



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Ergashev Oybek Qaxramon o'g'li¹, Abdullayeva Moxira²

¹International Islamic academy of Uzbekistan

²scientific supervisor

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6064824>

Man-Centric Approach to Religions.

Friedrich Max Muller, (1823–1900), German-born philologist and Vedic scholar, professor at Oxford University and celebrated public lecturer in the comparative study of language, mythology, and religion, editor of the Rig-Veda Samhita (6 vols.), and Editor of The Sacred Books of the East (50 vols.). Friedrich Max Muller was born on December 6, 1823, in Dessau, in the small German Duchy of Anhalt-Dessau. His father, Wilhelm Muller (1794–1827), had been a distinguished young Romantic poet known to many as the “Byron of Germany” for his Griechen Lieder, written in support of Greek nationalism. Before Wilhelm’s death, Franz Schubert had composed a pair of song cycles—Winterreise and Die Schone Mullerin—that immortalized two of Wilhelm’s best sets of poems. Max Muller’s mother, Adelheide Muller (c. 1799–1883), had been the eldest daughter of Ludwig von Basedow, a chief minister of Anhalt-Dessau. Max Muller was educated in nearby Leipzig, at the Nicolai-Schule where Leibniz also had been a student, and then at the University of Leipzig,

where his father’s memory opened doors for Muller into the city’s artistic circles. Muller at first considered a career as a poet and musician before settling upon the life of a scholar. Although he studied philosophy with Christian Weisse and M. W. Drobisch, Muller proved to be an especially gifted student of languages, mastering Greek and Latin as well as Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, the latter of which he had taken under Hermann Brockhaus. After completing a Ph.D. in philosophy in 1843, Muller continued his studies in Sanskrit and comparative philology at Berlin under Franz Bopp, who had been famous for examining the linguistic links among the so-called Aryan family of languages, and Friedrich Schelling, under whose influence Muller himself began to see striking parallels between the history of language and the history of religion. In early 1845, Muller travelled to Paris to study Sanskrit under Eugene Burnouf. Although Muller’s brief stay in Berlin saw the publication of his first book, a German translation of ancient Indian fables known as the Hitopadesa, it was in Paris where Muller received the research direction he needed. At Burnouf’s



urging, and with the diplomatic support of Baron Christian von Bunsen, Muller was commissioned by the East India Company and Oxford University Press to edit a critical edition of the Rg-Veda, a project that would take him twenty-four years to complete and would culminate in the six-volume Rig-Veda Samhita, with Sanaya's commentary. In 1846, Muller travelled to London, where a complete set of the Vedas was archived. Bunsen also helped Muller secure his first teaching and research positions at Oxford. In 1856, Muller achieved broad public recognition when he published his book-length essay "Comparative Mythology." In this essay, Muller applied current linguistic analysis to the study of mythology in order to account in a more intelligible manner for the creation of myths. According to Muller, the sun in its various phenomenal modes was the chief source of ancient mythology. In myths Muller saw not simply the personification of the sun, the dawn, the twilight, and so on, but a metaphysical correspondence that human thought and human language drew between the perception of nature and the analogies that the ancient Indo-Europeans had used when communicating what they perceived. The names that people gave to these phenomena, the nomina (sing. nomen), were later mistaken for divine beings, or numina (sing. numen), and myths began to develop around these names to account for their existence. Thus, for Muller, mythology represented an earlier "mythopoeic" period or strata in the evolution of human thought and, as such, was viewed by him as a vestige of the past that still

impressed itself on the thought and language of the present. Though Muller appears to have borrowed this and other ideas from Burnouf, including his assertion that mythology is a "disease" or weakness of language, the solar thesis that Muller had advanced as a young scholar came in time to overshadow much of his later, more original, thought. Beginning in the 1870s, critics, such as Andrew Lang, savagely attacked Muller's views on mythology. Indeed, it was Lang's relentless barrage against Muller that seemed to have had the most deleterious effect on the respect and influence that Muller's views on mythology had earlier enjoyed. In 1858 Muller was elected fellow of All Souls College, which, along with his stipend as deputy Taylorian professor of modern European languages, provided a sufficient income for him to marry and raise a family. In 1859, he published his most scholarly work to that point, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*. Although in 1860 Muller had lost a bitter election bid to fill Oxford's Boden Chair in Sanskrit, in 1861 and again in 1863 he presented a series of celebrated lectures on the study of language that were published in two volumes as *Lectures on the Science of Language*. By now Muller had become a leading voice in his field and, in recognition of his achievements, Oxford University created for him a chair in comparative philology, which he occupied from 1868 until his retirement in 1875. In his lifetime Max Muller achieved renown not only for his work in comparative philology and mythology, but also as a champion for the comparative study of religion as a



“science” apart from theology. But, despite his best efforts, Muller’s work would never gain the lasting success for which he had hoped. After his death in 1900, a Times of London obituary mourned his loss, acclaiming him “one of the most brilliant and prolific writers of our time; one whose voice has charmed several generations of Englishmen; who was a great scholar . . . possessing . . . a power of breathing human interest into dry bones, a curiously sympathetic intelligence and a rare mixture of the talents of the poet and the savant”. But others were much less effusive, such as Louis Henry Jordan, who called Muller’s work in comparative religion “incomplete and strangely defective.” Jordan believed that Muller had “attempted to be an investigator in far too many departments” and thus “was able to devote only such fragmentary leisure as he could manage to command. It was for this reason that he never really found time to apply himself, with resolute and persistent purpose, to the promotion of Comparative Religion”. Although Muller could not resist the temptation to open every door that invited his curiosity, he had in fact outlined for himself a specific research program that focused on questions concerning the origins and development of religion, mythology, and philosophy (or rather, cognitive thought) through a “scientific,” that is, comparative and historical, examination of language. It was near the end of his life, in his Contributions to the Science of Mythology (1897), that Muller laid out for his readers the logic behind the four sciences to which he had devoted much

of his fifty-year career at Oxford. Following the method of analyzing and clarifying concepts that he adopted from the German philosophers Johann Herbart and Friedrich Schelling, Muller’s aim was to trace the Indo-European (or Aryan) languages back to their common word roots, layer by layer, in order to uncover and comprehend “the whole sphere of activity of the human mind from the earliest period within the reach of our knowledge to the present day”. As he explained further: There is nothing more ancient in the world than language. The history of man begins, not with rude flints, rock temples or pyramids, but with language. The second stage is represented by myths as the first attempts at translating the phenomena of nature into thought. The third stage is that of religion or the recognition of moral powers, and in the end of One Moral Power behind and above all nature. The fourth and last is philosophy, or a critique of the powers of reason in their legitimate working on the data of experience. Muller believed that in the ancient Vedic scriptures, especially in its mythology, he had found the roots of human thought and the earliest form of religion. As he had proclaimed in his Autobiography: All knowledge, whether individual or possessed by mankind at large, must have begun with what the senses can perceive, before it could rise to signify something unperceived by the senses. Only after the blue aether had been perceived and named, was it possible to conceive and speak of the sky as active, as an agent, as a god. The step from the



visible to the invisible, from the perceived to the conceived, from nature to nature's gods, and from nature's god to a more sublime unseen and spiritual power. All this seemed to pass before our very eyes in the Veda, and then to be reflected in Homer and Pindar. Over three decades earlier, in the preface to his multi-volume collection of essays, *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867), Muller had already arrived at the interconnection among language, mythology, religion, and thought and the need for scholars to examine these connections historically and comparatively. As he wrote: "There is to my mind no subject more absorbing than tracing the origin and first growth of human thought not theoretically, but historically". At times he likened his linguistic work to that of an archaeologist and at other times to a geologist, digging down through the rock and shale to find the bottom layer of human conscious perception upon which the whole history of the evolution of human thought, mythology, and religion had been founded. "Language," he continued, "still bears the impress of the earliest thoughts of man buried under new thoughts, yet here and there still recoverable in their sharp original outline. By continuing our researches backward from the most modern to the most ancient strata, the very elements and roots of human speech have been reached, and with them the elements and roots of human thought". As with the roots of language, so with the roots of religion: "The elements and roots of religion were there as far back as we can trace the history of man; and the history

of religion, like the history of language, shows us throughout a succession of new combinations of the same radical *or root+ elements". For Muller, that foundation was the first conscious perception of the Infinite, this "One Moral Power behind and above all nature" mentioned earlier. Muller was convinced that it was from this perception of the Infinite that the root elements of all religions emerged, which included "a sense of human weakness and dependence, a belief in a Divine government of the world, a distinction between good and evil, and a hope of a better life". During his long career, Muller was engaged in nearly every intellectual debate that stirred up controversy, the most important of which was the debate over Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In his *Lectures on the Science of Language*, Muller argued forcefully that the distinction between human- and animal-kind was the possession of language by the former. So strong was Muller's position that when his younger Oxonian colleague Edward Tylor defended Darwin's position, Muller took it as a breach of their otherwise friendly rivalry. Then, when Darwin's book *The Descent of Man* appeared in 1871, Muller responded in 1873 with his *Lectures on Mr. Darwin's Philosophy of Language*, aimed largely to counter Darwin's supporters. Muller reiterated his views more systematically in *The Science of Thought* (1887), and once more in his *Three Lectures on the Science of Language* (1889). It should be noted that in all these works, Muller's main concern had been over the threat



that Darwin's ideas posed, not to religion, but to natural science. Muller, for his part, had already accepted the idea of an evolutionary development of religion, rejecting special revelation or any religious faculty or instinct in humankind as the source of religion or religious ideas. As Muller saw it, unless apes could speak and hence reason, Darwin was flatly wrong. And Muller declared that "language forms an impassable barrier between man and beast". Finally, in addition to his public stand against Darwinism, Muller also began to present to the English public his ideas on the comparative study of religion. Although Muller had been recognized chiefly for his work in comparative philology and mythology, it was his lectures in the "science" of religion that would prove to be his most provocative, earning him praise in some circles, but denunciation in others as being little more than an atheist in academic disguise. For instance, one clergyman condemned Muller's 1888 Gifford Lectures as "nothing less than a crusade against Divine revelation, against Jesus Christ, and against Christianity." Muller's first lecture series on religion, which he titled "Lectures on the Science of Religion," were given in 1870 and published in 1872 with a later dedication to Ralph Waldo Emerson. His second series of lectures, published in 1878 as *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion, as Illustrated by the Religions of India*, was presented at Westminster Abbey as the inaugural Hibbert Lectures. During this same period, Muller began work as editor of the monumental series *The Sacred*

Books of the East, the highly acclaimed fifty volume collection of sacred scriptures. For this collection, Muller offered several of his own translations, notably of the Upanisads (2 vols., 1879–1884) and of the Dhammapada (1881), both of which remain in print. During the last decade of his life, Muller returned once more to his views on the natural, or evolutionary, development of religion in four sets of Gifford Lectures, presented in Glasgow between 1888 and 1892. He published these lectures under the titles *Natural Religion* (1889), *Physical Religion* (1891), *Anthropological Religion* (1892), and *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (1893). As Muller explained anew, religion began with humanity's first perception of the Infinite in and beyond nature and natural phenomena. The Infinite has always existed but remained unnoticed until human consciousness rose above that of a brute animal. This awareness came, not by a divine revelation, but through human reflection upon the Infinite in nature, in humanity, and in the self. In essence, this is what Muller meant by natural, not nature, religion. Though almost wholly ignored by most modern critics of Muller's work, these four series of lectures encapsulate Muller's most complete and developed views, which had originated a half-century earlier. And though Muller believed that in his *Science of Religion* he was moving beyond theology to history, in the end his views were perhaps too heavily imbued with the language of theology—European as well as non-European—to



enable him to work out a truly comparative science of religion.

References

1. Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Karen Fields (Tr.), New York: Free Press, 1995.
2. Hinnells, John R. (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
3. James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Cambridge: Mass, 1985.
4. Jones, Lindsay. (ed. et al.), *Encyclopedia of Religion, USA*: Thomsan Gale, 2005.
5. Leeming, David A., Kathryn Madden and Stanton Marlan (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Religion*, New York: Springer, 2010.
6. Melton, Gordon J. (ed. Series), *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, New York: Facts on File, 2007.