University of Groningen

3.10 Max Müller: Chips from a German Workshop (England, 1867)

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Published in:

Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism

DOI:

[10.1163/9789004329003_039](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004329003_039)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Molendijk, A. (2017). 3.10 Max Müller: Chips from a German Workshop (England, 1867). In B. Benthage, M. Eggert, H-M. Krämer, & S. Reichmuth (Eds.), *Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism* (pp. 503-511). (Religious Studies, Theology and Philosophy E-books Online; Vol. 154), (Numen Book Series). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004329003_039

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Max Müller: Chips from a German Workshop (England, 1867)

Introduction

There can be no doubt that Western scholarship was an important part of the colonial project. Yet, that does not necessarily imply that it was viewed in a negative way. The work of the philologist, orientalist and religious studies scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), for instance, is still remembered with the greatest respect in India. In his biography of Müller, the famous Bengali writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri tells his readers how as a child he came to know about him. He had learned from his father who “was not a highly educated man in the formal sense” how Müller had established “that our languages and the European languages belonged to the same family . . .; that Sanskrit *Dyaus Pitr* and the Greek *Zeus Pater* were identical; and that we Hindus and the Europeans were both peoples descended from the same original stock.”¹ Müller never visited India, but his critical edition of the Rigveda (1873) was the *de facto* canonisation of a Sanskrit classic, later used to support a Hindu nationalism in India. The East was thus represented textually by translations. In this vein Müller launched the edition of the *Sacred Books of the East*—49 volumes appeared between 1879 and 1904 (the index was published in 1910).² His plan to include the Old and New Testament had to be abandoned out of fear that it would offend Christians.

Müller established his fame as a comparative philologist and, especially, as the founder of the comparative study of religion.³ He was born in Dessau in Germany in 1823. His father, Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827) was a well-known

1 Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller*, P. C. (Delhi et al.: Oxford University Press, 1974), 5.

2 F. Max Müller, *The Sacred Books of the East: Translated by Various Oriental Scholars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879–1910); Arie L. Molendijk, *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

3 On Müller and his scholarship see also: Norman Girardot, “Max Müller’s Sacred Books and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions,” *Religions* 4, 1/3 (2002): 213–250; Arie L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Romantic poet, who is nowadays chiefly remembered as the writer of poems such as *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise*, set to music by Franz Schubert. Max Müller worked and studied in Leipzig, Berlin, Paris, London, and Oxford. In Berlin, he attended classes with linguist Franz Bopp and Friedrich Schelling's lectures on mythology. In Paris, he was introduced to the eminent philologist Eugène Burnouf (1801–52), who encouraged him to copy and to edit a manuscript of the Rigveda. In 1858, he was elected a fellow of All Souls College at the University of Oxford. To his great disappointment, however, he did not obtain the prestigious and well-endowed Boden professorship of Sanskrit. In its obituary, *The Times* addressed this traumatic issue as follows: "he was foreigner, his theology was suspect to the rigid orthodoxy, he was a familiar friend of the liberal movement in Oxford."⁴ In 1868, Oxford acknowledged Müller's prestige and created a new chair for him in comparative philology.

Müller had high expectations in the newly established scholarship of *comparative religion* (as the endeavour was often called at the time) and he succeeded in popularizing the field. His lectures on religious subjects drew large crowds, and he was what one might call an academic celebrity. He had to read his Hibbert Lectures twice because the auditorium did not offer enough room for all who wanted to attend,⁵ and various pirate editions of his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* circulated. Müller himself was not unduly modest about what was to be achieved: "The Science of Religion may be the last of the sciences which man is destined to elaborate; but when it is elaborated, it will change the aspect of the world, and give new life to Christianity itself."⁶ The narrowness of our own religious horizon will disappear if we are willing to conduct the study of religion "in a bold, but scholar-like, careful, and reverent spirit."⁷

Müller combined a Romantic view of the value of religious difference with a firm belief in the possibility of a sound scientific investigation of these phenomena. If we are willing to study "positive facts" and to "read . . . the history of the world," we will see:

4 Lourens P. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller. A Life Devoted to the Humanities* (Leiden: Brill 2002), 83.

5 Cf. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans, Green, and co., 1878), vii.

6 Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop, vol. I: Essays on the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and co 1867), xix–xx.

7 Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, (London: Longmans, Green, and co 1873), ix.

that, as in geology, so in the history of human thought, theoretic uniformity does not exist, and that the past is never altogether lost. The oldest formations of thought crop out everywhere, and if we dig but deep enough, we shall find that even the sandy desert in which we are asked to live, rests everywhere on the firm foundation of that primeval, yet indestructible granite of the human soul,—religious faith.⁸

The analogy with the work of the geologist who digs up old layers and materials, the fundament of our existence, is striking. The findings of nineteenth-century geology and archaeology had contributed to the overthrow of the biblical chronology of world history. This was an important step in the development of a naturalistic science, which allowed the very origin of humankind to be studied without reference to supernatural intervention. What is also remarkable in the above quotation is the metaphor of the ‘sandy desert,’ which betrays a nostalgia for the religious past. Most pervasive, however, is the implied global view, which frames unity within religious difference. The preferred way to unearth the treasure is the comparative method: “all higher knowledge is acquired by comparison, and rests on comparison.”⁹ This insight also pertains to ‘our religion.’ “In order to understand fully the position of Christianity in the history of the world, and its true place among the religions of mankind, we must compare it, not with Judaism only, but with the religious aspirations of the whole world.”¹⁰ In the end, this endeavour, Müller strongly believed, would be to the benefit of Christian belief.

In 1867, Müller published the first volume of his *Chips from a German Workshop*, in which he collected his shorter essays on the science of religion “to engage the attention of the public at large” (viii). The text fragment presented here is taken from the preface of this collection and focuses on some of the basic issues of the new science and the benefits Müller expected from it. On the one hand, Christianity is seen as the culmination of religious development in world history, on the other hand, there is a (Romantic) notion of decay discernible in his work and the call to look for the unblemished origins of religion. Müller is especially interested in the radical (from the Latin *radix* = root) elements of religion, which although they often be distorted, come to the surface again and again. These original elements are—according to him—an

8 Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, xxxii.

9 Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 12.

10 Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, xxviii.

intuition of God, a sense of human weakness and dependence, a distinction between good and evil, and a hope for better life.¹¹

In his preface, Müller also noted that scholars had collected so many cultural and religious materials over the last fifty years, thereby making comparison feasible and meaningful. This does, however, not mean that there is agreement about the character of the various religions, and it is with this observation about 'contradictory views' that the fragment below starts. In the selected text, Müller explicitly points to the utility of the comparative study of religion for missionaries (who also, of course, collected materials, although it is clear that Müller is predominantly interested in the textual character of religions). The fragment stops when Müller embarks upon elaborating on the fact that the 'Fathers of the Church' were much more in favour of comparing religions than many present-day believers.

Müller's most famous saying likely is: "He who knows one [religion], knows none." The comparative study of religions will thus contribute to a better understanding of religion and will dig up invaluable treasures, the indestructible granite of the human soul, i.e. religious faith. This anti-institutional view of religion in fact implied a program of reform. Müller took a stance against all kinds of 'superstitions' and 'miracles' and defended an interiorised, almost mystical form of religion that "places the human soul in the presence of God."¹² The establishment of the new comparative science of religion, believed Müller, would lead to a transformation of religion itself and show the unity of the Finite and the Infinite.¹³

Arie L. Molendijk

Further Reading

Molendijk, Arie L. *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016.

Molendijk, Arie L. *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Van den Bosch, Lourens P. Friedrich Max Müller: *A Life Devoted to the Humanities*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Van der Veer, Peter. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001.

¹¹ Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, x.

¹² Müller, Introduction to the Science of Religion, 263.

¹³ Van den Bosch, *Müller*, 151.

Source Text¹⁴

If such contradictory views can be held and defended with regard to religious systems still prevalent amongst us, where we can cross-examine living witnesses, and appeal to chapter and verse in their sacred writings, what must the difficulty be when we have to deal with the religions of the past? I do not wish to disguise these difficulties which are inherent in a comparative study of the religions of the world. I rather dwell on them strongly, in order to show how much care and caution is required in so difficult a subject, and how much indulgence should be shown in judging of the shortcomings and errors that are unavoidable in so comprehensive a study. It was supposed at one time that a comparative analysis of the languages of mankind must transcend the powers of man: and yet by the combined and well directed efforts of many scholars, great results have here been obtained, and the principles that must guide the student of the Science of Language are now firmly established. It will be the same with the Science of Religion. By a proper division of labour, the materials that are still wanting will be collected and published and translated, and when that is done, surely man will never rest till he has discovered the purpose that runs through the religions of mankind, and till he has reconstructed the true *Civitas Dei* on foundations as wide as the ends of the world. The Science of Religion may be the last of the sciences which man is destined to elaborate; but when it is elaborated, it will change the aspect of the world, and give a new life to Christianity itself.

The Fathers of the Church, though living in much more dangerous proximity to the ancient religions of the Gentiles, admitted freely that a comparison of Christianity and other religions was useful. "If there is any agreement," Basilius remarked, "between their (the Greeks') doctrines and our own, it may benefit us to know them: if not, then to compare them and to learn how they differ, will help not a little towards confirming that which is the better of the two."

But this is not the only advantage of a comparative study of religions. The Science of Religion will for the first time assign to Christianity its right place among the religions of the world; it will show for the first time fully what was meant by the fulness of time; it will restore to the whole history of the world, in its unconscious progress towards Christianity, its true and sacred character.

Not many years ago great offense was given by an eminent writer who remarked that the time had come when the history of Christianity should be treated in a truly historical spirit, in the same spirit in which we treat the history

14 Taken from Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 1: *Essays on the Science of Religion*, second edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1868), xix–xxviii; taken from the "Preface," dated October 1867 (identical with first edition 1867).

of other religions, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, or Mohammedanism. And yet what can be truer? He must be a man of little faith, who would fear to subject his own religion to the same critical tests to which the historian subjects all other religions. We need not surely crave a tender or merciful treatment for that faith which we hold to be the only true one. We should rather challenge for it the severest tests and trials, as the sailor would for the good ship to which he entrusts his own life, and the lives of those who are most dear to him. In the Science of Religion, we can decline no comparisons, nor claim any immunities for Christianity, as little as the missionary can, when wrestling with the subtle Brahman, or the fanatical Mussulman, or the plain speaking Zulu. And if we send out our missionaries to every part of the world to face every kind of religion, to shrink from no contest, to be appalled by no objections, we must not give way at home or within our own hearts to any misgivings, that a comparative study of the religions of the world could shake the firm foundations on which we must stand or fall.

To the missionary more particularly a comparative study of the religions of mankind will be, I believe, of the greatest assistance. Missionaries are apt to look upon all other religions as something totally distinct from their own, as formerly they used to describe the languages of barbarous nations as something more like the twittering of birds than the articulate speech of men. The Science of Language has taught us that there is order and wisdom in all languages, and that even the most degraded jargons contain the ruins of former greatness and beauty. The Science of Religion, I hope, will produce a similar change in our views of barbarous forms of faith and worship; and missionaries, instead of looking only for points of difference, will look out more anxiously for any common ground, any spark of the true light that may still be revived, any altar that may be dedicated afresh to the true God.

And even to us at home, a wider view of the religious life of the world may teach many a useful lesson. Immense as is the difference between our own and all other religions of the world—and few can know that difference who have not honestly examined the foundations of their own as well as of other religions—the position which believers and unbelievers occupy with regard to their various forms of faith is very much the same all over the world. The difficulties which trouble us, have troubled the hearts and minds of men as far back as we can trace the beginnings of religious life. The great problems touching the relation of the Finite to the Infinite, of the human mind as the recipient, and of the Divine Spirit as the source of truth, are old problems indeed; and while watching their appearance in different countries, and their treatment under varying circumstances, we shall be able, I believe, to profit ourselves, both by the errors which others committed before us, and by the truth which they discovered. We

shall know the rocks that threaten every religion in this changing and shifting world of ours, and having watched many a storm of religious controversy and many a shipwreck in distant seas, we shall face with greater calmness and prudence the troubled waters at home.

If there is one thing which a comparative study of religions places in the clearest light, it is the inevitable decay to which every religion is exposed. It may seem almost like a truism, that no religion can continue to be what it was during the lifetime of its founder and its first apostles. Yet it is but seldom borne in mind that without constant reformation, i.e. without a constant return to its fountain-head, every religion, even the most perfect, nay the most perfect on account of its very perfection, more even than others, suffers from its contact with the world, as the purest air suffers from the mere fact of its being breathed.

Whenever we can trace back a religion to its first beginnings, we find it free from many of the blemishes that offend us in its later phases. The founders of the ancient religions of the world, as far as we can judge, were minds of a high stamp, full of noble aspirations, yearning for truth, devoted to the welfare of their neighbors, examples of purity and unselfishness. What they desired to found upon earth was but seldom realized, and their sayings, if preserved in their original form, offer often a strange contrast to the practice of those who profess to be their disciples. As soon as a religion is established, and more particularly when it has become the religion of a powerful state, the foreign and worldly elements encroach more and more on the original foundation, and human interests mar the simplicity and purity of the plan which the founder had conceived in his own heart, and matured in his communings with his God. Even those who lived with Buddha, misunderstood his words, and at the Great Council which had to settle the Buddhist canon, Asoka, the Indian Constantine, had to remind the assembled priests that "what had been said by Buddha, that alone was well said;" and that certain works ascribed to Buddha, as, for instance, the instruction given to his son, Râhula, were apocryphal, if not heretical. With every century, Buddhism, when it was accepted by nations, differing as widely as Mongols and Hindus, when its sacred writings were translated into languages as wide apart as Sanskrit and Chinese, assumed widely different aspects, till at last the Buddhism of the Shamans in the steppes of Tataria is as different from the teaching of the original *Samana*, as the Christianity of the leader of the Chinese rebels is from the teaching of Christ. If missionaries could show to the Brahmans, the Buddhists, the Zoroastrians, nay, even to the Mohammedans, how much their present faith differs from the faith of their forefathers and founders, if they could place into their hands and read with them in a kindly spirit the original documents in which these various religions

profess to be founded, and enable them to distinguish between the doctrines of their own sacred books and the additions of later ages, an important advantage would be gained, and the choice between Christ and other Masters would be rendered far more easy to many a truth-seeking soul. But for that purpose it is necessary that we too should see the beam in our own eyes, and learn to distinguish between the Christianity of the nineteenth century and the religion of Christ. If we find that the Christianity of the nineteenth century does not win as many hearts in India and China as it ought, let us remember that it was the Christianity of the first century in all its dogmatic simplicity, but with its overpowering love of God and man, that conquered the world and superseded religions and philosophies, more difficult to conquer than the religious and philosophical systems of Hindus and Buddhists. If we can teach something to the Brahmans in reading with them their sacred hymns, they too can teach us something when reading with us the Gospel of Christ. Never shall I forget the deep despondency of a Hindu convert, a real martyr to his faith, who had pictured to himself from the pages of the New Testament what a Christian country must be, and who when he came to Europe found everything so different from what he had imagined in his lonely meditations at Benares! It was the Bible only that saved him from returning to his old religion, and helped him to discern beneath theological futilities, accumulated during nearly two thousand years, beneath pharisaical hypocrisy, infidelity, and want of charity, the buried, but still living seed, committed to the earth by Christ and his Apostles. How can a missionary in such circumstances meet the surprise and questions of his pupils, unless he may point to that seed, and tell them what Christianity was meant to be; unless he may show that like all other religions, Christianity, too, has had its history; that the Christianity of the nineteenth century is not the Christianity of the Middle Ages, that the Christianity of the Middle Ages was not that of the early Councils, that the Christianity of the early Councils was not that of the Apostles, and "that what has been said by Christ that alone was well said?"

The advantages, however, which missionaries and other defenders of the faith will gain from a comparative study of religions, though important hereafter, are not at present the chief object of these researches. In order to maintain their scientific character, they must be independent of all extraneous considerations: they must aim at truth, trusting that even unpalatable truths, like unpalatable medicine, will reinvigorate the system into which they enter. To those, no doubt, who value the tenets of their religion as the miser values his pearls and precious stones, thinking their value lessened if pearls and stones of the same kind are found in other parts of the world, the Science of Religion will bring many a rude shock; but to the true believer, truth, wherever it appears, is

welcome, nor will any doctrine seem to be less true or less precious, because it was seen, not only by Moses or Christ, but likewise by Buddha or Lao-tse. Nor should it be forgotten that while a comparison of ancient religions will certainly show that some of the most vital articles of faith are the common property of the whole of mankind, at least of all who seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, the same comparison alone can possibly teach us what is peculiar to Christianity, and what has secured to it that pre-eminent position which now it holds in spite of all obloquy. The gain will be greater than the loss, if loss there be, which I, at least, shall never admit.

There is a strong feeling, I know, in the minds of all people against any attempt to treat their own religion as a member of a class, and, in one sense, that feeling is perfectly justified. To each individual, his own religion, if he really believes in it, is something quite inseparable from himself, something unique, that cannot be compared to anything else, or replaced by anything else. Our own religion is, in that respect, something like our own language. In its form it may be like other languages; in its essence and in its relation to ourselves, it stands alone and admits of no peer or rival.

But in the history of the world, our religion, like our own language, is but one out of many; and in order to understand fully the position of Christianity in the history of the world, and its true place among the religions of mankind, we must compare it, not with Judaism only, but with the religious aspirations of the whole world, with all, in fact, that Christianity came either to destroy or to fulfil. From this point of view Christianity forms part, no doubt, of what people call profane history, but by that very fact, profane history ceases to be profane, and regains throughout that sacred character of which it had been deprived by a false distinction.

Selected by Arie L. Molendijk