

## The Role of Text and Context in the Emergence of Religious Studies

**Review of: Molendijk, A.L. (2016) *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East*. New York: Oxford University Press. — 230 p.**

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In recent years, the global religious studies community has shown an interest in the history of the discipline. An example of such interest is Arie Molendijk's *Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East*, published in 2016 by Oxford University Press. This volume is of interest for several reasons. First, even though a considerable body of scholarship is dedicated to Max Müller's legacy, only two works touch upon his largest publishing project — the multivolume edition of *The Sacred Books of the East* (Sun 2013; Girardot 2002). Molendijk chose to fill this gap with a detailed analysis of the background, the content, and the theoretical foundations of the published series. The publishing of *The Sacred Books of the East* was one of the boldest publishing projects of the Victorian intellectual sphere and was comparable in scale only to the famed publication of J.P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, reprints of the Oxford English Dictionary, and the Encyclopaedia Britannica. For the study of religion in the nine-

teenth and early twentieth centuries, this work is unparalleled. Its value lies not only in the fact that Western readers were given access to Eastern religious texts in a familiar language for the first time, but more importantly, this project signals the beginning of the scientific study of religion (as F. Max Müller understood it). Second, the author of the volume, Arie Molendijk, is renowned as one of the most prominent and meticulous historians of the study of religion. His earlier work on the establishment of the scientific study of religion in the Netherlands shed light on previously unknown aspects of the development of religious studies and stimulated a reexamination of the process of its institutionalization, and a reevaluation of specifics and conditions for the genesis of the phenomenology of religion (Molendijk 2005). A distinctive feature of Molendijk's work is that he grounds it in previously unknown or less studied archival materials, and the volume in question is not an exception. Third, despite the fact that

the main theme of the book is the history and the content of the *Sacred Books of the East* series, Molendijk's work discusses a whole range of relevant questions for the history of religious studies.

Molendijk's book consists of six chapters. The first chapter, "The Right Honorable Max Müller" is dedicated to the biography of the scholar. Müller's biography in the book is not supplementary to the main content.<sup>9</sup> Molendijk explains that to understand the specifics of the series it is necessary to understand the personality of its chief editor, what qualities he possessed and what position he held in society. Molendijk reconstructs Müller's career, his studies in Germany with Schelling, Burnouf, and Bopp, his move to Britain in 1850, and his work in Oxford. His family life is also described along with his romantic encounter and marriage to Georgina and individual stories from his personal life.

Two aspects are of particular interest in the first chapter. The first connects to the general characteristics of Müller's personality. Molendijk purposely quotes nu-

merous assessments of him as a scholar and a person by his contemporaries. These assessments vary from "the greatest scholar of his generation" (p. 27) to "one of the greatest humbugs of the century" (p. 27). Molendijk deliberately refuses to identify with either. He shows that Müller was a complex personality and every opinion, even the harshest critique, could be justified. Müller was a public intellectual on the scale of Richard Dawkins, Noam Chomsky, or Jürgen Habermas; his work by definition could not go unnoticed, thus was bound to elicit critique. A significant part of the chapter is given to a description of Müller's self-understanding. He valued his own work and achievements highly and in the last decades of his lifetime engaged in active self-mythologization. Müller intentionally strove to create for himself the aura of a great man. This is supported by constant comparison of him to Indian philosophers in the biography compiled by Müller's wife and a telling text that Müller himself dictated on his deathbed to his son.<sup>10</sup> Despite his detach-

9. Let us follow the author's lead and call Max Müller simply Müller for brevity. As Molendijk comments, Müller was given two names at birth, Friedrich in honor of his mother's brother and Max for the main character of the opera *Der Freischütz*. When Müller moved to Britain, he made his middle name into part of his last name.

10. This text opens with a piece that is worth quoting here: "People wish to know how a boy, born and educated in a small and almost unknown town in the center of Germany, should have come to England, should have been chosen to edit the oldest book of the world, *The Veda* of the *Brahmans*, never published before, whether in

ment from the sources, Molendijk draws for the reader a portrait of a confident, fame-hungry, and determined scholar.

A second noteworthy aspect is connected to Müller's status in Oxford. Even though his standing at the university increased rapidly and steadily and after eighteen years of work a new chair of comparative philology was created for him, Müller met with apprehension and even hostility in Oxford. The reason for this was not only his wide popularity. Müller was a German Lutheran and alien to the Oxford establishment by nationality and faith. An important episode showing the attitude toward Müller in Oxford are the elections for the post of professor of Sanskrit that seemingly should have favored Müller as an expert of international renown. Müller competed for this position with his rival, Monier-Williams. Müller lost the election (only 610 professors voted for him versus 833 votes to his competitor), and the reason for this was that the Oxford establishment considered him an outsider.

The second chapter, "The Making of a Series," offers a de-

India or in Europe, should have passed the best part of his life as a professor in the most famous and, as it was thought, the most exclusive University in England, and should actually have ended his days as a Member of Her Majesty's most honourable Privy Council" (p. 10).

tailed description of the history of the creation of the series. It is interesting that originally, mainly because of the loss of the election, Müller was planning to leave Oxford and return to Germany.<sup>11</sup> In preparation for his departure, he proposed the *Sacred Books of the East* project to the University of Berlin, while stipulating to the Oxford leadership the conditions under which he would stay on in England. As a result, after a series of complicated negotiations, funding for the project was split between Oxford University Press and the India Office. Müller kept his salary at the university, but a new professor, who received only half-pay, was appointed to his teaching position; Müller was to discontinue teaching. All these conditions made it possible for Müller to work on the project. The publication project continued from 1879 to 1910; during this time, fifty volumes of translations were produced. Müller personally supervised the entire conceptual basis of the project. The project was substantially his own, and all other scholars took part merely as translators or, in some cases, as commentators. An international team worked on the project; among the contributors were a Frenchman, a Dane, a Dutch-

11. Molendijk even quotes Müller's letter to a friend: "Here I am a nobody in the University" (p. 45).

man, a Japanese, an Indian, six Sanskrit scholars from Germany and six translators from Britain. They translated texts from Chinese, Pali, Persian, and Arabic. Interestingly, there were virtually no theologians among the translators, and some did not hide their deep sympathies for Eastern religions. According to Müller's concept, the series was to include books from the eight world religions, which he believed to be Brahmanism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the faith of Moses, Christianity, the religion of Muhammad, the teachings of Confucius and Lao Tzu. Despite such a wide range, eventually the Old and the New Testaments were excluded from the series, because their equalization with texts from other religions caused strong protests among scholars and Anglican clergy. In the general composition of the texts Molendijk and other experts see a strong bias in favor of Hinduism, Müller's main passion. The chapter describes in detail all the difficulties that Müller encountered when working on his ambitious project.

The third chapter, "Concepts and Ideas," covers the key principles of the series design. Molendijk emphasizes that it was based on the unmistakable Protestant idea of authority of scripture. For Müller, the essence of religion was reduced to sacred texts, and the prerogative

of comprehending this text belonged exclusively to authoritative specialists, meaning Western scholars. Molendijk quotes a curious phrase of Müller's in this respect: "We cannot accept that the interpretation of Indian commentators, for instance, is always the right one. On the contrary, these native interpretations, by the very authority which naturally might seem to belong to them, are often misleading, and we must try to keep ourselves, as much as possible, independent of them" (p. 92). At the same time, Müller thought it necessary for Western scholars to put themselves in the position of believers from other religions. It can be said that the idea of empathic understanding was his main condition for an adequate translation of a sacred text.

From the conceptual point of view, the central concept for the entire project was the idea of a sacred book. Müller had a curious interpretation of the term "sacred" as applied to texts — a sacred text is one that received "general recognition or sanction" (p. 56). "Sacred" and "canonical" are synonyms for Müller. Thus, neither Homer's texts, nor the Egyptian Book of the Dead, nor Babylonian religious texts qualified as sacred. Müller was only interested in texts that played the largest historical role, so the defining factor for a sacred text was

not the conditions of its emergence but its reception by later generations. In addition, Müller believed that a sacred text should be organized as a book, to be divided into chapters or verses, to have a beginning and an ending. Collections of parables or less structured narratives did not qualify for the status of a sacred book. This led to the fact that many texts that are considered essential for understanding Eastern religions by modern scholars were not included in Müller's project.

Müller's attitude to principles of translation is also worth mentioning. He believed that a translation from one language to another even within the common Western culture is an extremely complex endeavor and complete adequacy of translation is unattainable. It is all the more difficult when the translation is made not only from a distant language but from a culture removed from us in time and space. Müller thought that translation was to build a bridge connecting different times and cultures, that it could bring a strange concept closer to us, make it more comprehensible, but it could not be communicated entirely accurately. Nonetheless, Müller made every effort to popularize Eastern texts in the West. This is reflected in one of his most widely known metaphors — Müller of-

ten called the *Sacred Books of the East* the Bibles of humanity. On the one hand, this expression clearly indicates a projection of Western culture onto the Eastern world; on the other hand, it reveals a desire to bring this culture closer and increase its status to equal the Western culture, in a sense. In doing so, he did not consider the term "Bible" as the only normative term and believed that it could be substituted with "the Vedas or the Korans of the World" (p. 96). From the technical point of view, Müller advocated for the most accurate translation of the text even when accuracy went against the literary norms of the English language. The only important exception to the rule of accuracy of translation were scenes of a sexual nature. Müller deliberately decided to exclude them from ancient sacred texts, on the one hand, to avoid scandalizing the demure Victorian public, and on the other, following his conviction that ancient religions contained too many useless strata that sometimes prevented pearls of wisdom from being discovered. Obviously, this approach played an important role in understanding ancient religions in the culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Writers, poets, and artists inspired by Müller's series often "portrayed childlike, often passionless inno-

cent deities, who were close to the natural order” (p. 103).

Chapter 4, “Methods,” focuses on the key principle of compiling the series, which is comparative religious studies. It has become a common understanding among researchers into Müller’s work that Müller’s theory of religion was derived from the linguistic theory he had developed in his early work in philology. In this book Molendijk follows this general idea and shows how consistently Müller applied and promoted the comparative method in the study of religion. Müller believed that by joining comparative linguistics and the historical method of the study of religion he was laying the foundations for a new empirical science of religion that would be equally removed from theological infatuation with religious ideas and from anthropological fixation on living religious communities and their practices. For him the study of religion was primarily a study of religious texts. The comparative method was expected to shed light on the unity of human history and common principles of its functioning and to show how individual religions evolved and enriched each other.

The fifth chapter, “Religion of Humanity,” covers the ideological subtext behind the project of publishing of *The Sacred Books of the East*. As was mentioned

earlier, Müller was a Lutheran, and Protestant principles of interpreting scripture that he absorbed from childhood played a key part in the design of the series. In this chapter, Molendijk specifically discusses the question of Müller’s personal faith. As the reader might remember, the opinion formed among scholars that while studying Hinduism Müller himself embraced the idea of the faith in the impersonal Unity, and proceeding from this, he studied other religions in the belief that all roads would lead to one source.<sup>12</sup> Molendijk contests this point of view. He demonstrates that Müller was a Lutheran his entire life, and quite conservative in his convictions. Müller did not accept all the achievements of biblical criticism and looked down on the High Church movement that strove to reinstate the role of religious rites in Protestantism. Moreover, Müller saw his project to publish books of the East as an act of evangelism. At the same time, he rejected the aggressive forms of contemporary mission that perceived all followers of Eastern religions as servants of demons. In his opinion, this tone of “offended orthodoxy . . . entirely disregards the fact that is

12. See, for example, Strenski (2015), who notes that “Müller’s own religion . . . tended toward pantheism” (Ibid., p. 41).

has pleased God to let these men and millions of human beings be born on earth without a chance of ever hearing of the existence of the gospel” (p. 154). Müller thought that mission should take a more delicate path of interfaith dialogue, and for that missionaries should know and understand the cultures in which they preach. This was the purpose of the *Sacred Books* project. Müller saw the same work of God in all religions, but he considered Christianity a superior religion, repeatedly emphasizing that in other religions grains of truth were buried under mountains of misconceptions. On the personal level, Müller made many attempts to persuade his Hindu friends to become Christians. At the same time, in the Lutheran spirit, he claimed that “Christian teaching [finds its entrance] into every human heart, which is freed from the ensnaring powers of priests and from the obscuring influence of philosophers” (p. 152).

The last chapter of the book, “Intellectual Impact,” comments on the place that Müller’s project occupied in the subsequent scholarly tradition. Molendijk emphasizes that the publication of the sacred books was part of the larger movement in creating high science. Müller’s project, which united so many scholars from different countries, defined

the view on Eastern religions for half a century in many respects. The authority of *The Sacred Books* went almost uncontested until the end of World War II and no similar projects emerged in this interval. At that, the project carried an imprint of the Victorian worldview and Victorian scholarship, and its essence was defined by Müller’s foundational Lutheran missionary concepts as well as philologically oriented principles of taxonomy and comparativism. These approaches became outdated by the second half of the twentieth century and could no longer generate interest.

Molendijk’s work is very rich and gives abundant food for thought. Further, we will turn to three important themes that it discusses. Molendijk positions himself as an expert on intellectual history, thus Müller’s work should be integrated into a broad cultural context. In this case the imperial discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cannot not be ignored. Müller’s work was funded by an imperial institution and played a certain part in strengthening the policies of the colonizers. It can be said that the translation of central Indian sacred texts into English was an attempt to colonize the Eastern world intellectually. Contemporary post-colonial studies clearly inscribe

Müller's project within this context.<sup>13</sup> Molendijk does not fully agree with this idea, he argues against simplistic interpretations, showing that in fact Müller aimed to create an image of humankind as one family, in which the East acted as the cradle of civilization. Thus, an understanding of ancient texts is an understanding of a common history rather than a simple tool for intellectual subjugation of another culture. The concept of the "Aryan" that Müller devised played an important role in this context. Scholars have frequently reproached Müller for laying the foundation for racial theory. Molendijk shows that Müller never sought to promote racial views, for him "Aryan" was a synonym of "Indo-European" and only had meaning as a linguistic category. However, Müller's work reveals the idea of an opposition between Semitic and Aryan types of religion. He saw the Aryan type as more rationalized, the Semitic as more ritualized, and Christianity as derived from a convergence of both these types. Unlike many contemporary historians, Molendijk avoids making harsh judgments, and instead he tries to analyze all the details and show the complexity of historical realities, even if they

are not similar to contemporary society.

The concept of constructing religious studies categories is connected to the idea of imperial discourse in many ways. Contemporary historians often accused Müller of being one of the first authors to suggest the construct "world religions," thus imparting an imaginary unity to unrelated religious traditions. Molendijk goes against the mainstream tendency here too. He openly criticizes the works of J. Z. Smith and T. Masuzawa, exposing their tendentious and sometimes superficial textual analysis. Molendijk believes that the trend of criticism focused on looking for hidden ideological patterns that has become popular in the recent decades often negates the value of the classic works of religious studies, taking them out of the context of the era in which they were written. Molendijk notes that Müller's work should not be seen as a work that created certain concepts but as a "crucial marker" (p. 184) that denotes certain processes in the history of religious studies. Thus, it was not Müller or his series that shaped the imperial discourse and the concept of world religions, on the contrary, they were only imprints of a common cultural process of the era and understanding them outside of this process is counterproductive.

13. See, for example, an integrated characteristic in Strenski (2015), pp. 38–40.

Molendijk's book poses another very valuable question. What place does Müller's project occupy in the history of religious studies? The author does not provide a direct answer to it; the book is only explicit about Müller's role in developing the comparative method of religious studies, however, the material offered in the text provides a basis for broader generalizations. Müller's approach to religion and its structure, his conception of the unity of the religions of humankind, the idea of translating religious concepts of one culture into the language of another, and empathy as a necessary condition for accomplishing a translation suggest that Müller's works played a significant part in the development of the classical phenomenology of religion. Chronological and textual connections as well as conceptual common ground can be traced between Müller's works and the works of phenomenologists. All the basic principles of the study of religion advanced by Müller are reiterated almost verbatim in the foundational works of F. Heiler (Samarina 2013). The concept of the unity of the world of religions, the idea of a single force acting within it, and, as a result, a possibility of interfaith dialogue are reflected in the projects of R. Otto and the activities of the Eranos circle (Nosachev

2015, 25–35). Müller's key understanding of religion as an "ineradicable feeling of dependence on God" deeply rooted within a human being refers directly to the philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose works also provided the foundation for the classical phenomenology of religion. Thus, Molendijk's work opens a new perspective for an examination of Müller's legacy within the context of the history of phenomenology of religion, but this work requires a separate study.

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