



# Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions

By Bruce Lincoln

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## Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions By Bruce Lincoln

Bruce Lincoln is one of the most prominent advocates within religious studies for an uncompromisingly critical approach to the phenomenon of religion—historians of religions, he believes, should resist the preferred narratives and self-understanding of religions themselves, especially when their stories are endowed with sacred origins and authority. In *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, Lincoln assembles a collection of essays that both illustrates and reveals the benefits of his methodology, making a case for a critical religious studies that starts with skepticism but is neither cynical nor crude.

The book begins with Lincoln’s “Theses on Method” and ends with “The (Un)discipline of Religious Studies,” in which he unsparingly considers the failings of uncritical and nonhistorical approaches to the study of religions. In between, Lincoln presents new examinations of problems in ancient religions and relates these cases to larger comparative themes. While bringing to light important features of the formation of pantheons and the constructions of demons, chaos, and the dead, Lincoln demonstrates that historians of religions should take religious things—inspired scriptures, sacred centers, salvific rites, communities graced by divine favor—as the theories of interested humans that shape perception, community, and experiences. As he shows, it is for their terrestrial influence, and not their sacred origins, that religious phenomena merit consideration by the historian.

Tackling many questions central to religious study, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* will be a touchstone for the history of religions in the twenty-first century.



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#### Review

“Bruce Lincoln is a *rara avis*. His combination of precise technical analysis of ancient religious texts, allied to a grand, comparative vision of religion in society, past and present, informs a reflection, at once anxious and radical, anchored in the predicament of our own times. This combination produces a humanistic approach, devoid of grandiloquence, and this strikingly original book will be of great importance to all students of ancient religions and to historians of religion in general.”

(Guy Stroumsa, University of Oxford)

“Bruce Lincoln has a gift for selecting persuasive examples, engaging them with creativity, and linking them to broader themes and scholarly debates. His cogent and provocative arguments in this book range across the scope of religious history, from the ancient world to twentieth-century Latin America, and engage with a number of significant topics, including religious violence, nationalism, definitions of religion, and religious innovation. Eminently teachable, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* is a book that invites critical analysis and reflection and will be a valuable addition to discussions about theory and method in the study of the history of religions.”

(Randall Styers, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

“A consistently critical and thoughtful assessment of the history of religions.”  
(*Catholic Sentinel*)

“Resulting from his masterly language skills, the main area of interest in *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* is unsurprisingly what Lincoln since many years avoids to label Indo-European religion. These chapters on ancient religions profoundly deepen our understanding of the mythologies and symbolic worlds of Persia, Vedic India, the Old Norse and the ancient world in general.”

(*Method and Theory in the Study of Religions*)

“Patrols with insightful expertise the ancient/medieval worlds of Old Norse gods and heroes, Zoroastrian cosmology and demonology, Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and indeed Vedic culture . . . not to mention politicised socioreligious conflicts in 20th-century Guatemala. . . . Lincoln writes in crisp, balanced and nuanced prose, which is a joy to read. . . . [This] is a book whose careful perusal teaches us how to read texts and, indeed, what proper research is all about.”

(*Religion*)

“Bruce Lincoln, like his teachers, has become one of the ‘giants’ in the discipline of religious studies, and the essays collected in *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* are a fine example of the methodological approach known in the field as the ‘history of religions,’ practiced by perhaps its most spirited and able exponent. This would be an excellent addition to any upper-level undergraduate or graduate syllabus considering current approaches to the academic study of religion.”

(*Reviews in Religion and Theology*)

“This new collection of essays from Lincoln is a model for history of religions theorizing in the early twenty-first century. . . . These twelve diverse essays are united by Lincoln’s penetrating and radical analysis.”

*(Religious Studies Review)*

#### About the Author

**Bruce Lincoln** is the Caroline E. Haskell Professor of the History of Religions, Middle Eastern Studies, and Medieval Studies at the University of Chicago, where he is also an associate in the Departments of Anthropology and Classics. He is the author of nine books, most recently of *Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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