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# Christianity and 'Other Religions': Contributions from the Work of F. Max Müller

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**THE** HISTORY OF Christian Thought in the West is not notable for its efforts to come to grips with the claims of other religious traditions, except for the purpose of proselytization, i.e. the concern to save souls. The attitude taken by Christian Churches toward other religions has often been labelled as exclusivism. In its extreme form its attitude has found expression in the assertion that among all peoples of the world, Christians alone have a corner on the truth.

There are, of course, periods in the history of Christianity, in which extreme forms of exclusivism came under attack. European scholars in the nineteenth century, as a result of the tremendous influx of new archaeological and textual materials from the East, felt compelled to raise anew the issue of the relationship between Christianity and other religions. An important figure among these scholars was F. Max Müller who, as a result of his efforts to make oriental religious texts available to the West, still receives acclaim as a founder or pioneer in the comparative study of religions.<sup>1</sup> As a result of his studies in philosophy, philology, and the religions of India he developed a theory of religion which brought into question the missionary enterprise and traditional expressions of Christian exclusivism and uniqueness.

## Theory of Religion

In developing his theory or his science of religion, Max Müller saw it as necessary to begin with a definition of religion, in order to define what it is one is studying or trying to under-

stand. For him, the distinguishing characteristic of religion or the religious consciousness is faith. Faith itself, he claimed, was nothing more than ordinary consciousness developed and modified in such a way as to enable one to apprehend religious objects; that is, objects or beings which cannot be apprehended by sense or reason.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly he defined religion as the apprehension or perception of the infinite under various names or guises. Max Müller maintained that such an apprehension is the necessary condition for all historical religions for they all display a longing for the infinite.<sup>3</sup> Thus he could state in his lectures on "The Science of Religion," delivered in 1870:

Without that faculty, no religion, not even the lowest worship of idols and fetiches (sic), would be possible; and if we will but listen attentively, we can hear in all religions a groaning of the spirit, a struggle to conceive the inconceivable, to utter the unutterable, a longing after the Infinite, a love of God.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of attacks on his definition of religion as the perception of the infinite, Max Müller restricted his definition to such perceptions of the infinite as are able to influence man's moral conduct.<sup>5</sup> Thus he saw religion as involving two aspects—the perception of the infinite and moral activity based on this perception—and these two aspects were seen as basic to all concrete or historical religions.

To understand the origin of the perception of the infinite and the notion of morality, Max Müller claimed that we need only to understand man's ordinary perceptions of natural

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phenomena. He insisted that in every finite perception there is automatically included an impression of the infinite.<sup>6</sup> As far as Max Müller was concerned, the development of this impression, and therefore of all historical religions, is inevitable because we can never in our perceptions fix a point so as to exclude the possibility or the implication of something beyond that point.<sup>7</sup> This notion of the infinite, once disclosed to us in our sense perceptions must be dealt with through faith, for neither the senses nor reason are competent to deal with the feeling or idea of the infinite.

The notion of morality was seen as exhibiting the same origin as the notion of the infinite. Max Müller claimed that from man's observations of the fixed paths and settled movements of the heavenly bodies, man derived the notion of a right path applied to man as well as to the heavenly bodies.<sup>8</sup> As far as Max Müller was concerned, all religions, including those that claim to be revealed find their roots in this universal stratum of sense perceptions. Thus he states in his lectures on the "Origin and Growth of Religion" delivered in 1878:

What we have learnt then from the Veda is this, that the ancestors of our race in India did not only believe in divine powers more or less manifest to their senses, in rivers and mountains, in the sky and the sun, in the thunder and rain, but that their senses likewise suggested to them two of the most essential elements of all religion, the concept of the infinite and the concept of order and law, as revealed before them, the one in the golden sea behind the dawn, the other in the daily path of the sun.<sup>9</sup>

Max Müller saw the growth of religion, wherever one cared to study it, as an intelligible, natural, and inevitable outcome of man's perceptions of the infinite and the moral law. It was to be understood as a development which moved from man's simplest perceptions of the infinite and the moral law to the highest and purest conceptions. Max Müller saw this development as the quest for the infinite, or the attempts to name and understand that infinite which is disclosed to man naturally and inevitably in all his finite perceptions.

In speaking of this quest, Max Müller delineated three phases. The first is physical reli-

gion in which man perceives the infinite in his observations of natural phenomena. The second is anthropological religion in which man is confronted by the infinite in his observations of himself and his fellowmen. The third is psychological or theosophical religion in which man attempts to bring together the perceptions of the infinite in nature and in man. Max Müller was quite convinced that every religion, if it could be studied adequately would exhibit a movement from the physical through the anthropological to the theosophical stage.<sup>10</sup>

Max Müller saw this development as having two distinct tendencies. On the one hand he spoke of the struggle against the material character of man's expression of the infinite, and on the other, he spoke of a relapse from the spiritual conception of the infinite to a more material conception.<sup>11</sup> On the whole, however, he saw the quest for the infinite as a process which moves to a culmination point, toward a point of purity in which the concept of the infinite is freed from all material ingredients. This culmination point was to be found in Christianity, the clearest expression of theosophical religion.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Max Müller argued that there is an intention and purpose in the development of all historical religions, a preparation for a culmination point. On this basis, he claimed that the intention of all religions is holiness; that is, to place the human soul in the presence of god. Every religion was seen as an attempt to give expression to this intention on the level of language and thought available to it.<sup>13</sup>

In Max Müller's thought, then, we are presented with an evolutionary theory for the development of religions. He argued for a movement in man's understanding of god which begins with the perception of the infinite in ordinary sensuous perceptions of finite objects. From these initial shadowy perceptions there is a growth in which the concept of deity is refined and purified. It is a movement which is natural, intelligible, and inevitable in the sense that it begins in ordinary perceptions and in the sense that an awareness of the infinite leads automatically to an attempt to understand that awareness. Finally, it is a movement which has a teleological dimension; that is, it moves toward a goal or a culmination point

which is expressed in a variety of traditions but most clearly in Christianity.

#### Application of the Theory

Max Müller's theory of religion had a number of important consequences for his approach and attitude to all religions. In the first place, his tendency was to treat all concrete religions not only sympathetically but also positively. For him, each religion was true in the sense that the level of language and thought determines what is possible for each age in terms of religious understanding.<sup>14</sup> Each religion was intended to teach mankind something. Thus he could say:

History seems to teach that the whole human race required a gradual education before, in the fulness of time, it could be admitted to the truths of Christianity. All the fallacies of human reason had to be exhausted, before the light of higher truth could meet with ready acceptance. The ancient religions of the world were but the milk of nature which was in due time to be succeeded by the bread of life.<sup>15</sup>

Basically, Max Müller claimed that one can discern the work of god everywhere, not simply in one or perhaps two religious traditions, namely, Judaism and Christianity.

Such a view allowed Max Müller to make both positive and derogatory statements about a given religious tradition. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in his comments concerning religious and cultural developments in India. On the one hand he could refer to Indians as

...our nearest intellectual relatives, ...the framers of the most wonderful language, the Sanskrit, the fellow workers in the construction of our fundamental concepts, the fathers of the most natural of natural religions, the inventors of the most subtle philosophy, and the givers of the most elaborate laws.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, he could refer to the hymns of the *Rig-Veda* as "old," "antiquated," "effete," and "extinct megatheria."<sup>17</sup> Such harsh comments were meant to underline his opinion that these ancient scriptures could no longer stand the test of the enlightened world view of the nineteenth century. Yet these scriptures were not to be seen as devoid of truth.

Secondly, Max Müller had no use for arguments from special revelation to prove the superiority of any religious tradition. In his Gifford lectures on religion delivered from 1889-1892 at the University of Glasgow, his stated purpose was to show how the human mind, given its environment, was inevitably led to a belief in god.<sup>18</sup> Such a belief was to be supported by a historical study of religion, or natural religion, and not by appeals to special revelation.<sup>19</sup> Such an appeal was to be seen as subversive to Christianity rather than essential. For his views Max Müller was charged with undermining the Christian faith and accused of holding infidel and pantheistic views.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Max Müller's theory of religion had important consequences for his views on the missionary enterprise. He was disturbed by that type of missionary activity which deprecated the religious traditions of other peoples. For him, the true missionary spirit was not one which sought the radical displacement of one religion by another, but one which sought the peaceful co-existence of religions in order to call out the best in each tradition and to eliminate undesirable aspects.<sup>21</sup> Thus Max Müller encouraged reform of existing religious traditions and even conversion. But such reform and conversion was seen as possible, not because Christianity alone contained truth, but because each tradition contained truth to which an appeal could be made.<sup>22</sup> In his emphasis on evolutionary progress, Max Müller saw such co-existence and dialogue as leading to conversion, a new religious understanding, and even the formulation of a new religion.<sup>23</sup>

#### Footnotes

- 1 F. Max Müller is remembered today for two achievements. The first and perhaps the most outstanding is his Sanskrit edition of the *Rig-Veda* including the commentary by the Indian Theologian Sāyana. The second is the Sacred Books of the East series to which he devoted his time as editor from approximately 1875 to his death in 1900. In its final form, the series was comprised of 50 volumes.
- 2 F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), pp. 20-21.

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- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- 4 F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), p. 12.
- 5 F. Max Müller, *Physical Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891), p. 294.
- 6 F. Max Müller, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, p. 43.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-42.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-235.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 10 F. Max Müller, *Physical Religion*, p. 5.
- 11 F. Max Müller, *The Science of Religion*, pp. 118-119.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-23. See also *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), pp. 446-455. When Max Müller spoke of religions finding their consummation in Christianity, he did not mean Christianity in general. He referred rather, to the expression of the relationship between man and god found in the early Alexandrian School of Theology. He found in Clement and Origen a palatable form of Christian thought principally because they did not make a radical qualitative break between god and man.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 15 F. Max Müller, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1968), p. 29.
- 16 F. Max Müller, *India, What Can it Teach Us?* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919), p. 15.
- 17 F. Max Müller, *Auld Lang Syne* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), Second Series, pp. 88-89.
- 18 F. Max Müller, *Theosophy*, pp. 2-6.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
- 20 "Max Müller denounced for heresy," *Open Court* V (1891), 2829-2832.
- 21 F. Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), IV, pp. 255-256.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.