

## Indo-European Religion

**Overview** The outlines of an Indo-European religion are generated both by historical linguistic evidence, as was, originally, the whole IE hypothesis, and by evidence drawn from comparative mythology and certain archeological finds that seem to support that mythology. The 'religion' extracted from these kinds of evidence is concrete but the reality you ascribe to it will depend on the view you take, of the way the component parts of the theory cohere.

**The linguistic evidence** The linguistic evidence was the first to generate the PIE theory. Philologists became aware, as early as the 18th century, that over a wide range of languages, the PIE languages, the word for 'god,' 'sky-father,' was similar: Sanskrit *dyaus-pita*; Greek *zeu-pater*; Latin *Ju-piter*; Umbrian *luve-patre*; Illyrian, *Dei-patyros*. The list is extensive, and the conclusion, to this and much more verbal evidence, makes it likely that multiple cultural moves might be in common among the language families assembled here.

**The mythological approach** The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) developed at length the theory that a society's myths reflect its own social structure. For instance, Sumerian society seems to be neatly replicated by the social interrelations and interactions of its gods, while Greek (Olympus society) and Norse (the world of Valhalla) societies reflect substantial parallels between the 'myth world' and the social structure 'behind it.' This fertile hypothesis, which has led in many scholarly directions, has been supplemented by the work of George Dumézil and Jan Puhvel--plus an army of scholarly enrichers--directed toward the application of myth theory to what we can surmise about IE cultures.

**What we learn from the mythological approach** We learn, thanks especially to the theories of Georges Dumézil, to look for (and find) tripartite and binary divisions which would appear to be plausible characteristics of IE societies, and to make out the profiles of an IE religion. (What religion is is itself one of the questions raised here.) The tripartite structure of IE myth is typically characterized by a belief system like the Vedic, in which the dominant myth characters are of three different types or levels: the *brahmanas* (priests), *ksatriyas* (warriors), and *vaisyas* (herdsmen or cultivators). This kind of tripartite division, among the dominant figures of a culture's myth--and thus a reflection of the culture's society--is amply illustrated by the myths reflected in other IE languages. In Greek and Roman societies, to illustrate, the same kind of tripartism is broadly reflected *on the mythological level*: the Greeks celebrating *priests and magistrates, warriors, then laborers/artisans*; the Romans *flamines (priests), milites (soldiers), and quirites (ordinary citizens)*, in that order, as their pre eminent myth figures.

**Ramifications of the mythological approach** The profiles of religious belief, sketched in the above fashions, have promoted widespread researches into the characteristics of IE belief. One might mention the importance of binary relations--the importance of twins, right and left hand relations--in the repertoire of belief-traits, to be found among IE cultures; or the importance of animal sacrifices, especially involving the horse in IE cultures. The approach before us deals in scattered shapings of belief, for the archeological or funerary evidence remaining cannot support a firmer theory of IE religious belief.

## Readings

Mallory, J.P., *In search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology, and Myth*, London, 1991.

Fortson, Benjamin W., *Indo-European Language and Culture*, Oxford, 2004.

## Discussion questions

Is myth an expression of religious belief? How are the two terms, myth and religion, related?

Are linguistic parallels, such as we find in the names for 'god' in IE languages, meaningful indications of affinities between cultures?

Do you see some relation between IE religion, and the major world religions which follow the PIE peoples?