



Friedrich Max Müller and His Asian Interlocutors: Academic Knowledge about 'Oriental Religions' in Late Nineteenth-Century Europe. Research Group "Discursive Practices of Political Legitimation", Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context", University of Heidelberg, 14.11.2014—15.11.2014.

Reviewed by Andreas Kiyotaka Koyama

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On 14th and 15th November 2014, the research group "Discursive Practices of Political Legitimation" of the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" at the University of Heidelberg welcomed scholars from an interdisciplinary field to shed light on important aspects in the work of philologist and influential Sanskritist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900). The workshop focused on Müller's role in establishing a scientific understanding of "world religions" as objects of research and on the effects his works may have had on the religions they meant to portray. Challenging established views on the production of knowledge in colonial contexts of the late nineteenth century, a main interest lay in highlighting how Max Müller's Asian interlocutors participated in the co-production of such knowledge.

ARIE L. MOLENDIJK (Groningen, Netherlands) contextualized the 50 Books of Müller's lifetime project "Sacred Books of the East" (SBE) in the concept of "Big Science," characterizing the advancements in the scientific institutions in late nineteenth century Britain. Müller, who initiated and edited the SBE, also translated some of the texts therein. The landmark character of this work was less in the quality of its reception than in the sheer demonstration of scientific power – showing what modern scholarship could achieve by making all major "world religions" readable and understandable in a textual form. By arguing in this way, Molendijk challenged some of the assumptions of the other contributors

to the workshop and made way for a lively debate.

NORMAN GIRARDOT (Bethlehem, USA) strengthened the image of Max Müller as the "bold general" of an orientalist science who helped facilitate the comparative study of religions through scientific know-how, entrepreneurship and clever usage of his scholarly fame. Girardot clearly problematized the colonial discourses that shaped Müller's stance towards his objects of research (and which are powerful until today) and gave, in the person of James Legge (1815–1897), an example of contemporary research methods that differed from Müller's "armchair" approach. In China, the missionary and translator James Legge engaged in and communicated with the religious traditions he was trying to understand. The "cautious pilgrim" Legge also collaborated on the SBE and could be seen as one example for a production of knowledge that cannot easily be framed in terms of a hierarchy of the West over the East.

Under the aspect of "Global History," MICHAEL BERGUNDER (Heidelberg, Germany) showed the entanglement of European and Indian motivations in the process of Max Müller's translations of Indian Advaita Vedanta texts. Müller's perceptions of the essence of Hinduism and religion in general as an anthropological necessity were refined via the exchange with Indian religious actors who functioned as his translators but also managed to use their work for Müller as a means to

transform inner-Indian discourses. As Bergunder's distinctly post-colonial interpretation of Müller's work stood in stark contrast to the emphasis in other contributions to the workshop that saw the SBE only as an object of prestige for Western-orientalist philology, his presentation was followed by an animated and productive discussion.

The second day of the workshop started with ANNA SUN (Gambier, USA) and some reflections on the problems of the current sociology of religion when doing research in the field of Chinese religions. By interpreting scholars of religion today as potential interlocutors of Max Müller, Sun proposed to use Müller's concept of *henotheism* as a tool to approach the multifaceted reality of Chinese religious life, despite the historical roots of this term in discourses of western hegemony. Setting out from the fact that terminology such as *polytheism* is not fit to grasp social reality, *Henotheism* with its emphasis on the veneration of not only one, but one out of many possible entities could be used as a sociologist category to frame some currents of Chinese religion. The following discussion revealed that while some attendants of the workshop also struggled to find useful categories for describing and analyzing the plurality of religions in Asian societies, they were reluctant to ignore the colonialist baggage of the term *henotheism*.

Host HANS MARTIN KRÄMER (Heidelberg, Germany) showed the current state of research on Japanese Buddhists such as Nanjō Bunyō (1849-1927) or Kasawara Kenju (1852-1883), who worked as translators for Müller but were also active as scholars in their own right. Following the same premise of *entangled history* as Bergunder, Krämer saw a possibility that these interlocutors could have been actively involved in the co-production of knowledge about Mahāyāna Buddhism in the early days of the study of religion towards the end of the nineteenth century. Through their influence on works such as the SBE, they took part in the formation of a changing, less defaming understanding

of Mahāyāna in Europe and Asia. The sheer amount of (seemingly) non-hierarchic interactions between late-nineteenth century scholars of religions and Japanese Buddhists could also be an indicator for modes of knowledge production that challenge the concept of a western dominated discourse.

In a closing discussion, the attendants agreed on the desirability of an edited volume on the production of the *Sacred Books of the East* that would focus on each religious tradition represented therein, in each case highlighting the international entanglements that made its inclusion into the SBE possible as well as the potential agency of non-European scholars. In addition, questions about the actual reception and discursive impact of the SBE have also not been answered by scholarship so far and might be another field open for future research.

Conference Overview:

Hans Martin Krämer (University of Heidelberg),
Welcome Address

Arie L. Molendijk (University of Groningen), The Production of the Sacred Books of the East

Norman Girardot (Lehigh University), Max Müller, the Comparative Science of Religions, the Production of the *Sacred Books of the East*, and the Pilgrim's Path of Orientalism. With Some Very Preliminary Reflections on the Still Inchoate Reciprocity of Orientalism

Michael Bergunder (University of Heidelberg), *My Indian Friends*: Max Müller and Advaita Vedanta

Anna Sun (Kenyon College), Max Müller's *Henotheism* and Chinese Religions

Hans Martin Krämer (University of Heidelberg), *Bringing the Pure Land to Europe: Max Müller and His Japanese Interlocutors*

General Discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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