PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES OF CLASSIFYING RELIGIONS ON THE BASIS OF CONFESSIONAL DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

The aim of the present article is to examine the most vital problems of classifying religions on the basis of confessional differences and thus to inspire scholars to create a completely different classification compared to the one already existing. In the article the following four problems of religions' classification are discussed. 1) The problem of preserving the principle of unity of the division basis in the classification for more than five thousand religions. The solution to this problem is to build a taxonomy, i.e. a combination of independent hierarchical classifications connected to each other only on the layer of the highest ('root') taxon. 2) The problem of religions' dynamism which it is offered to be solved by completing static classifications with schemes of religions' genesis. 3) The question of the ontological status of the lowest rank taxa. As the lowest taxonomic category it is suggested to choose the 'form'. Its corresponding taxa of the lowest layers are conventional units (such as, for instance, Adventism in Protestantism) constructed on the basis of least similarity according to confessional characters. 4) The problem of religion definition is regarded to be false. As classification is simply a tool, its basis can be any operational definition of religion. Consequently, there can be built many different classifications and taxonomies of religions.

Keywords: religion, study, classifications, taxonomy, classiology

1. Introduction

Although there are many different religions in the world, one cannot say that religious studies have reached good results in their classification. Therefore the aim of the present article is to examine the most vital problems of classifying religions on the basis of confessional differences and thus to inspire scholars to create a completely different classification compared to the already existing one.

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As religions are constantly developing, new religions are emerging and the old ones are disappearing, it is absolutely clear that there is an urgent need in a new and capacious classification which would allow not only to bring order to all that diversity, but also would help to develop notional and categorical tools of religious studies, finding gaps in the development of this young discipline. In this way it would satisfy the demands made nowadays to scientific classifications. These demands have big significance for classiology (the study of organizing objects into a system of classes [1], constitute a rather long list and are different from author to author. M.P. Pokrovskiy has analysed different works devoted to classification problems and has drawn only the demands which have constructive meaning. As general demands he pointed out the following: operational value of the classification basis, predetermination of the multitude and the classes being classified, unanimity of the classification basis, equality of the singled out classes to the original classifying set disjointness of the classes, numerical expression of the classes, lack of indivisible classes (apart from the last one which is on the lowest layer of the classification) and applicability of the classification to complex (combinatorial) objects [1-3]. D.P. Gorsky suggested an important methodological request to classification: "The best classification is the one where belonging to a particular class gives the possibility to make the maximum number of statements about the qualities of the subject" [4].

In modern religious studies there are few classifications which follow most of these principles. But they either have a limited application area, as for example the classification of Protestant denominations by T. Smith [5], or they classify separate religious aspects [L. Astahova, *Structuring of Current Religious Practices in Polyconfessional Regions*, Proc. of XVIIIth ISA World Congress of Sociology. Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for Global Sociology, Yokohama, https://isaconf.confex.com/isaconf/wc2014/webprogram/Paper 46351.html]. As for most famous classifications which tend to be more general and overall (we may call them general classifications of religions [6-13]) they get a lot of criticism [14-18] because they don't satisfy some scientific criteria. Especially difficult to follow is the requirement that the classes shouldn't overlap as the mentioned classifications are descriptive according to Rosova [19]. A big problem is also connected with the requirement to the classes being expressed in numbers. And at last, most general classifications of religions are based not on the fact that there are many religions in the world and new ones are emerging, but on a limited number of existing religions. A good exception is the classifications suggested in the following works [20, 21]. But those classifications are descriptive too. Segregating characters are singled out not clearly enough there. Therefore a lot of religions, especially new ones, are not included in these classifications. It is quite often that it turns out to be difficult to divide significant characteristics from the insignificant ones. That is the reason why these classifications are being criticized.

However, all the disadvantages mentioned can be partly overcome if religious studies go beyond their limits and start using the experience of other sciences.

Let's have a look at the most important problems of constructing confessional classification of religions which in religious studies is more often related to the notion of 'classification' in contrast with 'typology' [15, 22, 23]. Differentiating between typologies and classifications in Sociology and Religious studies starting with the works by M. Weber and E. Troeltsch can be regarded as a long tradition [24, 25]. However, quite often it is difficult to find any significant difference between 'typologies' in religious studies and 'classifications' in other sciences.

2. First problem

Religions are so different that it is difficult to find a unique basis of division for them which is a precondition for any classification.

Let's look more closely at the above outlined problem. The principle of unique division basis is the following: when dividing objects of a classification it is necessary to preserve the same basis. The basis of the division is a quality of the classifying set of objects or, usually in taxonomies, a certain set of essential traits. (We use the term 'quality/trait' in the meaning of denotation which is broader than denotations of concrete notions representing its meaning and called 'characters', and the term 'character' as the meaning of the quality). The relationship between qualities and characters can be described as subsumption [26]. For example we can classify European folks according to their religion. Confession then will be the quality of a part of people living in Europe and thus it will be the basis of the division. Members of the division will be classes pointed out as the characters of the qualities, the basis of the division: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and so on. The classes which are separated on the basis of one quality constitute one horizontal row of a classification, its layer, and constitute a particular classification category.

Ideally, in a strictly structured classification the basis of every classification category should be one particular quality or a few particular sets of qualities. But in our case classification categories should put in the order of the knowledge of about more than five thousand religions [18]. To work out such a system is a really difficult task to perform. On the highest layers of some still imaginary classification of religions it may be possible to construct a unique classifying category which has as its basis a certain quality applicable to all religions. But the more we divide the original notion of religion, the more difficult it becomes to preserve the unity of the system of classification categories (taking into account the fact that underlying qualities should have the same rank meaning for totally different religions, as for example the traditional religion of Australian aboriginals on the one hand and Christianity on the other). Here the dilemma emerges. On the one hand, if we stick to the principle of the unity of classifying categories for the whole classifying set, we are bound to construct an insufficient classification which, even if we manage to solve the problem of very unifying qualities for quite different types of religions, will include quite a few layers. Consequently, classes of the lowest layers in such

classification will be too broad and heterogeneous without additional order system. On the other hand, if one can try to put this multitude in order and to build a system which would unite a lot of independent classifications of concrete religions, classifications that would take into consideration all aspects of their internal connections, would be incomparable or badly comparable with each other.

In the most developed biological taxonomy this dilemma was solved by abolishing the strict connection between classifying categories and concrete characteristics. Only the highest classification categories (taxonomic, in this case) have characteristics. For example 'dominion' (archaebacterial, prokaryotes and eukaryotes) reflects the layer of cellular texture while 'type' reflects the body plan [27]. All other taxonomic categories are regarded as relative stages of the scale of ranks [27, p. 15]. The group of the dividing traits is related not to taxonomic categories but to ranks of taxa. The notions of taxonomic category and taxon rank are nearly synonyms. But one talks about rank in connection with concrete taxon and about the category in connection with a layer of classification as a whole. For instance, most famous taxonomic categories in modern Biology are Species, Genus, Family, Order, Class, Phylum, Kingdom, Domain, but in the expression 'family Compositae', 'Compositae' is the title of a taxon while the word 'family' indicates the rank of this taxon. Consequently, the underlying quality which serves to single out the taxonomic category 'type' (body plan) is different from the characters of the rank 'type' (for example, for the type Chordates (Chordata) – chorda, central nervous system and branchial grooves). In this way taxonomy is a union of independent hierarchical classifications related to each other only on the layer of the highest ('root') taxon.

What lesson can religious studies get from this short excursus into the history of biological systematization? Firstly, it has to be admitted that the above outlined problem about the difference and incomparability of different religions is rather far-fetched and is connected to the fact that scientists quite often neglect the experience of other sciences, like Biology or Linguistics. Secondly, if we agree that all religions can be systematized according to their confessional differences, we should take into consideration that the most appropriate way of solving this problem is to construct a taxonomy, not a strict classification. Theoretically it is possible to build faceted classifications. However, such classification, although it cope quite well with the function of information search and ordering of data, cannot perform such important functions as marking out of traits and relationships of the religions being studied, revealing of their essential traits, creating and sharpening of terminology, finding gaps in researches, pointing out new scientific challenges. In this case the question arises about the highest unifying taxonomic categories. Probably a satisfying basis for the division will be the 'presence/lack of the doctrine'. But one may also say that the solution is still beyond the existing concepts and categories in the field of Religious studies and requires a totally new approach.

3. Second problem

The second problem that is pointed out by H.B. Patin, the author of the article 'Classification of religions' in the famous 14 values 'Encyclopaedia of religions', is the dynamism of religions which makes their classification an 'unending task' [15]. Without any doubt, religions are very dynamic objects, therefore any classification of them, while they are developing, will be inevitably changing. The same is true about classification of languages and organisms.

Taxonomy can take into account the dynamism of religions and most processes of division inside them only in the case if taxa in it reflect certain stages or fragments of the development of the system. According to this principle it may quite probably happen that more stable and more frequent traits of taxa can cause their higher rank and vice versa. It also turns out that the essential traits which came about earlier would be seen more often and thus would determine a comparably high rank position of taxa. That is why, although traits of high rank taxa characterize on the one hand the peculiarities of a religion and its main branches, on the other would also characterize the early stages of religious communities. To some extent such taxonomy will include developing dynamism of every concrete religious system perceived as a whole. But in general it would still be too static to reflect the origins of religious communities. And it may quite possibly happen that early and maybe non existing by this time religious communities could be in this classification on the same layer as modern religious unions.

In the history of classifications this problem is well known and is usually solved by building a genesis scheme (phylogeny in Biology). It implies that hierarchical classifications built with the help of typological method reflecting essential bounds and traits of the objects being researched are supplemented by independent genesis schemes. For instance, quite often in course books in Zoology and Botanic (the structure of which actually reflects the taxonomy of animal and plant world) separate paragraphs are devoted to phylogenesis [28, 29]. It is obvious that this solution is suitable for systematization of religions.

4. Third problem

The third problem concerns the ontological status of taxa of the lowest layers. Religions are represented by different types of bodies at the primary layer: some are formal groups, others are informal, some have quite a strict structure, others are quite amorphous (as for example shamanism). What is to be acknowledged as the minimum taxonomic unit? Should it be in the confessional taxonomy real or conventional communities? It seems naturally to take as such a unit some real community. For example in the classification by P.I. Puchkov and O.E. Kazmina they are concrete confessions such as the Episcopal Church in Scotland (Protestantism, Christianity) or the Hanbalites (Sunnism, Islam), Karma-pa (the Vajrayana, Buddhism) and so on.

However, methodological difficulty consists in the following: between particular real communities, especially in Protestantism, the differences that led to confessional demarcation may be quite insignificant. For example, if for Christianity we point out as the essential traits the ones connected with Dogmatics, then Seventh-Day Adventists and Adventists Reformers, which are different in some nuances in their attitude towards service in the army, would happen to be in the same taxon of lowest rank (namely: 'form Seventh-Day Adventists'). While United Seventh-Day Brethren would have the status not of a subtaxon but an independent taxon of the lowest rank (Table 1).

Table 1. Taxonomy of Adventists.

Taxonomic category	Taxon
Concrete religion	Christianity
Branch	Protestantism
Current	Adventism
Form	1. Seventh-Day Adventists = S.D.A.*
	group 1: Seventh-day Adventist Church**
	group 2: Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement**
	group n: ... **
	...
	1+n: United Seventh-Day Brethren**

Legend: * - conventional community, ** - real community

In this way the following dilemma arises: shall we admit multi layers of the lowest taxa which correspond to the names of real communities (which is not desirable, although it is acceptable in some non biological classifications) or shall we regard the lowest taxa, the minimum elements of taxonomy, always as conventional units. The advantage of the second variant, besides preserving the good structure of taxonomy, consists in the possibility to compare religious organizations of different types (for example, denominations and nondenominational Churches) on the basis of their characters and put them in taxa of the same rank. In this case characters related to their organizational peculiarities will determine their innertaxonic differences.

In our example it will look like that:

Concrete religion: Christianity

Branch: Protestantism

Current: Adventism

Form 1. Seventh-day Adventists

Bodies (related not to taxa but to the descriptive part of taxonomy):

    1) The Seventh-day Adventist Church

    2) The Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement

    3) The Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Association

    4) Branch Davidians

Form 2. Church of God (Seventh Day)

Bodies:

    1) The Church of God (Seventh Day)

Form n...
...
Form n+1. United Seventh-Day Brethren
Bodies:
    1) The United Seventh-Day Brethren
    Consequently, we offer to consider taxa of the lower rank as conventional units which correspond with the lowest taxonomic category 'form', while titles of real groups within every form can be given in a partly structured list with additional characteristics.

5. Fourth problem

And at last, let's examine the key question of Religious studies, namely the definition of religion. In order to classify more than five thousand religions it is necessary to determine their set with the help of the definition of what religion is. It is well known that definition of religion is one of the most difficult questions in Religious studies [30-41]. But classification is only an instrument which is not bound to solve any philosophical or ideological problem. We can define religion quite strictly and include in this notion only those systems that possess all the elements of so-called religious complex (faith and beliefs, religious cult and religious organisations). We may also define religion in a broader sense and include in this notion pseudo- and quasi communities, and even superstition, magic etc. It is up to the good will of a systemiser to choose one way or the other. But one cannot forget that the definition of religion should have an operational value. Anyway, the problem of the definition can be solved in order to construct a classification or a taxonomy. And it can be solved in many ways. It means that many classifications/taxonomies can be built. And their capacity will depend on the base definition and the determined classification set.

6. Conclusions

Based upon most constructive demands made in classiology to scientific classifications, we outlined the problem of building hierarchical classification of religions which would satisfy these demands. We also singled out the four most important classification problems. As the first one we denoted the principle of unity of the division basis which should be obeyed in broad classifications of more than five thousand religions. We assumed that it is practically impossible to have the same basis of division on all layers of classification as far as big classifications are concerned unless we would like to build a well-structured multi-layer classification. Therefore the only acceptable solution, under the condition of following the hierarchical principle of classification, is to build a taxonomy, i.e. a unity of independent hierarchical classifications connected with each other only on the layer of the highest ('root') taxon. In every such classification the principle of unity of the division basis is obeyed but it is not

applied to the taxonomy as a whole. The second problem concerns the dynamism of religions. Is it possible to reflect this dynamism in a static taxonomy? And how can it be done? We concluded that taxonomy can reflect only the general tendencies of this dynamism, but it can't describe the chronological sequence, the origin of some objects (religious groups) from the others. This task can be much easier solved with the help of genesis schemes of religions. That's why it is essential that systematization of religions should include both static classifications and genesis schemes. The third question was about the ontological status of the lowest ranks taxa. Should they be names of real communities (concrete organizations and religious groups) or should they be conventional units constructed with the aim to organize effectively data about religions? Having examined both variants, we came to the conclusion that conventional units are more suitable (as for example, Adventism in Protestantism) and they are constructed on the basis of least similarity according to the confessional characters. We denoted taxonomic category, which fix taxa of the lowest ranks, with the term 'form'. As for real communities it seems impossible to find common traits for many of them. That is why it is better to relate them to sub ranks of the lowest taxa and, if possible, partly to structure them. One of the most difficult questions of Religious studies – about the definition of religion – is not a real problem when constructing a classification of religions. And as classification is only a tool, many definitions can be suggested as the basis of classification. The analysis of concrete definitions of religion was not our goal. But they should all be operational. Accordingly, many classifications and taxonomies of religions can be built.

Acknowledgement

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