

FROM COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY TO THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION: THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY OF MAX MÜLLER

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Abstract

The article examines Max Müller's engagement with Eastern religious texts and his role in the development of comparative religious studies within the context of the nineteenth-century German philological tradition. Special attention is given to the relationship between comparative philology, Sanskrit studies, and the historical study of religion. The research employs historical-comparative, hermeneutic, and historiographical methods. The study analyses Müller's major works, including the Introduction to the Science of Religion, the series The Sacred Books of the East, and his studies of Vedic literature. It is argued that Müller played a significant role in the institutionalisation of comparative religious studies through the application of philological methods to the study of religious texts. At the same time, the article discusses the limitations of his approach, particularly its text-centred character and its connection to the broader European intellectual tradition of the nineteenth century, which remains relevant for contemporary religious studies and Islamic textual scholarship. The article concludes that Müller's scholarly legacy occupies an important place in the history of religious studies while also reflecting the intellectual context of its time.

Keywords

Max Müller; comparative religion; philology; Eastern texts; Sacred Books of the East; Vedas; mythology; hermeneutics; Orientalism; science of religion.

Introduction

The question of how religious studies became an independent science remains important for understanding the humanistic tradition as a whole. Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) is often called the “father” of the scholarly study of religions. Contemporary historiography treats this title with caution: Müller was neither the sole nor an uncontested founder, and the very image of a “founding father” is today subject to criticism (Girardot N., 2002:218). What is of interest, therefore, is not the title itself but the substantive question: which ideas – philological, romantic, historicist – did Müller convert into the first version of a “science of religion,” and at what cost.

The topic contains an important internal tension. Müller was educated in Germany but built his academic career at Oxford and wrote mostly in English (Heath H., 1900:1). This means that, in his case, “the formation of religious studies in Germany” cannot be understood literally, as an attachment to a place. The point is different: the German philological and romantic school – Bopp, Humboldt, the Schlegel brothers, Jacob Grimm – was transferred to a British university, and it was there that it took shape as a project of the comparative study of religions. If this transfer is overlooked, Müller is either mistakenly turned into a “British” scholar, or his place of work comes to stand in for his genuine intellectual lineage.

Historiography developed in several stages. Early texts – obituaries from the turn of the century and the memoirs of contemporaries – described Müller above all as a great Orientalist, whose edition of the Rigveda alone secured him a leading place in scholarship. In the second half of the twentieth century the focus shifted: Sharpe, and later Girardot and Masuzawa, redirected attention from Müller’s theories to their institutional and discursive role (Girardot N., 2002:220). The early academic approaches that shaped the discipline in the German-speaking world have likewise been examined in recent scholarship (Mukhamedov N. & Turambetov N., 2024:267). A separate debate concerns the relationship between philology and mythology: Masuzawa sees a rupture between them, whereas Strenski argues for their unity, rooted in German romanticism (Strenski I., 1996:293). Finally, after the appearance of Edward Said’s Orientalism, the study of Müller has become impossible apart from the question of the power and representation of the East – a line of critique developed for the study of religion by King (King R., 1999:61).

The aim of the article is to show how Müller worked with Eastern religious sources and how his philological method became an instrument in the formation of comparative religious studies, while at the same time delineating the limits of that method. The scholarly novelty lies in the fact that the transition from philology to the science of religion is treated not as simple progress but as a deliberate choice

with concrete costs, visible also from an Eastern – and in particular Islamic – textological perspective.

Research Methodology

The study relies on four interconnected methods. The historical-comparative method makes it possible to place Müller among his contemporaries and predecessors and to establish exactly how his approach differs from the anthropological and the theological. Hermeneutic analysis, in the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, is used to reconstruct how Müller understood the meaning of a religious text and what path to that meaning he envisaged. The historiographical method serves to separate early and modern assessments and to subject the evaluative frameworks themselves to critical scrutiny. Finally, elements of discourse analysis, deriving from the critique of Orientalism, help to reveal the hidden cultural presuppositions of a “neutral” science.

The source base is divided into two layers. The first comprises Müller’s own texts – the Introduction to the Science of Religion (Müller F., 1873), Chips from a German Workshop (Müller F., 1867-1875), his autobiographical fragment (Müller F., 1901), and the series The Sacred Books of the East (Müller F., 1879-1910). The second is historiographical: the works of Sharpe, Girardot, Strenski, Masuzawa, and Carroll, as well as the theoretical literature on Orientalism (Said, King). Priority in the analysis is given to the first layer: the assessments of modern scholars are drawn upon in order to test and refine the reading of Müller himself, not to replace it.

The Intellectual Context of Nineteenth-Century Germany. German Oriental studies in the first half of the nineteenth century were primarily a philological and philosophical enterprise rather than a colonial one. The romantic interest in India as the most ancient homeland of humankind, set in motion by Friedrich Schlegel, was combined with the historicist conviction that the nature of a phenomenon is disclosed through its origin. Franz Bopp’s comparative grammar turned the conjecture about the kinship of the Indo-European languages into a rigorous method, while Wilhelm von Humboldt linked language with the spirit of a people. It was from this combination – romanticism, historicism, and comparative philology – that Müller’s project grew.

The biographical connection with the German school is direct. Müller studied at Leipzig, where under Brockhaus he began to learn Sanskrit; he then attended the lectures of Bopp and Schelling in Berlin, and in 1845 went to Paris to study with Eugène Burnouf, who advised him to undertake an edition of the Vedas (Kashikar C., n.d.:79). Müller built his system of research on the works of the leading German scholars – Schlegel, Humboldt, Grimm – and regarded comparative philology as a

more fundamental science than classical philology (Kashikar C., n.d.:79). His move to Oxford to work with the Vedic manuscripts of the East India Company and the Bodleian Library became the British dénouement of this German beginning.

For Müller, Sanskrit was not an end in itself but a key to the question of the origin of religion and thought. Kashikar aptly observes that Müller came to Sanskrit out of a philosophical interest: the closeness of philosophy to religion led him to the history of religion and then to the science of religion (Kashikar C., n.d.:77). From this it is already clear that philology, mythology, and religion constituted for him a single subject, not a succession of changing enthusiasms.

Müller's Scholarly Activity: Method and Theory. The principal work of Müller's life was the critical edition of the Rigveda with Sāyaṇa's commentary, which he prepared on commission from the East India Company from 1847 to 1874 (Heath H., 1900:1). The method of the edition was strictly text-critical: Müller collated the available manuscripts, restored the text of the commentary, and traced most of its citations back to their sources (Kashikar C., n.d.:79). It was the prestige of this work, and not his later popularising activity, that secured his authority. Strenski rightly stresses that the priority of Vedic studies is explained not by personal taste but by the status of high philology as the foundational science of the age – one cannot reach the Vedic myth without a good edition of the Veda (Strenski I., 1996:294).

Müller himself introduced the term “science of religion” to denote the comparative method applied to the study of religions. He expressed the logic of the method in a well-known formula going back to Goethe: “*he who knows one, knows none*” (Girardot N., 2002:223). For him, knowledge begins with comparison; all genuine cognition is metaphorical and begins with the joining of two things into one (Girardot N., 2002:223). On this basis Müller distinguished “comparative theology” – the study of the historical forms of religion – from “theoretical theology,” that is, the philosophy of religion and dogmatics; he regarded only the former as scientific and demanded that all religions be placed on an equal footing, without dividing them into the “revealed” and the “natural” (Girardot N., 2002:223).

To assess the method without intermediaries, it is worth reading Müller closely. In the Introduction to the Science of Religion he builds his project on the model of comparative linguistics: just as comparative grammar united scattered languages into families, so a comparative science of religion should order religions by kinship and type. The conceptual field characteristic of the text reveals the author's working space: Aryan and Semitic peoples, Turanian tribes, the Vedas and Vedic hymns, Dyaus and Varuna, the names of the gods among the Greeks, the

Germanic peoples, and the Zulus. Religion is here conceived from the outset as an object of classification by linguistic and historical criteria – an orientation that, as Girardot notes, *The Sacred Books of the East* would subsequently consolidate (Girardot N., 2002:234).

The theory of mythology – the most vulnerable part of the system – follows directly from philology. Taking archaic Sanskrit as the language closest to Proto-Aryan, and the Rigveda as the most ancient source of Aryan beliefs, Müller used a generalised “Grimm’s law” to trace the names of the Greek, Roman, and Germanic gods back to Vedic roots (Carroll M., 1985:266). He regarded the series Dyaus = Zeus = Jupiter = Tyr as his most important discovery (Carroll M., 1985:267). He understood myth as a “disease of language”: a metaphor (for example, “the sun pursues the dawn”) gradually lost its original meaning, came to be understood literally, and acquired a narrative – so that, according to Müller, the tale of Daphne and Apollo arose from a phrase about the sunrise (Carroll M., 1985:269). For him the connection between language and religion was not an analogy but the foundation of the entire construction.

The Study of Eastern Religious Sources. The culmination of Müller’s Oriental programme was the series *The Sacred Books of the East* (Müller F., 1879–1910) – fifty volumes of translations of Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Confucian, and other texts. The conception, which went back to a suggestion of Bunsen, was to apply to the most ancient texts the instruments of comparative philology and to set them alongside the Bible and the Qur’an (Kashikar C., n.d.:79). The principle of selection was distinctly text-centred: Müller sought the genuine meaning of a religion in its most ancient written monuments rather than in living practice.

This choice had far-reaching consequences. Girardot shows that the edition itself – its selection and its solemn editorial framing – generated a whole taken-for-granted system of concepts: the idea of “sacred books,” the grouping of “world religions,” the priority of the most ancient scriptures, and the opposition of pure doctrine to later “priestly” distortion (Girardot N., 2002:234). In other words, the Eastern sources were not merely translated – the conceptual grid of the discipline itself was built together with them. As Masuzawa argues, the category of “world religions” arose at the junction of comparative linguistics and the science of religion, and the classifications of language and race lent particular weight to Buddhism and Islam, opposing the “Aryan” to the “Semitic” – a development closely tied to the editorial logic of Müller’s own series (Girardot N., 2002:234).

It is here that the critique of Orientalism comes in. According to Said’s now-classic thesis, Western knowledge of the East is inseparable from power: the East appears as something to be described and represented on its own behalf. King

applies this argument directly to the study of religion, showing that scholarly categories carry colonial and Protestant presuppositions (King R., 1999:61). Müller's priority of "classical" scriptures turns out, in essence, to be a covertly Protestant orientation: a concern with the sources of authority and with the normative text, transferred to all traditions (Girardot N., 2002:234). Thus the "neutral" science of religion carried within itself a quite definite cultural optic.

Müller and the Formation of Comparative Religious Studies. Müller's contribution consists above all in transferring the rigour of comparative philology to the study of religion and in the institutional consolidation of this step. The chair of comparative philology created for him at Oxford in 1868, the inaugural lecture on the value of the subject, and the international congresses of Orientalists in which he actively took part – all of these are elements in the professionalisation of the new knowledge (Girardot N., 2002:220). As contemporaries aptly remarked, Müller was "famous for being famous": his strength lay not only in his research but also in his ability to advance and popularise a new, demonstratively comparative view of religion (Girardot N., 2002:220). It is therefore more accurate to say that he became one of the principal architects of the discipline rather than its sole creator.

To understand Müller's distinctiveness, it is helpful to compare him with his contemporaries. Unlike Edward Tylor and James Frazer, who derived religion from "primitive" thought and relied on ethnography and the idea of evolution, Müller sought the origins of religion in the most ancient written languages and in the experience of the infinite. From Schleiermacher, for whom religion is above all feeling and experience, Müller is separated by his wager on language and text as the path to meaning. Rudolf Otto would later concentrate on the category of the holy as a particular inner experience, and Mircea Eliade on the structure of symbol and myth; against their background Müller appears as a philologist for whom the word and its history are the key to everything. These thinkers are discussed here as points of contrast rather than as direct sources (see Schleiermacher F., 1996; Otto R., 1923; Eliade M., 1959). Such a comparison shows that Müller's contribution lies not in a theory of religious experience but in method and in the categorial structure of the discipline.

Müller conceived the connection of philosophy, philology, and religion as an ascent from the sensibly given to the idea of the infinite. In the Hibbert and Gifford Lectures he rejected both the theory of fetishism and the theory of a primitive revelation, proposing a path from the knowledge supplied by the five senses to a faith in the "various aspects of the infinite" (Kashikar C., n.d.:77). This rationalist and immanentist orientation (Girardot N., 2002:223) made it possible to study religion historically and comparatively without breaking with the liberal-Protestant

and romantic perspective – and it is precisely this orientation that would come to lie at the centre of later criticism.

Critical Approaches: The Limits of the Method. Classical criticism focused on solar mythology. Andrew Lang, and later Durkheim, pointed to two weaknesses. First, a committed “solarist” is able to give a “solar” interpretation to almost any myth, and this ease undermines confidence in the procedure. Second, from one and the same material different investigators were able to derive equally convincing but incompatible interpretations (Carroll M., 1985:273). Contemporaries carried this to the point of parody: Littledale’s “The Oxford Solar Myth” (1870) “proved” that the solar deity was Müller himself (Carroll M., 1985:273). Carroll, however, shows that the reputation of an unrestrained interpreter is partly unjust: Müller’s detailed solar analyses are few, about eight, and the excesses are rather the fault of George Cox (Carroll M., 1985:274).

A deeper criticism concerns Eurocentrism. Girardot, relying on King, notes in Müller an “endemic essentialism”: abstract conceptions of “religion” are detached from historical circumstances, and the comparison tends to suppress difference for the sake of a universal identity (Girardot N., 2002:250). The textual priority – the reliance on the most ancient scriptures – turns out to be an orientation covertly Protestant in origin (Girardot N., 2002:234). As Masuzawa adds, the very scheme of “world religions” is not neutral but carries within it a European universalism merely disguised in the language of pluralism – a point consonant with the essentialism Girardot identifies (Girardot N., 2002:250).

At the same time, contemporary historiography guards against anachronistic judgement. In his dispute with Masuzawa, Strenski insists that the rupture between philology and mythology exists rather in the eye of the reader: in Müller himself, language, myth, and religion form a single whole, rooted in German romanticism and liberal Protestantism (Strenski I., 1996:294). Carroll goes further and proposes to see in Müller the source of a “meta-methodological” lesson: his requirement of philological identity of names before postulating a historical connection was a way of limiting the arbitrariness of interpretation (Carroll M., 1985:276). A comparison of the assessments shows that the reproach of reductionism is correct in substance but should not obscure the rational core of the method.

Significance for Regional Comparative Religious Studies. Müller’s scholarly approach remains relevant for contemporary researchers working in the field of comparative religion in Central Asia. The region possesses a rich historical legacy shaped by the interaction of various religious traditions, including Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and local belief systems. In this context, Müller’s emphasis on philological precision, comparative analysis, and the

systematic study of religious sources offers important methodological insights for regional scholarship.

The principles employed by Müller in his study of ancient religious texts – including manuscript comparison, source verification, historical contextualization, and comparative interpretation – correspond closely with the broader intellectual traditions that developed within Central Asian scholarship over many centuries. These approaches encourage the study of religions not in isolation, but as interconnected historical and cultural phenomena shaped through dialogue, exchange, and mutual influence.

Particularly significant for contemporary comparative religious studies in the region is the recognition that comparative methodology cannot be viewed solely as a European intellectual construct. Central Asian scholars historically engaged in forms of intercultural and comparative analysis long before the institutionalization of comparative religion in nineteenth-century Europe. A notable example is Al-Biruni, whose analytical and comparative examination of different religious traditions demonstrated a sophisticated source-critical approach that anticipated several later developments within modern comparative religious studies (Mukhamedov N. & Turambetov N., 2023:105).

At the same time, the criticism of Müller warns against an uncritical transfer of his frameworks. The text-centrism that, in Müller, turned into a muting of living religious practice, and the universalist scheme of “world religions,” into which Islam fell as the “Semitic” opposite of the “Aryan” (Girardot N., 2002:234), show that European categories cannot be accepted as neutral. From this there follows for national religious studies a twofold task: to master the rigorous text-critical procedures and at the same time to develop its own conceptual language, grounded in the hermeneutics of the Islamic tradition rather than subordinated to ready-made Western classifications.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken here permits several conclusions. First, Müller’s “science of religion” was a transfer of the German philological and romantic tradition into a British institutional context; the “Germanness” of this project is a matter of lineage, not geography, and it is precisely this that explains both his method and its limits. Second, philology was for Müller not an auxiliary means but a foundation: the unity of language, myth, and religion is a structural principle of his system, not a set of disparate enthusiasms.

Third, Müller’s role is twofold. He played a key part in the institutionalisation of the discipline, giving it a comparative principle, the distinction between the scholarly and the theological approach, and – through *The Sacred Books of the East*

- a conceptual grid that long defined the field. But the same text-centred and universalist orientation carried Eurocentrism, a covert Protestant normativism, and reductionism, exposed by criticism from Lang to Said and King. Müller's contribution to contemporary religious studies should therefore be conceived dialectically: the discipline inherits from him institutionally and categorially while overcoming him in substance.

Three directions appear promising for further research: a comparison of the German and British lines of the institutionalisation of religious studies; a reconstruction of the translation principles of individual volumes of *The Sacred Books of the East* in their connection with the construction of the category of "world religions"; and a comparison of Müller's text-centrism with the hermeneutics of Islamic textology, important for the scholarship of Central Asia. Such an approach makes it possible to move from an assessment of Müller as a "founder" to an understanding of him as a nodal figure in the long and contradictory history of the discipline.

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