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A CRITIQUE OF MAX MULLER'S METHODOLOGY OF MYTHOLOGY

Max Müller's *Essay in Comparative Mythology* (1856) was the earliest significant discussion of comparative religion, and, it could be said that Müller was the father of *Religionswissenschaft* or Religious Studies. At any rate, he coined the term. Müller approached the study of religion from his knowledge of Sanskrit and other ancient languages. He was primarily a philologist and his methodology was linguistic. Interested in archaic forms of religion, he suggested that contemporary primitives might preserve some very ancient mythologies, rituals, and beliefs which could be taken as survivals from prehistoric times, and that from them one could discern originals. Müller pioneered this particular approach. He considered the currently popular fetishism theory to be an example of the grossly inadequate notions of the theorists like Comte who had nothing but conjecture and that data was wilfully distorted. What was even more serious, in Müller's view, was the poverty of information about primitives, the unreliability of the reports, and the superficiality of the reporters. Müller did not think it possible to go behind the facade of contemporary primitivism to the *primaeval* and consequently, discarded the anthropological approach.

At the same time, Müller did think that there was a valid means of discovering something about religion at the dawn of history. As a philologist, a student of Indo-European languages, and especially Sanskrit, Müller thought that etymology provided the best method of reaching the early beliefs of historical peoples. In his view, "even if we go beyond the age of literature, we explore the deepest levels of human thought, we can discover, in the crude ore which was made to supply the earliest coins or counters of the human mind, the presence of religious ingredi-

ents.”¹ Going on to root up possible clues, he analysed Sanskrit terminology on the assumption that the Vedas were the earliest religious scriptures. He was fascinated by the relationship between *deva* meaning “god” to its radical, *div*, meaning “to shine”. The latter hinted at solar worship, and on such etymological grounds as these, Müller developed the theory that early man worshipped divinity manifest in concrete natural forces such as the sun. It was not the sun that was worshipped but the inexpressible, infinite, and intuitively perceived ultimate reality of which the sun was an important concrete expression.

Ancient literary works such as the Vedas, Müller contended, take the scholar back to the point where religion became organized and when actual beliefs and doctrines were formulated. This, he suggested, was the real beginning of religion. Supernaturalism is not significant until concepts are formulated, and rites are practised.

Müller thought that the invention of writing and the organizing of religion occurred simultaneously and were intimately related to one another. Pre-literate peoples, he insisted, have only faint and vague notions about religion. “No religion is of importance to the surrounding world in its first beginning,” he wrote. “It is hardly noticed so long as it is confined to the heart of one man and his twelve disciples.” We only know a religion “...after it has assumed consistency and importance, and when it has become the interest of certain individuals, or of a whole class, to collect and to preserve for posterity whatever is known of its original and first spreading.”²

For these reasons, Müller concentrated his interest on the historical religions. “Though we can no where watch the first vital movements of a nascent religion,” he said, “we can in some countries observe the successive growth of religious ideas. Among the savages of Africa, America, and Australia this is impossible. It is difficult to know what it is at present; *what it is in its origin, what it was even a thousand years ago is entirely beyond our reach*”.³

Müller’s interest, then, was not the origins of religion, because he was convinced that there was no way of reaching them.

1. F.M. Müller, *Lectures on the Origins and Growth of Religion*, p. 4.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 128f.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 129; Italics mine.

His specialization was Indo-European etymology and what intrigued him most was the Vedic names of their deities, the fact that Varuna meant "sky", Indra "thunder", and the Maruts "wind". He was also fascinated by the close relationship between Sanskrit and Greek terminology, for example, and shared the widely held opinion that there had been an Indo-European homeland in distant antiquity located somewhere between the Black and Caspian Seas. The study of language could take one back to the dawn of history and, by inference, suggest something about prehistory. But at best the scholar in search of the origins of religion could descend only a short way down the trunk of the tree; he could not reach the roots.

The philological approach to the origins of religion has been found to have other serious limitations as well as the above-mentioned rather obvious ones. Müller himself discredited his own thesis by carrying it to absurd lengths. In particular, he became obsessed with the solar myth theme and found it cropping up almost everywhere. The myth of Apollo and Daphne, for example, turned out to be the sun driving away the dawn. The word "psyche", meaning "breath", was extrapolated into "soul" to distinguish between the body and something felt to be within the body. *Geist* or "ghost" also means breath and so figurative expressions eventually acquired concrete form. Philosophers and theologians added to them and, in this way, religions evolved. For this reason, Müller unfortunately called religion a "disease of language", a comment which did little good to his scholarly reputation. The latter was further damaged by his assertion that the Iliad was a solar myth, all of which inspired someone to write a pamphlet suggesting that Max Müller was a solar myth, too.⁴

Other objections, ultimately more serious, have arisen among Sanskrit scholars. As written scriptures, the Vedas are comparatively late, the earliest portions of the Rig Veda being not much older than Seventh Century B.C. In origin, to be sure, most of them are much more antique, and perhaps go back to the Thirteenth Century B.C. as oral transmissions.⁵ what is most damag-

4. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 22.

5. R.C. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures* and J.A. Van Buitenen, "Vedic Literature" in *Civilization of India Syllabus*.

ing to Müller's thesis, however, is the strong evidence that the Vedas were priestly writings composed when the Arya Religion was already highly developed and complex.⁶ Because these same considerations apply in all ancient religious texts, the Sumerian and Egyptian included, philology has been since abandoned as a means of reaching back to the earliest stages of religion.

6. B. Walker, *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, i, p. 450.