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Is Philology Relevant?

'The history of religions ... is, with regard to its method, a philological discipline, working with the interpretation of texts. In addition to that, it is also an ethnological and an archaeological discipline.' These words are a quotation from an elementary introduction to the study of the history of religions published in Swedish in 1963 by Erland Ehnmark, professor at the university of Lund (Ehnmark 1963: 20). They are no doubt typical of a certain generation of scholars, of a certain moment in the history of our discipline. Research in the history of religions very much meant in those days a study of texts, and of words. The scholar had to be fabulously good at languages (especially dead languages) and a virtuoso in the handling of vast masses of diverse and difficult text materials. This picture is certainly true for Scandinavia, and probably for most other countries too which have strong traditions in our discipline. For instance, Günter Lanczkowski, in his *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft* from as late as 1980—a book dedicated, by the way, to Geo Widengren—insists that, 'Es ist sinnlos, hinwegdisputieren zu wollen, daß *Religionswissenschaft zu einem guten Teil Philologie* ist' (Lanczkowski 1980: 39). And twenty-four years ago, at the previous IAHR conference on methodology here in Åbo, Kurt Rudolph took a similar position: 'For history of religions as a whole, the basic method is the "philological-historical"' (Rudolph 1979: 99).

For the young student who considered a career in the history of religions in this part of the world at the end of the sixties, the history of religions did in fact present itself as very much a philological discipline. As an essential part of our training we were expected to learn the languages necessary to deal with texts in their original languages—preferably *many* languages. Familiarity with Latin and Greek was only where you started—until you were conversant with Syriac you were still an amateur.

But there were other voices too, which began to be heard more and more loudly at the time. There was, for instance, the statement of Eliade, in one of his best articles, 'Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,' from 1959, that

One is a historian of religions not by virtue of mastering a certain number of philologies, but because one is able to integrate religious data into a general perspective. The historian of religion does not act as a philologist, but as a hermeneutist. (Eliade 1959: 91)

Eliade argued that the philological method is not conducive to the formation of general theory. Philology can only yield specialist research, and therefore misses the comparative perspective which is the *sine qua non* element of the discipline of the history of religions. Here, then, was one area where philology was judged deficient, and a field where the proponents of its methods faced opposition—we had a battle between the philologists and the comparativists, specifically the phenomenologists.

But there were other battlefields too. In 1973, Åke Hultkrantz published a book, in Swedish, on methods in the comparative study of religions. On page 1 of that book he attacks the view of Ehnmark which I started out by quoting, and allies himself with Eliade against the belief in philology as the essential method of the discipline. His own grievance against this belief, however, was another. A specialist in the indigenous religions of North America, he made the observation that there are vast areas in the world of religion which cannot be accessed through the study of written documents. Actually living religion, whether in distant illiterate tribes, or in the present time of modern societies, must be studied instead by way of observation in the 'field.'

So this second battle was between philology and 'fieldwork,' especially such fieldwork as was carried out by the social anthropologists. Hultkrantz' book can plausibly be seen as in part a reaction against what he saw as the imperialist dominance of the philological approach to the study of religion at the time. He wanted, I guess, to cut the philologists—especially in Sweden—down to size. In so doing, it must be added, he did not avoid revealing a little imperialist design of his own: 'In essence, the study of religion ... is to be described as an anthropological type of activity' (Hultkrantz 1973: 3–9).

In this sentiment, he was not alone. In the seventies it was fashionable to be a social scientist, and many a historian of religion of a more traditional training was in those years to develop the uncomfortable symptoms of an inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* social anthropology.

Well, then, the historian of religion working as a philologist was to learn that he was no good as a comparativist, and that he was unfit to do fieldwork. In addition, there were the voices that insisted that religion expresses itself in images as well as in texts—'iconography'

was the catch-word here—and there were of course the archaeologists, always predisposed to distrust textual sources as a matter of principle over against the *in situ* physical evidence of the past.

All these battles form part of the politics of the discipline—different parties competing for influence over its shape, and struggling over the power to describe what the discipline is. Today it is probably correct to say that these conflicts have calmed down, and that there exists widespread recognition of the necessity and naturalness of a diversity of methods and approaches in the discipline. It is my belief that we should look at this diversity as a boon and a source of continual enrichment in our work. For there is hardly another discipline in the faculties of arts and social sciences which aims to encompass both historical and contemporary evidence, as well as systematic and cross-cultural theorization, all at once. In other subjects within the human sciences these various types of interests have tended to split into distinct disciplines, and even into separate faculties. The history of religions is relatively unique in still trying to negotiate the tensions between these interests within the project of a shared discipline.

It is possible to see the methodological tensions within our discipline as a reflection of the development of the human sciences as a whole. In the 19th century, philology, and primarily classical philology, had the position as the ruling paradigm of the human sciences. This was above all the case in Germany, which played the leading role at the time. Philology was by no means then conceived as a narrow pursuit. According to such highly influential figures as F.D.E. Schleiermacher and August Boeckh, the methodology of philology was to be divided into two parts. There was on the one hand *Kritik*, which was the effort to look beyond the transmitted texts of manuscripts in order to sift what was older and more original from the later accretions in the transmission. The second task of philology, however, deemed to be just as essential as the first, was called *Hermeneutik*—this was the matter of the proper interpretation of the texts. Under this heading, Boeckh listed linguistic interpretation (syntax and lexicon), interpretation through consideration of the literary form, interpretation with regard to historical context, and, finally, individual interpretation, by which he had in mind the characteristic peculiarities of an author, as far as these could be ascertained from a corpus of documents.

The object of this kind of study was not merely the texts as such, but the totality of a given culture. Therefore you had to know as much as possible about this culture in order to work with the criticism and the interpretation of the texts, while the texts in turn

served as the sources for understanding the culture and reconstructing its history. These were all parts of a necessary hermeneutical circle, which justified a notion of philology as a comprehensive science of culture. And even more than that, philology was the articulation of something very basic and universal, the drive to understand the thoughts of other people—*das Verstehen*. And so Boeckh, with no intention whatsoever of being ludicrous, could arrive at the statement that, 'Philology is one of the primary conditions of human life.'¹

This vision of philology as an all-embracing human science did not work, of course. What happened was that in the course of the 19th century, first history established itself as an independent discipline, and then various specialist disciplines with systematic programmes broke loose, some of which went on to become social sciences. The underlying reasons for this breakup were, as I see it, two: First, there was an incongruence between the object of study and the methods proposed for studying it—put simply, the study of culture could not be reduced to a study of texts. And secondly, the approach was individualizing and historicizing, and did not sufficiently provide for comparative theory formation. The humanities were conceived as an idiographic form of science, different in principle from the nomothetical concerns of the natural sciences.

In my view, the human sciences today all still exist as the effect of the breakup of the philological paradigm. The gains and losses of their emancipation from this paradigm can be discussed for each of them separately, but that will not be done here, for obvious reasons. Anyhow, as far as the history of religions is concerned, the philological paradigm continued to maintain itself more strongly than in other disciplines. Why?

One major reason is that language and texts are generally conceived as playing a very great role in the study of religion. Religious ideas and sentiments are probably more difficult to translate than any other part of a culture, so in order to understand a religion from the agents' point of view you must get into their language codes. This I take to be intuitively true, and will not argue the point further.

If you add this observation to the fact that historians of religion, like all historians, need to work with written sources, you are in a working situation which is philological: You need a high degree of linguistic competence in order to deal with sources for religion—source criticism and linguistic interpretation go hand in hand.

¹ "...dass die Philologie eine der ersten Bedingungen des Lebens ... ist" (Boeckh 1886: 11). I have discussed the hermeneutics of Boeckh and Schleiermacher in Thomassen 1990.

Moreover, many religions are themselves strongly text-oriented, so that for this reason the study of texts becomes a way of studying these religions. And finally, religious texts typically have long and complicated histories of transmission and redaction, which present the scholar with formidable tasks of reconstruction.

In such work, the classical canons of philological methodology hold true. Textual criticism, from the 'lower' criticism of the edition of texts to the 'higher' criticism of sources and redaction history, must go hand in hand with the interpretation of what the texts are saying. This is one reason why some historians of religion at least must also be philologists. To do critical work on religious texts you need also to be a scholar of religion.

However, the application of the philological paradigm in the history of religions also introduces pitfalls and problems into the discipline. Within the limited space still available, I shall briefly comment on three areas of problems: the object of study, the models of historical explanation, and the relation of the particular and the general, i.e. comparison.

First of all, with regard to the object of our study, it must be observed that in an important sense, texts are not religion. Ideally, what we should be looking for when writing the history of religion is the history of religious *practice*. Writing history on the basis of texts tends to divert our vision, first, into placing too much emphasis on religious *ideas*, which of course are more readily represented in writing than are the practical realities of religion, and, secondly, into foregrounding the religion of the literary élite at the expense of that of the mass of the common people. The philological orientation in our discipline has too often walked hand in hand with a prejudice taken over from theologians: that the history of a religion is its history of dogma. But why should we assume, for instance, when writing the history of early Christianity, that an intellectual like Clement of Alexandria, whom very few people at the time read, is a better representative of Christianity in Egypt around the year 200, than the people appearing in the magical papyri from the same period, invoking Christ and the archangel Michael against the demons of sickness? (Meyer 1994) And, to take a different example, why do books on 'Islam' in the modern period tend always to focus on a certain number of modernist and fundamentalist writers, rather than on the beliefs and practices of the average Muslim? Why do we not write the modern history of Islam from their point of view?

What has been said so far in no way implies a criticism of the philological method as such. On the contrary, it implies that greater source-critical awareness is needed with respect to what we are

writing the history of when we are writing the history of religion. There are source-materials which should be given greater prominence, such as demographic data, epigraphic and archival materials, artifacts, popular literature, sources illuminating rituals and institutions etc., whereas the significance of the literature of the intellectual élite should be correspondingly toned down. It is true that we often will lack the sources which we need in order to write such social histories of religion. That in itself, however, is not a good enough reason for failing to observe that that is the sort of history we ideally should write.

Having said this, I must modify my statements on an important point. There is a kind of philological work which properly belongs to the history of religions although it does not directly illuminate the social history of a religion. This is the critical work on sources which are important because of their *Wirkungsgeschichte*. This potentially applies to all historical sources, because every source left to us invites an interpretation some way or another by posterity. But it is a particularly important task with regard to sources which have acquired a degree of canonical status in the course of history. (Canon is a relative thing, as we all know.) There are reasons which justify that more resources are spent on studying, say, the Bible, than on other documents from the past, reasons which do not simply have to do with the value of the Bible as a historical source for the religious situation at the time when its various documents were written. For such sources are being used to construct versions of history today, and also to create norms on the basis of these constructions. In this regard, the proper role of the history of religions has always been that of an independent investigator. It has applied the tools of philology to the study of the canonical literature of the religious traditions and of their formative periods, and thereby provided a critical perspective from the outside of these traditions themselves.

This critical outsider's role is undoubtedly one of the constitutive impulses of our discipline. In this area there is still very much more to be done, especially if one compares what has been accomplished in the study of the Bible and early Christianity, for example, with where we are in the study of the canonical writings and early literature of other traditions. To give only one example: We still lack a critical edition of the Qur'an, and it is only a few years ago that Gordon Newby published a first, tentative reconstruction of the whole historical work of Ibn Ishaq, which enables us to see better how this author constructed his biography of Muhammad on the basis of the stories of the preceding prophets (Ibn Ishaq 1989). In conjunction with the work of Crone, Cook and Wansbrough, Newby's work has

created a situation where the early history of Islam now invites major reconsideration.

A second deficiency of philological methodology is with regard to historical explanation. Studying the history of religions on the basis of texts has sometimes given rise to the notion that that history could be written as the diffusion of ideas. 'Where does this idea come from?' has been a typical question asked in our discipline. Such studies of 'influences' do undoubtedly provide a hermeneutical perspective which is helpful for systematizing religious history and analyzing religious ideas as transformations of previously existing patterns. But they do not have much explanatory force when it comes to understanding why actual people in given circumstances choose to think and act the way they do. Thus, for instance, the historian of religion trained as a philologist was unable to explain why the Iranian revolution happened in 1979. (Though the political scientists did no better, it must be added.) With regard to events of this type we need explanatory models which cannot be derived from the exegesis of texts, but rather from a study of social processes.

Thirdly, and finally: the question of comparison. This is a large issue, but let me just say this. Eliade, as we saw, demanded a 'general perspective' which was somehow situated above the philological work of the specialists. Here, he expressed a disagreement which is also epistemological in nature. For the philological paradigm emphasizes the differences between cultures and moments in history, as well as the context-sensitive nature of linguistic meaning. According to this view, each cultural datum must be understood on its own terms, and has an interest in itself. This is the opposite of a position which approaches such data as only so many examples of the same general phenomenon. This I perceive to be the approach of Eliade, as well as, to cite a more recent example, that of Jonathan Z. Smith, who states, in his *Imagining Religion*: 'For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as *exempli gratia* of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion' (Smith 1982: ix).

The epistemology of the philological paradigm assumes, on the contrary, that data do possess intrinsic interest. One reason for this has already been pointed out. It is the hermeneutical significance, in the Gadamerian sense, of historical data, or, the fact of their *Wirkungsgeschichte*: that data are interesting because they are perceived to relate to 'our own' history in special ways (regardless of how one

might wish to construe the 'we').² Not only philology, but disciplines such as history and ethnography too are meaningful enterprises primarily on this basis. Correspondingly, data about religion as well possess various degrees of intrinsic interest based on the relative historical significance accorded to them.

A somewhat different matter, however, is that of the status of individual data with regard to the operations of comparison, generalization and theory formation. Whether such operations are desirable is not the issue. The formation of general concepts is a property of the synthetic faculty of the human mind. Without them, thinking itself is impossible. The point is, rather, that the formation of concepts in the human sciences depends on semantically pre-formed data, which may be translated into analytical languages of relatively higher generality, but cannot be fully accounted for as identical instances of the operation of general laws or principles formulated in a universal metalanguage independent of the semantics through which the data are accessible to us. The various criticisms of objectivism in the human sciences formulated in the last thirty years (critical theory, hermeneutics, post-structuralism) all seem to make this observation one way or the other. The conclusion to be drawn from this, however, is not unequivocal. We need general terms in order to think about and describe our data in a disciplined way. In this respect the question, 'What is this an example of?' is always appropriate. On the other hand the serious scholar will never be content to reduce the meaning and the interest of his or her data to their being simply another instance of a common phenomenon, one more example of 'the same.' There will always be alternative ways of looking at the data, extra features which remain unexplained by the model, and additional reasons for finding the data interesting.

The mere fact that philology, and other disciplines which deal primarily with the specific, still continue to exist alongside disciplines founded on systematic programmes, offers so to speak an empirical confirmation of this methodological situation in the humanities. History still exists as a separate discipline as well as sociology, and the study of individual languages and literatures still have their legitimate places alongside the disciplines of general linguistics and literary theory. Is this not in itself an indication that the explanatory power of the available general theories is limited, and that these

² This is implicitly recognized by Smith, when at one point he describes the operation of *exempli gratia* as making comparison by means of 'an arsenal of classic instances' (Smith 1982: 113). The qualifier 'classic' obviously connotes intrinsic interest.

theories do not satisfy all legitimate interests in the human sciences? On the other hand, the existence of distinct disciplines which aim for theory and the systematic testify to the continued impulse of the human mind to put the mass of its knowledge into general categories.

The question of comparison in the history of religions is then, again, a variation on a problem which runs through all the human sciences. It is a problem which is constitutive of these sciences: On the one extreme we find the meaninglessness of the purely empirical, on the other, the emptiness of the tautological a priori. The humanities, and our discipline among them, live and breath in the interstice between these two ends of the scale, the space where meaning is produced only through the perpetual interplay of the specific and the general, of difference and sameness.

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