

Friedrich Max Müller

While in the Veda we may study the childhood, we may study in Kant's *Critique* the perfect manhood of the Aryan mind.

– Max Müller¹⁹

Max Müller (1823–1900) was a descendant of the Romantic movement and its longings for civilization's origins. He also made many influential contributions to linguistics and religious studies. Like Renan, his prolific writings reached a wide readership. For more than forty years, both the scholars worked with the concept of race, using the categories of Aryan and Semite.²⁰ But they differed in major ways. Max Müller took the position that no single culture had exclusively come up with monotheism, which was the common property of humanity, and that linguistic structures turned this into multiple religions, including both monotheistic and polytheistic forms.

Max Müller did not want to use the Indian civilization to introduce polytheism into the development of Christianity the way Renan wanted to. Nor did he go the other way and try to make the Aryans appear monotheistic the way Pictet did (discussed later). Instead, he emphasized linguistic differences to explain the divergent religious views. Müller wanted a science of religions to reveal the divine in all things. The use of comparative methods, the new discipline, like other natural sciences, should strive to reveal the providential unity underlying the variegated world of appearances. This providential order had been inscribed in nature at the beginning of time, and it was the task of comparative philology and mythology to find its traces in myths and religions, among which Christianity of course occupied a unique position.²¹

Max Müller served as a functionary for the colonialists and for Christian evangelists, while being deeply interested in ancient Indian texts. This orientation is reflected in one of his letters addressed to the duke of Origoil, who was the British secretary of state for India. Müller wrote on 16 December 1868: 'The ancient religion of India is totally doomed and if Christianity doesn't step in whose fault will it

11. His teacher, possibly the only person in continental Europe who was capable of teaching Sanskrit at that time, was a Scot named Hamilton who had been captured by the French in India and was being held in Paris as a prisoner of war. The development of Schlegel's ideas about India have been traced in (Wichman, 2006, 28).
12. Neo-Classicism refers to certain movements in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that draw upon Western classical art and culture, usually that of ancient Greece or ancient Rome. These movements were dominant during the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century.
13. (Schlegel, 1860, 514)
14. (Schlegel, 1860, 509-11)
15. Sir H.S. Maine, 'The effects of observation of India on modern European thought', 1875 Rede lecture – quoted in (Trautman, Aryans and British India, 2004, 2)
16. This section on Renan draws heavily on (Olender, 1992, 53-4, 63-71, 73, 76-9)
17. (Olender, 1992, 66)
18. (Olender, 1992, 70)
19. As quoted in (Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* 1988, 133)
20. At the end of their lives, they cautioned readers about the dangers of racism brought by their fashionable comparative philology.
21. Max Müller opposed Darwinian theories to explain the origin of languages, which he felt were not of animal origin. He said famously that no process of natural selection will ever distill significant words out of the notes of birds or the cries of beasts. (Max Müller, 1869, 354)
22. (Müller, 1902, 346)
23. Pictet described the Aryan ancestors of European Christians as follows: 'In an epoch predating all historical records, cloaked in the darkness of time, a race destined by Providence one day to dominate the globe, slowly came of age in what was to be the training ground for its brilliant future. Outstripping all others in innate beauty and gifts of intelligence, nurtured by a grand but harsh natural setting that was generous but not lavish with its treasures, this race was destined from the first to conquer. . . . It was therefore quick to develop gifts of the mind, for planning, and energy, for execution. Once initial difficulties were overcome, it enjoyed the tranquil well-being of a patriarchal existence. While thus jubilantly growing in numbers and in prosperity, this fertile race forged itself a powerful tool, a language admirable for its richness, vigor, harmony, and