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3

Translating the *Sacred Books of the East*

Friedrich Max Müller and the Orient

Arie L. Molendijk

Introduction

The edition of the 50 massive volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910, hereafter *SBE*) was one of the most ambitious and daring translation and editorial projects of late Victorian scholarship. Here a 'religious' East was systematically presented to a Western readership in English translations. The German-born philologist, orientalist, and religious scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) persuaded Oxford University Press to embark on this venture. "Müller's grand design" (Sutcliffe 1978: 45) was supported financially by Oxford University Press and the India Office of the British Empire. Müller resigned from his Oxford chair of comparative philology to become the general editor of this megaproject. He engaged an international team of renowned scholar-translators (among whom were James Legge, James Darmesteter, Hendrik Kern, Julius Eggeling, Thomas William Rhys Davids, Kashinath Trimbak Telang, and Hermann Oldenberg) to translate the 'sacred texts'. The series used and defined existing categories of the study of language and religion. The study of religion was often called 'comparative religion' at the time, indicating the importance of the comparative method for this emerging discipline.

Müller's project used translation into English from various ancient languages and locations as an interpretative tool with which to compare key religious texts. At the International Congress of Orientalists in London in 1874, Max Müller first presented the idea of establishing a series of translations and stressed the need to make 'Oriental knowledge' productive and available to the general public. This called for a joint effort and Müller summarized this venture in terms of a military expedition:

> If we want to see real progress made in that work with which we are more specially entrusted, the re-conquest of the Eastern world, we must work with one another, for one another, like members of one body, like soldiers of one army, guided by common principles, striving after common purposes, and sustained by common sympathies.
>
> *Müller 1876: 180*

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Even a scholar such as Müller, who was very sympathetic to the East and to India in particular, claimed that the "East is ours, we are its heirs, and claim by right our share in its inheritance" (Müller 1876: 183). This 'imperial' type of discourse, including the entanglement of oriental studies and colonialism, has been severely criticized after Edward Said's controversial, but path-breaking study on orientalism (Said 1995 [1978]). Müller's conviction that we owe vital elements of Western culture and civilization to the East leads indeed to an amazing sense of entitlement. He was utterly convinced of the benefits of comparing religions and their sacred books which would make it possible to attain a higher, spiritualized form of religion. There are only few scholars who have specifically focused their research on the *SBE*. This comes as somewhat of a surprise if one considers the vast amount of literature on the various aspects of Müller's work. The most extensive book still is Lourens van den Bosch's monumental monograph, which offers a fine overview of Müller's work and publications (van den Bosch 2002). Recently a volume on Müller, philology and religious studies in the Victorian era has been brought out (Davis and Nicholls 2018), as well as 'a transnational history of Modern Vedanta' through a study of two of its most influential exponents, Swami Vivekananda and Müller (Green 2016). Three scholars have specifically researched the *SBE*. Both Anna Sun and Norman Girardot addressed the subject in the context of their respective books on the controversies over the religious nature of Confucianism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Sun 2013), and on James Legge, the missionary, Sinologist, and later Oxford colleague of Müller, who contributed no fewer than six volumes to the series (Girardot 2002a).

One recent monograph that focuses on the *SBE*, offers critical analysis of the edition (Molendijk 2016). This chapter draws heavily on this monograph while foregrounding translation issues, which are of special interest on this occasion. First, the scope of the series will be addressed; second, Müller's views of translation will be scrutinized (including a separate, third section, on the allegedly 'hideous and repellent' character of the ancient texts); fourth and fifth sections discuss the role of the *SBE* in framing and establishing the concept of 'world religions' and the underpinning method of comparison; followed by sections highlighting the issue of the implied textualization of religion, Müller's take on the incongruity of ancient and modern language, and finally but briefly, the reception of the series.

Scope of the *SBE*, Selection of the Sacred Texts and Translation Difficulties

Müller thought the *SBE* not only useful to European theologians and missionaries, but of a more general historical importance as well. In his view, as the earliest records of civilizations, these texts provided information on "the moral sentiments, the social institutions, the legal maxims of some of the most important nations of antiquity" (Müller 1879: xl). But general historical interest was not the main criterion for inclusion. The texts needed to have a 'sacred' character, which means that they must have received 'general recognition or sanction' as a sacred text. The word sacred is used by Müller as a synonym for "canonical" (Müller 1879: xli). Homeric hymns do not qualify, and texts such as the Egyptian Book of the Dead are also excluded, because their interpretation is "as yet so difficult" that they only have an interest for specialists and are "hardly available for historical purposes" (Müller 1879: xli). The principle criteria for selection that Müller seems to be working with are what he perceived as canonical books of historical interest to the West. It took some time for Oxford University Press to approve the first 25 translations. Even Müller did not expect the *SBE* to be a commercial success, but it was, and subsequently there were no doubts about publishing the second series. Between 1879 and 1910, 50 volumes would appear—with some delay the huge index was published in 1910.

Six religions are represented in the *SBE*: Hinduism (the Vedas of ancient India), Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam. The "Jewish and Christian Scriptures" were left "out of consideration" (Müller 1879: xli). Personally, he regretted this very much, but the idea that the Christian religion was on the same par as other religions was unacceptable at the time in conservative Anglican Oxford. The religions that were included are not represented equally. In a laconic way Müller claimed that for Islam, "all that is essential is a trustworthy translation of the Koran" (Müller 1879: xlv). E. H. Palmer's translation of the Qur'an was published in 1880 in two volumes. Müller's close associate James Legge translated *The Sacred Books of China*, including four volumes on Confucianism and two on Daoism. The choice to represent East Asian religions by Confucianism and Daoism was at the time perhaps tenable, but does not do justice to East Asian religious traditions (Girardot 2002b: 226). Importantly, the inclusion of these two traditions *as religions* can be disputed as well. Anna Sun (2013) has argued in detail how the series contributed to the definition of Confucianism as a world religion (and not as a philosophy or ethics), which is heavily contested up to the present day.

In his Prospectus submitted to OUP for the entire series, Müller was—probably for strategic reasons since he did not know in advance which texts and translators would be available—not always very specific about the question of which texts were to be translated. As far as the 'Sacred Books of the Zoroastrians' were concerned, he only detailed that they will "require fuller notes and commentaries in order to make a translation intelligible and useful" (Müller 1879: xliv). In this rubric we find James Darmesteter and L. H. Mill's translation of the Zend-Avesta in three volumes, and five volumes of 'Pahlavi Texts', which were all translated by E. W. West. Twenty-one volumes were devoted to Hinduism, ten to Buddhism, complemented by two volumes of 'Jaina Sutras', translated by Hermann Jacobi.

In the whole series there was a heavy bias towards the Indian religions, which were of special interest to the Indologist Max Müller. In his Prospectus of 1876 he promised to give a—much asked for—translation of the *Rig-Veda* (the most ancient and fundamental Hindu text), "with a few explanatory notes only, such as are absolutely necessary to enable readers who are unacquainted with Sanskrit to understand the thoughts of the Vedic poets" (Müller 1879: xliv). At the same time, he would continue his *traduction raisonnée* of the hymns, which was intended for Sanskrit scholars. The translation for non-specialists would appear in the second series. First, Müller contributed two volumes with a selection of the principal Upanishads (later Vedic texts held sacred by Hindus), which he called "theosophic [sic] treatises of great interest and beauty" (Müller 1879: xliv). His next contribution to the series was a translation from the Pali of the *Dhammapada* (which is the most widely esteemed text of Theravada Buddhism, containing 423 verses), a collection of sayings attributed to the Buddha, a translation that Müller had published earlier in 1869. The series also included law texts and later works such as the now famous *Bhagavad-Gita* (a Hindu scripture that is part of the larger epic *Mahabharata*) and the popular *Vaya-purana* (one of the 18 major Puranas of Hinduism).

It is hard to pass judgement on his selection of texts. To some extent, Müller and his co-workers were aware of the limitations of their project. It can also be argued that their choice depended at least partly on the available translators and their competence and willingness to invest time in translations which were time-consuming and poorly paid. Traditional, oriental interests too played a role—intellectually and financially—as the India Office subsidized the series and was not willing to pay for texts that were not related to India. Importantly, the idea that ancient, eastern religions were at the cradle of a universal history of civilizations determined the scope of the series. Notwithstanding the criticisms that can and must be made both from a contemporary and a present-day perspective, we must also acknowledge that the series covered a broad span of religious traditions from the East.

One of the recurring themes in the various introductions to the translations is how difficult it was—even for specialist translators—to come up with an intelligent and intelligible rendering of the ancient texts and manuscripts. Even if the technical jargon was tackled and the major linguistic puzzles were solved, there still remained according to Müller "a vast amount of what we can only call meaningless jargon" in the Upanishads (Müller 1884a: xx). In his translation of some of the Buddhist sutras, T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), the British orientalist and founder of the Pali Text Society, was dubious about the efficacy of the translation project:

> I cannot hope that the renderings of the many technical terms, now for the first time submitted to the judgment of students of early Buddhism, will all stand the test of time. So perfectly dovetailed is the old Buddhist system, so utterly different from European Christianity are the ideas involved, so pregnant are the expressions used with deep and earnest religious feelings resting on a foundation completely apart from our own, that the translation of each term becomes a problem of great difficulty and delicacy.
>
> *Davids 1881: xxv*

Therefore, he decided not to present a "mere word-for-word-translation", but to try to convey an impression of "the unconscious eloquence which springs from deep religious emotion" (Davids 1881: xxxi). Others, similarly, expressed their concern. Hendrik Kern pointed to corrupt passages, which could not be rendered literally (Kern 1884: xxxviii), Georg Bühler found the problems he encountered in earlier translations he had made "infinitely less complicated than those connected with the metrical law-books and especially with the Manu-smriti" (Bühler 1886: xi), and L. H. Mills "laboured under no common difficulties" in finishing the third and concluding volume of the translation of the Zend-Avesta (Mills 1887: ix).

The sometimes lengthy introductions of the translators concern mainly linguistic problems pertinent to individual texts and languages, the character of the translated texts, and sometimes a relevant piece of history of the specific religion. Only Müller wrote about the objectives of the whole endeavour. The perspectives and ideas of the other translators played at best a subordinate role in defining the series. Müller deemed it necessary to study the ancient religions "in their own canonical texts", which should put an end to "vague assertions as to their nature and character, whether coming from the admirers or the detractors of those ancient creeds" (Letter to Liddell, 18 March 1882: 19). These historical documents were not to be tampered with. Translations had to be "accurate, complete, and unembellished" (Müller 1879: xx). After the painstaking work of precise translation was done, scholars may pass judgement on the moral value of these texts. Since Müller put his mark on the series as a whole, the focus of this chapter is on his views, rather than on individual translators contributing to the series.

Ideas on Translation

Crucial to the whole project of the *SBE* is the idea of translation. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Müller devoted a large part of his preface to the series as a whole to the character of the original texts and to the question of how to translate these in the right way. He formulated three 'cautions', the first concerning the character of the translated texts, the second with regard to the "difficulties [in] making a proper use of translations", and the third about the possibilities and impossibilities of rendering "ancient thought into modern speech" (Müller 1879: ix). The first warning will be treated in the next section, whereas the focus here is on Müller's view of translation.

Translations could never, according to Müller, take the place of originals. He warned, in particular, of jumping to conclusions before examining the whole corpus of texts. For instance, the claim that the religious notion of sin was missing altogether in the *Rig-Veda* was to be qualified as a result of other new translations, which had recently become available (Müller 1879: xxii). Translations were helpful, but they could not replace the original, as they were more easily misunderstood (Müller 1879: xxiii). What to make, for instance, of the 'perplexing' beginning of the *Chandogya Upanishad*: "Let a man worship the syllable Om"? To understand this expression, one had to know that meditation on this syllable consisted of its continuous repetition "with a view … of concentrating … on some higher object of thought" (Müller 1879: xxiii). This Hindu form of concentration of thought he felt may be 'almost unknown' to his age, which made passages like these very hard to understand. This does not mean, however, that they were meaningless. Only that the Western world had drifted away from these Eastern forms of thought and religion, according to Müller, and is hardly related at all to them anymore.

The issue of the contrast between 'modern' and 'ancient' is also addressed in the third caution. Given how difficult it already is to translate contemporary texts from German into French, or from English into German, it must be considered almost impossible to render ancient Sanskrit or Chinese into modern languages. In Müller's view, the most his collaborators could achieve was an "approximation of our language to theirs" (Müller 1879: xxvii). This last sentence has to be taken quite literally, as the source language (so to speak) is normative for him. The translator should "prefer to do some violence to language rather than to misrepresent old thoughts by clothing them in words which do not fit them" (Müller 1879: xxvii–xxviii). This is the lesser of the two possible evils. This point of departure has severe consequences: the readers may find some of the translations 'rather rugged', they may meet completely new combinations of nouns and adjectives, expressions may 'sound foreign', and sentences may seem "too long or too abrupt" (Müller 1879: xxviii). Yet in the preface to his translation of the *Rig-Veda*, Müller acknowledged that there are limitations to this principle and that translations "cannot retain expressions which, if literally rendered in English or any modern language, would have an air of quaintness or absurdity totally foreign to the intention of the ancient poets" (Müller 1869: xii). Despite this, a translation that was as close as possible to the original was of immense importance to Müller.

Müller's attempt to do justice to the original words and sentences boils down to a technique of estrangement that makes readers aware of the differences between ancient and modern language. Such techniques of estrangement are often referred to in translation studies as a 'foreignizing' approach to translation, a formulation Lawrence Venuti (1995/2008) developed from Friedrich Schleiermacher's essay 'Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens' (1813). Müller gave the example of the translation of 'Atman', which should not be rendered by 'soul, mind, or spirit', because these words may be predicated, whereas 'Atman' can only be used as a subject. Müller proposed to translate the Sanskrit word by 'self' or 'Self' (in the plural even 'selfs'):

> [n]o doubt in many passages it sounds strange in English to use self, and in the plural selfs instead of selves; but that very strangeness is useful, for while such words as soul and mind and spirit pass over us unrealised, self and selfs will always ruffle the surface of the mind, and stir up some reflection in the reader.
>
> *Müller 1879: xxix*

The advice is to keep as close to the original as possible, and in case of doubt even retain the Sanskrit word "rather than use a misleading substitute in English" (Müller 1879: xxii).

Müller's plea for a way of translating that shows how unfamiliar these ancient texts often are has severe consequences. The explicit purpose is to 'startle' his readers, "to set us thinking" (Müller 1879: xxxvi). The critical question that comes to mind here is whether this really helps the readers to understand the texts. Will they not just be baffled and stop reading? Müller's response to strengthen his position was to provide a whole commentary on what the terms or sentences meant. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that at other occasions he made a plea for a *traduction raisonnée*. In the preface to his translation of the *Rig-Veda*, Müller explained that he did not want to give a 'mere' translation, "but a full account of the reasons which justify the translator in assigning such a power to such a word, and such a meaning to such a sentence" (Müller 1869: xv). The implication, of course, is that the 'mere' translation could only be really understood along with the running commentary. This practice makes the readers aware of the fact that they do not really understand the texts which the experts translated and commented upon (Yelle 2012).

For Müller, crucial in understanding these ancient texts and their translations is becoming aware of the fact that they are fundamentally different. The flip side of this supposition is that to really understand these texts one has to get the perspective and intentions of the authors. This step from a basically alienated perspective to an inner understanding is made in the following fascinating passage in the introduction to the *SBE*:

> It is not enough simply to read the half-religious, half-philosophical utterances which we find in the Sacred Books of the East, and to say that they are strange, or obscure, or mystic. Plato is strange, till we know him; Berkeley is mystic, till for a time we have identified ourselves with him. So it is with these ancient sages, who have become the founders of the great religions of antiquity. They can never be judged from without, they must be judged from within. We need not become Brahmans or Buddhists or Taosze altogether, but we must for a time, if we wish to understand, and still more, if we are bold enough to undertake to translate their doctrines. Whoever shrinks from that effort, will see hardly anything in these sacred books or their translations but matter to wonder at or to laugh at; possibly something to make him thankful that he is not as other men. But to the patient reader these same books will, in spite of many drawbacks, open a new view of the history of the human race, of that one race to which we all belong, with all the fibres of our flesh, with all the fears and hopes of our soul.
>
> *Müller 1879: xxxvi–xxxvii*

This hermeneutics of—at least temporary—identification must bridge the, in other respects, apparently almost insurmountable distance between nineteenth-century translators and readers, on the one hand, and writers and believers in days long gone, on the other. Müller thought this possible on the basis of a shared human nature and—one is tempted to add—on the basis of the "omnipresence of a higher Power", which makes itself felt throughout human history in similar ways (Müller 1879: xxvii). This identification seems to be, however, more a religious act than helpful for the hard work of translation, as it is not clear how personal identification can actually contribute to solving the allegedly huge linguistic problems of near incommensurability. It is fascinating to see that while the tremendous problems of matching terms and meanings are at the forefront of Müller's discussion, understanding is also simultaneously taken for granted, as he assumes that once the terms are matched, translators and readers can, almost magically, overcome the huge distance in time and place between themselves (regardless of current religious beliefs) and an ancient religion.

"Hideous and Repellent"

Quite a few pages of Müller's introduction are spent on the first 'caution', concerning the 'character' of the source texts. He warned against high expectations. Older anthologies of ancient texts had led to the idea that these books are "full of primeval wisdom and religious enthusiasm"; it is now time "to dispel such illusions, and to place the study of ancient religions of the world on a more real and sound, on a more truly historical basis" (Müller 1879: ix). Amateurism has to be replaced by real scholarship, which is not blind to the true character of these ancient texts. A loving and at the same scholarly attitude does not ignore "faults and failures", and accepts the fact that the "dawn of religious thought … is not without its dark clouds, its chilling colds, its noxious vapours" (Müller 1879: xi).

Although Müller observes, "[w]e do not know Germany, if we know the Rhine; nor Rome, when we admired St. Peter's," he did not draw the spatial and geographical metaphors further, to show that there is also an ugly side to Germany and Rome. It is evident now that the scholar will not only focus on beautiful, strange, or startling aspects, but will also show "what is commonplace, tedious, or may it be repulsive, or, lastly, what is difficult to construe and to understand" (Müller 1879: xii). Müller even said how difficult it was for him to 'confess' that the *SBE* contains so much that is "not only unmeaning, artificial, and silly, but even hideous and repellent". To a certain degree, this is a rhetorical ploy, which is used to prepare his Victorian readers for what they must expect, but it is more than that. Apparently, it was not enough for Müller to speak of 'unintelligible' and 'childish' texts, suggesting distance and a scheme of development in religious history, but he actually expressed his distaste for these 'repellent' passages in the sacred texts.

Müller went to great lengths to explain this 'problem'. The old idea that non-Christian religions are based on ignorance and depravity had to be discarded right out. Rejecting this explanation, which, of course, would undermine his whole undertaking, he admitted that he had only a partial explanation for the "hideous and repellent" character of these ancient texts. First, he referred to the oral tradition underpinning the ancient texts, where every story may have received "very soon a kind of hallowed character" (Müller 1879: xiii). Within the original circumstances a tradition may have been important, but as soon as these were forgotten, it became "trivial and almost unintelligible" (Müller 1879: xiv). Liturgical or ceremonial codes may have been passed on, even if the priestly caste did not any longer understand their original meaning. This way it was even more probable that mistakes emerged. This messy process of transmission explains at least to some extent "the wild confusion of sublime truth with vulgar stupidity that meets us in the pages of the Veda, the Avesta, and the Tripitaka" (Müller 1879: xv–xvi). The ultimate presupposition of the whole edition is, of course, that there is gold amongst all this 'rubbish', and that by distinguishing "between what is essential and what is not" Western scholars and readers will be able to find these "precious grains in the sacred books of other nations" (Müller 1879: xxxviii).

Another consideration Müller brought forward was the argument that original traditions could be spoiled by later "apocryphal accretions" (Müller 1879: xvi). The original was thought by him, and other contemporary scholars, to somehow represent the unblemished core of religions. The most important explanation for the mixed character of these texts, however, was the difference between the ancient Eastern and modern Western mind-set. Müller used the technical concept of parallax to explain the difference between the two angles. Parallax indicates a difference in the apparent position of an object viewed along different lines of sight. The term derives from the Greek word *parallaxis*, meaning alteration. Müller explained that Western music, for instance a symphony of Beethoven, "would be mere noise to an

Indian ear", whereas "an Indian Sangita seems to us without melody, harmony, or rhythm" (Müller 1879: xvi).

Müller's rather harsh terminology concerning the 'repulsive' character of ancient texts may also be explained by the explicit sexuality in some of the ancient texts. Notwithstanding the emphasis on the need for complete translations, Müller made one exception:

> There are in ancient books, and particularly in religious books, frequent allusions to the sexual aspects of nature, which though perfectly harmless and innocent in themselves, cannot be rendered in modern language without the appearance of coarseness.
>
> *Müller 1879: xxi*

Therefore, Müller felt compelled "to leave certain passages untranslated, and to give the original, when necessary, in a note" (Müller 1879: xxi). He claimed that this was only done in 'extreme' cases. No offence was to be given to Victorian readers. This translation project was therefore an element in a process that the intellectual historian Frank M. Turner has termed the 'domestication' of ancient civilizations and religions (Turner 1981: 110–14). Another, even more important, element in this process was Müller's influential mythological studies, which aimed to show that the gods of Greece and India were not fools, but "had a rational meaning and a noble purpose" (Turner 1981: 109). Müller's influential solar theory played down the unwelcome mythological stories of theft, murder, homosexuality, promiscuity, and adultery and relegated them to the background. Contemporary painters and writers such as G. F. Watts, Lord Leighton, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin took over this moral and spiritualizing view of the ancient world. They, as Frank Turner put it, "portrayed childlike, often passionless, innocent deities who were close to the natural order and inordinately fascinated by the sun" (Turner 1981: 111). Müller's representations of the Hindu gods through translation and accompanying preface and notes contribute to their domestication and, as the next section elaborates, to the re-construction of Hinduism as a 'World Religion'.

Translation and the Construction of World Religions

According to Tomoko Masuzawa, the collection of the *Sacred Books of the East* "effectively defined the parameters of the 'major religions of the world'" (Masuzawa 2005: 260). The main argument underpinning this statement is that before this translation project was published, there was no established, self-evident list of 'great religions.' Norman Girardot posits that the series ratified "a particular grouping of 'world religions'" (Girardot 2002a: 220). Terminology is important here, and in this respect, the first point that has to be noted is that the term does not play an important role in Müller's work. Masuzawa writes that the term "world religions" is "generally absent" from his writings (Masuzawa 2005: 217, note 15). Strictly speaking this is correct, but one should not overlook the fact that Müller spoke incidentally about the "(principal) religions of the world" (Müller 1865/67: 20). In the introduction to the series, Müller referred to "book-religions", and the "great and original religions which profess to be founded on Sacred Books" (Müller 1879: xli). As the biblical texts could not be included, only six of these great religions were represented in the series (Müller 1873: 54–5).

The specific terminology of 'world religions' emerged in German and, especially, Dutch debates about the classification of religions in the late nineteenth century. In this context, the use of the term originates—as far as we know—with the Dutch scholar C. P. Tiele (1830–1902), professor in the history and philosophy of religion at the University of Leiden. Already in 1864, in his book on the religion of Zoroaster, Tiele had used the term *wereldgodsdiensten* frequently

(Tiele 1864). Here he made an attempt to determine the place of Parsism in religious history in general by means of classification. The last phase is constituted by the triad of Buddhism, Christianity, and 'Mohammedanism', "which we could call the universalistic or world religions" (Tiele 1864: 275; Molendijk 2016: 173–5).

If we look at the usage of the actual term 'world religions', it is not clear that Müller's series defined the discourse, as there was no consensus at the time about which particular religions were to be included in this 'top' category. Tiele spoke only about Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam in this context. In his influential studies of the economic ethos of world religions from a later date, the sociologist Max Weber used a numerical definition of the term:

> By 'world religions' we understand the five religions or religiously determined systems of life-regulation which have known how to gather multitudes of confessors around them. The term is used here in a completely value-neutral sense. The Confucian, Hinduist, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamist religious ethics all belong to the category of world religion.
>
> *Weber 1920/1958: 267*

Taoism and Zoroastrianism are missing in this listing. Weber, however, also included Judaism in his analysis, because of its importance for the understanding of Christianity and Islam on the one hand, and the development of the Western economic ethos on the other.

What is the importance of Müller's series in this respect? Although the edition of the *SBE* did not directly promote the spread of the term 'world religions', it surely was a defining moment in establishing what in other contexts were being termed 'world religions.' The edition presented to a relatively wide range of scholars and educated laypeople the main religions of the East—not only nominally, but in their textual richness. Although Müller's series did not literally define the extension of (what were supposed to be) the big, established religions, it did sum up a certain idea of the main religions represented by sacred texts that mattered or should matter to a Western audience—scholarly and practically. As in the construction of the category 'World Literature' (Damrosch 2003), the translations of the *SBE* enabled national or local sacred literatures to enter the world stage as a kind of common, religious and textual heritage to be shared and owned.

Comparison and Spiritualization

The discourse of 'world religions' implied notions of classification, development, and comparison. Even where this exact terminology was not used—as in the case of Max Müller—a certain way of doing 'comparative religion' is implied. The early practitioners of the science of religion wanted to outline development as well as progress in the history of religions (Molendijk 2005: 143–78). Methodologically, the idea of comparison lies at the root of the new discursivity. In Müller's view the study of the East has provided "us with parallels, and with all that is implied in parallels, viz. the possibility of comparing" (Müller 1876: 184). The best way to argue that the *SBE* "publicly defines and authoritatively establishes the new comparative science of religion at the end of the [nineteenth] century" (Girardot 2002b: 219–20) is that it provides 'parallels' for comparison. Thus, it may be claimed that the series inscribed and promoted a new comparative way of doing the study of religion, by translating and placing these texts together in 50 volumes.

This line of argumentation finds support in the writings of Max Müller himself. Knowledge that deserves this name begins in his view with comparison. He would have firmly rejected the idea—as later formulated within the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism—that the humanities would study unique events, whereas the hard sciences would formulate laws. Diametrically

opposed to such a view, Müller claimed that all human knowledge begins with "the comprehension of two single things as one" (Müller 1876: 184). Thus, single events cannot really be understood. Therefore, the sacred books "had to be placed side by side with perfect impartiality, in order to discern the points which they share in common as well as those that are peculiar to each" (Müller 1876: 185). Although the *SBE* is not a manifesto that publicly announces new methods and concepts, the series nevertheless incorporates these. The translations of the sacred texts bring the world religions into a relationship with each other and thus introduce a degree of critical comparison. The *SBE* did not only envision a method, but also specific results, a theology of religions, as we would call it nowadays. The series presents—he claimed in his lecture to the Oriental Congress of 1874—hard evidence that "all religions spring from the same sacred soil, the human heart", that the infinite is the very condition of the finite, and that man "yearns for something the world cannot give" (Müller 1876: 185).

For Müller the shared elements of the world religions centred on the human capacity to apprehend the infinite. On the basis of this, core religions and in particular Christianity can and will develop into the all-encompassing religion of the future, which will fully realize the commandment of love. This way the ethical and the spiritual in religion are to be combined, without giving up the transcendent, the infinite, or divinity. The spiritualization of religion, of which Müller surely was a proponent, did not lead in his view to an opposition between (the old) religion(s) and (new) spirituality. His explicit aim was to 'give new life to Christianity'; however, an unintended consequence of his work has been to pave the way for the modern opposition between (institutionalized) religion and spirituality. In Müller's work, we see a tension between universalism and particularism, as he defends the idea that the universal spiritual core of religion per se is ultimately (best) realized in the Christian tradition.

Textualization of Religion

The *SBE* was thus a landmark in the establishment of the modern scholarly study of religion. Another crucial aspect is its prominent role in the so-called textualization of Eastern religions. Western scholars and oriental officers—often there was no more than a very thin line between the two—went on a hunt for manuscripts and foundational texts of Eastern religions, or what they thought to be religions. The study of Buddhism, for instance, started rather late in the Oriental Renaissance (Schwab 1984). The Sanskrit manuscripts that Brian Hodgson of the British East Asia Company discovered in the 1820s and 1830s and sent to various learned societies, among these the Société Asiatique in Paris, formed the basis for Eugène Burnouf's path-breaking *Introduction à l'histoire du Buddhisme indien* from 1844 (Almond 1988). Thus, Buddhism was constituted primarily as a textual object and Buddhist studies became "a history of master texts", a form of orientalism criticized by Edward Said and others for being allegedly "based on the finality and closure of antiquarian or curatorial knowledge" (Lopez 1995: 7).

Presently, there are many studies on the invention of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, *et cetera*, which demonstrate that these 'religions' and their 'sacred texts' were produced—as the preferred metaphor runs—in the West (Marshall 1970). If one would have asked the believers or even the religious specialists, they would have given varying answers as to what their most important religious scriptures were. This is not because of religious ignorance, "but because there does not appear to be a wholly accepted body of scripture that is of equal value to the entire community" (Folkert 1989: 175). Thus, Müller's edition not only contributed to the process of textualization of religion as such, but also played a significant role in highlighting particular texts as representative of particular traditions.

A good example of this process of 'canonization' is how the Jain scriptures were selected for the series. An illuminating article of Kendall W. Folkert draws attention to the fact that the corpus of 45 Jain texts that would define this 'religion' for some time was presented as such by one scholar, the orientalist Georg Bühler. Bühler had obtained his information from a *single* informant within the Jain community. This selection of texts only partly matched with other oral and written sources, "[y]et he put it forward, and lived to see it perpetuated by other scholars" (Folkert 1989: 175). Not everyone, however, committed themselves to this 'canon'. When Hermann Jacobi was asked to translate Jain texts for the *SBE*, he selected the *Kalpa Sutra*, which did not belong to the corpus that Bühler had put forward. Yet he chose this text because of its enormous popularity and value to the community, which is attested by its "overwhelming presence" in manuscript collections (Folkert 1989: 175). Thus, the series contributed to a break with and a renewal of a presumed Jain canon.

In this way, a view of religion with a strong emphasis on scriptural canonicity was superimposed by translator-orientalists onto a religious community, in which texts had hitherto mainly a ritual function and no independent authority in themselves. In this sense, the edition of the *SBE* indeed ratified the idea that religious texts of oriental religions functioned as scriptures in ways analogous to the Hebrew and Christian bible. No doubt, the Protestant idea of the normative character of scripture also played an important role in fuelling this approach. The notion that there are sacred books and scriptures is thus by no means an innocuous one when applied to religious traditions. Without colonial expansion, such ancient texts would never have been 'discovered' and subsequently translated. The textualization of foreign religions may be symptomatic of cultural imperialism, by which scholarly Western authority is imposed on Eastern cultures.

Textualization is not just an unintended consequence of the inclusion of foreign cultures in the comparative studies of cultural phenomena. Max Müller and others were explicit in this respect. In his 'Sketch of Buddhism' (1828), Brian Hodgson explained how he procured in Nepal "large works relating to Buddhism" from an old man, the *Pâtna Bauddha*, whom he presented with "a set of questions, which I desired he would answer from his books" (Hodgson 1828/1874: 35–6). His information was to be corroborated by the texts that he had acquired for Hodgson. In this procedure, texts that actually played a subordinate role in practical life were given authority over the religious specialist, whose authority is redirected and redefined by the textual evidence.

In the same vein, Müller claimed that—notwithstanding its shortcomings—the translations of the *SBE* were to be accepted "for the present as a sufficient authority" (Müller 1897: 29). On one occasion, Müller invited the 'learned natives' to give their opinion about their own traditions, on the condition, however, that they should always support their statements by reference to their own sacred texts. In this way they could "hold their own against the best oriental scholars of Europe, nay, even correct their views by their own more intimate acquaintance with their sacred texts, and their more living knowledge of the present working of their religion" (Ibid.). The tacit implication, of course, was that it could also be the other way around. Seemingly, authority is handed back to the 'natives', whereas structurally it is in the hands of Western scholars, who literally produced and constructed these texts as the only sources of authority.

Incongruity between Ancient and Modern: The Question of Authority

One of the basic presuppositions of Müller's edition of *SBE* is the idea that ancient texts are relevant for modern man. The series was meant to provide data for the scholar of religion, the history of religions serving at the time as a source of ethics and worldviews (Kippenberg 2002).

The relevance of these ancient texts, however, appears to be somewhat hidden, as according to Müller they contain so many obsolete elements. The differences between ancient and modern languages were deemed to be huge: "Modern words are round, ancient words are square, and we may as well hope to solve the quadrature of the circle, as to express adequately the ancient thoughts of the Veda in modern English" (Müller 1879: xxvii). How did Müller deal with this incongruity? The most obvious answer is 'by a particular theory of interpretation'.

Müller said that many difficulties in religious history are due to the "constant misinterpretation of ancient language by modern language" (Müller 1873: 43). What does this remark mean? We may easily agree that there is a huge gap between ancient and modern thought and that much concentration and expertise is needed to make ancient words intelligible. The hidden implication of this statement, however, is that in order to make sense of these ancient words they have to be re-appropriated through translation to 'modern' standards of thought. Thus, the relationship between antiquity and modernity, in particular between the ancient East and the modern West, is framed in a dialectical way by Müller: we need to know the ancient oriental roots of the West to understand our Western culture and religion; to penetrate into these depths, however, we cannot and must not take ancient statements at their face value; we need a 'charitable' interpretation that does not focus on the 'literal sense' of words but aims to understand "their true and original purport". This is the way to discover "the real truth of ancient sacred books" (Müller 1873: 281). Most present-day scholars of religion, of course, will reject this type of 'interpretation' outright, because in their view it would impose modern meanings on ancient texts. Notwithstanding Müller's original intention to give accurate—even neutral—translations, which preserve ancient thought in modern language, it becomes evident here that this translation project involves powerful interpretative acts (Israel 2019: 334). This approach is justified by claiming that this way the true and original purport of the texts is retained.

The *SBE* series also entails a time frame. Notwithstanding a longing for the ancient past, the opposition between ancient and modern prompts the idea that 'we' have moved on since ancient times. Müller does not represent a hegemonic Enlightenment form of rationality, because his views are mitigated by what could be called a Romantic inclination to appreciate cultural diversity and a sense of the importance of origins, which help us understand our present-day civilization. According to Müller, the oriental Renaissance—to refer to the title of Raymond Schwab's famous book—has taught us that the Orient and the Occident are closely connected. This conviction underlies his paradoxical claim that the true charm of antiquity lies in its modernity and relevance for 'us' today (Müller 1891: 805).

The collection, translation, and interpretation of the sacred books is primarily a matter for knowledgeable specialists, who sacrificed their time to translate these sometimes "tedious and childish" texts (Müller 1884b: 1004). It is with these modern scholars, who are presented as martyrs for the noble cause of the series that authority resides. The value of ancient texts and religions is not a question that is to be settled in an open religious dialogue, but is determined by authoritative scholars, who can detect the 'grains of gold' in otherwise antiquated texts. For instance, from his modern point of view Müller considers the religion of India to be "like a half-fossilised megatherion walking about in the broad day-light of the nineteenth century" (Müller 1873: 279).

Beyond the scholarly surface of the literal translations of the *SBE* lies the quest for a deeper understanding of the human condition. For its *auctor intellectualis* there was no doubt that the texts—provided they are interpreted correctly—will point to the core of all religions, that is, the perception of the infinite. Editing, translating and studying textual traditions, thus contributes

to a spiritualized understanding of religion (van der Veer 2014). Under the aegis of modern historical and philological scholarship and translation, a new idea of 'religion' is developed and promoted. Thus, a programme to reform 'religion' is legitimized by projecting a modern ideal into the ancient past. In this process, the authority of religions and their religious specialists is transferred to scholar-translators and their institutions of learning.

Reception

The edition of the *SBE* is somewhat of a mixed bag. Although scholarly translations that aim to do justice to the original texts are presented in their entirety, to which readers in particular is the series addressed? On the one hand, it aims at educated readers in general, but are they really expected to buy and read all the 50 volumes? I did not find anything in the archives about subscriptions to the whole series, and even libraries often ordered only specific volumes. Given the fact that the first editions comprised 1,500 copies and that many volumes were reprinted, there must have been a serious interest among an educated elite. On the other hand, the series aimed at scholars of religion, who finally had reliable texts on which they could base their comparisons. To the best of my knowledge, there is not much evidence to support the idea that the translations were actually used in many cases for this purpose. The positive reception of the volumes seems to have mainly taken place within specific disciplines such as Chinese studies and Indology and less in the nascent field of 'comparative religion.'

No doubt, the series is a monument in the history of the comparative study of religion, because it is the powerful expression of the wish to gather the main religions of the world under one umbrella—in one prestigious and expensive edition. The set was presented to the leaders of the world, not only to Queen Victoria, but also to the Sultan of Turkey and the Pope in Rome (Müller 1902 II: 187, 300, 354, 358). In this respect, it is an imperial edition, which establishes authority by representing authoritative sacred books and presenting these to authorities with religious and worldly power. Generally, Müller's work was well received in India; especially, his edition and translation of the *Rig-Veda* found wide acclaim, establishing the foundational text of Hinduism. After visiting Müller in Oxford, Swami Vivekananda, who introduced a purified form of Hinduism to the West, famously wrote: "Max Müller is a Vedantist of Vedantists. He has, indeed, caught the soul of the melody of the Vedanta" (Vivekananda 1896: 281).

The moral and religious hopes that Müller associated with the emerging science of religion are hard to imagine for present-day scholars. But the ideas that are embodied in the *SBE* have had a huge influence on religious studies in the twentieth century. Even more recently in a discussion of new translations of 'Indian Classics', the Italian writer and publisher, Roberto Calasso, takes the edition of the *SBE* as his point of reference to hail Max Müller as a "formidable impressario, of the kind and quality that we sorely lack these days" (Calasso 2015: 64).

Conclusion

The translation and edition of the 50 authoritative volumes of the *SBE* marks the coming of age of the 'science of religion', which would rigorously assemble, translate, compare, and evaluate data. Notwithstanding the price of the series and its scholarly ambitions (presenting the texts in full), it did spread the 'good news' (from the East) among the educated elites of its time

in Europe. Müller's edition contributed hugely to a textual understanding of religion. In this ambitious project it is scriptures that define what religion is about—'bookless' religions are not included. Oral traditions are translated and thus possibly deformed and fixed into textual modes of representation, as shown by Müller's use of the expression 'walking manuscripts' to refer to the learned informants in the East. Textualizing and—if this word is permitted—'religionizing' the Orient are the key effects of the series in the history of the study of culture and religion.

The edition is rightly considered a landmark in the history of religious studies, because it favours the study of religions that have sacred *books*, thus promoting the discursivity of 'world religions', which must be studied in relation to each other. It also testifies to the rise of big science, of large-scale joint efforts, funded with extra money, producing a steady flow of publications. The fact that it was partly funded by the India Office of Britain makes it all the more clear that the *SBE* was a token of imperial knowledge as well, creating through translation a textual East that is subjugated to the power of modern historical and comparative scholarship. Eastern religions brought home did matter.

Methodologically, the series served the comparative understanding of religions—not so much for the individual contributors, who dealt with their own translations, as for Max Müller himself, for whom the series embodied the imperative to compare. That the edition was not often used in this way—not even by Müller himself—does not alter this fact. The readers were encouraged to widen their perspective by taking the alleged key texts of the 'world religions' into account. Although nowadays many translations are out-dated, the series can still be consulted at the Internet Sacred Texts Archive, which presents documents from various religious traditions (www.sacred-texts.com/sbe/index.htm). The edition was, and is, a monument to the emerging 'science of religion', which still reminds us—like physical statues and monuments—of Müller's power to edit a defining translated series, which over the course of time has become not (as was hoped) a working tool for comparativists, but a textual and digital *lieu de mémoire* of a field of study that was thought to change the aspect of the world.

The series can be fruitfully compared to the enterprise of the British Museum, providing a textualized museum, displaying to the reader key artefacts from six religious cultures. As such, it can attract both the scholarly, the student and the merely curious, general viewer. To Müller, it was absolute necessary to bring together the "fathers of the Universal Church" (Müller 1884b: 1004), and he was not particularly modest about what was achieved. He claimed that his edition had done more to spread mutual respect among believers than the famous 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions (Molendijk 2016: 189). The translations of the *SBE* had to be accepted as *the* authoritative texts, presenting the wisdom of the East to a Western, English-speaking audience. By translating, and thus interpreting, these canonical texts their meaning is fixed anew by the authority of Western scholarship, which had first established editions and now translations of these editions. Thus the 'world', and its leaders, were presented a scholarly monument or museum that incorporated the idea of what a 'world religion' actually is.

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Further Reading

Davis, John R. and Angus Nicholls, eds. 2018. *Friedrich Max Müller and the Role of Philology in Victorian Thought*, London; New York: Routledge.

The volume brings together papers by experts in German studies, German and British history, linguistics, philosophy, English literary studies, and religious studies in order to examine the many facets of Müller's scholarship.

Girardot, Norman J. 2002b. 'Max Müller's *Sacred Books* and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions', *Religions* 41/3: 213–250.

The article gives a concise overview of the establishment of the Sacred Books of the East in relation to the emerging comparative study of religions in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Molendijk, Arie L. 2016. *Friedrich Max Müller & the Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The book offers the first ever work on Friedrich Max Müller's edition of the *Sacred Books of the East* based on archival research, and considers its influence on the development of what would become the discipline of Religious Studies.

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