sup> In Caso's widely shared view, religion was "agglutinative of all other manifestations of social life".<sup>110</sup>

"Religion was the preponderant factor and was the basic cause even in those activities such as sports, games and war which, to us, seem quite divorced from religious sentiment. Religion regulated commerce, politics and conquest, and intervened in all acts of the individual, from the day he was born until the hour when priests burned his body and buried his ashes. It was the supreme motive of all individual acts and was the underlying reason for the life of the State itself."<sup>111</sup>

And, for Caso, unassailable archaeological evidence of that deep religiosity came in the architecture of "temples" and, even more, in iconography and burial offerings that seem to depict

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<sup>108</sup> Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 53.

<sup>109</sup> Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun*, xvii. Regarding the centrality of religion in this overview, note that this 1958 book is an expanded version of Caso, *La religión de los aztecas* (1936).

<sup>110</sup> This phrase appears in the editor's introduction to a block of articles on "Indigenous Religion," including several short (excerpted) pieces by Alfonso Caso, in *México Prehispánico: Culturas, deidades, monumentos*, Antología de *Esta Semana-This Week*, 1935-1946, ed. Emma Hurtado (México, D.F.: Rafael Loera y Chavez, 1946): 342; my translation.

<sup>111</sup> Alfonso Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs* (México, D.F.: Editorial Fray B. de Sahagun, n.d. [Spanish original, 1936]), 61.

priests and “gods.”<sup>112</sup> This assumption that ancient Mesoamericans, like other “pre-scientific” peoples, operated with profoundly “spiritual” priorities that would strike modern Westerners as lofty, but also curiously impractical, was seldom questioned.

In this era (i.e., 1940-1970), then, accentuating the religiosity of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican—as opposed, for instance, to underscoring their brute militaristic opportunism—if condescending in some ways, served to humanize and validate the dignity and high-mindedness of the peoples who were positioned as esteemed ancestors to modern Mexicans. And thus, not surprisingly, in the (re)construction scenarios of the rise and fall of Monte Albán crafted by Caso and later by Ignacio Bernal, his successor as the leading voice in Oaxaca archaeology, both of which present ancient Mesoamericans in very laudatory terms,<sup>113</sup> religion, albeit loosely defined, plays a very prominent (if decidedly contradictory) role in the accomplishments of all pre-Columbian peoples.<sup>114</sup> Additionally, both Caso and Bernal did make

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<sup>112</sup> Archaeological evidence of “gods,” including that marshaled by Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, will a major topic of discussion below in chapter 4 on “the divinity priority (II-A).”

<sup>113</sup> Regarding the similar but different (re)constructions of Monte Albán’s history offered by Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal, see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 1 (on Caso) and 2 (on Bernal). Both present historical scenarios in which religion plays a crucial role in Monte Albán’s rapid rise to prominence and then, ironically enough, it is an inordinate preoccupation with religion that provides a root cause of the city’s collapse. Note also that (re)construction of Monte Albán presented by John Paddock (which is addressed in *ibid.*, chap. 3), while very different from those of Caso and Bernal in many respects, is similar in affording ancient Zapotec religious sensibilities a leading role in both the rise and collapse of Monte Albán.

<sup>114</sup> Irrespective of the superlative quality and quantity of Alfonso Caso’s and Ignacio Bernal’s academic writing, it is difficult to extract from either’s work a clear and sustained theory of religion, arguably because neither really has a fully considered theory of religion. Nonetheless, both seem to take for granted that “belief in gods” (i.e., supernatural entities that do *not* actually exist) is the foremost criterion. Ignacio Bernal, *100 Great Masterpieces of the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969), 11, for instance, maintains that in Mesoamerica an overwhelming majority of significant works of art are of “a religious nature” on the grounds that “Many pieces represent deities... They derive from a spiritual world where man is secondary and his sole purpose is to serve the gods and to fulfill his part of the social contract under which, in exchange for having been created and maintained in life, he must submit wholly to the gods...” For his part, Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun* (1958), which is an expanded version of *La religión de los aztecas* (1936), opens with a four-page section on “Magic and Religion” that gives some clues as to his operative conceptualization of “religion in general.” Caso presents, for instance, a kind of intellectualist view wherein religion and magic,

exceptionally extensive use of sixteenth-century ethnohistorical accounts of Zapotecs and Mixtecs to enhance their (re)constructions of prehistoric Oaxacan culture and religion; and Caso especially took a very strong interest in the beliefs and practices of contemporary indigenous communities. But neither Caso or Bernal is an exception to Medina Hernández's observation that, in this era, Mexican archaeologists and ethnographers operated in largely separate spheres insofar as the modest circumstances of present-day native communities were regarded as too far removed from their pre-Hispanic roots to shed significant light on the mindsets and lifeways of ancient Mesoamericans.<sup>115</sup>

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both ostensibly "as old as humanity itself," arise—from "man's need to philosophize" (p.6)—as non-scientific solutions to "the problem of control of the world." (p.3) Where "magic" is based on a confidence that nature will respond one's spells and gestures, "religion is quite different" insofar as it depends upon "the divine will, to which [man] can appeal in prayer." (p.4) Caso also affirms the more psychological view that "fear and hope are the parents of the gods," and thus he maintains that: "Man, confronting nature, which frightens and overwhelms him, sensing his own inadequacy before forces that he neither understands nor is able to control but whose evil or propitious effects he suffers, projects his wonder, his fright, and his fear beyond himself, and sense he can neither understand nor command, he fears and loves—in short, he worships." (p.3) According to Caso, "Hence gods have been made in the image and likeness of man. Each human imperfection is transmuted into a god capable of overcoming it. Each human quality is projected into a divinity through which it acquires superhuman or ideal proportions." (p.3) Additionally, as I will note again in chapter 4, Caso describes a kind of evolutionary scheme wherein "the most primitive people" fear and worship natural forces without formulating the notion of personal gods, while "peoples with more advanced concepts of religion" tend to move "from polytheism to dualism, and the latter to monotheism." (p.6) Though conceding that scheme does not apply universally, Caso concludes that "the religion of the Aztecs [and presumably the Zapotecs of Monte Albán] was polytheistic, based on the worship of a multitude of personal gods, most of them with well-defined attributes." (p.7) These are more topics that I will revisit in chapter 4 on the "divinity" priority (II-A). Also, regarding Caso's and Bernal's ambivalence about religion, which is crucial to the mixed role that both of them attribute to religion in the rise and fall of Monte Albán, Caso (p.95) writes, "But if religion was for the Aztecs the strength and reason of their lives... it was also a fatal limitation for their culture as, on a minor scale, it was for all of the indigenous cultures of Mexico and Central America." Thus in the case of Monte Albán, Caso and Bernal, on the one hand, credit Zapotec religion with the inspiring and stabilizing force that accounts for many of the capital's artistic, social and political triumphs; but, on the other hand, they likewise attribute to an inordinate investment in religion a kind of top-heavy "theocracy" that leads to the capital's eventual demise.

<sup>115</sup> Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 102.

For their part, early and mid-twentieth century Mesoamericanists based in the USA and Europe, while less concerned to depict pre-Columbian peoples as the honored ancestors of modern Mexico, were, nevertheless, in wide agreement that those populations had been profoundly pious in decidedly non-Western ways. Most (in)famously, Mayanists Sylvanus Morley and Eric Thompson, as is so frequently pointed out, advanced the notion that Classic Mayas were veritable nature mystics, fervent, peace-loving and philosophically-inclined worshippers of time who were thoroughly preoccupied with the dynamics of calendars and astronomy, and thus largely indifferent to empire-building or socio-political control; these ancient Mesoamericans were, supposedly, “religious” in laudably apolitical ways.<sup>116</sup> And, in a rhetorical counterpart to the beatific Mayas, these Carnegie Institution of Washington Mayanists also advanced the notion that Central Mexican Toltecs and Aztecs were equally fervent in their ceremonializing compulsions, though in contradistinct ways that illustrated the darker and less savory side of religion—i.e., that which is associated with fanatical superstition and showy ritual, both which find their quintessential expression in ancient Mexicans’ penchant for dramatically staged human sacrifices.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, from the earliest European and American efforts to “make sense” of ancient Mesoamericans, and then well into the twentieth century, “religion,” by its loose and flexible conceptualization, served as a kind of interpretive panacea that could explain all of the “strange” features and practices for which no more prosaic explanation seemed adequate. At Monte Albán and other sites, anything too elaborate, over-sized or seemingly impractical to have served a more utilitarian purpose could, for better or worse, be attributed to the “intense religiosity” of pre-Columbian peoples.

## **2. Stage Two—A Narrowed and Diminished Role for Religion: The Revisionist Priorities of Marxist and Processual Archaeologists**

In Medina Hernández’s scheme, a second phase in Mexican archaeology and anthropology (1970-1980)—which likewise has clear analogues in the realigned study of Oaxaca

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<sup>116</sup> On Sylvanus Morley’s and Eric Thompson’s respective characterizations of Classic Maya religiosity, see Lindsay Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination: Maya-Mexican Polarity and the Story of Chichén Itzá, Yucatan;” *American Anthropologist*; vol. 99, no. 2 (June 1997): 281-84.

<sup>117</sup> See Jones, “Conquests of the Imagination,” 281-84.

and Monte Albán during those decades<sup>118</sup>—features more Marxist approaches, which afford religion a lesser and considerably less sanguine role in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican culture. Medina Hernández credits student activism of the late 1960s with a significant role in the emergence of these more avowedly Marxist approaches, of which he notes two competing variations.<sup>119</sup> Both strains have the effect of picturing indigenous Mesoamericans as less exotic and more “normal;” and both approaches thereby shrink substantially the role of religion in the history of the region. One strain, which is more significant for my present purposes, embraced Marxism as a heuristic model that was used to analyze the ancient Mesoamerican past, including archaeological sites, from the perspective of modes of production, exploitations of labor and class conflict; these (re)interpretations of ruins thus shifted attention from the elite, who had previously received most of the attention, to the pre-Columbian proletariat, as it were.<sup>120</sup> The other, more politically engaged strain of Marxism advanced a notion of “ethnic conscience” vis-à-vis “class consciousness” in order to focus attention on—and to attempt redress of—the presently pressing problems of Indian peoples within the framework of a twentieth-century Mexican nation state.<sup>121</sup> This was anthropology of a more applied, socially constructive sort.

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<sup>118</sup> The opening section of Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 4, “Richard Blanton on Monte Albán as a ‘Disembedded Capital’: A Story of Militarism, Regional Cooperation and Religious Neutrality,” describes the shift in emphasis from Caso, Bernal and Paddock’s preoccupation with central Oaxaca’s monumental architectural remains to the “regional archaeology” characterized by the Prehistory and Human Ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, directed by Kent Flannery and begun in 1964, and the Prehistoric Settlement Patterns of the Valley of Oaxaca Project, headed by Richard Blanton and begun in 1971.

<sup>119</sup> Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 87. While Mexican student activism may have played a significant role in this shift of attitudes about religion, archaeology and the priorities of native culture, there were, to be sure, much broader forces at work, which account for broadly parallel developments among USA-based scholars.

<sup>120</sup> Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 86, distinguishes between two academic positions that rely on this broadly Marxist tack: one that is defended by Angel Palerm and affiliated with the proposal of Karl Wittfogel on the hydraulic societies and “Eastern despotism,” and a second that is advanced by the group of researchers led by Pedro Carrasco, which postulates a mode of tax production. For more on these two Marxist approaches, also see *ibid.*, 88-93.

<sup>121</sup> Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 86, 110; my translation.

While the strictly academic Marxist interpretive frame and Marxism in its more activist guise represent notably different agendas and goals, both had the mixed consequence of, on the one hand, heightening appreciations of indigenous culture and non-elite populations and, at the same time, redirecting attention toward socio-economic and political issues, and thus away from concerns about religion, symbolism, cosmology, myth and ritual. From either of these de-exoticizing Marxist perspectives, the priorities of both pre-Columbian and present-day indigenous Mesoamericans were characterized less as "deeply spiritual" than as politically pragmatic; according to this anti-sentimental revisioning, native populations, not differently from peoples in all contexts, were and are preoccupied with the decidedly "secular" priorities of food, shelter, economic autonomy, political power, etc. From these views, religion was either a non-factor in their social analyses or, perhaps more often, the conception of religion was narrowed, reduced and identified with "ideology" and socio-political control. That is to say, instead of associating "religion" with the grand artistic, calendrical and intellectual accomplishments of ancient Mesoamericans as Caso and Bernal had, religion was reduced to the premier tool with which elites manipulated and exploited non-elites. Scholars operating with these skeptical perspectives are, in other words, explicit in contending that religion is *not* that which matters most to native peoples.

The same informing suppositions are shared also by many Mesoamericanists who, though not proponents of Marxism per se, are nonetheless persuaded that it is socio-economic rather than religious concerns that really determine the course of social evolution, and who, for their own reasons, are likewise determined to refocus attention on "commoners" rather elites. For instance, the highly influential USA-based "processual archaeologists" and advocates for the so-termed "New Archaeology" of the 1960s and 1970s, though not doctrinaire Marxists, shifted attention away from the concentration on monumental architecture that had characterized Caso's era in favor of broader if less glamorous foci on subsistence patterns, locational analysis and human ecology.<sup>122</sup> And that redirected emphasis, compelling in numerous respects, also led

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<sup>122</sup> Regarding the methods and assumptions of the so-termed New Archaeology, which in the 1960s opened the way to "processual archaeology," the landmark text is Gordon R. Willey and Phillip Phillips, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago

them, as Medina Hernández observes, to pay much less attention than their predecessors to matters of religion and cosmology.<sup>123</sup> Processual archaeologists, as a rule, agree that ancient Mesoamericans had been far more interested in the practicalities of resource management than with agonizing over calendrical or astronomical abstractions.

In Oaxacan Studies, though explicitly Marxist perspectives are rare, Richard Blanton's *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978), for instance, provides an approach to "regional archaeology" that issues in a thoroughgoing account that, remarkably enough and by stark contrast to those of Caso and Bernal, affords religion no role whatever in the rise and fall of the great mountaintop capital.<sup>124</sup> In Maya studies, Linda Schele and Mary Miller's *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (1986) marks a parallel sort of sea change wherein old-school images of the cerebral, gentle and apolitical Maya are replaced by the alternate view that religion and ritual were dedicated almost wholly to publicizing and legitimating the "bloodlines" of competing sovereigns in a vicious and endemic scrum for control of the Classic Maya world.<sup>125</sup> And the "action theory" approach utilized in Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus's *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (1996) similarly narrows and diminishes the role of "religion" by explicitly

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Press, 1958). The subsequent literature variously in support or criticism of that way of operating is immense, though, for our special purposes, it is worth noting that the topic of religion plays only a minor role in that fulsome debate.

<sup>123</sup> Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 53, 85ff.

<sup>124</sup> Regarding the absence of religion in Richard Blanton's original (re)construction of the rise and fall of Monte Albán, and then the insertion of a significant but still modest role for religion in later revisions of that scheme, see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 4. Also, see *ibid.*, chap. 5 in order to appreciate that the (re)construction of Monte Albán history that emerges from Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (1989, 1992), while directly at odds with Blanton's version on many key points, is similar to Blanton's with respect to the very small role that Winter attributes to religion. For Winter, at least in that early and broad survey work, the course of pre-Columbian social evolution owes overwhelmingly to the strategic management of natural resources, not religious ideology. Be that as it may, Winter does, as we'll see at several points in this project, pay much greater attention to ancient Oaxacan religion in later writings and, in so doing, he also presents alternate assumptions about nature of "religion."

<sup>125</sup> See Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, 9-33.

discouraging researchers from imagining that ancient Oaxacans conducted themselves, and made their most important decisions, on the basis of extramundane priorities that would strike present-day researchers as impractical, non-rational or otherwise "weird."<sup>126</sup>

To the contrary, all these works, and many roughly contemporaneous others, though not Marxist as such, argue for the benefits of imaging ancients Mesoamericans as more familiar than strange, not more (or less) seduced by the invariably manipulative illusions of religion than more modern populations. Wary of perpetuating what they see as the romanticizing excesses for their predecessors, these scholars venture that we respect pre-Columbian Mesoamericans, and we have the best chance of making sense of their accomplishments, by approaching them as essentially individualistic, self-interested, rational and pragmatic; that is, "actors [who] go after what they want, and what they want are things that are materially and politically useful for them, given the cultural and historical situations in which they find themselves."<sup>127</sup> In schemes of this sort, religion, instead of a driving force in pre-Columbian social evolution and an agent of cultural creativity, is reduced to a kind of top-down strategy of governance whereby Mesoamerican elites camouflaged and exercised their more plainly political priorities. From these perspectives, which continue to enjoy a strong following, "religion" is routinely conceptualized, in short, as socio-political ideology.

### **3. Stage Three—Renewed and Revised Appreciations of Religion: Post-Processualism and the Emergence of "the Cosmivision Approach"**

The third phase in Medina Hernández's account of Mexican anthropology and archaeology (1980-2001) entails a kind of reaction or backlash that reasserts religion, as it had

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<sup>126</sup> See Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996). Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 6, reviews Marcus and Flannery's (re)construction of Monte Albán's history and notes that this jointly authored work actually contains two quite different conceptions of "religion": one connected to the decidedly non-Western "ancient Zapotec mind," which is nearer to the notion of "cosmovision," and another, which is more prominent in this account, that depicts religion largely as an instrument of statecraft.

<sup>127</sup> Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 31.

been in the era of Caso and Bernal, as a matter of first-order importance—though now, one hopes, with a more nuanced (re)conceptualization. More specifically, Medina Hernández maintains that the broadly Marxist affirmation of Mexico's indigenous cultures, contemporary native communities included, was paired, in the main, with a neglect of "the broad and complex field of religiosity."<sup>128</sup> And that combination of heightened respect for native communities but diminished appreciation for the role of religion opened the way to a third stage that featured the emergence of a compelling new interpretive focus that did attend more fully to "the field of the symbolic"—namely, *cosmovisión*.<sup>129</sup>

USA-based Mesoamericanists were slower to react against what Medina Hernández describes as the second-stage (Marxist) neglect of the important role of "religiosity and the symbolic;" and, indeed, even now, the notion that serious scholars avoid sentimentalizing and demonstrate suitable skepticism by holding the focus on the socio-political purposes of Mesoamerican religion and ritual remains the prevailing academic practice. The positivistic tendencies of processual archeologists remain every much in evidence, including in the abundance of interpretations of ancient Oaxaca that continue to separate "the religious" from "the political," and then assign the latter the most important role in pre-Columbian history. Be that as it may, so-termed "post-processual archaeologists," Ian Hodder perhaps foremost among them, adopt revisionist attitudes that parallel trends in "postmodern" literary criticism, and thereby explicitly undermine the positivistic claims of their New Archaeology predecessors in favor of more explicitly interpretive or "hermeneutical" explanations;<sup>130</sup> and though post-processualists are not, in the main, particularly interested in religion, their efforts do much to

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<sup>128</sup> Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 100; my translation.

<sup>129</sup> Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 103; my translation.

<sup>130</sup> Works most typically associated with the emergence of post-processual archaeology include Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1987, 1992). To call this "a more hermeneutical approach to archaeology," though a generalization in need of some qualification, is not altogether inappropriate.

reopen the way for fuller attention to religion as a primary force in social change. Despite frequently persisting in the broadly Marxist (or perhaps Subaltern Studies) concern for a corrective attention to the lower segments of society, archaeologists participating in this trend are more willing to consider religion and ritual as guiding motivations for non-elite constituencies as well as mere means of control for elite rulers.

In Oaxacan Studies, the work of Arthur Joyce, to which I turn frequently in this project, provides by far the clearest exemplification of these methodological shifts.<sup>131</sup> In a host of articles and then the broad synthesis *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (2010), Joyce undertakes what he terms a “post-structural” re-reading of the region’s pre-Columbian history, which has paired incentives both (1) to attend more fully than his predecessors to the underestimated “agency of non-elites,” which he insists is always consequential in the course of Oaxaca social evolution, and (2) to consider seriously that religious motivations were indeed guiding factors in the rise and fall of ancient Oaxaca cities.<sup>132</sup> Though he makes little explicit use of the notion of cosmivision, and though I will (especially in chapter 10 relative to “the propitiation priority, III-C”) take issue with his characterization of ancient Oaxacan religious priorities, Joyce makes a signal contribution by arguing that the driving forces for many social institutions and many monumental architectural configurations—Monte Albán’s providing a foremost exemplar—was a shared investment among all sectors of society in the maintenance of a “sacred covenant” between themselves and the divine.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> See Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7, “Arthur Joyce’s Poststructural Rereading of Oaxacan Social History: A Story of Sacred Spaces, Rituals and the Agency of Commoners,” for a summary and critical reading of historical (re)construction of Monte Albán that emerges from Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>132</sup> The first two sections of Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7, address, respectively, Joyce’s emphasis on the agency of commoners in the history of Monte Albán and, second, the heightened role for religion, ritual and “sacred space” in that history.

<sup>133</sup> On his recurrent appeal to the notion of a “sacred covenant,” which Joyce borrows from John D. Monaghan, *The Covenants with Earth and Rain: Exchange, Sacrifice, and Revelation in Mixtec Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), see, among countless possibilities, Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 60-63, 107, 111, 126-27, 137-39, 212, 283.

Demonstrating yet again the merging interests, but also the lack of explicit cross-fertilization between Religious Studies and Mesoamerican Studies, Joyce makes no mention whatever of Mircea Eliade while nonetheless appealing to the unmistakably Eliadean conceptions and phraseology of “the sacred,” “the divine,” “sacred space,” “cosmic mountain” and “*axis mundi*” in order to make his case.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, when Joyce urges scholars in a current collection on religion and politics in the ancient Americas “to move beyond a focus on religion as a mean of political integration” and “to consider Native American religion from the perspective of indigenous ontologies,” these are trends that—like “the cosmovision approach”—aspire to a more balanced and full view of ancient Mesoamerican religion.<sup>135</sup> In short, Joyce’s work provides Oaxaca studies’ most conspicuous analogue to the renewed interest in “the broad and complex field of religiosity” that Medina Hernández’s attributes to this third stage in the trajectory of Mexican anthropology and archaeology.<sup>136</sup>

### C. ALFREDO LÓPEZ AUSTIN ON COSMOVISION: PAN-MESOAMERICAN UNITY, APPEALS TO ETHNOGRAPHY AND “THE HARD NUCLEUS”

The focus on *cosmovisión*—which I prefer to translate simply as “cosmovision” rather than the prevailing alternative, “worldview”—is, then, a relatively recent development in Mesoamerican Studies, but one for which there are significant precedents and roots. Moreover, the term remains far more prominent among Mexican than USA-based scholars. Be that as it

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<sup>134</sup> Frequently—for instance, in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 7, a sub-section entitled “A Second Guiding Narrative Theme: Reviving a Determinative Role for Religion, Ritual and ‘Sacred Space’”—I comment on Joyce’s heavy reliance on Eliadean themes without, however, ever citing or even mentioning Eliade.

<sup>135</sup> Arthur A. Joyce, “New Directions in the Archaeology of Religion and Politics in the Americas,” in *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Americas*, eds. Sarah B. Barber and Arthur A. Joyce (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2018), 4-11, for instance, enumerates the three themes that organize this volume: (1) To move beyond a focus on religion as a means of political integration; (2) to consider Native American religion from the perspective of indigenous ontologies; and (3) to consider the archaeology of religion and politics from the perspective of materiality. I would consider all of those very positive aspirations.

<sup>136</sup> Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 100; my translation.

may, among other advantages, the so-termed cosmovision approach brings back to the fore questions that are of obvious concern for scholars of religions; and, more specifically, it presents a conception of "religion" that comports much more fully with hermeneutical historians of religions' emphasis on orientation and a meaningful "mode of being in the world."

Cosmovision, while, as we'll see, referring to a systematic set of foundational existential investments, is neither a select "system of beliefs" nor an apolitical sphere of speculation on otherworldly matters; rather, the term directs attention to convictions that Mesoamericans "practically lay to heart," often without asserting them even to themselves, "concerning their vital relations to this mysterious universe, and their duties and destiny therein."<sup>137</sup> To borrow Carlyle's phrasing again, Mesoamerican cosmovision is "that which matters most" insofar as it is "the primary thing for them, which creatively determines all the rest."<sup>138</sup>

The now-fashionable term has a somewhat indefinite genealogy. The first use of "cosmovision" in relation to Mesoamerica may appear in ethnographer Calixta Guiteras Holmes' 1965 account of the nuanced perspective of a Tzotzil Maya thinker from San Pedro Chenalhó, Chiapas.<sup>139</sup> That David Carrasco entitles the most prominent English-language introduction to the field *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* (originally 1990) brings the term to the attention of North American audiences.<sup>140</sup> And a 2001 book edited by

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<sup>137</sup> Here I paraphrase language from Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, 3.

<sup>138</sup> Again I paraphrase Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," 101, suggests that earliest use of the term cosmovisión may come in Calixta Guiteras Holmes, *Los peligros del alma: Visión del mundo de un tzotzil* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965), and that Guiteras Holmes borrows the concept and term from French anthropologist Marcel Griaule's *Conversations With Ogotemmel: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>140</sup> The subtitle of David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers*, (originally 1990), is directly indebted to Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas*, 2 vols. (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980); English translation, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, 2 vols., trans. Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1980).

Johanna Broda and Félix Baez-Jorge, *Cosmovisión, ritual e identidad de los pueblos indígenas de México* (*Cosmovision, Ritual and Identity among the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico*), which presents the work of scholars who hold several different positions about Mesoamerican cosmovision, may provide a kind of symbolic confirmation of the mainstream acceptance of the concept, at least in Mexico.<sup>141</sup>

But by far the leading proponent of “the cosmovision approach” is Mexican historian Alfredo López Austin, whose *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (*The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*), published in 1980, is the earliest of his many highly influential works that elevate cosmovision to no less than the dominant model for interpreting Mesoamerican culture and religion.<sup>142</sup> An unprecedented three-

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<sup>141</sup> On the influence of that collection, which includes an important essay by Alfredo López Austin, see, for instance, Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 53-54.

<sup>142</sup> Alfredo López Austin is by far the leading and most prolific force in disseminating the notion of cosmovision. Three linked books bring the term to prominence: (1) Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (1980), which I just cited; (2) Alfredo López Austin, *Los mitos del tlacuache: Caminos de la mitología mesoamericana* (México, D.F.: Alianza, 1990); English translation, *The Myths of the Opossum: Pathways of Mesoamerican Mythology*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); and (3) Alfredo López Austin, *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994); English translation, *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997). For subsequent refinements and adjustments of his notion of cosmovision, see, among many possibilities, Alfredo López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y tradición mesoamericana,” en *Cosmovisión, Ritual e Identidad en los Pueblos Indígenas de México*, Johanna Broda y Félix Báez-Jorge, coords. (México, D. F.: Consejo Nacional para las Culturas y las Artes, 2001), 47-65; Alfredo López Austin, *Las razones del Mito: La cosmovisión mesoamericana* (Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2015); and Alfredo López Austin, “Sobre el concepto de cosmovisión,” en *Cosmovisión mesoamericana: Reflexiones, polémicas y etnografías*, Alejandra Gámez Espinosa y Alfredo López Austin, coords. (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas, 2015), 17-51. For broader and more concise overviews of the concept, see Alfredo López Austin, “Cosmovision,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican*, ed. Carrasco, vol. 1, 268-74; and a three-volume special edition of *Arqueología Mexicana*, vols. 68-70 (2016) is devoted entirely to the single-authored work, Alfredo López Austin, “La cosmovisión de la tradición mesoamericana.” For a complete list of his publications (which continues to grow), see *Alfredo López Austin: Vida y Obra*, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma y Angela Ochoa, coords.

volume special issue of *Arqueología Mexicana* (2016), authored fully by López Austin, provides an elaborately illustrated summary-overview of his more-than-three-decades of reflection on the topic.<sup>143</sup> In Oaxacan Studies, while many area specialists appeal to the notion of cosmovision, ethnographer Alicia Barabas probably is the most direct and copious in arguing for the advantages of the term in ways that appeal explicitly to López Austin.<sup>144</sup>

## **1. Mesoamerican Unity and Continuity: Contemporary Indigenous Communities as Prime Resources for the Study of Ancient Mesoamerica**

López Austin's notion of cosmovision, which he concedes has fluctuated considerably in his many works on the topic, depends upon a qualified reaffirmation of Paul Kirchhoff's 1941 presentation of Mesoamerica as a unified "cultural superarea," albeit with geographic boundaries that changed over time.<sup>145</sup> Kirchhoff concludes his still-influential survey of traits shared by all Mesoamericans, numerous of which are present in few or no other contexts, by noting:

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(México, D. F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017).

<sup>143</sup> Alfredo López Austin, "La cosmovisión de la tradición mesoamericana," *Arqueología Mexicana*, primera parte, edición especial 68 (2016); segunda parte, edición especial 69 (2016); y tercera parte, edición especial 70 (2016).

<sup>144</sup> Of countless places in which she applies the notion of "cosmovision" to contemporary indigenous Oaxacans, see Alicia M. Barabas, "Cosmovisiones y etnoterritorialidad en las culturas indígenas de Oaxaca," *Antipoda: Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, núm. 7 (julio-diciembre 2008), 2 (my translation), where she cites several of the same works referenced here in support of the observation that, following in the wake López Austin's path-breaking proposals, "discussion about the persistence of the cosmovision and body of beliefs of Mesoamerican origin in the current indigenous cultures has been accepted by almost all scholars of Mesoamerican religions, without, however, reaching a definitive agreement."

<sup>145</sup> The original article is: Paul Kirchhoff, "Mesoamerica: sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales," *Acta Americana*, vol. I, no. 1 (1943): 92-107. The much-read English translation is: Paul Kirchhoff, "Mesoamerica: Its Geographical Limits, Ethnic Composition and Cultural Characteristics," trans. Norman McQuown from *Acta Americana*, vol. I, no. 1 (1943): 92-107; reprinted in *Ancient Mesoamerica: Selected Readings*, ed. John A. Graham (Palo Alto: Peek Publications, 1981), 1-10. According to Kirchhoff's classic proposal, *ibid.*, 6-8, in spite of the region's extensive linguistic plurality and political particularism, Mesoamerica can be defined as a "superarea" unified by common historic and cultural features that include: intensive agriculture, numerous cultigenes (i.e., cultivated organisms for which no

"All of this shows the reality of Mesoamerica as a region whose inhabitants, both the very old immigrants and the relatively recent ones, were united by a common history which set them apart as a unit from other tribes of the Continent, their migratory movements being confined as a general rule, once they had entered the area of Mesoamerica, within its geographical limits. In some cases tribes of different families or linguistic groups took part in these migrations together."<sup>146</sup>

Embracing the broadly pan-Mesoamerican perspective of Kirchhoff, López Austin nonetheless declines, unlike Mircea Eliade, to stretch into the sorts of cross-cultural comparison or broad theorizing that would enable postulations about "religion in general." The Aztec specialist is, in his own words, committed to propositions and definitions "that have as their concrete basis the religious conceptions of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, preferably those of the beliefs and practices of the Mesoamerican tradition. But I am not interested in extending its validity to other areas."<sup>147</sup> Though, as will become apparent, López Austin's work is highly comparative in several respects, he explicitly eschews the mantle of "comparative religionist."

In any case, following Kirchhoff's lead, López Austin insists upon an essential unity and continuity that are pertinent to the *entire geographical breadth* of Mesoamerica, from the northern frontier to the Maya Lowlands. Indeed, on the much-debated issue of whether Mesoamerican religion is many or one, his emphasis on a fundamentally shared "Mesoamerican world vision," though always paired with acknowledgements of rich diversity in regional and

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wild species is known such as maize, beans and squash), writing, bark paper, a ritual calendar, human and animal sacrifices, distinctive architecture that includes pyramids and urban centers, some shared cosmological concepts and deities, shared aspects of material culture, and substantial political and economic contacts across the area. Regarding López Austin's qualified affirmation of Kirchhoff's conception of "Mesoamerica" and the enumeration of eight principles concerning the nature of concept, see López Austin, *The Myths of the Opossum*, 12-13. (But note also that in this 1988 work, which focuses especially on myth, López Austin makes only sparing use of the term "cosmovision.")

<sup>146</sup> Kirchhoff, "Mesoamerica: Its Geographical Limits, Ethnic Composition and Cultural Characteristics," 3. Medina Hernández, "La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma," for instance, devotes a large share of this article to contextualizing the ongoing significance of Kirchhoff's conception of Mesoamerica; see especially, *ibid.*, 67-85.

<sup>147</sup> Alfredo López Austin, "Los ritos: un juego de definiciones," *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. VI, núm. 34 (noviembre-diciembre 1998), 5; my translation.

local expressions, puts López Austin in the latter camp.<sup>148</sup> Consequently, while his specific examples from Oaxaca are, with notable exceptions, fairly sparse in his broader arguments, Oaxacan specialists, as we'll see, frequently appeal to López Austin's work for insights to address such large and controversial topics as the nature of Mesoamerican gods, the role of mythology and the logic of ritual.<sup>149</sup> To be sure, no other scholar is utilized nearly so frequently for that sort of broadly theoretical insight by present-day (Mexican) Oaxacanists.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, extending Kirchhoff's proposal, López Austin likewise insists on a cultural continuity across the region's *entire historical span* from the Formative period (certainly by 2500 BCE) clear through, not only pre-Columbian and colonial-era times, but also into present-day indigenous communities.<sup>151</sup> Contemporary indigenous peoples thereby become unprecedentedly important resources for the study of ancient Mesoamerica, pre-Hispanic Oaxaca included.

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<sup>148</sup> Frequently revisited debate over the essential unity (or lack thereof) among Mesoamerican religions invariably refers to a symposium on the topic at the 1968 International Congress of Americanists in which Alfonso Caso and Paul Kirchhoff, reiterating a view previously expressed by Eduard Seler, strongly asserted the unity of the religions. See Alfonso Caso, "Religión o religiones mesoamericanas?" *Verhandlungen des XXXVIII Internationalen Amerikanistenkongresses* (Munich: Kommissionsverlag Klaus Renner, 1971), 189-200, in which Caso argues for a unity among Nahua, Maya and Zapotec religions, so that we can speak of a single Mesoamerican religion as far back as the Classic period (300-900 CE). On the opposing side was Wilberto Jiménez Moreno, "Religión o religiones mesoamericanas?" *Verhandlungen des XXXVIII Internationalen Amerikanistenkongresses, Stuttgart-Munich, 1968*, München, Kommissionsverlag Klaus Renner, vol. 3 (1971): 241-45, who pointed out deep ruptures in Mesoamerican history that had resulted in considerable transformations in religious thought. Of innumerable summaries of the debate, especially helpful is that presented in López Austin, *The Myths of the Opossum*, 106-9. For a more current and qualified affirmation of the unity of Mesoamerican religions, ancient Zapotec religion explicitly included, which also references the famous 1968 debate, see Lind, *Ancient Zapotec Religion*, 350-51.

<sup>149</sup> In a broad survey of Mesoamerican history, Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján, *Mexico's Indigenous Past*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), the authors do present evidence that Oaxaca and Monte Albán participate in essentially all of the broader patterns that they describe.

<sup>150</sup> Note that, irrespective of English translations of several of his most important books, USA-based Oaxacanists continue to cite López Austin far less frequently than do Mexican Oaxacanists.

<sup>151</sup> Regarding a couple of qualifications to which I will return: First, by locating the origins of Mesoamerican cosmovision in the Formative period, López Austin, while acknowledging that some elements of this outlook emerged previously in an era of hunting and gathering, invariably

There is, we should note, a scholarly tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century, probably earlier, of Americanist archaeologists capitalizing on living native communities, especially elderly “informants,” to help make sense of pre-Columbian remains—a method based on the logic of working from the known to the unknown that is eventually labeled “the direct historical approach.”<sup>152</sup> Additionally, because of southern Mexico’s unusually strong continuity from prehistoric times through to the wealth of presently vibrant indigenous communities—more than half of Oaxaca’s present-day population is “indigenous”—this approach has had special appeal in the Oaxaca region;<sup>153</sup> and, furthermore, because religion and ritual have usually been judged as conservative forces, which are particularly slow to change but also particularly difficult to discern from the archaeological record, interpretations of these are topics have been, for better or worse, especially prone to “ethnographic analogies.” We should note also, however, that advocates for the so-termed direct historical approach as a means of understanding ancient Oaxaca religion have usually been arguing for the strategic use of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts of “pagan” practices written by Spanish friars—notably, those of Fray Juan de

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stresses that the most distinctive and enduring features of what he will come to term “the hard nucleus” of the Mesoamerican cosmovision are linked to an agricultural lifestyle. And second, while asserting that there is indeed “an important and unquestionable religious tradition with roots in [ancient] Mesoamerica” that extends to the present time, López Austin, *The Myths of the Opossum*, 16, likewise presents the crucial qualification that “in stating this we must recognize the great difference between [ancient] Mesoamerican religion and contemporary indigenous religions.” He elaborates on the persistence and continuity of what he terms “the Mesoamerican religious tradition” in, among many places, *ibid.*, chap. 24.

<sup>152</sup> For a classic description and defense of this approach, see Julian H. Steward, “The Direct Historical Approach to Archaeology,” *American Antiquity*, vol. 7, no. 2 (April 1942): 337-43. And for some prominent early twentieth-century exemplars of “the direct historical approach,” see Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, “Ancient Zapotec Ritual and Religion: An Application of the Direct Historical Approach,” in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, eds. Ezra B. W. Zubrow and Colin Renfrew (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 55-56.

<sup>153</sup> Noting that both Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal made extensive use of ethnohistorical sources to enhance their interpretations of pre-Columbian Oaxacan cultures, Marcus and Flannery, “Ancient Zapotec Ritual and Religion: An Application of the Direct Historical Approach,” 56, describe the Valley of Oaxaca as “one of those ‘fortunate’ areas (from the perspective of archaeology) where there is great continuity from prehistoric to Spanish Colonial times.”

Córdova (1587), Fray Gonzalo de Balsalobre (1656) and Fray Francisco de Burgoa (1670, 1674), all of whom I will discuss at length in chapter 4 with respect to “the divinity priority (II-A)” — rather than extrapolations based on the ethnography of twentieth-century and present-day indigenous groups.<sup>154</sup>

In any case, those important antecedents notwithstanding, López Austin outpaces the opinions of Kirchhoff and nearly everyone else in appreciating the extent to which contemporary native communities, even more than the heavily worked ethnohistorical sources, provide uniquely revealing windows into pre-Columbian conceptions of the cosmos, human body and ritual practice.<sup>155</sup> For López Austin, ethnography, a reservoir seldom tapped by historians and archaeologists as fully as it could be, will join—and in lots of respects exceed—the ethnohistorical analysis of colonial-era texts, which is always a fraught undertaking owing to the distortions of Spanish writers (another point to which I will be returning often), as a prime resource to supplement archaeology in discerning pre-Columbian priorities and practices. *The Human Body and Ideology* (1980), which combines insights from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* with those the ethnography of contemporary Nahua communities, is path-breaking in this respect. Likewise in *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan* (1994), translated as *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist* (1997), López Austin relies on careful readings of ethnographic research in three regions—the Tzotzil Mayas of the Chiapas Highlands; the Nahuas, Otomies, Tepehuas and Totonacos of the Sierra Madre Oriental; and the Huichols of the Sierra Madre Occidental—in order to deliver interpretations of Postclassic Aztec religion that are of unprecedented texture, depth and detail.<sup>156</sup> And these are again more insights that can, with

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<sup>154</sup> Marcus and Flannery, “Ancient Zapotec Ritual and Religion: An Application of the Direct Historical Approach,” for instance, argue for and demonstrate the viability of the direct historical approach in helping to make sense of pre-Columbian Zapotec religion. But it is noteworthy that in this article, they are actually arguing for the strategic use of sixteenth-century documentary sources—i.e., ethnohistorical resources—rather than ethnographic accounts of present-day native communities.

<sup>155</sup> The foremost of many demonstrations of this combined reliance on ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources is López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*.

<sup>156</sup> Medina Hernández, “La cosmovisión mesoamericana: La configuración de un paradigma,” 102, opines that it is in *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan* (English translation, *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan*:

caution, be extrapolated into Oaxacan contexts, which also has a strong ethnographic tradition of its own.<sup>157</sup>

Consequently, when, for example, again in chapter 4, I explore the incessantly debated question of ancient Zapotecs' investments in anthropomorphic gods and/or impersonal supernatural life-forces, we will find the most informing clues not in the archeological record nor in the colonial-era written sources, but rather in ethnographic studies of Oaxaca's contemporary indigenous communities.<sup>158</sup>

## **2. Peripheral Differences and Central Similarities: Ancient and Present-day Participants in "the Hard Nucleus" of Mesoamerican Cosmovision**

While constantly foregrounding seemingly pan-Mesoamerican traits, López Austin likewise introduces countless essays by insisting that "diversity is as important as the similarities to the understanding of the past."<sup>159</sup> Accordingly, he urges scholars, on the one hand, to respect and attend to the exceptionally rich variety of ethnicities, languages, beliefs, practices, architectures and institutions that present themselves across Mesoamerican geography and

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*Places of Mist*) that López Austin provides his "most elaborate proposal for answering the question of relations between Mesoamerican post-Classic societies and contemporary Indian peoples."

<sup>157</sup> Regarding some older but still relevant Oaxaca-based ethnographic works, see, for example, John D. Monaghan and Jeffrey H. Cohen, "Thirty Years of Oaxacan Ethnography," in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 6, Ethnology, ed. John D. Monaghan, with the assistance of Barbara W. Edmonson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 150-78. And regarding more recent Oaxaca ethnography, especially helpful is the work of Miguel Alberto Bartolomé and Alicia M. Barabas, both of whom make frequent appeal to the work of Alfredo López Austin (and notable if less frequent appeal to the work of Mircea Eliade).

<sup>158</sup> In chapter 4, see especially a sub-section entitled, "Competing and Complementary Sources on Ancient Zapotec Conceptions of Divinity: Ethnography, Ethnohistory and Archaeology."

<sup>159</sup> López Austin, "El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana," 53; my translation.

history.<sup>160</sup> Few would disagree; and ascertaining, for instance, uniquely Oaxacan and/or Zapotec beliefs and practices will be a constant challenge. Yet, for him, these acknowledgements of particularity are nearly always the prelude to far more contentious propositions about significant commonalities among all that diversity:

“similarities in productive techniques, forms of social and political organization, conceptions about the structure of the cosmos and many other practices, beliefs and institutions whose resemblance derive from intense and prolonged interaction.”<sup>161</sup>

For López Austin, a strong advocate for comparison (within Mesoamerica), there is, in other words, a kind of asymmetry in the play of similarities and differences insofar as “diversity appears in those [features] that could be considered *peripheral expressions*, some of them so spectacular that they hide the crux of systems,” while, by contrast, “we will find that most of the similarities appear in *the fundamental centers* of the different systems of thought that make up the cosmovision.”<sup>162</sup> In his view, differences showcase creativity and innovation, but in phenomena that are usually short-lived and not infrequently aberrant. By contrast, it is in the pan-regional and pan-generational similarities that one discovers the more stable and underlying Mesoamerican cosmovision with which López Austin is especially concerned.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Of the eight principles concerning “the nature of Mesoamerica” enumerated in López Austin, *The Myths of the Opossum*, 12-13, perhaps most important in the present context is number seven: “Relationships among Mesoamerican societies gave rise not only to similarities among them, but also to differences and limitations due to asymmetrical interdependencies.” *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>161</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 48; my translation.

<sup>162</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 58; my translation; italics added.

<sup>163</sup> Note also how López Austin’s dual emphases on differences and similarities positions him in relation to the decades-long debate as to whether it is more suitable to stress the unity of the region by speaking of one Mesoamerican religion or, alternatively, its diversity by insisting on a plurality of different religions. Eduard Seler, who at the turn of the century accentuated to the basic unity of Nahua, Maya and Zapotec religions—exemplified perhaps most strongly by their shared investments in a 260-day calendar and all that is implied by that conceptualization of time—may deserve credit for the first clear statement of the former view. See the sub-section on “Unity of Mexican and Central American Civilization,” in Eduard Seler, “The Wall Paintings at Mitla,” in *Mexican and Central America Antiquities, Calendar Systems, and History*, translated from the German under the supervision of Charles P. Bodwitch, Bureau of American Ethnology

Furthermore, this venturesome claim that it is the most important aspects of Mesoamerican consciousness that also have the greatest geographical and historical continuity that provides the ground for López Austin’s formulation of the seminal notion of a *núcleo duro*, or “hard nucleus,” of Mesoamerican cosmivision, another insight to which I will appeal frequently.<sup>164</sup> That is to say, while no one can argue against his assertion that “both similarities and diversity are characteristic of the same cultural tradition,”<sup>165</sup> more controversial is his bold contention that pan-regional similarities reveal to us “a structure or matrix of thought” that operates beneath the region’s more particularistic cultural expressions. Regarding this shared set of existential investments—i.e., “the hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmivision—he writes:

“In Mesoamerica, the deep similarities took root in a complex of cultural elements, highly resistant to change, which acted as structuring agents and thereby allowed new elements to be incorporated in ways that were congruent with the traditional heritage. This complex was the hard nucleus.”<sup>166</sup>

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Bulletin 28 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904): 266-75. But, as noted in a previous footnote, the more high-profile debate was between Alfonso Caso, “¿Religión o religiones mesoamericanas?”, who followed Seler in arguing that we can speak of a single Mesoamerican religion from as far back as the Classic Era (300-900 CE), versus Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, “¿Religión o religiones mesoamericanas?”, who countered with the view that there had been a plurality of Mesoamerican religions, albeit with many shared concepts, but with differences comparable to Judaism, Christian and Islam in the ancient Middle East. While López Austin might seem, then, to be the inheritor of Seler’s and Caso’s “one religion” position (and in an important sense he is), he pushed back the beginnings of that shared outlook into the Formative Era and, more notably, stretched ahead its continued relevance clear into present-day indigenous communities. And, even more importantly, López Austin’s notion of a “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmivision locates that unity at a deeper level so that he is, like Jiménez Moreno, highly attentive to the regional and temporal differences of various Mesoamerican religious expressions. In short, López Austin’s notion of the shared “hard nucleus,” while extending the stance of “one Mesoamerican religion,” refers to a mindset that has both an earlier historical origin and a “deeper” or more elemental status than what Caso was describing.

<sup>164</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmivisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 58; my translation.

<sup>165</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmivisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 51; my translation.

<sup>166</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmivisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 59; my translation. David Carrasco, “An Unfinished Biography of a Big Idea: ‘Núcleo Duro,’ Mircea

Appealing to Fernand Braudel’s notion of “*longue durée*” (that is, a long historical duration), López Austin extends that notion from the slowly evolving, or all-but-permanent, “secular processes” associated with geography, geology and great bodies of water to the realms of myth and religion. Building his notion of a “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmivision on this basis, he explains:

“Braudel introduced the concept of a long historical duration [i.e., “*longue durée*”] that includes secular processes. With this approach we can understand the Mesoamerican religious complex, its myths, its magic, and, in a wider sense, its cosmivision, as a structured complex of social processes, beliefs, practices, values and representations that changed over several centuries.”<sup>167</sup>

The nature, functioning and substance of that so-termed hard nucleus, a set of resilient core commitments that “can be discovered precisely among the similarities”<sup>168</sup>—including its enormous relevance to the layout of Monte Albán—will become apparent throughout this project.<sup>169</sup> But suffice it for now to note three very important parallels between this

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Eliade, Fernand Braudel, Alfredo López Austin” in *Del saber ha hecho su razón de ser... Homenaje a Alfredo López Austin*, Tomo I, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma y Ángela Ochoa coords. (México, D. F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017), 47-49, offers some suggestions on how López Austin anticipated the notion of a “hard nucleus” in his earlier work, before actually adopting the term, perhaps for the first time in his “El núcleo duro, la cosmivisión y tradición mesoamericana” or his *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* entry on “Cosmovision,” both of which appeared in 2001.

<sup>167</sup> López Austin, *Tamoanchan/Tlalocan: Places of Mist*, 5.

<sup>168</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmivisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 58; my translation. Regarding this connection between López Austin and Fernand Braudel, see Carrasco, “An Unfinished Biography of a Big Idea: ‘Núcleo Duro,’” 47-49.

<sup>169</sup> Regarding an important precedent to López Austin’s notion of an enduring “hard nucleus,” note that Alfonso Caso, as I mentioned previously, like Kirchhoff, is another who advocated for an essential cultural and religious unity across the full breadth and duration of Mesoamerica. Caso opined, for instance, in the context of remarks on Aztec religion that, “This profound religiosity of the Mexican Indian, still very much in evidence today, is *the scarlet thread in the woof of history*; it allows us to understand his way of life, at times indolent, at times active and energetic, but always stoic, because the life of man, according to his way of thinking, depends on the impenetrable will of the gods.” Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs: The People of the Sun*, trans.

reconceptualization of Mesoamerican religion as a “*cosmovisión*,” an approach that has largely won the day in Mesoamericanist studies, and historian of religions’ somewhat earlier embrace of “orientation,” or “a mode of being in the world,” as the most suitable gloss for “religion in general.”

#### **D. COSMOVISION, ORIENTATION AND “THAT WHICH MATTERS MOST”: COMPATIBLE RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF “RELIGION” IN THREE CRUCIAL RESPECTS**

It is somewhat ironic that at the same time the phenomenological approach associated most of all with Mircea Eliade, which had dominated Religious Studies from 1960s through the 1980s, was weathering a barrage of criticism,<sup>170</sup> Mesoamericanists were moving toward a stance that echoes Eliade’s in a host of important ways. As noted, Alfredo López Austin and other proponents of “the cosmovision approach” seldom appeal directly to Eliade, to the broader tradition of the History of Religions, or to the technical language of hermeneutical

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Lowell Dunham (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 97; italics added. Lines very similar to this had appeared in Alfonso Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs* (México, D.F.: Editorial Fray B. de Sahagun, n.d. [Spanish original, 1936]), 62. Recall, however, Caso’s deep ambivalence about religion—which is *not* shared by López Austin. That is to say, one finds in López Austin’s work no counterpart to Caso’s dark assessment that Mesoamericans’ deep investments in religion, while initially energizing, were ultimately “a fatal limitation” that accounts for the demise of all of the great pre-Hispanic civilizations, Monte Albán included. In Caso’s view, unlike López Austin’s, “the religion that had acted as an incentive became a restraint, and the products of religious enthusiasm smothered the creative personality of the individual and destroyed all possibilities of cultural development” (Caso, *The Aztecs*, 95).

<sup>170</sup> Much of the criticism of Eliade’s approach was grounded in highly debatable accusations about his early life political involvements; for a summary and rejoinders to those largely personal accusations, see, for instance, Bryan S. Rennie, “Eliade, Mircea [Further Considerations],” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Jones, vol. 4, 2757-60. But, as noted earlier, a more pertinent line of criticism involves the ways in which phenomenological approaches have been over-generous and insufficiently attentive to the insidious political entanglements of religion, i.e., that Eliade’s “sympathetic attitude” makes him a “caretaker” rather than a “critic” of the religions he studies. I hope in this work to demonstrate, particularly in chapter 6 on “the politics priority (II-C),” that broadly phenomenological approaches can indeed attend to those “darker” and worldlier involvements of religion and ritual.

phenomenology.<sup>171</sup> And where Eliade ventures observations about a religious impulse ostensibly shared by all of humankind, López Austin frequently cautions that the applicability of the “cosmovision” and “hard nucleus” he describes does *not* extend beyond the confines of Mesoamerica.

Be that as it may, the cross-culturally relevant conception of religion as “a mode of orientation” and the more culturally-specific focus on Mesoamerican “cosmovision” present highly compatible approaches—which together are ideal for our purposes. The “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmivision, in a sense, adds substantive content to the more generic category of orientation. Moreover, both conceptions avoid those two endemic modernist, Protestant-derived presumptions about “religion” (1) as a personalistic system of beliefs or (2) as high-minded concerns about otherworldly matters that are largely divorced from the “down and dirty” workings of politics. Alternatively, both conceive of religion as more existential than intellectualist, grounded more in lived experience and apprehensions of the material world than in philosophical speculation about metaphysical matters. Both thereby put in doubt pervasive assumptions that the truest of version of a religion is expressed most fully and accurately in literary sources; and thus both undermine commonplace assumptions that “sacred texts” are more reliable resources than “material culture” for recovering religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, both orientation and cosmivision constitute the sort of large-umbrella conceptions of religion that allow us to avoid neatly reified conceptions of Monte Albán religion as just one contradiction-free system of ideas in favor of appreciating the heterogeneous, less-than-perfectly-synthesized “multiple experiences of the sacred” that the coexisted quite comfortably in that socially diverse and hierarchical urban context.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Carrasco, “An Unfinished Biography of a Big Idea: ‘Núcleo Duro,’” 46, argues that “the evidence suggests that López Austin found more value in Eliade’s big ideas in the earlier part of his career [than later].” To make that case, Carrasco, *ibid.*, observes: “When we look, for instance, at López Austin’s ground breaking *Hombre Dios: religion y política en el mundo náhuatl* [1980] we see cogent uses of Eliadian notions of ‘archetype and repetition’ when laying out his early views on Mesoamerican cosmology, the nature of the *hombre dios* as well as in his construction of a key diagram on the interaction of daily events, legends, myths and history in the formation of concepts of the *hombre dios*.”

<sup>172</sup> Again I borrow the apt phrase “multiple experiences of the sacred” from Bartolomé, “Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca,” 629; and again this heterogeneity of

Accordingly, proponents of both fields come to see “religions” as all-embracing sensibilities that are relevant to all members of a population, instead of as specialist-led orthodoxies in which “common people” may or may not be inclined to participate. From both these perspectives, every constituency of elite and non-elite builders, residents and visitors at pre-Columbian Monte Albán was equally, if differently, “religious.” Furthermore, specifically with respect to the study of Mesoamerican urbanism—that is, ceremonial city sites like Monte Albán—I concur with Aztec specialist Leonardo López Luján and Mayanist William Fash that “the cosmovision approach, which emphasizes the symbolic roles of cities as human replications of the cosmos,” is ideally suited to augment ecological and functional approaches by attending more fully to the complex and region-specific ways in which pre-Columbian architectural configurations reflect cosmological as well as pragmatic political investments.<sup>173</sup> In short, orientation and cosmovision make a reciprocative and potent pair.

Nonetheless, mindful that both the stock English translation of *cosmovisión* as “worldview” and the terminological choice of “hard nucleus” may trigger some misleading connotations, I enumerate three important ways in which these two methodological approaches inform the broad conceptualization of “religion” that underwrites this project. None of these three concerns is especially original; all reflect insights that have been expressed by forward-thinking archaeologists. But they do, in the spirit of summation, provide important reminders as

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different religious outlooks coexisting within Monte Albán will be the central premise of chapter 4 on “the divinity priority (II-A).”

<sup>173</sup> Editors’ Introduction to *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, eds. William L. Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009), 3. Fash and López Luján link “the cosmovision approach” specifically to “the lead of the great urban geographer Paul Wheatley,” who, as I will note in chapter 1, draws his primary inspiration for inquiries into “the cosmo-magical symbolism” of pre-industrial cities from Mircea Eliade. While I see highly significant parallels between the cosmovision approach and the ideas about “cosmo-magical symbolism” and “astrobiological thinking” discussed in Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), chap. 3, “The Nature of the Ceremonial Center,” I do not find evidence that Mesoamericanists, except those who learn of Wheatley’s work thorough the writing of David Carrasco, are really influenced by Wheatley (though, having had him as a teacher in graduate school, I certainly am).

to the somewhat atypical notion of religion as "that which matter most" on which this analysis of Monte Albán relies. Accordingly, consider the three issues in turn, each of which I will then correlate with a more specific interpretive challenge that I will, in subsequent chapters, be working to resolve.

### **1. Homologized Systems and Cosmic Harmony: Cosmovision and Religious Orientation as Overarching, Unifying Forces**

First, not unlike Eliade's insistence that the *homo religiosus* "lives in an orderly and unified cosmos," López Austin maintains that the various components of the Mesoamerica cosmovision "constitute a systemic complex,"<sup>174</sup> which enables a holistic and interactive experience of all dimensions of the natural and supernatural world: "The cosmovision, though never explicitly formalized, was reflected in *all* concrete realms of human activity..."<sup>175</sup> Resemblant of the language on which historians of religions rely to explain "a religious orientation," Mesoamerican cosmovision, far more than simply a view of the cosmos per se, constitutes a triply encompassing (or perhaps triply undergirding) foundation that provides mutually compatible replies to *cosmological questions* about the nature of space and time, *theological questions* about the nature of divinity and extra-human forces in the universe, and *anthropological questions* about the nature of human bodies and beings during and after earthly life. Cosmovision not only informs ways of thinking about both lofty and prosaic matters, but also ways of acting and ways that social institutions facilitate human interactions. Instead of being confined either to otherworldly matters or to the purview of religious specialists, cosmovision has what others term "a quality of embeddedness" insofar as it shapes the thoughts and practices of everyone in the community.<sup>176</sup> Via fidelity to the Mesoamerica cosmovision,

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<sup>174</sup> López Austin, "El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana," 59; my translation.

<sup>175</sup> López Austin, "Cosmovision," 269; italics added.

<sup>176</sup> Renfrew, "The Archaeology of Religion," 47.

the quintessence of a "cosmological conviction" or "locative world view," all aspects of worldly and otherworldly reality are synchronized and coordinated.<sup>177</sup>

This embracive, unifying quality thereby adds weight and substance to Carlyle's contention that "religion" is "that which creatively determines all the rest."<sup>178</sup> The so-termed hard nucleus of the cosmovision, as López Austin says, provides core principles that structure and give a unified, coherent meaning to the full range of social thought and life;<sup>179</sup> or, in terms borrowed from Eliade, the basic premises of the Mesoamerican cosmovision disclose "a congruence among all aspects of life."<sup>180</sup> With respect to an all-embracing view that I will illustrate next chapter in relation to the conception of the Main Plaza at Monte Albán, Eliade explains:

"Obviously, the metaphysical concepts of the archaic world were not always formulated in theoretical language; but the symbol, the myth, the rite, express, on different planes and through the means proper to them, a complex system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things, a system that can be regarded as constituting a metaphysics."<sup>181</sup>

Indeed, for Eliade, the unique efficacy of "religious symbols" (as opposed to mere "signs" or "emblems") is their ability "to reveal a perspective in which heterogeneous realities

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<sup>177</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 151-53, concisely summarizes Cornelius Loew's term "cosmological conviction," and then deploys it in his own exposition of "locative world views," which he contrasts to what he terms "utopian world views." In Smith's critical view, nearly all of Eliade's work (and I would wager that this applies as well to Alfredo López Austin's writings on Mesoamerican cosmovision) speaks, in full and accurate ways, to a so-termed locative world view; but this emphasis means, on the other hand, that Eliade has neglected what Smith terms "utopian world views," which are less attached to particular places and landscapes.

<sup>178</sup> Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, 3.

<sup>179</sup> López Austin, "El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana," 60.

<sup>180</sup> Mircea Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 99.

<sup>181</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 3.

are susceptible of articulation into a whole, or even integration into a 'system.'"<sup>182</sup> In one of his favorite illustrations, Eliade explains, for instance, the sense in which the different meanings of lunar symbols form "a sort of 'system,'" and thereby alert indigenous people of the important interrelatedness of realms and processes that might not seem immediately interconnected:

"On different levels (cosmological, anthropological, "spiritual"), the lunar rhythm reveals structures that can be homologized, that is to say, modalities of existence subject to the laws of time and of cyclic becoming, existences destined to a "life" which carries in its very structure death and rebirth. 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>183</sup>

Via the symbolism of the cyclical phases of the moon, the *homo religiosus* of traditional contexts has been, according to Eliade, apprised of the coordinated or "homologized" dynamics of celestial bodies, seasonal changes, ocean tides, animal movements, female bodily processes, and the scheduling of planting and harvesting—all of which participate in a "connatural solidarity" or systemic interrelatedness.<sup>184</sup>

In sum on this first point of convergence, then, the notions of orientation and cosmovision similarly add nuance to the stock statement that, in a context like ancient Mesoamerica, "religion," rather than the compartmentalized component of life that one observes in most modern Western contexts, informs all aspects of existence, which, moreover, exist together in thoroughly interlinked and interdependent "cosmic harmony." In traditional contexts, the cosmovision—which is to say, the "religion"—provides an all-encompassing orientation that is pertinent to nature and supernature, which constantly interact; and thus that outlook informs

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<sup>182</sup> Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," 99-100.

<sup>183</sup> Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," 100.

<sup>184</sup> See Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," 99, or Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 154ff. For Eliade, "homology," a term that appears frequently and in different forms throughout his work, refers to "a correspondence or similarity often attributable to common origin." Thus, "homologization" or "to homologize" entails recognizing a system of correspondences, or a set of qualities or attributes, that correspond in relative position, structure, etc.

not only to the realms of myth and ritual, but also those of architectural construction, agricultural production, governance and rulership, trade and exchange, war and alliance-making.

Conceptualized either as orientation or as cosmovision, "religion" is not a distinct sphere of concern that stands alongside and parallel to the political, the social or the economic. From this view, nothing is "strictly religious" and nor is anything fully exempt from religion; religion is by no means confined to conceptions and interactions with deities, though those may be its most unmistakable purview. To the contrary, religion, as it is conceptualized in this work, underlies and informs all worldly and otherworldly pursuits; and thus to explore the "religion" of Monte Albán will require consideration of all those realms and activities.

## **2. Efficacious Misrecognition: Cosmovision and Religious Orientation as Experiential not Intellectual Responses**

Second, both academic traditions urge us to appreciate that, especially in contexts like ancient Mesoamerica, neither the creation nor the operationalization of one's "religion" is a matter of self-conscious, deliberative decision-making. Suitable emphases on the "agency" of both elite and non-elite ancient Oaxacans alert us that socio-religious allegiances are deliberative and may change in the courses of one's lifetime; but no one makes a personal choice to participate in the hard nucleus of Mesoamerican cosmovision or, for that matter, any religious orientation of the sort of described by Eliade or López Austin. And nor could ancient Mesoamericans, were we somehow able to interview them, be expected to articulate the point-by-point religious priorities to which they subscribe. A Zapotec priest's enumeration of the gods officially recognized by Monte Albán elite, for instance in reply to the interrogations of Spanish colonial officials, would provide only a thin slice of the religious orientations that operated in the city.<sup>185</sup>

The scholar's challenge is, therefore, in Eliade concise phrase, "to understand the existential situation of one for whom all these homologies are *experiences* and not simply

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<sup>185</sup> Here I am alluding again to the frequent but, I think, mistaken assumption that the sort of deity lists extracted from colonial-era Dominican sorts like Córdova or Balsalobre (both discussed in chapter 4) are reliable depictions of "ancient Zapotec religion."

*ideas.*"<sup>186</sup> For him, thoroughgoing religious outlooks arise "anterior to reflection,"<sup>187</sup> not from philosophical speculation or critical cogitation but from the practical challenge of coming to terms with "one's existential situation in the world," and thereby adopting "a certain mode of 'being present' in the world."<sup>188</sup> López Austin too, though he does, on occasion, describe cosmovision as "a set of concepts," "a complex of fundamental ideas" or "a common body of thought shared by many different ethnic groups,"<sup>189</sup> explicitly rejects the notion that Mesoamericans "think up" their myths or cosmological conceptions. Thus while he does contend that the overarching coherence of cosmovision is "a product of rationality,"<sup>190</sup> López Austin is far more adamant that,

"Its authors, the members of the community, are not aware that their actions are the rational source of the macrosystem; instead, they accept the order of the cosmovision, its precepts and its orientation, as a sacred, universal truth, independent of the conceptions of the community to which they belong."<sup>191</sup>

Just as Eliade argues that the adoption of a religious orientation is an existential rather than intellectual process, López Austin persuades us that,

"Mesoamerican cosmovision was a product of daily life in agricultural societies. In a process spanning millennia, it was gradually shaped in *a rational, though unconscious, manner* through the action of humans facing nature and themselves."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 166; italics his. In chapter 1, I will address at length what "homology" means in the context of Eliade's work.

<sup>187</sup> Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on Religious Symbolism," 98.

<sup>188</sup> Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on Religious Symbolism," 99.

<sup>189</sup> López Austin, "Cosmovision," 268.

<sup>190</sup> López Austin, "El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana," 63; my translation.

<sup>191</sup> López Austin, "El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana," 63; my translation.

<sup>192</sup> López Austin, "Cosmovision," 269; italics added. In other words, though without the technical language of phenomenology, López Austin shares the characteristic phenomenological emphasis that "religion" is a response to "lived experienced" rather than to intellectual speculation.

At this point, then, both López Austin and Eliade reecho Emile Durkheim's classic insight that "religion does not know itself. Religion knows neither what it is made of, nor what needs it satisfies..."<sup>193</sup> Both adhere to the Durkheimian postulate that religion, and more specifically rituals, have power and influence precisely because people experience them as something *not* of their own choice or making.<sup>194</sup> But, instead of assessing this "blindness" as a shortcoming on the part of either ceremonial occasions or their participants, ritual theorist Catherine Bell, for instance, following Pierre Bourdieu and others, contends that ritual is rewarding and successful precisely because it is embedded in "a fundamental 'misrecognition' of what it is doing, a misrecognition of its limits and constraints, and of the relationship between its ends and its means."<sup>195</sup> Rituals, and also conceptions of space, time and social responsibility, have authority and are experienced as efficacious precisely because they are perceived as conforming to the transhuman dictates of the relevant cosmovision. Or, to phrase it another way, the thoroughgoing unity of cosmological conceptions and effective guides to social action—though these remarkably well-coordinated systems are products of the human imagination—derive not from feats of intellectual synthesis, but rather from what Durkheim terms "an immense co-operation,"<sup>196</sup> a gradual and experiential process in which all members of society

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<sup>193</sup> Emile Durkheim quoted in *Durkheim on Religion*, ed. W.S.F. Pickering (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 251.

<sup>194</sup> Of course, Eliade especially frequently makes explicit about how his view of religion and of "the sacred" is, in many respects, fundamentally different from that of Durkheim. See, for instance, Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 12-15, 19, 127-130.

<sup>195</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 82. One might extract this insight from the sociological perspectives of Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu, but there are other possible sources as well. For instance, Bell, *ibid.*, notes, "An appreciation of the dynamics of misrecognition as such goes back to the Marxist argument that a society could not exist 'unless it disguised to itself the real basis of that existence.'" Bell, *ibid.*, 108, also notes a parallel between "strategic 'misrecognition'" and Althusser's comments on the intrinsic "blindness" of practice; and she observes that "Foucault implies a similar principle when he notes that people know what they do and they know why they do what they do, but they do not know what they are doing does."

<sup>196</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 29.

participate, but none are fully cognizant. The "cosmovisions" and "religious orientations" that operate at Monte Albán are, in other words, human constructions that, to the great benefit of their adherents, are "misrecognized" as the work of the gods.<sup>197</sup>

Via this conceptualization, then, so-termed religion, in a context like ancient Monte Albán, could not be more at odds with the modern American presumptions that one's religion is "a personal matter," and thus that individuals might, like responsibly discerning consumers of other goods and services, take the thoughtful initiative to reject one religious affiliation and replace it with a more intellectually appealing alternative. To be sure, as noted, I applaud recent scholars' emphases on the "agency" of both ancient Oaxaca's charismatic leaders and "commoners;"<sup>198</sup> but each Eliade's and López Austin's views undermine the prospect that ancient Mesoamericans were able to pick and choose their religious commitments. For both of them, religion is a consequence of pragmatic lived experience rather than deliberative reflection. Nor would either maintain, as some Marxist views do, that manipulative rulers were able to impose religious ideas and rules on a less discriminating wider populace. Alternatively, both these scholars suggest, and I concur, that cosmovisions and religious orientations arise from and belong to communities rather than individuals, and, moreover, that the very deep investments that communities have in those specific ways of engaging the world are *not* the consequence of self-conscious choices either by leaders or followers. That is to say, my approach to Monte Albán "religion(s)" has much more in common with those who search after "the ancient Zapotec mind," which subliminally informs all aspects of life,<sup>199</sup> than those who work to ascertain a pat

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<sup>197</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 82, finds apt parallels to Bourdieu's notion of "misrecognition," in Louis Althusser's notion of "a sighting in an oversight" or Paul DeMan's discussion of "blindness and insight."

<sup>198</sup> See Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 6, regarding Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus's emphasis on the crucial role of the "agency" of charismatic rulers in ancient Oaxaca; and see *ibid.*, chap. 7, regarding Arthur Joyce's corrective emphasis on the crucial role of the "agency of commoners" in the history of Oaxaca and Monte Albán. To be sure, ancient Mesoamericans take an active initiative in selecting their religious loyalties; but I will follow Eliade and López Austin in maintaining that these strategic choices are driven by existential rather than intellectual decision-making.

<sup>199</sup> On "the ancient Zapotec mind," see, for instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 18-21.

enumeration of the "pantheon of gods," which presumably emerges from the careful reflections of Zapotec elites.<sup>200</sup>

In sum, therefore, on this second point, to which I will allude at several points in the forthcoming chapters, were the challenges of recovering the religious orientation of pre-Columbian Oaxacans not daunting enough, this insight into the experiential basis of cosmovision requires us to admit that we scholars are working to make explicit ideas and assumptions that those ancient populations could not themselves have articulated. Moreover, Eliade's and López Austin's shared posit that religion is a matter of pragmatically lived experience rather than abstract thinking provides us a means of appreciating the diversity of not-altogether-consistent conceptions of divinity that, I am sure, coexisted in the urban capital of Monte Albán.

### **3. The Malleability of the Hard Nucleus: Cosmovision and Religious Orientation as Frameworks for Diversity and Change**

And third, irrespective of the connotations of stiffness and rigidity that come with a term like "hard nucleus," López Austin echoes the claim of historians of religions that religious orientations are the sort of agents of continuity that also allow for considerable flexibility and change.<sup>201</sup> That tension between constancy and change is reflected, for instance, in the way that Eliade's enormous corpus includes, on the one hand, synchronic or thematic works like *Patterns in Comparative Religion* wherein he accentuates commonalities that, he thinks, apply across the

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<sup>200</sup> In chapter 4, on the ritual-architectural commemoration of divinity (priority II-A), I will discuss at length the highly problematic but still exceptionally common assumption that, were we able, for instance via a close reading of colonial-era Dominican writings by Juan de Córdova or Gonzales de Balsalobre, to identify "the main gods of the Zapotec pantheon," that we would have gone very far in ascertaining the truth about "the religious outlook" of pre-Columbian Monte Albán.

<sup>201</sup> Regarding the malleability of Mesoamerican cosmovision, Carrasco, "An Unfinished Biography of a Big Idea: 'Núcleo Duro,'" 52-53, makes the suggestion that López Austin's own description of a "hard nucleus" that is actually "rather 'soft,' permeable, open and flexible;" and on those grounds, Carrasco, *ibid.*, argues for relabeling the "núcleo duro" instead as the "durable nucleus."

entire breath and duration of humankind’s engagements with the sacred.<sup>202</sup> In these largely ahistorical works, he underscores the unity and persistence of a limited number of patterns—the symbolism of the center, the sacredness of the sky, worship of the moon, water, sacred stones and the earth, etc.—all of which, akin to something like a “hard nucleus” in the global history of religions,<sup>203</sup> reappear in countless far-spaced cross-cultural contexts, again and again over centuries and even millennia. In these cases, Eliade can, therefore, address “religion” in the singular as a stable and unified phenomenon, a constant in the full history of humanity. But he also writes, on the other hand, more diachronic or historical works like his multivolume *A History of Religions Ideas*, which accentuates changes over time in the ways that humans have expressed their involvements with the sacred.<sup>204</sup> In these works, the singular “religion” is augmented by an acknowledgement of the plurality and diversity, sometimes eccentricity, of many historically specific religions.

Similarly, Alfredo López Austin, though limiting his frame to the breadth and duration of Mesoamerica rather than the whole history of humanity, repeatedly addresses the tension between continuity and change in the cosmovision.<sup>205</sup> He notes, for instance, that while the

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<sup>202</sup> Along with Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, the best example of this sort of synchronic or thematic approach to the whole history of religion is his *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, the work that he thought best captures his central ideas.

<sup>203</sup> Carrasco, “An Unfinished Biography of a Big Idea: ‘Núcleo Duro,’” 44-47, notes the parallels between key elements of López Austin’s Mesoamerica-specific “núcleo duro” and “the limited set of patterns” relevant to the general history of religions to which Eliade directs attention in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.

<sup>204</sup> Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol.1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), was supplemented by two more sequential volumes that track changes and developments in the history of religion over time: Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 2: From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985; and Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 3: From Muhammad to the Age of Reforms*, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>205</sup> Focused specifically on Oaxaca, Marcus and Flannery, “Ancient Zapotec Ritual and Religion: An Application of the Direct Historical Approach,” 55, provide an apt parallel to López Austin’s balancing of continuity and change in the “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmovision when they explain: “In this paper, we will try to show that ideological and cosmological principles

Mesoamerican hard nucleus—“a complex of ideas, quite resistant to change,” which began to take shape around 2500 BCE—would forever reflect the inheritance of concepts that emerged in an Early Formative era of nomadic hunting and gathering, those core ideas derive their most prominent features from the ensuing lifestyle of sedentary maize cultivators.<sup>206</sup> The cosmovision derived from the experience of Mesoamerican hunters is *not* fully applicable to ensuing agriculturalists and city-dwellers. Moreover, he observes that, around 1200 BCE, as largely egalitarian agricultural societies became more hierarchical, there were more corresponding adjustments in the region-wide Mesoamerican cosmovision;<sup>207</sup> and around 400 BCE, with the emergence of urban configurations—including at Monte Albán—and thus extensive technological, economic, social and political transformations, there were yet more mirroring alterations within the cosmovision.<sup>208</sup> Subsequent developments were sufficiently disruptive to prompt his use of Mesoamerican cosmovisions in the plural. He notes, for instance, that the Postclassic era gave birth to “a new cosmovision” that, in unprecedented ways, emphasized warfare and human sacrifice;<sup>209</sup> and he describes how “the colonial regime produced fragmentation that led to the birth of new cosmovisions in which Mesoamerican and Christian elements were united in diverse formulations and proportions.”<sup>210</sup> In brief, López Austin insists that the Mesoamerican cosmovision continually evolves and morphs in ways that mirror changing lifestyles and social circumstances.

Consequently, while I have accentuated López Austin’s striking claim that, “Today, despite the shock of the Conquest and the difficult conditions of colonial life, many elements of

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evolved (and were readapted over time) as Mesoamerican cultures went from egalitarian village societies to ranked societies or chiefdoms, and finally to urban civilizations.”

<sup>206</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 268.

<sup>207</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 268.

<sup>208</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 269.

<sup>209</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 269.

<sup>210</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 269.

the hard nucleus have survived among Mesoamerica’s descendents,”<sup>211</sup> he likewise, and like Eliade, acknowledges an ever-unfolding succession of new religious ideas and practices—but only within quite confined parameters. As noted, he contends, also like Eliade, that the greatest divergences and diversity appear in “peripheral expressions,” while it is similarities that reveal “the fundamental centers,” which work as the constraints or non-negotiable organizing principles that enable minor changes in the cosmivision, but mitigate against drastic breaches or disruptions. López Austin maintains that peripheral matters fluctuate, but the core concerns are constant:

“The constituent elements of this hard nucleus were systematically interrelated so that they were self-adjusting and could incorporate new elements of culture, accommodate existing ones, and substitute for those lost in order to give meaning to the remaining components of social thought.”<sup>212</sup>

Deploying an updated metaphor for Durkheim’s notion of “an immense cooperation” that keeps the social and spiritual components of the system operating in mutually reinforcing ways, López Austin at times describes the hard nucleus as “functioning like a large computer,” which locates new elements within the traditional frame, eliminates points of contradiction, and reinterprets foreign interventions in ways that “give meaning to the novel.”<sup>213</sup> In short, then, though neither the continuity nor the changes in the cosmivision can be attributed to deliberate interventions—for instance, by savvy leaders or by disgruntled commoners—over the past several thousand years, the hard nucleus has proven remarkably enduring, but also susceptible to considerable refinement and innovation.

This third point of convergence has especially important and tangible ramifications for how I undertake an inquiry into the religion(s) of Monte Albán. It is, on the one hand, as should be apparent next chapter, relatively easy—and, I hope, not uninteresting—to see ways in which the Zapotec capital exhibits many of the spatial organizing principles and “patterns” that Eliade

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<sup>211</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 270.

<sup>212</sup> López Austin, “Cosmovision,” 268.

<sup>213</sup> López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” 61; my translation.

regards as nearly ubiquitous in the cross-cultural history of religions. And it will likewise prove fairly simple to point out features that reaffirm Monte Albán's participation in the cosmovision and hard nucleus that López Austin sees operating throughout Mesoamerican history. Those discernments of commonality will demonstrate that Monte Albán is special, but by no means aberrant; and I will, moreover, argue that there is indeed a significant continuity within the religious orientation that abides across the entire twelve-century career of the Oaxacan capital. In this respect it does make sense to describe "the religion" of the Monte Albán capital in the singular.

The larger challenge will be, however, to ascertain ways in which Monte Albán had a ritual-architectural program that was unique among other great Mesoamerican capitals, especially by contrast to those in Central Mexico and the Maya zone. Yes, showing how the great Oaxacan capital is singular and different—perhaps stretching and subverting the characteristic cosmovision of wider Mesoamerica—will be more difficult, but also more rewarding. Moreover, irrespective of its enduring appeal as a kind of "cosmic mountain" that both precedes and survives the site's career as a major political capital and habitation center, it will be important to discern changes in the ritual-architectural priorities over time; though Monte Albán, it seems, lacks the modest beginnings of most great capitals, there is no question that its character and primary concerns changed significantly over the ensuing centuries. Additionally, nearly all commentators on Monte Albán religion rightly observe substantial differences among the public ceremonials staged in the Great Plaza, the more exclusive rites celebrated in grand temples and palaces, and the sorts of devotional practices undertaken in more modest domestic settings. And, furthermore, it will prove a major and fruitful challenge to appreciate the social stratification of the urban capital, and thus the different perspectives of Monte Albán's elite and non-elite constituencies, as well as the distinct ways in which residents and visitors variously experienced the ritual proceedings.

In short, while it is plausible to speak of Monte Albán religion in the singular, it is also important—if much more difficult—to appreciate that this was the site to many perspectives and thus many religions.<sup>214</sup>

### **E. MONTE ALBÁN’S RELIGION AND/OR RELIGIONS: A SUMMARY STATEMENT OF THREE CONCEPTUAL CORRECTIONS AND THUS THREE SPECIAL INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES**

In final sum, therefore, while it may seem tedious, perhaps persnickety and pedantic, to labor so long on the (re)conceptualization of religion that will inform this project, I consider these methodological musings very important scutwork. As *Narrating Monte Albán* reveals, very often Oaxacanist debates ostensibly about the historical role of religion at Monte Albán are actually disagreements about just what religion is and what role it plays in social history; and thus methodological clarity and self-consciousness about how we frame the discussion are constant concerns. Accordingly, I vey briefly summarize and reiterate the central issues of this Introduction by noting that I have capitalized on the convergence of (re)conceptualizations of

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<sup>214</sup> Note that this very important matter of balancing the claim to a single, enduring “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmovision with an acknowledgment of multiple and changing cosmovisions applies also within the unity-and-diversity of the Oaxaca region. In this respect, ethnographer Alicia Barabas is the leading voice who mirrors López Austin’s arguments about the paired unity and diversity in Mesoamerica writ large with arguments about paired unity and diversity within Oaxaca; of many works in which she advances that dual claim, a concise example is: Alicia M. Barabas, “Cosmovisiones y etnoterritorialidad en las culturas indígenas de Oaxaca,” *Antipoda: Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, núm. 7 (julio-diciembre 2008). In that article, Barabas, on the one hand, reaffirms López Austin’s bold contention about a “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmovision that applies across both the geographical reach and the Formative-to-contemporary history of the region. And, on the other hand, Barabas also stresses the decided differences among 16 indigenous Oaxacan groups: (1) Amuzgos, (2) Cuicatecos, (3) Chatinos, (4) Chinantecos, (5) Chochotecos, (6) Chontales, (7) Huaves, (8) Ixcatecos, (9) Mazatecos, (10) Mixes, (11) Mixtécos, (12) Nahuas o Mexicanos, (13) Triquis, (14) Tzotziles, (15) Zapotecos and (16) Zoques Chimalapas. In her view, these are not only distinct ethno-linguistic groups but also distinct “ethno-territorial groups” insofar as their different permutations on the “hard nucleus” are ultimately a consequence of the different ecological zones within Oaxaca in which they respectively live. Later I will elaborate on this fascinating notion of “ethno-territoriality;” but note for the moment the way in which Barabas, like López Austin, balances the notion of one shared “hard nucleus” that applies to all Oaxacans with an assertion that each of these 16 Oaxacan groups has a community-specific permutation on the general Mesoamerican cosmovision—i.e., in that sense, there are multiple Mesoamerican and Oaxacan cosmovisions.

religion undertaken by phenomenological historians of religions and, more recently, by Mesoamericanists preoccupied with cosmovision in order to accentuate three attributes of the elusive category. Each of these three qualities, which together support my aspiration to get at "that which mattered most" to ancient Zapotecs, carries with it a special interpretive challenge and charge for this study of Monte Albán.

First, from both perspectives, "religion" is conceived as an all-embracing sensibility rather than a distinct sector of life, which thus requires that we pay attention to a very broad swathe of social, political, ecological, economic, commercial and artistic realms and activities—all of which are shaped and unified by the "religious orientation" of Monte Albán's citizenry. Instead of imagining, as many scholars implicitly have, that we will have recovered ancient Zapotec religion when we ascertain what "gods" they worshipped, my target is a more diffused pre-Columbian "mode of being in the world," which accounts not only for human interactions with deities, but for "a congruence among all aspects of life."<sup>215</sup> By this (re)conception, all beliefs, practices and institutions, as well as all features of the material culture in the Oaxaca capital, are informed by, and thus revealing of, its "religion." And accordingly, during the course of this study, I will devote attention to various topics and aspects of the ancient Zapotec capital that those operating with narrow conceptions of religion may regard as beside the point, but that I consider fully relevant to "the religion(s) of Monte Albán."

Second and closely related, both academic traditions urge us to see "religion" as a pragmatic, "rational though unconscious" response to one's existential situation in the world rather than as a thoughtfully constructed set of beliefs and policies. That corrective that puts us on notice about mistaking the official orthodoxy depicted in elite art and iconography, including, for instance, the calendrics articulated on Monte Albán ample carved stones or the "deities" depicted on the Zapotecs' famous funerary urns, as reliable indicators of the cosmological and theological investments of the less articulate, but not less religious, wider populace. Repeatedly I will circle back to the crucial realization that Monte Albán was socially hierarchical and multiculturally diverse urban environment—indeed among first sites in Mesoamerica facing the

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<sup>215</sup> Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," 99.

specific challenges of urbanism—which was, therefore, charged with accommodating a wide diversity of divinity conceptions and what Miguel Bartolomé terms “multiple experiences of the sacred.”<sup>216</sup> All residents of Monte Albán were forced (or allowed) to exist in an ambience of religious pluralism, which tolerated and likely even thrived on quite different assumptions as to what beliefs and practices enable a rewarding life. And thus we can never expect to appreciate either the diversity or the depth of Monte Albán’s religious orientations simply by analyzing the self-representations of elites in public contexts and by assuming that everyone had signed onto the party-line. Routinely concealed and “misrecognized,” the mechanisms of religion are seldom above-board and out in the open; and thus plumbing past the explicit and obvious is likewise a constantly challenging necessity.

And third, while very appreciative of Eliade’s observations about omnipresent “patterns” in the general history of religions and López Austin’s assertions of remarkable persistence in the “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican cosmovision, I am likewise informed by their conceptions of “religion” as dynamic, malleable, ever-unfolding and always in flux. This large qualification requires us to move past the assessment of Monte Albán as exemplary or “typical” of broader trends—though certainly it is that!—to appreciate the uniqueness, atypicality and diversity of different religions that operate across the city’s history. I will contend that religion plays a crucial role in the city’s site selection, founding and rapid rise to prominence; religion plays a different set of roles in the functioning of Monte Albán as a great regional capital; and there are more controversial and complex ways in which religion was, it seems, a major factor in the city’s demise and depopulation. Moreover, though eventually divorced from most of its Classic-era stately functions, religion continued to be a major but different sort of factor in attracting visitors to the largely abandoned site in the Postclassic era. Likewise, each of those eras comprises different constituencies with different outlooks. Elite rulers and “commoners”—those who designed the great ceremonial spaces of Monte Albán and those who labored to build them—along with the *mélange* of home-grown residents, migrants and periodic visitors, allies and adversaries of the Zapotec rulership, all would have experienced the capital’s ritual-architectural

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<sup>216</sup> Bartolomé, “Elogio del politeísmo: las cosmovisiones indígenas en Oaxaca,” 606.

occasions in very different ways. And, consequently, the greatest interpretive rewards may come in appreciating that the “religion” of Monte Albán was actually many religions.

In sum, to repeat myself a final time, I do not present this (re)conceptualization of religion and these three emphases as a final solution to the infamous definitional dilemma. Far more modestly, my select stipulation reflects my special interest in ascertaining that which ancient Zapotecs “practically lay to heart, concerning their vital relations to this mysterious universe, and their duties and destiny therein.”<sup>217</sup> In the analysis of many religion-related circumstances, this formulation will *not* work to reveal the pertinent problems and concerns. But this broad way of thinking about religion—when paired with a long list of more specific queries posed in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* and enumerated in Appendix B of this work—is, I hope to demonstrate, the sort of heuristic framework that will bring to the table a large share of the central problematics at issue in the religion(s) of pre-Columbian Monte Albán.

### **III. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK: BUILDING ON THE RESPECTIVE THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TWO PREVIOUS BOOKS**

Lastly, I address the organization or the “architecture” of this entire project, which, owing to its length and sometimes teacherly style, may have more the character of a kind of extended Monte Albán study guide than a book per se. This work, which no one will read from front to back, is built on, and would be impossible without, two earlier and book-length studies, which together provide its respective theoretical and historical moorings. The first—*The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (2000)—supplies the general theoretical basis for the eleven essays in this volume. And the second—*Narrating Monte Albán: Seven True Stories of the Great Zapotec Capital of Southern Mexico* (2015)—furnishes the warrant for a preoccupation with the history of ideas about the ancient capital, and therefore my commitment to entertain multiple versions of the history of Monte Albán. Consider, then, somewhat more specific comments on each of these two earlier works impacts on this one.

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<sup>217</sup> This is yet another paraphrase of Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, 3.

**A. NARRATING MONTE ALBÁN: A WARRANT FOR RESPECTING THE HISTORY OF IDEAS AND MULTIPLE VERSIONS OF THE CAPITAL’S FOUNDING, FLOURISHING AND COLLAPSE**

Regarding the latter book, when I turned my attention to Monte Albán, as a historian, I initially imagined that the first step toward an understanding of the religion(s) of the Zapotec capital would be to acquaint myself with the straightforward journalistic facts about when, by whom and to what ends the city had been constructed. Quickly, however, I discovered that, while archeologists have been remarkably successful in assigning relative and eventually absolute dates to most of Monte Albán’s main features, even now, there is nothing remotely resembling a consensus as to the socio-religious motives and politico-economic forces that account for the great capital. There is no “master narrative” of Monte Albán history. To the contrary, the range of conflicting opinions and diverse interpretive models is enormous, sometimes dizzying; and resolution, even on the largest of historical questions, is nowhere in sight. Nevertheless, eventually, after pouring over that conflicted literature, I reached the conclusion that the past 100 years of scholarly investigation have produced just seven thoroughgoing and viable ways of (re)constructing the history of the founding, florescence and collapse of Monte Albán—and I critically summarize each of those in *Narrating Monte Albán*.<sup>218</sup> Though, to me, fascinating in its own right, this was menial, preparatory labor that had to be done before I could process to this project.

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<sup>218</sup> In Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, Introduction, a sub-section entitled, “‘Emplotment,’ ‘Followability’ and Understanding: Invariably Narrative Solutions to the Enigma of Archaeological Ruins,” I explain my reliance on Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 155-61, for a definition of what qualifies as a “followable narrative”—namely, an account that explains the beginning, middle and ending of Monte Albán according to some coherent logic. Based on that criterion, I devote chapter summaries to the seven foremost narrative (re)constructions of the history of the Zapotec capital, namely, those issuing from works by Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal, John Paddock, Richard Blanton, Marcus Winter, co-authors Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus and Arthur Joyce. While there are, of course, countless additional opinions regarding various aspects of Monte Albán, I wager that are, at present, no additional beginning-to-end “followable” renditions of the history of the ancient capital.

That is to say, while there is no single unified view with respect to the history of Monte Albán, nor are there dozens of alternative views. Instead, as I explain in detail in that earlier book, there are, to date, not more or less than seven (or maybe just six) decidedly different ways of telling a rigorously empirical, feasible and “followable,” start-to-end story of the ancient capital.<sup>219</sup> While elements of all these (re)constructions can be judged as plain wrong at this point—and while I absolutely do not endorse the glib stance that one story of Monte Albán is as good and true as the next—nor do I assess these as mutually exclusive renditions. The newer versions neither nullify the older versions, nor do any of them represent authoritative alternatives that all or even most Oaxacanists are willing to accept.<sup>220</sup> Disagreements are as pervasive as ever; and, contrary to commonsensical expectations, progress in understanding Monte Albán’s history is cumulative in only some respects. To a surprising degree, each new interpretation—invariably based more on very different theoretical presuppositions concerning the driving factors in Oaxaca social evolution than on the discovery of new data—constitutes a fresh start rather than a refinement of older theses.<sup>221</sup> But, as we learn from numerous hermeneutical

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<sup>219</sup> On the “followability” of narrative, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 152. Regarding the number of extant versions of Monte Albán’s history, I sometimes waffle between assertions that there are seven thoroughgoing narrative (re)constructions of the Zapotec capital and that there are only six, because, as I explain in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, chap. 1, “Closing Thoughts: The Content and Context of a Mexican Story of Monte Albán,” Alfonso Caso, while uniquely important in laying the foundations for all the rest, ironically enough, does *not* himself present a “followable” narrative of the origin, florescence and collapse of Monte Albán. In that respect, one must look to the work of Ignacio Bernal for the a full-blown narrative (re)construction that implements most of Caso’s opinions about Monte Albán.

<sup>220</sup> Regarding the subtle (and controversial) matter of “the truth” of historical (re)constructions and regarding my position, which few archaeologists are inclined to accept, concerning the non-mutual exclusivity of these various renditions of Monte Albán history, and thus the continued viability of older stories along with that of more recent versions, see Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, Introduction, “The Absence of a Master Narrative: 100 Years of Storytelling at the ‘Ruins’ of Monte Albán.” Also, by the way, in that Introduction I explain my use throughout that earlier book and this one of the parentheses in “historical (re)construction” to hold in the foreground the widely shared hermeneutical view that all sustained accounts of historical circumstances are “constructions,” which reflect countless factors in addition to “the plain facts” about “what really happened.”

<sup>221</sup> Again, I discuss this important, if perhaps counterintuitive, realization that alternative versions of Monte Albán history have depended much less on the discovery of new data than on the utilization of different interpretive frameworks in Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*,

theorists, when writing even the rigorously empirical history of any prolonged and complex historical phenomenon, say, the history of the Industrial Revolution or of the Vietnam War, there are many viable and accurate ways of recounting the same circumstance.<sup>222</sup> And my acute interest in the history of ideas—that is to say, the ongoing “ritual-architectural reception history” that the remains of Monte Albán have spawned and continue to evoke—leads me not to endorse one historical (re)construction in ways that allow us to ignore previous versions. Instead, when dealing with various historical questions, I keep afloat all seven of these interpretive frames, and sometimes others as well.<sup>223</sup>

In other words, while reflections on the religion(s) of Monte Albán might seem to be predicated on the endorsement of a single version of the history of the site, that is not my way of operating. Consequently, throughout this project, when a question arises concerning the historical and socio-cultural forces that account for a particular feature of Monte Albán, I will feel compelled to entertain multiple views on the topic rather than throwing full weight behind one perspective, however persuasive it may appear at the moment. Simply put, I decline to succumb to the sort of presentist hubris, which can be observed across Mesoamerican Studies, wherein archaeologists of every generation imagine that they have “set straight” some historical problem in a fashion that thereby quashes all of the earlier explanations of “what really happened.”<sup>224</sup> Especially when, as an outsider, I revisit in quite rapid succession the full palate

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Introduction, a sub-section entitled “The Priority of Presuppositions: The Contingent Quality of Every Monte Albán Narrative (Re)construction.”

<sup>222</sup> See, for instance, Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 91-225, part II, “History and Narrative;” Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 133-212, chap. 4, “The Critique of Historicism;” or Jones, *Narrating Monte Albán*, Introduction.

<sup>223</sup> While I venture that there are not more than seven thoroughgoing versions of the full Monte Albán story, there are, as we’ll see, many more opinions than that on lots of more specific historical problems.

<sup>224</sup> Indeed, among the most profound, perplexing and humbling realizations to emerge from years of reading these Mesoamerican materials is that the leading archaeologists of their respective eras invariably operate with theories, and especially with historical (re)constructions of particular sites, that their successors judge to be largely incorrect. This troubling observation that essentially all of the greatest Mesoamericanists have been proponents of historical

of the past century's ideas about ancient Zapotec capital, it is unmistakably apparent that archeologists stand, even now, at a very preliminary stage in the ongoing investigation of these ruins, some 85% of which remain to be systematically excavated. There is, from that broader frame, little reason to doubt that the presently prevailing interpretations of Monte Albán will not prove equally vulnerable to the revisionist efforts of forthcoming generations of Oaxacanist scholarship.

Accordingly, I do not fixate on the present state-of-the-art, which is certain also to give way to newer hypotheses. Alternatively, be forewarned that there will be, for better or worse, many digressions in which I inventory the range of opinions—that is, the history of ideas—about a particular problem before venturing my own hypotheses concerning the consequences with respect to the religion(s) of Monte Albán.<sup>225</sup>

**B. THE HERMENEUTICS OF SACRED ARCHITECTURE: A GUIDE TO EXPLORING THE SITE-SPECIFIC RELEVANCE OF ELEVEN GENERALIZED RITUAL-ARCHITECTURAL PRIORITIES**

The second preclusive work—*The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*—establishes the theoretical basis for the eleven thematic essays of which this project is composed. In fact, the logic and order of those essays, each situated within a broader structure, but each potentially free-standing, exactly mirrors the logic and order of that earlier and more broadly theoretical work, which addresses the myriad ways that built forms express and evoke religious sensibilities

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(re)constructions that their successors regard as fundamentally wrong first came to my attention with respect to my earlier work on the history of the study and interpretation Chichén Itzá. In Jones, "Conquests of the Imagination," for instance, I recount how Sylvanus Morley, Eric Thompson and Alfred Tozzer all adhered to historical (re)constructions of Chichén Itzá based on versions of a "Toltec Conquest of Mayas," which subsequent scholars are certain never happened. By the same token, we can be certain that presently prevailing historical (re)constructions, whether of Chichén Itza or Monte Albán, are certain to be undermined by ongoing scholarship.

<sup>225</sup> In other words, while the latest and presently most compelling theories of various aspects of Monte Albán features invariably come and go, chronicling *the history of ideas about the ancient Zapotec capital*, which is my first concern, is cumulative and perpetually informing.

in contexts across the world. That two-volume study is, as noted in the Preface, the methodological prolegomenon that underwrites this entire Monte Albán undertaking.<sup>226</sup>

Accordingly, on the one hand, I reaffirm here all of the fundamental theoretical propositions that I articulated in those previous volumes. Here again I depart from the basic premise that the design of broadly religious architecture, whether in ancient Mesoamerica or elsewhere, entails a balancing of competing "ritual-architectural priorities."<sup>227</sup> And one will encounter, therefore, fairly frequent footnotes to where in that foregoing work I address a whole host of cross-culturally comparative terms and concepts that are pertinent to my particularistic interpretations of Monte Albán. Among the foundational formulations on which I rely, the most important are: "the superabundance and autonomy of sacred architecture," the "eventfulness" or "occasionality" of architectural meaning, the concept of "a ritual-architectural event," "the twofold mechanism of architecture," the necessity of "ritual-architectural allurements," the "productivity" or transformative power of religious architecture, the central concept of "revalorization," and thus the merits of composing "ritual-architectural reception histories."<sup>228</sup> In short, I stand by, and put in motion, every generalized theoretical formulation articulated in both volumes of *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*. On the other hand, though, I shift attention from the general workings of sacred architecture to the specifics of pre-Columbian Monte Albán; and thus in this project, I will largely forgo reiteration of the theoretics already

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<sup>226</sup> The two volumes of *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* are entitled: *Monumental Occasions: Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture*, which introduces the foundational notions of "the superabundance and autonomy of architecture," "a ritual-architectural event," "ritual-architectural reception history," etc.; and *Hermeneutical Calisthenics: A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities*, which has chapters on each of those eleven priorities.

<sup>227</sup> On the basic premise that architectural design, including that of religious structures, depends upon the balancing of countless and competing "ritual-architectural priorities," see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chap. 13, "A Morphological Agendum: Organization by Ritual-Architectural Priorities."

<sup>228</sup> All of these terms and concepts are addressed at length in Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I.

outlined in that earlier work.<sup>229</sup> Though I do find all of that theorizing important and relevant, I repeat in the present project very little of that methodological infrastructure—but I presume it all.

More specifically, readers of those broadly framed volumes will recall that so-termed “hermeneutical interpretation,” as described by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and others who operate (as do I) in the Heideggerian tradition, proceeds on the model of conversation or “to-and-fro dialogue,” which entails strategic questioning paired with a careful listening for answers.<sup>230</sup> It is a fundamental hermeneutical principle that, instead of aspiring to “objective” analyses (which do not, in fact, exist), strong, interesting and viable interpretations of what is happening at a place like ancient Monte Albán depend upon strong and interesting questions as to what might have been happening. In a refrain I often repeat: questions not asked are seldom answered. If, for example, one’s sole queries concerning the religion of Monte Albán are “What gods did the Zapotecs worship?” or “How do rulers manipulate the masses via religion?” then the resulting conclusions are certain to be similarly limited. Bland and over-determined questions issue in bland and over-determined interpretations.

Devoted to mitigating that sort of impoverished slate of inquiries—and thereby to widening Oaxacanists’ appreciation of the manifold capabilities and complexities of monumental architecture—I borrow from the second volume of *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture* roughly 30 pages composed entirely of evocatively leading questions, which reappears in the present work as “Appendix B: An Expanded Heuristic Framework of Ritual-Architectural Priorities.”<sup>231</sup> Those dozens of leading questions are organized according to the following eleven-part scheme:

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<sup>229</sup> I concede that for those interested primarily in ancient Oaxaca, all of that theoretical language concerning “the universality of hermeneutical reflection” and the meaning-making processes of architecture can prove tiresome, too abstract and too far removed from the empirical realities of the ancient Zapotec capital to seem very apposite. And thus I omit most (but not all) of that theorizing from the present work.

<sup>230</sup> See Jones, *The Hermeneutic of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 1.

<sup>231</sup> In other words, “Appendix B: An Expanded Heuristic Framework of Ritual-Architectural Priorities” in the present work is slightly amended version of the Appendix that appears in Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, 295-332.

## A Morphology of Ritual-Architectural Priorities<sup>232</sup>

### I. Architecture as Orientation: The Instigation of Ritual-Architectural Events

- A. Homology: Sacred architecture that presents a miniaturized replica of the universe.
- B. Convention: Sacred architecture that conforms to standardized rules and/or prestigious mythico-historic precedents.
- C. Astronomy: Sacred architecture that is aligned or referenced with respect to celestial bodies (e.g. the sun, moon, planets or stars).

### II. Architecture as Commemoration: The Content of Ritual-Architectural Events

- A. Divinity: Sacred architecture that commemorates, houses and/or represents a deity, divine presence or conception of ultimate reality.
- B. Sacred History: Sacred architecture that commemorates an important mythical, mythico-historical or miraculous episode.
- C. Politics: Sacred architecture that commemorates and legitimates (or challenges) socio-economic hierarchy and/or temporal authority.
- D. The Dead: Sacred architecture that commemorates revered ancestors and/or other deceased individuals or groups.

### III. Architecture as Ritual Context: The Presentation of Ritual-Architectural Events

- A. Theatre: Sacred architecture that provides a stage setting or backdrop for ritual performance.
- B. Contemplation: Sacred architecture that serves as a prop or focus for meditation or devotion.
- C. Propitiation: Sacred architecture and processes of construction designed to please, appease and/or manipulate “the Sacred,” however variously conceived.
- D. Sanctuary: Sacred architecture that provides a refuge of purity or perfection.

The respective chapters of this project are, in other words, composed of Oaxaca-specific replies to the eleven sets of general questions posed under these headings.<sup>233</sup> Part I, the first

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<sup>232</sup> The layout and logic of this eleven-part framework—which I refer to as a “heuristic morphology” and not a “descriptive typology”—is the subject of Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chap. 13, “A Morphological Agendum: Organization by Ritual-Architectural Priorities.” It is reproduced in the present work as “Appendix A: A Heuristic Framework of Ritual-Architectural Priorities.”

<sup>233</sup> Much more generally, note also that throughout this study I will alternate between a “*hermeneutics of empathy*” (or “*hermeneutics of retrieval*”), wherein one operates with a generous or open frame of mind, “suspending ordinary disbelief” in order to entertain the viability of pre-Columbian Oaxacan presuppositions and commitments that may strike modern Westerners as strange and sometimes far-fetched, and, by contrast, a “*hermeneutics of*

three chapters, under the broad label of "*Orientation and Allurement*," addresses means by which the designers of Monte Albán made their city respectable, compelling and "alluring."<sup>234</sup> Chapter 1 uses the shorthand rubric of "homology (priority I-A)" to explore the very considerable extent to which the ancient capital conforms to Mircea Eliade's famous model of sacred space, and to categories like "cosmic mountain," the "symbolism of the center" and "*imago mundi*" or a miniaturized replica of the universe. Chapter 2, relying on a quite specific meaning of the term "convention (priority I-B)," surveys the means and extent to which the layout and built forms of ancient Monte Albán are made credible and alluring by conforming both to standardized rules of proportioning and to well-established precedents from earlier and contemporaneous ceremonial centers. And chapter 3 on "astronomy (priority I-C)," broadly conceived, pursues ways in which Monte Albán's ritual-architectural program is made even more enticing and irresistible via alignments to various celestial bodies and phenomena. Together these first three alternatives speak to what I term the "*strategies of allurement*" or "*ritual-architectural instigation*" whereby audiences are persuaded that the ceremonial proceedings in the Great Plaza and other precincts of the city are legitimate, authoritative, and thus worthy of their serious attention.

Part II, the second block of chapters, under the broad rubric of "*Commemoration, Messages and Meanings*," addresses the sorts of meanings, information or substantive content

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*suspicion*," a term usually traced to work of Paul Ricoeur wherein one operates with a skeptical frame of mind in order to expose the worldly interests that are frequently being masked by presentations of otherworldly matters. Regarding the balance and productive tension between a "hermeneutics of empathy" and the "hermeneutics of suspicion," see, for example Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 194ff. That alternation between empathy and skepticism will issue in interpretive results that, on the one hand, reaffirm many previous conclusions about the religious sensibilities at work in the ancient Zapotec capital; and, on the other hand, numerous of my interpretations will challenge conventional wisdoms about the ritual-architectural priorities that were most important in the rise, florescence and decline of Oaxaca's premier ceremonial center. Interested neither in congratulating nor condemning ancient Mesoamericans for their religious investments, I want, in the end, simply to describe and interpret their priorities as fully as I am able.

<sup>234</sup> The first three chapters of the present work, all of which come under the rubric of what I term "ritual-architectural allurement," are correlated with, respectively, Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chaps. 14, 15 and 16.

that were expressed in those ceremonial proceedings.<sup>235</sup> Chapter 4 invokes the encompassing label “divinity (priority II-A)” in order to revisit the fiercely debated question of what sorts of supernaturals—whether personal gods or impersonal life-forces—were most important to ancient Zapotecs. Chapter 5, on “sacred history (priority II-B),” examines ways in which the built forms, iconographic displays and ceremonials express, reiterate and commemorate various mythical or mythico-historical episodes, individuals and locations. Chapter 6, relying on the shorthand designation of “politics (priority II-C),” inventories the wide range of ways in which architecture and ritual either legitimate and/or challenge the prevailing socio-economic hierarchy of the Zapotec capital. And chapter 7, on “the dead (priority II-D),” pays special attention to the famous burials and tombs of Monte Albán as a means of delving into topics connected to the commemoration of the deceased persons, including but not limited to preoccupations with esteemed ancestors. Together that set of four essays inventories the sorts of information, messages and meanings that were transacted in both the large-scaled public ceremonies and more modest domestic ritual occasions.

Finally, Part III, the third block of chapters, under the wide heading of “*Choreography and Ritual Context*,” explores alternate means of presentation or staging that support Monte Albán’s various ceremonial occasions.<sup>236</sup> Chapter 8 examines ritual-architectural configurations that I label “theatrical (priority III-A)” insofar as they facilitate performative events that are witnessed by substantial, sometimes enormous, audiences. Chapter 9 uses the rubric of “contemplation (priority III-B)” to search after the less obvious prospect of built forms that serve not simply as the backdrop for ceremonials, but as props or foci for meditation or devotion. Chapter 10, under the shorthand label “propitiation (priority III-C)” and featuring the notion of “obligatory reciprocity,” a line of inquiry in some respects distinct from the other ten priorities, explores ways in which both works of architecture and processes of construction are designed to

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<sup>235</sup> Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the present work, all of which pertain to what I term “the content of ritual-architectural events,” are correlated with, respectively, Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chaps. 17, 18, 19 and 20.

<sup>236</sup> Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 of the present work, all of which come under the rubric of what I term “the presentation of ritual-architectural events,” are correlated with, respectively, Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. II, chaps. 21, 22, 23 and 24.

variously please, appease and/or manipulate gods and other supernatural entities. And chapter 11 relies on a specific meaning of “sanctuary (priority III-D)” in order to scrutinize the diverse ways that numerous of Monte Albán’s ritual-architectural configurations provide exclusivistic “sacred spaces” to which access is limited in thoughtful and strategic ways. Unapologetically mismatched, these last four options belong together in the framework, not because they are parallel terms, but because, in hermeneutical practice, as I work to demonstrate, they have proven to play off of one another in very productive and intriguing ways.

In other words, then, the entire project relies on the hermeneutical principle of interpretation via rigorous questioning—indeed systematic and sustained interrogation—and careful consideration of the site-specific replies that emerge from all that is known about the conception and history of Monte Albán. In that sense, the staid remains of ancient buildings are imagined as boundlessly compelling “conversation partners,” which we engage in back-and-forth interpretive dialogues.<sup>237</sup> Moreover, though I rely on the point-by-point pattern of interrogation drawn from *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, which I consider the most salient questions to ask of any broadly religious architecture, I also use a large portion of each chapter to introduce and discuss some of the most high-profile topics and controversies in the ongoing study of Monte Albán. That is to say, while much of my approach entails raising questions that it has never occurred to Oaxacanists to ask, this latter component addresses the “hot-button issues” that seasoned students of Monte Albán have debated for decades.

Chapter 1 on the homology priority (I-A), for instance, explores the endlessly debated rationale for the seemingly improbable positioning of Monte Albán atop a previously uninhabited *altépetl* or water-mountain, which is arguably the central fact that informs all the rest. Chapter 2 on the convention priority (I-B), reflects on an abiding tension between assessments of the Zapotec capital as a premier site of innovation and “firsts”—arguably Mesoamerica’s very first city—versus intimations of Oaxaca’s decided unoriginality as the

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<sup>237</sup> On the fundamental Gadamarian notion that works of architecture are, for both their indigenous users and for scholarly interpreters, “conversation partners” (or “players” in a back-and-forth game), see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, chap. 3, “Conversation and Play: The Eventfulness of Architecture.”

quintessential place of crossing, borrowing, admixing and synthesizing, which links Central Mexico and the Maya zone, but that contributes little that is really novel or new. And chapter 3 on the astronomy priority (I-C) explores highly specific controversies about the astronomical alignments of various Monte Albán structures, but also the more general incentives for orchestrating celestial-architectural effects.

By the same token, chapter 4 on the divinity priority (II-A), rehearses, but also contests, the uniquely notorious presumption that the religion of Monte Albán is foremost about the worship of a pantheon of gods by stressing the multiple and not-fully-consistent conceptions of divinity that coexisted in the city; in this chapter, I revisit the interminable, if ill-framed, debate that ancient Zapotecs were animatists and not polytheists. Chapter 5 on the sacred history priority (II-B), which engages the literature on Zapotec writing and iconography, addresses head-on the mélange of older opinions as well as Javier Urcid's stunning reinterpretations concerning the infamous Danzante carvings and other public visual, maybe narrative, displays. Chapter 6 on the so-termed politics priority (II-C) takes on the rife revisionist claims that Monte Albán was driven fully by politics, and not all by religion, by locating explicitly political factors as not less or more than one of the crucial priorities that accounts for the layout of the capital; here I will reassess claims that Monte Albán, better than any other Mesoamerican site, fits the description of a "theocracy." Chapter 7 on the ritual-architectural commemoration the dead, priority II-D, tackles the enduring claim that ancient Oaxacans had a unique preoccupation with funerary rites and postmortem interactions with the (un)dead ancestors. And chapter 10 on the propitiation priority (III-C), for instance—which explores the logic of obligatory reciprocity, or perhaps "a sacred covenant," between people and supernaturals—also provide as an occasion to assess critically the much-debated role of human sacrifice at Monte Albán.

That is to say, besides addressing the framework of cross-culturally-informed questions derived from *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, which some Oaxacanists are certain to find eccentric, I also weigh in on the most conspicuous of controversies about Monte Albán. And by that dual emphasis, I endeavor, by the end of the work, not only to offer many original hypotheses concerning the religion(s) of Monte Albán, but also to bring to the table considered

opinions on all of the major disputes that have driven the past century of scholarship about the ancient capital.

**C. A REAFFIRMATION OF THE HERMENEUTICAL, INTERPRETATION-VIA-INTERROGATION  
METHOD: ALTERNATE QUESTIONS LEADING TO ALTERNATE CONCLUSIONS**

With those complementary agendas described, I end the Introduction with a candid and enthusiastic reaffirmation that this hermeneutical dialogical, interpretation-via-interrogation approach does, in fact, work! My years of labor on this project have reaffirmed again and again my contention that the fundamental shortcoming in the study of the religion and architecture of Monte Albán is not a shortage of "raw data," but rather a very limited catalogue of theoretical queries. Over those years, as I worked on each chapter—and thus repeatedly brought new sets of questions from the general History of Religions to bear on the specifics of Monte Albán—every visit to the site was an occasion of excitement and rediscovery wherein I noticed and appreciated all sorts of things that had earlier escaped me. It was, for example, not until I pursued the disciplined pattern of questioning concerning homology, convention and astronomy (priorities I-A, I-B and I-C) that I began to notice both additional purposeful alignments, but also innumerable asymmetric anomalies in the orientational layout of the ancient city. And only then did I fully appreciate that the lion's share of the energy and resources that the pre-Columbian builders had expended in transforming a natural mountain into a ceremonial city were devoted to what I will term "ritual-architectural allurements."

Likewise, only after months of working to find Monte Albán-specific replies to the general queries associated with the divinity priority (II-A) did I begin to formulate a strong alternative to the false contrariety that Zapotecs were either polytheists or animatists. Only after entertaining under the heading of sacred history (priority II-B) a series of general questions about the strategic presentation and contested reception of foundation myths the exploits of various mythico-historic individuals did I arrive at a strong opinion about the not-exactly-narrative quality of the infamous Danzante Wall and other public iconographic displays. Only after the undertaking a similarly generalized interrogation with respect to the politics priority (II-C) was I able to formulate an alternative to persistent suggestions that the Main Plaza was first, foremost

and almost exclusively, configured as “a military showcase” and “a frightening display of terror tactics.”<sup>238</sup> And not until I deployed cross-culturally informed interrogatories about ancestor worship and alternative ways of conceiving of ongoing relations between the living and the deceased (i.e., the commemoration of the dead, priority II-D) did I find ways of making sense of the disproportionately abundant and elaborate tombs of Monte Albán.

In all these respects, I arrived at fresh and unprecedented interpretations of the Zapotec capital not because I know more about the ancient city than previous scholars—which certainly is *not* the case—but because of a willingness to pose provocatively leading questions that Oaxacanist specialists have never ventured to ask. To be sure, with the step-by-step plodding through more than 30 pages of generalized questions about the workings of sacred architecture, this hermeneutical method reconfirmed, time and again, the obvious but essential insight that questions not asked are very seldom answered.<sup>239</sup> And, therefore, at the end of that interrogational reassessment, never have I been more convinced that that this version of an interrogatory hermeneutical method, in fact, works.

The outcome of all that cross-examining of the architectural remains of Monte Albán is, I am the first to concede, a text that is long and complicated in ways that will prevent all but the hardiest readers from proceeding straight through from beginning to end. Perhaps more a manual or an inventory than a narrative (and more a study guide than a book), this collection of essays—which does constitute a single overarching argument—is constructed less like a well-honed film with a concisely composed prelude, climax and dénouement than a serpentine Mexican telenovela that unfolds over weeks or months. Along the way, I have developed my own strong opinions concerning “that which mattered most” to the builders and residents of Monte Albán; but I am more than content to see my hypotheses as contributions to the ongoing “reception history” of the ruins rather as corrective replacements for earlier opinions. My

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<sup>238</sup> On the recurrent description of the Main Plaza as a “military showcase,” see, for example, Blanton, *Monte Albán*, 39, 47, 58 and 63.

<sup>239</sup> Here again I refer to the 30-plus pages of general questions about the eleven respective priorities enumerated in “Appendix B: An Expanded Heuristic Framework of Ritual-Architectural Priorities.”

passion for the history of ideas about Monte Albán—outmoded theories included—together with my reliance on cross-cultural comparison, eventuate in what many will see as frequent digressions from the main matter of “what really happened” at the ancient Oaxacan capital. But each chapter does have a stand-alone quality that ends with “Closing Thoughts” in which I foreground what I regard as most significant. And, even importantly, I have attended carefully to organizational matters, which should be evident in a very detailed Table of Contents. I hope, then, that the titles of innumerable sections and sub-sections that one finds in that opening outline of the entire work can guide less patient, more circumspect readers to the topics that comport with their special interests. Lastly, I redouble the standard acknowledgement that, while the insights are obviously borrowed from many, the errors are all mine. *The Religion of Monte Albán* is, even in its last iteration, a work in progress.