

Nuristani Theonyms in Light of Historical Phonology

It is often assumed that the pre-Islamic religion of Nuristan in the Afghan Hindu-Kush (called Kafiristan in pre-Islamic times) was little affected by outside influences over the centuries, due to the remote location of its practitioners (cf. Fussman 1977: 23). From this, the conclusion is drawn that it can be considered an archaic hold-out of a non-brahmanized form of the Proto-Indo-Iranian religion closely comparable to Vedic beliefs (cf. Fussman 1977: 24-27).

In order to move beyond mere speculation in the reconstruction of historically unattested religious systems, the reconstructions should be tied to linguistic evidence.

Fussman (1977: 30-31) considers the names of the gods of Kafiristan phonetically regular developments from Proto-Indo-Iranian, which would justify ascribing significant antiquity to the religious practices associated with them. A closer examination of the theonyms in accordance with the principles of regular sound change, however, reveals that they lack the most fundamental characteristics of Nuristani historical phonology and that they are quite clearly borrowings from Indo-Aryan languages.

In this talk I intend to survey the phonological evidence in the attested theonyms and to refute the hypothesis of an ancient Hindu-Kush pantheon that was unaffected by outside influences and is directly reconstructible to the stage of Proto-Indo-Iranian.

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