



## Max Müller: Navigating the Intricacies of Scholarship and Colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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### Abstract

This research paper delves into the complex relationship between 19th-century academic scholarship and colonialism, concentrating on the life and work of Friedrich Max Müller, a significant figure in comparative linguistics and religious studies. Previous research has underscored Müller's pivotal contributions to studying Sanskrit texts and his theories on language and religion, demonstrating his profound influence on multiple academic fields. However, many of these studies have not sufficiently explored the colonial context that shaped Müller's work, often neglecting how his scholarship reinforced Eurocentric perspectives and contributed to the formation of racial theories. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing Müller's scholarship, translations, and evolving views on India and Hinduism through a postcolonial lens.

This paper critically examines Müller's legacy and its lasting influence on Indology and religious studies using a comprehensive review of primary sources, scholarly critiques, and postcolonial theory. The methodology includes a close reading of Müller's writings, contextualised by historical analyses and critiques that reveal the interplay between his intellectual pursuits and the colonial power structures of his time. The findings of this research underscore the need for persistent critical reflection and decolonisation within academic disciplines, underscoring the importance of acknowledging the colonial entanglements in the foundations of contemporary scholarship. This analysis contributes to broader discussions on how historical scholarship can perpetuate power dynamics and the ongoing endeavours to reshape these narratives for a more inclusive academic discourse.

Keywords: Max Müller, colonialism, Indology, comparative linguistics, religious studies, Orientalism, Rig Veda, Aryan race theory, postcolonial theory

## Introduction

Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) stands as a towering figure in the history of Indology and comparative religious studies. His monumental work on Sanskrit texts, particularly his translation of the Rig Veda, along with his theories on language and religion, left an indelible mark on multiple academic disciplines [2]. However, as Edward Said's influential critique of Orientalism suggests, the work of scholars like Müller cannot be separated from the colonial context in which they operated [24]. This paper examines Müller's scholarship, situating it within the broader framework of 19th-century colonialism and its impact on knowledge production.

The colonial context of the 19th century had a profound influence on academic scholarship, shaping how European scholars approached the study of non-Western cultures and religions [10]. The British colonial presence in India, in particular, played a significant role in developing Indology as a field of study [29]. Müller's work and that of his contemporaries were deeply embedded in this colonial milieu, often reflecting and reinforcing Eurocentric assumptions and power structures [14].

Edward Said's groundbreaking work, "Orientalism," provides a critical lens through which to analyze the relationship between scholarship and colonialism. Said argues that the Western study of the "Orient" was not an objective, disinterested pursuit of knowledge but a discourse that served to dominate, restructure, and have authority over the East [24]. This critique is particularly relevant to the study of Müller's work, as it calls into question the underlying assumptions and power dynamics that shaped his scholarship.

The objectives of this research paper are multifold:

It aims to comprehensively analyze Max Müller's scholarly contributions and their

influence on Indology, comparative linguistics, and religious studies.

It seeks to explore the colonial context in which Müller's work was produced and disseminated, examining how his scholarship was shaped by and complicit in colonial power structures.

This paper attempts to analyze the dubious elements of Müller's theories with particular regard for his significant duty in commemorating the idea regarding a "superior Aryan race" which later on has brought about unsuitable racist viewpoints.

As Muller's opinions on India and Hinduism changed over time, the article looks at how speaking across cultures could contribute to a decolonizing philosophy.

In evaluating Müller's lasting relevance and consequences, this paper explores both his scholarly accomplishments as well as the colonial background of his work.

The methodology employed in this research paper involves a close reading and critical analysis of Müller's primary texts, including his translations, scholarly works, and personal writings. It also draws upon various secondary sources, including scholarly critiques, historical analyses, and postcolonial theory, to contextualize and interrogate Müller's work. By bringing together these multiple viewpoints, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced and thorough understanding of Müller's complex relationship to colonialism and its impact on his scholarship.

## Early Career and Colonial Entanglements

Max Müller's academic pursuits were closely intertwined with British colonial interests in India from the outset of his career. His early work on the Rig Veda was commissioned by the East India Company, with the explicit aim of assisting Christian missionaries in their efforts to convert Hindus [2]. Müller himself acknowledged this missionary objective, stating his desire to

uncover "the old mischief of Indian priestcraft" and pave the way for "simple Christian teaching" [18]. This alignment of scholarly work with missionary goals exemplifies the complex relationship between academic knowledge production and colonial agendas in the 19th century.

The East India Company's patronage of Müller's work was not an isolated incident but rather part of a broader pattern of colonial involvement in developing Indology as a field of study. As Thomas Trautmann notes, "the British conquest of India was the enabling condition for the scholarly conquest of its past" [29]. The colonial administration actively supported and funded the work of scholars like Müller, seeing it as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of Indian society and culture, which could ultimately facilitate more effective control and governance [7].

However, as Müller delved deeper into his studies of Sanskrit and Indian religious texts, his views began to evolve. He developed a genuine fascination with and appreciation for Indian philosophy, particularly the Upanishads [19]. This shift in perspective highlights the transformative potential of intense cross-cultural engagement, even within the constraints of colonial power structures. Müller wrote, 'The Vedas are the oldest books in existence and represent the first literary efforts of the human race.' This demonstrates his high regard for Indian scriptures. [19].

Müller's growing admiration for Indian thought challenged, to some extent, the prevailing Eurocentric assumptions of his time, which often dismissed non-Western traditions as primitive or inferior [14]. In his collection of lectures, Müller addresses India's cultural and spiritual richness and criticizes the methods employed by Christian missionaries. He argues that attempts to convert Hindus and Buddhists using derogatory techniques are not only disrespectful but also ineffective in cultivating

genuine understanding and respect for Indian spiritual traditions [19]

However, despite this evolution in his personal views, Müller's work remained deeply embedded in the colonial context. His translations and interpretations of Sanskrit texts, while groundbreaking in many respects, were also shaped by the assumptions and agendas of the colonial enterprise. As Richard King argues, "the Western study of Indian religious traditions has been inextricably bound up with the power dynamics of colonialism and neo-colonialism" [10]. Müller's scholarship, even as it grew more appreciative of Indian thought, could not entirely escape these power dynamics.

The colonial entanglements of Müller's early career had far-reaching consequences for developing Indology and studying religion more broadly. His work helped establish Sanskrit studies as a legitimate European academic discipline. However, it also contributed to constructing a particular image of India and Hinduism shaped by colonial interests and assumptions [30]. As we shall see in the following sections, while influential, Müller's theories on language, race, and religion were also profoundly problematic in perpetuating Eurocentric views and reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

### **Comparative Linguistics and the Aryan Theory**

Max Müller's contributions to comparative linguistics were groundbreaking and laid the foundation for the modern study of language. His work on the Indo-European language family, which he initially termed "Aryan," revolutionized the understanding of linguistic relationships and historical language development [25]. Müller's linguistic theories were deeply intertwined with his study of ancient texts, particularly the Vedas. He argued, "Language is the outward expression of the spirit, and the study of language, in its widest sense, is the study of the working of the human mind" [32]. This perspective highlights Müller's

belief in the intrinsic connection between language, thought, and culture.

Müller's approach to Sanskrit was deeply rooted in his belief in its importance for understanding human thought and culture. As he wrote, "Sanskrit is to the science of language what mathematics is to astronomy" [33]. This perspective elevated the status of Sanskrit studies and contributed to a renewed interest in India's linguistic heritage.

Müller's systematic comparison of Sanskrit with other ancient languages, such as Greek, Latin, and Persian, revealed striking similarities that suggested a common ancestral language [16]. This discovery had profound implications for studying language and understanding human history and migration patterns.

Müller's linguistic theories were profoundly influential and inspired a generation of scholars to pursue the comparative study of languages. His emphasis on the systematic collection and analysis of linguistic data, as well as his promotion of a scientific approach to language study, helped to establish comparative linguistics as a rigorous academic discipline [11]. Müller's work also had a significant influence on the development of modern linguistic theories, particularly in the areas of phonology and morphology [31].

However, Müller's linguistic theories were not without their problematic aspects. One of the most controversial elements of his work was his promotion of the concept of an "Aryan race." While Müller initially used the term "Aryan" to refer specifically to a linguistic group, his writings often blurred the lines between language, race, and culture [29]. This blurring of categories reflected the pervasive Eurocentric assumptions of his time, which sought to classify and hierarchize human populations based on perceived linguistic and cultural differences [23].

Müller's characterization of the "Aryan race" as a superior civilization that had originated in Central Asia and spread throughout Europe and India had far-reaching consequences. His theories were later misappropriated by racist ideologies, such as Nazism, to justify claims of European racial superiority and to legitimize colonial domination [1]. While Müller himself did not advocate for a racist interpretation of his work, his use of racialized language and his promotion of a hierarchical view of civilizations contributed to the development of problematic racial theories that would have devastating consequences in the 20th century.

Moreover, Müller's theories about the Aryan race and its supposed origins in Central Asia were based on limited linguistic evidence and were heavily influenced by the Eurocentric assumptions of his time. Thomas Trautmann argues, "the Aryan theory was a product of European philology and had no basis in Indian tradition" [29]. The idea of an Aryan invasion of India, which Müller helped to popularize, was later challenged by archaeological evidence and has been largely discredited by contemporary scholars [4].

Müller's work on comparative linguistics and the Aryan theory also had substantial implications for studying Indian history and culture. His theories about the Aryan invasion of India and the supposed superiority of Aryan civilization over the indigenous Dravidian population reinforced colonial hierarchies and justified British rule over India [28]. These theories also had a profound impact on the development of Hindu nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as some Indian intellectuals sought to reclaim the Aryan heritage as a source of national pride and identity [13].

Ultimately, Müller's work in the field of comparative linguistics, irrespective of its own historical baggage, was highly significant; however, his espousal of an Aryan theory with



all its racial aspects is reprehensible. His work was, as with many of his contemporaries, conditioned by the Eurocentric assumptions and colonial power configurations which were prevalent in those days. The racist misuse of his theories and the role they played in Indian nationalism remind us once more of the often problematic relationship between scholarship and politics in a colonial setting.

### Müller's Translations and the Study of Religion

Max Müller's translations of Sanskrit texts, particularly the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, profoundly impacted European understandings of Indian religions. Müller devoted decades to translating the Rigveda, often underscoring its profound literary and philosophical significance rather than using it as a tool for proselytization. His monumental work on the Rig Veda, which he began translating in 1849 and completed in 1874, made this ancient text accessible to a broad audience for the first time [18]. As Müller himself noted, "I should like to live for ten years quite quietly and learn the language, try to make friends, and then see whether I was fit to take part in a work using which the old mischief of Indian priestcraft could be overthrown and the way opened for the entrance of simple Christian teaching" [18].

Müller's translations were significant not only for their linguistic accuracy and scholarly rigor but also for shaping European perceptions of Hinduism and Indian culture more broadly.

Müller's Sacred Books of the East series, which he edited and oversaw from 1879 to 1910, further expanded the scope of his translational work. This series, which eventually comprised fifty volumes, included translations of Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Islamic texts, among others [22]. The series was intended to make the "sacred books" of the East accessible to a Western audience and to promote the comparative study of religion. However, as Richard King argues, the selection and framing of these texts were shaped by colonial interests

and Orientalist assumptions about the nature of "Eastern" religions [10].

While innovative for its time, Müller's approach to comparative religious studies often reinforced Eurocentric views of religious evolution. Müller's works encouraged a comparative study of religions and highlighted common philosophical themes between Eastern and Western thought, promoting understanding over conversion (Müller, F. Max. Lectures on the Science of Religion. Longmans, Green, and Co, 1873).

He positioned Christianity as the pinnacle of religious development, with other traditions representing earlier stages in a universal progression towards monotheism [20]. This hierarchical framework, while reflecting the dominant Western perspective of the era, devalued and essentialized non-European religious traditions.

Moreover, Müller's translations and interpretations of Sanskrit texts were often colored by his theological and philosophical assumptions. As a devout Christian, Müller sought to reconcile his faith with the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads, usually accentuating aspects of these texts that resonated with his own religious beliefs [2]. While not uncommon among 19th-century scholars, this approach distorts and misrepresents the complexity and diversity of Indian religious thought.

Müller's work on comparative religion also had noteworthy implications for developing Indology as an academic discipline. Müller's extensive works on the Rigveda and Upanishads introduced Indian philosophy to a broader Western audience, contributing to the establishment of Indology as a respected academic field [5]. His emphasis on the study of texts and his promotion of a "scientific" approach to religion helped establish Indology as a legitimate field of study in European universities [14]. However, this textual focus also marginalized other aspects of Indian

religious life, such as ritual practice and oral traditions [30].

Furthermore, while groundbreaking in some respects, Müller's comparative approach to religion was also deeply problematic in its perpetuation of colonial power dynamics. As Tomoko Masuzawa argues, "the discourse of world religions...was a discourse of secularization that effectively functioned to assert the West's rational superiority over the 'Rest'" [14]. Müller and his contemporaries helped reinforce European intellectual and cultural superiority by classifying and comparing religions according to Western categories and standards.

Despite these problematic aspects, Müller's translations and his work on comparative religion profoundly impacted the development of religious studies as an academic discipline. His emphasis on the importance of studying religious texts in their original languages and his promotion of a comparative approach to religion helped to lay the foundation for modern scholarship in the field [12]. However, as contemporary scholars have increasingly recognized, this early work's colonial and Orientalist underpinnings must be critically examined and deconstructed to develop a more nuanced and equitable approach to the study of religion.

### Changing Views and Contested Legacy

Max Müller's attitudes towards India and Hinduism significantly changed throughout his long and prolific career. In his letters, Müller clarified that he aimed to study and preserve Indian texts authentically, and he regretted any misinterpretation of his work as a means to propagate Christianity [21]

In his later writings, Müller voiced a profound admiration for Indian philosophy and culture, describing India as a "paradise on earth" [19]. He became particularly enamored with the Upanishads, which he saw as containing profound spiritual truths that could rival the

teachings of Christianity [22]. This transition in mindset reflected, in part, Müller's growing disillusionment with the dogmatism of European religious institutions and his increasing appreciation for the diversity and complexity of Indian religious thought.

However, despite this evolution in his personal views, Müller's work remained profoundly affected by his time's Eurocentric assumptions and colonial power structures. As David Bosch argues, Müller's admiration for Indian philosophy never led him to question his fundamental commitment to Christianity as the ultimate truth [2]. Moreover, his comparative approach to religion, while ostensibly guided by a desire to understand and appreciate the diversity of human religious experience, often had the effect of decontextualizing and essentializing Indian religious traditions [27].

Müller's legacy, both in India and in the West, remains contested and complex. While he is often credited with introducing Indian philosophy and religion to a Western audience and promoting a more sympathetic understanding of Indian culture, his work is also criticized for its Orientalist assumptions and its role in perpetuating colonial power dynamics [30]. Ronald Inden argues, "Müller's Indianism, his glorification of 'Indian wisdom,' was part and parcel of the Orientalist project of dominating India" [9].

Müller's legacy in India is particularly complex. Reformers like Swami Vivekananda acknowledged Müller's role in rekindling interest in Indian philosophy and used his translations to challenge Western misinterpretations of Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda lauded Müller for his appreciation of Indian philosophy and his endeavors to elevate a more positive image of India in the West, others criticized him for his Eurocentric assumptions and his role in perpetuating colonial stereotypes [8]. As Wilhelm Halbfass notes, "Müller's reception in India oscillates

between uncritical appropriation and vehement rejection" [8].

Müller's legacy in the field of religious studies is similarly contested. While his emphasis on the comparative analysis of religion and his promotion of a "scientific" approach to the study of religious texts helped to establish religious studies as an academic discipline, his work is also criticized for its Orientalist assumptions and its perpetuation of colonial power dynamics [14]. Richard King argues, "the study of religion has been shaped by the discourse of Orientalism, which has served to construct, control and dominate the 'Orient' through the production of knowledge about it" [10].

Despite these critiques, Müller's work remains influential in religious studies, particularly in the subfield of comparative religion. His emphasis on the importance of studying religious texts in their original languages and his promotion of a comparative approach to religion have had an enduring effect on the development of the field [12]. However, contemporary scholars have increasingly recognized the need to critically examine and deconstruct the colonial and Orientalist underpinnings of this early work to develop a more nuanced and equitable approach to the study of religion [6].

So, with Max Müller, throughout Indiology and religious studies alike the legacy is multifarious at best. Although his work has been essential to the history of and belief about Indian philosophy/religion, it is similarly poised within colonial power structures and Orientalist foundations prevalent in his day. As contemporary scholars seek to decolonize and reimagine the study of religion, Müller's legacy serves as an essential reminder of the ongoing need for critical self-reflection and the decentering of Eurocentric perspectives in producing knowledge about the non-Western world.

## Conclusion

The life and work of Friedrich Max Müller offer a fascinating and complex case study of the entanglement of scholarship and colonialism in the 19th century. As one of the most influential figures in the early development of Indology and comparative religion, Müller's contributions to these fields were groundbreaking and far-reaching. His translations of Sanskrit texts, his theories on language and religion, and his promotion of a comparative approach to the study of religious traditions helped to establish these fields as legitimate areas of academic inquiry and laid the foundation for much of the scholarship that followed.

However, as this paper has demonstrated, Müller's work cannot be separated from the colonial context in which it was produced and disseminated. From his early involvement with the East India Company to his promotion of the Aryan race theory and his comparative approach to religion, Müller's scholarship was profoundly shaped by the assumptions, interests, and power structures of British colonialism in India. Even as his personal views on Indian philosophy and culture evolved, Müller remained committed to a fundamentally Eurocentric worldview that positioned Christianity as the ultimate standard against which all other religions were to be measured.

The complex and contested legacy of Müller reminds us that colonial-era scholarship continues to impact contemporary articulations [or self-fashioning] of Indian history, culture, and religion. As Richard King notes that "the study of Indian religions has been inextricably bound up with the construction of Western identity and the legitimation of Western cultural and political hegemony" [10]. Müller's work, while pioneering in many ways and ultimately was authoritative in the process that helped establish enduring Western perceptions of India and Hinduism, which have continued to inform

academic as well as popular Orientalist discourse till date.

Acknowledging the colonial and Orientalist biases underlying Müller's work does not devalue his contributions to Indology or religious studies but, instead, emphasizes a continued critical reflection on the origins of these disciplines. As contemporary scholars seek to decolonize and reimagine the study of religion, engaging with postcolonial critiques and centering the perspectives and experiences of those traditionally marginalized or excluded from producing academic knowledge is essential.

By critically examining Müller's life and work, this paper has sought to contribute to this larger project of decolonizing the study of religion and language. Through a close reading of Müller's texts and a critical engagement with the secondary literature, this study has underscored how scholarship and colonialism were intertwined in the 19th century and the ongoing legacy of this entanglement in contemporary academic discourse.

Ultimately, Max Müller's case reminds us of the importance of reflexivity and critical self-examination in all academic pursuits. As scholars, we must remain attentive to how our assumptions, biases, and institutional contexts shape the knowledge we produce and its impact on the world. By engaging in ongoing processes of self-reflection and critique, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive approach to scholarship that acknowledges the complex histories and power dynamics that have shaped our fields of study.

In conclusion, the life and work of Friedrich Max Müller offer a rich and multifaceted case study of the relationship between scholarship and colonialism in the 19th century. Although his contributions to Indology and religious studies were notable and long-lasting, they have proved an embattled or problematic legacy when we consider the colonial situation within which he worked or

the naive Orientalist bias that enabled them. Contemporary scholars exploring the decolonization and transformation of these fields will inevitably have to grapple with Müller's work, its legacy, and reception in order to develop more nuanced, self-reflective modes for studying religion and language well into our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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