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 Dyau 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 orthodox Christians.

Müller has 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

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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 the familiar friend of the liberal movement in Oxford.” In 1868, Oxford acknowledged Müller’s achievements 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, 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.”

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.”

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:

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