

RELIGION AND LANGUAGE: HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COMPARATIVE STUDIES



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Abstract. Religion and language are intertwined on a profound level. A comparative approach has shown itself to be essential in the early days of philology/linguistics.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to revisit key historical formational milestones of religious studies as a field and reexamine its foundational and essential concepts in the context of *comparative studies of language and religion*; and 2) by reanalyzing classical literature, which contains those key concepts, to address some of the problems and reactualize academic discourse, the relevance and necessity of an multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to the comparative study of ancient sources, languages, and everything related to both. The goal of this article is only to highlight the main issues. An extensive problem mapping needs a separate and dedicated paper (or sets of papers), dissertation, or monograph.

Keywords: *comparative studies, religious studies, religion and language, language family, comparative philology, multidisciplinary / interdisciplinary approach.*

Introduction

This particular paper is concentrated on classical sources, historical and analytical approach.

Literature review. Available sources on the topic are quite diverse in terms of their subjects of research and goals; nevertheless, all of the present literature can be divided into two groups by the field criteria:

1) Sources that dealing with general issues of religious studies and its development history, as well as its comparative methodology (contributions of Oliver Freiberger, André Droogers, Donald Wiebe, Arvind Sharma, Walter H. Capps, William E. Deal, Timothy K. Beal, and others);

2) Sources that dealing with issues of language studies, textual studies, and comparative methodology in the linguistic context (both classic: Franz Bopp, Archibald Sayce, Berthold Delbrück, Friedrich von Spiegel and contemporary: Raimo Anttila, Theodora Bynon, Jean Kellens). All of them have made a significant contribution to the partial study of the current topic, depending on their field and goals. Despite the abundance of literature, there is a lack of sources that coherently combine endeavors of the both mentioned fields.

The phenomenon of religion is one of the most complicated in the human world, and it affects almost all facets of the civilization, including language, philosophy, ethics/morality, law, etc. It's so both conceptually broad and deep that scientists are trying to grasp the full scope of its phenomena. This postulates numerous problems for the religious studies, among which, I would argue, two are the most important: 1) definition problem; 2) unity-fragmentation problem. If these problems sought to be ever solved, it's only by combining different fields, and building coherent picture of the world.

Problem of the definition. So far, there is no single and universal, scientifically acceptable definition of religion that would cover all aspects of this phenomenon and encompass all of its diversity and complexity. This definition problem is known right from the beginning of religious studies, nay, even before (Capps, 1995, pp.2-8).

On the one hand, as stated above, core of this problem partially lies in the deep and vast nature of religion itself, which has an enormous amount of diverse traditions and forms. This leads to the

challenge of combining all the features and qualities, all the forms both modern and ancient, all its functions in the societies under one inclusive definition that is neither broad nor narrow.

On the other hand, the problem partly stems from various kinds of prejudices and preconceptions about religion. And they arise not only from the extreme positions that Müller wrote about (Müller, 1873, p.4.), but also from biases within the academia itself. This can be seen immediately at the foundations of this field, when different and in many ways polar and opposing views on the essence of the religion have been formed. Each one of these approaches tried to reduce religion to one historical root (in the context of so called "*genetic*" (Ibid., p. 41,82.), relationship between religions and its development), to find its true essence or its "*minimum*" (Tylor 1871, pp.383-385.), and to explain its nature through one core characteristic: whether its sociological (E. Durkheim, L. Lévy-Bruhl), initial (E. Tylor, R. Marett, H. Spencer) or later anthropological approaches – psychological functionalism (B. Malinowski) and structuralism (C. Lévi-Strauss), or any other theories, which all was limited by a single conceptual prism.

Unity-fragmentation problem. This matter is more of a conceptual/philosophical (metaphysical), and psychological nature, which unfolds into at least two paradoxical issues

1) Religion, as we call it, is not homogenous. None of the religious movements have ever been. Each religious tradition is a multilayered phenomenon, with, it appears, innate tendencies to branch off into different sects, denominations, and numerous factions within itself. Though, these branches connected one to another. There is no completely isolated culture, just as there is no absolutely isolated religion around the world. That's why we can trace the migration of different ideas and views from one part of the world to another, from one culture to another. And that's why the actual visual representation of the interconnected ideas between religions looks more like a web than anything else. However, a tree-like diagram is a classic visual rendition of the interconnectedness between religions and their lineages. It's an established schematic tool for representing the evolution of different cultural and natural phenomena, including both religion and language.

2) Our innate perception of reality forces us to fracture the objects and subjects that we study or perceive into smaller, more comprehensible fragments, both consciously and subconsciously. It appears that the underlying reality, whatever it is, is unified. But our venture in its understanding demands its fragmentation into countless subjects (each with their own fields of study), which afterwards we are attempting to assemble into a single, unified, and coherent worldview. That's why we have to be aware of this paradox and trait of perception, which also includes perception time and its vector.

Origo et hereditas: Origins and legacy of comparative studies. The emergence of *religious studies* in its various names (Freiberger, 2019, p.8.) had many factors at its root: whether it was biased theology, or various attempts by philosophers of different directions and traditions to critically evaluate the phenomenon of religion, or the fruits of a critical, literary approach to sacred texts (in particular, the fruits of biblical studies), or a comparative approach to understanding language (the so-called "*comparative philology*" or "*comparative linguistics*"), all these factors, to varying degrees, played a role in the formation of this field. But the final momentum came from comparative method in linguistics. This is not so unexpected or strange, considering the fact, that language is one of many, but arguably one of the main forms to embody religious ideas (Sayce, 1890, p.299). Comparison of the Vedas and the Avesta revealed the kinship of Sanskrit with Middle and Old Persian and further added to knowledge about the Indo-European language family, while archaeological finds of Babylonian cuneiform sources and analysis of their content revealed the kinship of the Akkadian with the Ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, which at that time had been studied actively in the context of textual analysis of the biblical literature.

The study of ancient languages, translation and analysis of ancient textual sources are many of the common tasks of philology and religious studies. And the success of the comparative approach to language studies both inspired and stimulated the development of the comparative approach to religion. It was famously propagated by *Friedrich Max Müller*, one of the pioneers in the comparative study of religion, in his lectures (Müller, 1873, pp.2, 12-13.). He argued that the study of religion required a comparative approach, in which scholars would compare and contrast the beliefs, practices, and traditions of different religious traditions from around the world in order to identify commonalities and differences, and map those relationships in the manner necessary to form a coherent picture. He firmly believed that by examining the diversity of religious traditions across cultures and times, scholars could gain a deeper understanding of the universal human religious

experiences that underlie beliefs and religious practices. His advocacy for comparative religion emerged within the context of a broader 19th-century movement towards the scientific study of different phenomena, including religion. This movement sought to apply philosophy and analytical methods of the sciences to the study of religion and was shaped by the emphasis on rationalism, empiricism, critical and analytical approaches. As for Müller, as a linguist, he saw comparative philology as a model for religious studies, which he famously called "*science of religion*". Müller's work helped lay the groundwork for the development of the field of comparative religion, which has since evolved to encompass a diverse array of perspectives and methodologies.

As Müller states, a few hundred years before establishing comparative philology, the idea of Hebrew being the original language, from which other languages have descended, was almost universally accepted (Ibid., p.10) among "researchers" and "educated people" of that time. And only the actual process of language comparison and critical analysis of textual sources provided an objective picture of language development and established a "*language family*" category. Müller, based on available at the time knowledge, has tried to group known languages into families and connect them with religions. As a result, in his classification, he distinguished three branches (Ibid., p.54): *Aryan*, *Semitic*, and "*Turanian*" (Müller, 1854, p.220). He also pointed out the migration of religious ideas from one language family to another¹ and described genetic relationships between the phenomena of language and religion (Müller 1873, p.90).

The comparative approach has yielded many successful results in both linguistics and religious studies. But it will suffice to point out just one of the two examples: 1) discovering links among Indo-European languages, in particular Sanskrit and Persian; 2) identifying links among the Afro-Asiatic language family, in particular the affinities between Akkadian and Hebrew.

Persian and Sanskrit: sources and words of sacred and divine meanings.

1) *Persian vs. Sanskrit: historical background.*

Similarities between different languages obviously have been noticed a long time ago, but clear textual evidence we can trace starting at least from the 16th century. Filippo Sassetti² (16th cent.), Marcus Zuerius van Boxhorn (17th cent.), Gaston Coeurdoux (18th cent.), William Jones (18th cent.), and many others, observed and noted this. However, all these examples are more like hints, simple observations, and educated speculations than fully dedicated academic studies, as we know them now. And only after the 18th century scholars begun to take seriously these astonishing similarities between European and Asian languages, both ancient (such as Latin and Ancient Greek) and contemporary (such as English, German, French, Italian, other Romance languages, as well as Slavic languages, including Old Church Slavonic). Eventually, this discovery caused a thorough examination of the possible connections and eventually led to comparative language studies and the development of the field, which sought to identify and reconstruct the ancestral languages. As part of this effort, scholars began to compare the grammar patterns, shared vocabulary, and phonetic systems of different Indo-European languages, including Persian and Sanskrit. These similarities suggested that Persian and Sanskrit were both descended from a common ancestral language, which scholars then called "Proto-Indo-Iranian" or "Proto-Indo-Aryan", which was one of the bigger branches of "Proto-Indo-European" languages along with Italic, Germanic, Balto-Slavic, and other branches.

2) *Persian vs. Sanskrit: analysis of sources.*

Some of the first steps in these comparative endeavors can be considered The German scholar Friedrich von Spiegel, in his work "*Die arische Periode und ihre Zustände*" ("*The Aryan Period and its Conditions*"), drew attention to the similarities between many words that had related semantics: water, wind, air, fire, heaven, etc (Spiegel 1887, pp.142-158). Many of the words had religious-related meanings (Ibid., pp.178, 194, 243, 289, 303). Then, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, James Darmesteter, Georges Dumézil, and Albrecht Weber made their contributions to the comparative studies, including that of the Avesta and Vedas. Darmesteter, a French scholar of Iranian studies, published a book called "*Le Zend-Avesta*" ("*The Zend-Avesta*"), which provided a

¹ He wrote: "*Buddhism, being at its birth an Aryan religion, ended by becoming the principal religion of the Turanian world. The same transference took place in the second stem. Christianity, being the offspring of Mosaism, was rejected by the Jews as Buddhism was by the Brahmans. It failed to fulfill its purpose as a mere reform of the ancient Jewish faith, and not till it had been transferred from Semitic to Aryan ground...*" (Müller 1873, p.55).

² He wrote "*...ed ha lingua d'oggi molte cose communi con quella, nella quale sono molti de' nostri nomi e particolarmente de' numeri il 6 7 8 e 9, Dio, serpe, ed altri assai.*" (Sassetti 1844, p.221).

critical translation and analysis of the Avesta corpus. He argued that the similarities between the Avesta and the Vedas reflected a common Indo-Iranian cultural and linguistic heritage. Dumézil focused on the similarities between the myths and rituals of the two traditions, while Weber, predominantly concentrated on Vedic culture and its corpus of texts, but he also hinted at the linguistic and historical connections between Old Persian and Sanskrit languages.

In the 20th century, scholars continued to refine and expand upon the comparative study of the Avesta and Vedas. The American scholar Mary Boyce made significant contributions to the study of Zoroastrianism and its connections to the broader Indo-European world. The French scholar Jean Kellens contributed to the study of Avestan culture, religion, grammar, and the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-Iranian.

The comparisons went through many stages, and they did not go in the same vein; each scholar focused on their own specific goals, whether it was analyzing and translating sources or studying society, mythology, and rituals. But the vector and conclusions they reached were similar.

3) *Persian vs. Sanskrit: words of sacred and divine meanings.*

Some of the most suitable sources for comparing those ancient languages were sacred/epic literature and monumental texts and inscriptions. On the one side, it was the Avesta and Behistun Inscription, and on the other, the Vedas and related literature.

Numerous similarities have been noted when comparing the religious terminology of the Avesta and the Vedas. This is especially true of such central concepts as "god", "deity" and its attributes, ethical concepts, some names of gods, the elements and forces of nature (as mentioned above), et cetera (Ibid., p.225). In this sense, the word "god" is quite important for comparison, helping to reconstruct common semantic and etymological origins. The word has several variants in Sanskrit and Avestan language, two are most known: 1) *baga/bhaga*, and 2) *deva/daeva*.

1) The ancient Persian language had a word "*bagâ*" (*bagâha* in plural)³ to refer to a deity. Sanskrit had the cognate term "*bhaga*" (Pokorny 1959, p.107; 154). So do the Slavic languages – "*bog*"/"*bor*" (Croatian: *bog*, Czech: *bůh*, Slovak: *boh*, Polish: *bóg*, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Bulgarian: *бог*, and etc.), which we can reconstruct to Proto-Slavic **bogъ* (*bogŭ*), and all the examples above – ultimately reconstruct to Proto-Indo-European root **b^heh₂g-*.

2) The second example is unique, having numerous forms in Indo-European languages (Ibid., pp.183-185). Most of the languages have words derived from its ancient root, maintaining its ancient semantics, referring to concepts like "light/bright", "day", "heaven", "divine" (which itself in English of this root), or "god" (i.e., a heavenly, light being). This word was reconstructed to its hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root **dyeu-*. As well, based on its intrinsic religion-related semantics it was proposed "Sky Father" (**Dyēus ph₂tér*) hypothesis.

Conclusions

A comparative approach has shown itself to be essential in the early days of philology/linguistics. Discovering and examining connections between roots and their respective languages had led to the establishment of comparative language studies, and their success had led to the development of the field of religious studies. There are still many unresolved issues: the definition problem, the fragmentation problem, the one-sided approach to the nature of religion and language (and other phenomena), and many more. If these problems are ever sought to be solved, it's only by bringing different fields together in multidisciplinary or, even better, interdisciplinary settings – and building the most complete and coherent picture of the world as possible.

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³ 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (sing. *bagâ*, pl. *bagâha*) in syllabic form, as we find it in Behistun Inscription (Column IV, lines 61,63) or as a logogram: 𐬀𐬎𐬎

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