



The study of Religions in Greece: a case of transition¹

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It is a well known fact that the study of religions as an independent discipline is established in the 19th century under the term “Religionswissenschaft” or the “science of religions”. Naturally, the spirit and ideas of the Renaissance had strongly contributed to this development, as the discoveries and exploration of previously unknown continents during the 15th century and thereafter revealed new worlds and new horizons for the knowledge of the essence of the religions and the religious world of humanity. The adventures of the first explorers, which were compiled into travel diaries, had a profound effect on European intellectual circles. To these stories, the epistles and journals of missionaries to America, China and India would later be added. Thus, during the period of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment the idea of common source and common denominator for all religions was formed. This will later give rise to the theory of Deismus, according to which there is a religion of reason, the natural religion or “religio naturalis”, whose essence is found when it is purified and confirmed by the reason. The study of religions does of course have ancient roots and goes back to the great civilizations of old. Especially in ancient Greece, where in the 6th century BC elegiac poets and philosophers attempt to find the essence of religion and differentiate it from the earlier anthropomorphism of Homer, Hesiod and others. Distinctive asset remains the well-

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known in the scientific research *Interpretatio Graeca*, applied by Herodotus, “the father of History”, which identified the Egyptian and some other Gods of the East to the Greek ones. Interpreting the religious mythology the ancient greek thought classified the myths in three categories: allegoric, physiocratic and orthological. This interpretation constitutes a kind of study of religions but not an independent discipline.

All of this will lead to the establishment of religion as an independent discipline at around 1870. The study of religions aimed to examine religions as a whole and discern the similarities and differences which existed between various forms of religion. Its purpose was to provide an objective exhibition of the essence and the historical development and practical issues of all religions, not only of the religions of its day, but also of dead religions. It even aspired to delve into prehistoric history and investigate the religious behavior of prehistoric man.

Three methods were established for the approach and the study of the religious phenomenon. The History of Religions, the Comparative study of religions and the Phenomenology of Religions. The History of Religions is the safer method to approach the religious experience of mankind. This method examines each religion separately, according to its sources and its monuments and follows its historical origin and development.

The term Comparative study of religions has been used from the middle of the 19th century (especially from 1890) to the first half of the 20th century and became the prefer tool to achieve the phenomenon of religion. It is of course known that this comparative method was first established by Friedrich Max Müller, with his work *Essay on Comparative mythology* (1856). In this work he compares the Indo-European Myths according to the Comparative Linguistics of his time. The comparative study of religions is an hermeneutical method, which ranks religions on a scale of superior and inferior ones. This method followed the Enlightenment and served the purposes of colonization, which depended upon the philosophies which ranked civilizations as superior and inferior. The position of Auguste Comte (1778-1857) is typical: he would say that only one civilization deserves to be called civilization, the European one. There are of course some other civilizations, as the Indian and Chinese ones, but they are far inferior.

The comparative method started being questioned in the middle of the 20th century, whereas it is not used nowadays in its initial dimension. Instead of this, the term History of Religions comes into vogue. This method examines each religion and attempts to investigate the genesis, evolution, teaching and worship of every religion and its relationship with society in order to investigate each religion's influence on society and vice versa.

Another method that arose and has a direct connection with the comparative method of religions but attempted to avoid its weaknesses, is the phenomenology of religion. This is a method that was developed according to the phenomenology of Husserl's philosophy, which had greatly impressed the scholars of Europe during the first half of the 20th century. Husserl believed that with the phenomenological method the philosopher began from the phenomena of philosophical thought reaching likewise to the essence of the philosophical thought or idea. In parallel with the phenomenology of philosophy some historians of religions reached the phenomenology of religion. In other words they accepted that a researcher, starting from the religious phenomena that directly affect our conscience can finally reach the essence of the religion. Guided by a scheme of five concentric circles, from the tangible points of religions toward its meanings and ideas, the researcher can arrive at the inconceivable *Deus absconditus*. The main users of this theory (like the Hollander Gerardus van der Leew [+1950]), employed a completely a-historic method in their research and examined religions as a sum total without taking into account their genesis and evolution, comparing like and unlike religious groups (temples, holy scriptures, symbols, ideas and so on). It was soon seen that this method disconnects religions from its everyday life, making it unlikely that one will reach the core of the religious phenomenon, the *deus absconditus*. For this reason, more recent phenomenologists, led by Mircea Eliade (+1986), attempted to connect phenomenology with history and examine religions from a historic as well as typological aspect. The main work of Mircea Eliade moves along these two lines of research: typology and history of religions. However, today a certain distrust of this method is becoming evident, and attempts are made to examine religions in conjunction with the sociological and anthropological method.

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All of this will lead to the establishment of the study of religions as an independent discipline. The route that the study of religion followed in the European and North American arenas is well known to the Scholars of study of religions. The first tenured position of the study of religions was created in 1873 in Geneva, whilst in England, historians of religions at Oxford and London were already at work from 1871. Those people were well known figures such as Edward Taylor, Andrew Lang and John G. Frazer. After 1876 four university chairs were created in Holland and in 1879, the first position in the Collège de France in Paris. In 1885 the Sorbonne founded a special department for the study of religions. These changes were swiftly followed by Brussels in 1884, Berlin in 1910, as well as Bonn, and other European cities, such as Vienna where Wilhelm Schmidt, who promote, like Andrew Lang in England, the theory of early monotheism, as well as in Louvain, where Etienne Lamotte promotes research into Hinduism and Buddhism.

Given that this conference is taking place in Greece, it is pertinent to follow this general review with a description of the study of religions in the Greek academic arena. In Greece, the study of religions in the Athens Faculty of Theology was founded in 1931 and the one of Thessaloniki in 1942. It is important to point out that the History of Religions in Greece is cultivated exclusively in the Faculties of Theology, except some attempts made recently (after 1990) in some other faculties that approach religions, especially Islam, from an anthropological, social and geopolitical point of view (eg. political sciences e.t.c).

It would be an omission if before the presentation of the Study of Religions in Greek Universities, we did not refer to the personality and work of Demetrius Galanos, a great Greek Hinduist. In the middle of the 19th century, when the knowledge of India began to spread in Europe and America, Athens saw the publication (1845-1853) of a series of superb translations of Indian poetry and written texts which had been carried out by Demetrius Galanos. The Athenian Demetrius Galanos departed to India in 1786, invited by a Greek merchant of Calcutta, Konstantine Pantazis, in order to teach Greek to his relatives. Alongside his six-year teaching, Galanos devoted himself to the study of English, Sanskrit, Persian and other Indian dialects. After successful investments in the larger trading houses of

Calcutta, which ensured he could cover all his living expenses in order to allow him to devote himself to his studies, he departed for the holy Hindu city of Kāśī (Benares) where he spent the remaining forty years of his life, living amongst the intellectual Brahmins of his time and absorbing the Indian thought and philosophy. He dies at Kāśī on the 3rd of May, 1833 at the age of 72. He left all his Sanskrit texts and handwritten translations to the Academy of Athens. He also left behind a substantial sum of money, which was used for the creation of the University of Athens. His precious manuscripts were published as we have already said, between 1845 and 1853 by G.K. Typaldos, trustee of the National Library of Athens, and G. Apostolidis, curator of the above mentioned library. Demetrius Galanos is undoubtedly one of the first pioneers of Hinduist study in Europe, as European Hinduist scholars of the 20th century had written, who praised his works.

However, the study of religions will only begin in the Athens Faculty of Theology in 1931 and Hinduist studies will be promoted in their essence in 1970. The initiator was Nikolaos Louvaris, a professor of philosophy who saw the study of religions as a means for one to admire the philosophical thought and the contemplative search for the holy in the religions of the world. A real scholar of the study of religions was encountered in the figure of Leonidas Filippidis, who took over the seat of religious studies in 1936 and drew his attention to certain aspects of Indian and Buddhist thought, and authored the studies *The theory of Vedanta on sorrow and redemption* (Athens, 1934) and *The Highest Moral Ideal according to Buddha* (Athens, 1936). Since he himself did not have knowledge of Sanskrit, he did not continue in this direction of study. He did however concern himself with contemporary issues in Europe, such as the *Religion of Prehistoric Man and Primitive and Primordial Religion*. He also did a significant study with the title of *History of the New Testament Era* (Athens, 1958). In this he follows a personal but disputed method of approaching the religions of the world – both the existing and dead ones – attempting to prove that all ancient religions until the birth of Christ converged with a general plan of God to prepare humanity for the coming of Christ.

In more recent decades, Dimitrios Stathopoulos, professor of History of Religions in the Faculty of Theology at Athens University, began to look into ancient Greek mythology. He translated the known work of Károli Kerényi *History of Ancient*

Greek Mythology, and began to delve into Japanese Buddhism. He is the first to use scientific principles to study this form of Buddhism, carving a road for others to follow. His work includes *The School of Pure Country (Jōdo Shū) and its founder Hōnen Shonin or Genku (1133-1212)*, (Athens, 1990), *Zenism, its ancient Evolution and meaning* (Athens, 1997), *Ten Degrees of Self-Knowledge*, (Athens, 1979).

In essence however, the door towards the study of Japanese Buddhism and Shintō was first established by Stelios Papalexandropoulos, today a professor of the study of religions in the Athens Faculty of Theology. Papalexandropoulos lived and studied for several years in Japan, mainly in Kyoto but also in Tokyo, and approaches the Japanese sources with great ease. Basing himself mainly upon the writings of great teachers of Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism he follows the historical-evolutionary method and observes the origin and development of the religious and social currents of Japanese religious life. He authored the following studies: *The Japanese Philosopher Nisinta Kitaro: conditions for the definition of his Buddhist identity*, (Phd, Athens 1992), *Deities and world in the world genesis of Kontziki*, (Athens, 1995), "Christianity and the Far East", *Synaxi* 78 (2001) 44-77. "Sinto and ancient Greek religion—similarities and differences", *Love and Confession* (Athens, 2001) 201-214. *The true reality in the work of Ndogen. Study of Japanese Buddhism*, (Athens, 2002). He also works upon translating scientific and literary Japanese texts into the Greek language.

In the area of intellectuals two successful diplomats concerned themselves with Hindu topics. Vassilis Vitsaxis authored two studies, the first titled *Hindu Epics, Myths and Symbols* (New Delhi, London, New York, 1977) and the second *Plato and the Upanisands* (New Delhi, London, 1977). Dimitris Velissaropoulos wrote *The History of Indian Philosophy* (Athens, Dodoni Publications, 1975).

In the Thessalonikis Faculty of Theology worked two men. Ioannis Trakas, who between 1942 and 1960 contributed to the establishment of the lesson of the study of religions, but left no written works. Also, Euaggelos Sdrakas, who between 1964 and 1974 focused on the polemics of the Byzantine theologians against Islam, the importance of dance in certain forms of religion and left behind a manual of religions, written according to the method that dominated in the study of religions circles of Europe before 1960.

A broad spectrum of the study of religions based on the modern tendencies and the demands of research will appear in the 1970 and thereafter in the two Faculties of Theology in Athens and Thessaloniki, from the emeritus now professors Anastasios Giannoulatos, actually Archbishop in Albania, and Grigorios Ziakas.

Giannoulatos is the first to promote research into African religions, having worked for several years as a missionary in central Africa. In his university lectures he has covered forms of Hinduism and Buddhism. He is also the first to take significant steps towards the systematic and scientific research of the religion of Islam with his work *Islam: an overview of the study of religions*. He has and continues to contribute much to the inter-religious dialogue.

The second emeritus now professor of the Thessaloniki Faculty of Theology, Gr. Ziakas, basing himself upon the sources, and working according to the historic, philological and morphological method, covered a wide spectrum of studies about the history of Religions. A speaker of Arabic, he initially concerned himself with almost all aspects of the Islamic religion and Islamic civilization, such as Islamic mysticism, Muslim theology and eschatology, the destination of man according to Islam, as well as the history of transmission of Greek and Hellenistic thought and Greek letters in the Arab-Islamic tradition. He also studied the historic path and evolution of the study of religions and turned his attention towards the religion of prehistoric societies and ancient people. He subsequently focused upon the religions and civilizations of Asia (Hinduism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Tibet and Japan) and wrote many articles upon inter-religious dialogue.

With these two researchers the circle of the “general historians of the study of religions” closes, and the circle of specialization begins. Apart from the aforementioned scholar of Japan at the Athens Faculty of Theology, Stelios Papalexandropoulos, the study of religions at the Thessaloniki Faculty of Theology, is promoted by the professor Panayiotis Pahiis, who concerns himself especially with religions and mysteries cults of the Greco-Roman world and their relationship with the religiousness of the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean. His studies cover many facets of the religious life and mystery cult and worship of the Greek and Roman world, such as the *Mysteries of Eleusis*, the *Role of water and the concept of catharsis at the mysteries*, the *Mysteries of Mithras in Thessaloniki and the greater*

Aegean area, the Orgiastic elements in the cult of Cybel and Attis. The microcosm-macrocosm relations of Mithraism, the Religious policy of the roman state against Manichaeism, Eastern worship of the Greco-Roman period in Rome, Demeter Karpoforos (Fruitbaerer), a study that covers the religion and farming economy of the ancient Greek civilization as well as basic studies of Isis and the Hellenistic and Egyptian mysteries. In the study of religions he follows the historic-sociological analysis and criticism of the sources of the Greco-Roman world, with special emphasis on the socio-historic and economic bases of religious life (*religion es system*).

The speaker, who studied Islamology and the Arabic language, works upon Islam and examines the relationship of Islam with the Byzantine and post-Byzantine world (*La recherche grecque contemporaine et l'Islam*, PhD, University of Strasbourg, 2002, ARNT, 2004), as well as the current themes of sociopolitical and geopolitical extensions of Islam (Sunnism and Shiism) in the Middle East.

In parallel to the study of religions there exists the sociology of religions, the conclusions of which the study of religions should take into account in order to judge the social phenomenon of each religion. Conversely, sociology on its part needs to consider the conclusions of the study of religions, since without knowledge of basic conceptions, of the teachings and evolution of a religion we are unable to comprehend the social manifestations of the religious society. The same is true for the anthropology that is practiced outside the sphere of theology. At the Thessaloniki Faculty of Theology, the Sociology of Religion is taking great steps under the guidance of professors Vassilios Gioultsis, Ioannis Petrou and Niki Papageorgiou, scientists with whom we, the scholars of the Study of Religions, feel mutual understanding and connection. The two latter professors examine the new currents of sociology, without undermining the essence of religious life or submitting it to the terms of the past or present.

It is worth mentioning the work in progress of the social anthropologist Gerasimus Makris at the Panteio University of Athens. His work examines forms of beliefs and practices of Islamic society, and in particular aspects of the African and Sudanese Islam. In Thessaloniki, social anthropology is promoted by the professor Fotini Tsimpiridou through studies that refer to the position of Muslim women of the

East and the sociopolitical extensions. The history and literature of the Arabic world of the older and newer eras are promulgated in the Thessaloniki Faculty of Philosophy by the professor Hassan Badawi and in the Athens Faculty of Philosophy by Helene Kondylis. Meanwhile, at the Ioannina Faculty of Philosophy professor H. Giannakis works upon a similar issue, and especially the relationship of the older Greek and Arabic philosophy.

In general the methods that are employed in the Greek study of religions are adapted to the historic nature of the subject. The purpose of the historian of religions is to accurately evaluate the historic people and items of a religion and present them as objectively as possible. Today however, the study of religions does not cease at the simple historic presentation of religious events, but also applies to the social, political and economic dimensions of the religious phenomenon. The question of the value or truth of one religion cannot be set by the study of religions, since it is not the philosophy of religion that approach religion with a certain valuation. The philosophical hermeneutic approach, in its attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the phenomenon which it studies, can give subjective or even dogmatic interpretations and arrange religions in superior and inferior ones, as was done during the period of colonization.

The scholar of the study of religions also attempts to avoid syncretism. This concern a misunderstanding upon certain theologians zealots based themselves against the study of religions. The comparative study of religions does not mean syncretism. The purpose of the scholar of the study of religions is not to isolate sections of certain religions' teachings and provide us with a new religious creation, but to objectively examine the religious forms of each religion and supply us with the convergence and divergence between each religion. From this point of view the comparative study of religions, against the hesitation to its use, has its merits. The avoidance of the comparative study occurs either because such a study is too demanding or because it is too often tainted with explicit or implicit theological stances. Naturally, the comparative study of religions has an ambiguous relationship with theology, but the careful and consistent scholar of the study of religions has the capacity to avoid the pitfalls. This is where the beauty of the study of religions lies: it does not permit the researcher to encapsulate himself in dogmatic or explicit

positions. However, we can not ignore the intercultural positions which are created between religions and civilizations, such as those in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, where Jews, Christians and Muslims were met and certain forms of common civilization, communication and understanding arose.

Today, the students of the Thessaloniki Faculty of Theology are taught the following lessons of the study of religions: methods of the study of religions and history of prehistoric societies and ancient people, Religion and the Mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world, religions and civilizations of Asia, Islam and inter-religious dialogue.