

Fieldnotes in the Critical Study of Religion

Revisiting Classical Theorists

Edited by

**RICHARD NEWTON AND
VAIA TOUNA**

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Friedrich Max Müller

Brent Nongbri

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.¹

Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) is widely considered to be a—or perhaps even *the*—founding figure of the academic field that would eventually become known in North America as religious studies.² As a student in Leipzig, Müller studied philosophy and at age nineteen completed a doctoral dissertation on Spinoza’s *Ethics*. At the same time, he mastered several languages and became especially adept at Sanskrit. Following further study in Paris and Berlin, Müller settled at Oxford in 1850 and deepened his linguistic knowledge by working on unedited Sanskrit manuscripts that had been gathered by the British East India Company. After being passed over for a chaired professorship in Sanskrit at Oxford in 1860, Müller turned his attention to comparative linguistics and religion. By 1868, Oxford had established a chaired professorship in comparative philology, to which Müller was the first person appointed. During his time at Oxford, Müller wrote prolifically in both academic and popular outlets and became a well-known public intellectual in the UK and beyond. At the heart of his work were the convictions that (1) the comparative study of languages could offer deep insight into human thought, mythology, and religion, and (2) that just as scholars had been able to

develop a systematic and comparative "Science of Language" in the mold of the emerging fields of geology, chemistry, and biology, they could and should also be able to develop an analogous "Science of Religion."³

The quotation that opens this chapter is extracted from the preface to the first volume of *Chips from a German Workshop*, a collection of lectures and articles that Müller produced in the 1850s and 1860s while he was working on an English translation of the *Rigveda*, a large collection of ancient Sanskrit hymns. Most of the essays in *Chips from a German Workshop* take an explicitly comparative approach (for instance, "Genesis and the Zend-Avesta"), and such comparisons were a regular feature of Müller's work. Our quotation's placement of Christianity "among the religions of the world" fits comfortably within Müller's relentlessly *comparative* approach to the study of religion. As he phrased it elsewhere, "He who knows one, knows none."⁴ For Müller, a truly scientific approach to religion had to be comparative. This emphasis on comparison has left a strong imprint on the academic study of religion up to the present day. For a considerable period in the twentieth century, almost any study of religion in university contexts was carried out under the banner of "Comparative Religion."⁵ Even now most university curricula emphatically stress the importance of comparison in the study of religion, although what exactly is meant by "comparison" varies from scholar to scholar, as I will discuss later.

While Müller's focus on the importance of comparison may thus feel familiar to twenty-first-century students of religious studies, the overt Christian bias in the opening quotation will certainly strike some as odd and inappropriate. That the "Science of Religion" should (scientifically!) establish the superiority of Christianity over other religions is a position that no critical scholar would embrace today. Yet, this was a very common view in the nineteenth century when the academic study of religion was beginning to take shape. Comparison involved value judgments, and the "scientific" study of religion could have quite practical outcomes. As Müller noted in a passage that follows shortly after our opening quotation, "To the missionary more particularly a comparative study of the religions of mankind will be, I believe, of the greatest assistance."⁶ That is to say, knowledge of "other" religions could be helpful for Christians seeking to win converts. For Müller, there was no contradiction between an objective "Science of Religion" and the obvious preeminence of Christianity. He was not alone. The Dutch scholar and theologian Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830–1902) shared Müller's concern that the study of religion should be comparative. And like Müller, Tiele sought "to treat Christianity simply as a subject of comparative study, from a scientific, not for a religious point of view." Nevertheless, Tiele's "scientific" examination led to a classification and hierarchical ranking of religions. The "highest" religions were those he categorized as "universal": Islam, Buddhism, and

Christianity. And for Tiele, "Christianity ranks incommensurably high above both its rivals."⁷ A generation after Müller and Tiele, Louis Henry Jordan (1855–1923) would frame the general principle of agonistic comparison in clear terms: "Comparative Religion is that Science which compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various Religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, *and their relative superiority or inferiority when regarded as types.*"⁸ Given the European and North American setting of much of this early scholarship, it should come as little surprise that "scientific" analyses of religions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries strike these tones of Christian triumphalism.

If these founding figures of the "Science of Religion" were operating within what now seems to be such a problematic framework, what light can Müller's quotation cast on the *current* state of the academic study of religion? I would like to draw out three strands of thought from Müller's statement—the practice of religious studies as a legacy of Christian identity formation, the framing of the study of religion as a "science," and the ongoing emphasis on comparison in academic approaches to religion.

It is not controversial to point out that Müller, Tiele, and others of their generation operated with ideas about religion that were decisively shaped by the Christian contexts in which they lived and worked, just as we all are products of our social locations. Indeed, a common way of narrating the history of the academic discipline of religious studies is to plot it as a story of a progressive liberation from Christian theological presuppositions: While the early practitioners of the discipline may have been impaired in some respects by their Christian assumptions, subsequent generations of scholars studying non-Christian cultures have become increasingly aware of Christian theological "biases" and "distortions" and eliminated them with greater and greater success as the years have passed. Yet, one of the insights of the last several decades of reflection on the concept of religion is the recognition that religion is not a native category for most cultures. The concept of religion is itself a relic of specifically Christian disputes over identity that took place during the era of the Protestant Reformation and the age of European colonial expansion.⁹ Europeans' efforts to understand newly discovered peoples around the world drew upon comparisons with warring factions of Christians back in Europe. The idea of a world populated by people belonging to different religious groups is a result of what the historian Peter Harrison has aptly described as "the projection of Christian disunity onto the world."¹⁰ It is this projection that helped to generate the "world religions" studied by Müller and his contemporaries. It is not the case, as Müller and many others have imagined, that religions are simply part of the natural world and form a natural category common to all cultures.¹¹ Thus, while the narrative of a progressive

"de-Christianizing" of the study of religion may in some regards ring true, the overall enterprise of the study of religion, even in its twenty-first-century manifestation, has an inescapably Christian orientation.

This state of affairs leads to a second point that should catch our attention, Müller's characterization of the academic study of religion as a "science." At first glance, this term may seem insignificant, simply the result of a clumsy translation of the German word *Wissenschaft*, which both had and still has a broader meaning than the English word "science," encompassing learning of all sorts, including what we might today call arts and humanities along with the natural sciences. But the writings of Müller and his contemporaries make it quite clear that they saw themselves as constructing something more akin to what we would today call one of the "natural sciences" or "hard sciences."¹² Müller regularly used analogies with such sciences to describe the "Science of Religion":¹³

My endeavour has been ... to yield to no presumptions, but to submit to facts only, such as we find them in the Sacred Books of the East, to try to decipher and understand them as we try to decipher and understand the geological annals of the earth, and to discover in them reason, cause and effect, and, if possible, that close genealogical coherence which alone can change empirical into scientific knowledge. This *genealogical* method is no doubt the most perfect when we can follow the growth of religious ideas, as it were, from son to father, from pupil to teacher, from the negative to the positive stage. But where this is impossible, the *analogical* method also has its advantages, enabling us to watch the same dogmas springing up independently in various places, and to discover from their similarities and dissimilarities what is due to our common nature, and what must be attributed to the influence of individual thinkers.¹⁴

Here, Müller invokes analogies from both geology and biology to frame the study of religion. That Müller should make such connections is not surprising. He lived through an age of rapidly changing ways of understanding and classifying the natural world, from the development of evolutionary taxonomy in the 1860s to the formalization of the periodic table of elements in 1871. A drive toward comparison and classification was in the air, and Müller framed both the "Science of Language" and the "Science of Religion" as a part of this general movement: "All real science rests on classification, and only in case we cannot succeed in classifying the various dialects of faith, shall we have to confess that a science of religion is really an impossibility."¹⁵ Much of Müller's prodigious corpus of writing about religion sought to carry out this kind of classification and systematization. The results of his labors and those of other early practitioners were summarized by Jordan, who assured readers

that by 1905 the "Science of Religion" had indeed met the most demanding standards:

By "Science" we mean, in brief, not only ample knowledge, but systematised knowledge. In addition to the multifarious facts which have been collected and verified and then assorted into classes, we must be able to discover and verify some at least of the *laws* which link these facts together, and which demonstrate that they are in reality integral parts of a coherent whole.¹⁶

Jordan thus suggested that the "Science of Religion" could operate in the same way as physics or biology, observing facts and generating laws with explanatory and predictive force. The idea that the study of religion should be expected to engage in the same kinds of processes and produce the same kinds of results as the natural sciences has had a mixed legacy. Over the course of the twentieth century some practicing scientists themselves began to argue that the natural sciences are not simply a set of disembodied laws but rather a cluster of social practices.¹⁷ Viewed from this angle, the "hard sciences" are a discourse (the sum of what scientists do and say), and not the transparent window on nature that many of Müller's contemporaries imagined that the natural sciences could be. Today, then, many scholars of religion see no reason at all to attempt to model the study of religion strictly on the natural sciences. On the other hand, a significant segment of the academic field of religious studies continues to look to the natural sciences, especially cognitive science, as the most promising direction for the study of religion.¹⁸

I turn finally to the ongoing role of comparison in the study of religion. Müller's generation of scholars were intent upon describing the world as they thought it actually was and then organizing this knowledge. Religions existed in the world and needed to be accurately understood. Such understanding of religions was best achieved through *comparison* of characteristics. Some in the field today embrace a similar approach to comparison.¹⁹ The now time-honored practice of introducing university students to the study of religion by teaching them sets of facts about "World Religions" would be a prime example. Other scholars, however, have attempted to use comparison in a rather different way. Jonathan Z. Smith, for instance, has made the following case:

Comparison does not necessarily tell us how things "are." ... Like models and metaphors, comparison tells us how things might be conceived A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being "like" in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which

we "re-vision" phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems.²⁰

Recognizing that no specific items or characteristics of items naturally *demand* comparison requires us to direct our attention to which items a given scholar *chooses* to compare and how that scholar goes about the act of comparison. As we have already noted, Müller took for granted that religions were simply there in the world, waiting for competent scholars to accurately describe and classify them. For Müller, the means of comparison of these religions was obvious. To compare religions was to compare *texts*: "In order to have a solid foundation for a comparative study of the religions of the East, we must have before all things complete and thoroughly faithful translations of their sacred books."²¹ To this end, Müller undertook the monumental task of overseeing the publication of a fifty-volume set of English translations of ancient "sacred" literature, *The Sacred Books of the East*, published between 1879 and 1910. Cultures without writing (and hence without scriptures) were simply not a part of this comparative undertaking. Müller was happy to have the input of modern practitioners from various traditions, but the point of reference for him was always texts: "Nothing can be more welcome for our purpose than that learned natives also from eastern countries should give us their individual views of their own religions. But it should be a condition *sine qua non* that they should always support their statements by references to their own sacred and canonical texts."²² In addition to neglecting those cultures that lacked written scriptures, the choice (both by Müller and many of his predecessors and contemporaries) to focus strictly on comparison of texts also tended to "textualize" those groups that they did study. European scholars who mastered the ancient languages tended to judge contemporary practitioners against the idealized religious systems they extracted from these ancient texts. For instance, Müller had this to say about the modern Parsis (followers of the Persian prophet Zoroaster) in India: The Parsi priests "would have to admit that they cannot understand one word of the sacred writings in which they profess to believe A Parsi, in fact, hardly knows what his faith is."²³ Such scholars thus effectively made themselves the arbiters of what counted as "good" religion and "bad" religion. Again, this is a role that many scholars of religion still wish to play.²⁴ For our purposes, the point is that choices about what to study and compare have consequences.

Thus, one lesson that can be taken away from Müller is this: When we make comparisons, we should take care to be acutely aware of our own choices: Why are we comparing *these particular* items and not others? How and why have we chosen the *criteria* by which we will compare our chosen items? Making these choices explicit allows others to subject them to analysis and criticism, which, at the end of the day, is what scholarship is all about.

Müller's approach to the study of religion as reflected in the opening quotation is thus perhaps not so distant from the practice of religious studies today as it might at first appear. As we have just seen, Müller's comparative impulse finds different forms of expression among contemporary students of religious studies. And even Müller's obvious Christian biases may be understood as simply saying out loud that which is only just whispered or implicit in much current scholarship on religion in North American and in some European contexts: Even the most seemingly objective comparative studies of religion are, simply by using the concept of religion, inflected with (Protestant) Christian assumptions, even those studies of religion that are still couched in terms of "science."²⁵

1 Friedrich Max Müller

- 1 Friedrich Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop: Essays on the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1867), 1.xx.
- 2 See, for example, Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 68: “[Müller] must be regarded as one of the chief founders—as well as one of the most prominent sustaining patrons—of the new science of the study of religion.”
- 3 For a chronology of Müller’s life and an overview of his career, see Lourens P. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). For an alternative take on Müller’s views on Christianity, see Tomoko Masuzawa, “Our Master’s Voice: F. Max Müller after a Hundred Years of Solitude,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15 (2003): 305–28.
- 4 Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1873), 15–16. Müller was here summarizing the viewpoint of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who demanded a comparative approach to language, claiming that “If you have no familiarity with foreign languages, then you don’t really know your own language” (“Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen”); see Johann Peter Eckermann and Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer (eds.), *Goethe’s Werke: Vollständige Ausgabe letzter Hand*, vol. 49 (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung, 1833), 44.
- 5 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, [1975] 1986).
- 6 Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, 1.xxi.
- 7 For the quotations, see Cornelis P. Tiele, “Religions,” in *Encyclopaedia Briannica*, 9th ed. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1886), 20.358–71, at 20.369. For his more extended arguments, see Cornelis P. Tiele, *Elements of the Science of Religion*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1897–9).
- 8 Louis Henry Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1905), 63 (emphasis added).
- 9 See Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). It is interesting to see a reflection, albeit a distorted one, of the specifically Christian character of the enterprise of comparative religion in Müller’s own writings:

It is Christianity alone, which, as the religion of humanity, as the religion of no caste, of no chosen people, has taught us to study the history of mankind, as our own, to discover the traces of a divine wisdom and love in the development of all the races of the world, and to recognise, if possible, even in the lowest and crudest forms of religious belief, not the work of the devil, but something that indicates a divine guidance. ... In no religion was there a soil so well prepared for the cultivation of Comparative Theology as in our own. (Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 38–9)

- 10 Peter Harrison, *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 174.
- 11 Müller's statements on this point are fairly unambiguous. For example: "No human beings have been found anywhere who do not possess something which to them is religion" (*Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), 79).
- 12 Müller's preferred term was "physical sciences" (as opposed to the "historical sciences"). He made extended arguments for the classification of the "Science of Language" as a physical science (see, for instance, Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, first series, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), 1–27). I am not aware of such explicit claims for the classification of the "Science of Religion," but contemporary reactions to Müller seem to have found this implication in his writings. Thus William D. Whitney wrote in 1881:

The comparative study of the non-Christian religions has, as everyone knows, become in recent time a prominent subject of public attention, and is likely so to continue. It has even been ticketed with the name of a "science," in accordance with the fashion of the day—or, it may be said, with the intent of claiming for this department of investigation a breadth of basis, a strictness of method, and a certainty of attained results analogous with those of other departments commonly called by the same name. As to whether the claim is well founded opinions will, and with good reason, differ. (William D. Whitney, "On the So-called Science of Religion," *Princeton Review* 57 (1881): 429–52, at 429)

- 13 Müller was not fond of the terminology of "comparative religion," preferring "comparative theology," on analogy with naming conventions of other sciences: "The name of comparative religion should be avoided. We do not speak of comparative language but of comparative philology. No one would use comparative bones in the sense of comparative anatomy. If theology is the science of religion, comparative theology is the natural name for a comparative study of religions" (Friedrich Max Müller, "The Principles of the Science of Religion Or Comparative Theology," in *Universal Religion: A Course of Lessons, Historical and Scientific, on the Various Faiths of the World*, ed. Edmund Buckley (Chicago: University Association, 1897), 17–29, at 21).
- 14 Friedrich Max Müller, *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1893), vi–vii.
- 15 Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 123.
- 16 Jordan, *Comparative Religion*, 13–14. Italics in original.
- 17 See the essays collected in Andrew Pickering (ed.), *Science as Practice and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 18 For a recent example, see Donald Wiebe, "An Old *Methodenstreit* Made New: Rejecting a 'Science-Lite' Study of Religion," in *Evolution, Cognition, and the History of Religion: A New Synthesis, Festschrift in Honour of Armin W. Geertz*, ed. Anders Klostergaard Petersen, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Luther

- H. Martin, Jeppe Sinding Jensen, and Jesper Sørensen (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 130–40.
- 19** An especially prominent example is the popular work of Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2007).
- 20** Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52. Italics in original.
- 21** Friedrich Max Müller (ed.), *The Sacred Books of the East, Translated by Various Oriental Scholars*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), xi–xii. For a contextualization of this project, see Arie L. Molendijk, *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 22** Müller, "The Principles of the Science of Religion," 29. Italics in original.
- 23** Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, 1.170–1.
- 24** For examples of scholars attempting to dictate good and bad religious practice and a critique of this overall approach, see Aaron W. Hughes, *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2015).
- 25** Here I have in mind evolutionary and cognitive science approaches to religion, which seem to me to be at risk of biologizing or medicalizing and thus naturalizing and universalizing a local and culturally specific taxon (religion). A more fruitful way of proceeding with cognitive science and evolutionary theory may be to turn to the larger cognitive phenomena of which religion is but one local, culturally specific example. See Maurice Bloch, "Why Religion Is Nothing Special but Is Central," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 363 (2008): 2055–61.

2 William James

- 1** William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), 490.
- 2** *Ibid.*, 31.
- 3** *Ibid.*, 489. Italics in original.
- 4** Birgit Meyer, "Medium," *Material Religion* 7.1 (2011): 58.
- 5** Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 6.
- 6** Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 71–5.
- 7** Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff: An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis* (New York: J. S. Brown, 1857), 218.