



**Friedrich Max Müller and the sacred books of the east, by Arie L. Molendijk, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, xvi + 230 pp., US\$105.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978 0 19 878423 4**

Christoph Uehlinger

To cite this article: Christoph Uehlinger (2017): Friedrich Max Müller and the sacred books of the east, by Arie L. Molendijk, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, xvi + 230 pp., US\$105.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978 0 19 878423 4, Religion, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315630](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315630)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315630>



Published online: 19 Apr 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Friedrich Max Müller and the sacred books of the east**, by Arie L. Molendijk, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, xvi + 230 pp., US\$105.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978 0 19 878423 4

Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), a German-born Sanskritist who spent most of his career at the University of Oxford, is widely regarded as *the* founding father of the modern ‘science of religion,’ which he introduced in the 1870s in terms of an essentially comparative undertaking based on philology and linguistics. Like many a founding father, Max Müller has been held in high esteem for some time but harshly criticized by later scholars, who reject the entanglements of late 19th-century scholarship with European, and particularly British, imperialism. While it is necessary for contemporary scholars of religion to have a critical view of these early days of their discipline, my personal opinion is that intellectual distancing should be based on historical analysis and explanation in the first place: under what conditions, in what political, economic, social, intellectual, and academic context, was that scholarship produced, publicized, and disseminated? The book under review provides substantial answers to such questions.

Max Müller has already got his due in various treatments of the early history of the scientific study of religion (e.g., by Eric Sharpe or Hans G. Kippenberg) and in a massive biography published by Lourens Van den Bosch (2002). Arie Molendijk, Professor of History of Christianity and Philosophy at the University of Groningen, Netherlands, takes another approach, offering a monograph on what may be considered to represent Müller’s most monumental publishing project: the 50-volumes series entitled *Sacred Books of the East*, of which no fewer than 48 volumes were issued by Oxford University Press between 1879 and 1900. (Only volume 48, George Thibaut’s *The Vedanta Sutras*, published in 1904, and volume 50, the index compiled by Moriz Winternitz, appeared after Müller’s death.) With all its biases and limitations, the series as a whole – ‘one of the most ambitious and daring editorial projects of late Victorian scholarship’ (1) – represents an outstanding achievement, not only in terms of the scholarship that made it possible but also because it is a mixture of scholarship, business, academic engagement, and civilizing zeal. Since the series as such has rarely been the object of close historical research (one exception being an article by Girardot [2002], another Anna Sun’s *Confucianism as a World Religion* [2013]), Molendijk’s monograph is an original and very welcome contribution.

The book comes with an Introduction, six chapters, and some Afterthoughts which tie together some of the more important insights of his study. The ‘key idea’ for Molendijk is ‘that the [*Sacred Books*] series embodies formative ideas in the emerging comparative study of religion and culture’ (2). The author wants to offer ‘a critical reflection on the conceptual and theoretical agenda of the series’ (3). For this purpose, chapter 1 gives a short account of Müller’s life and work (‘The Right Honourable Max Müller,’ 9–40). Chapter 2 addresses ‘The Making of a Series’ (41–88). Chapter 3 then turns to governing ‘Concepts and Ideas’ (89–121), while chapter 4 is concerned with ‘Methods’ (122–142). Chapter 5, entitled ‘Religion of Humanity’ (143–161), reconstructs what might be called the theory behind the *Sacred Books*, and chapter 6 evaluates the series’ ‘Intellectual Impact’ (162–186). As may be seen from this short listing alone, the first part of the book is largely narrative and full of interesting observations and anecdotes, while the second is more analytical and reflective and has shorter

chapters. Altogether this makes reading the book as a whole an easy, but reflective and rewarding experience.

The biographical chapter opens on Max Müller's early career, which gained momentum with his setting out on a critical edition of the *Rig-Veda Samhita* that would take his attention from the mid-1840s to 1874. This major project was already sponsored in part by the East India Company, that is, Britain's colonial agency, whose Court of Directors considered that better knowledge of 'the early religion, history, and language of the great body of their Indian subjects' (quoted on 15) might be useful for governance purposes. The project established Müller's reputation as a Sanskritist and made him settle in Oxford, where the German scholar, a pious Lutheran brought up with Romanticism, would never become fully at home among Anglican orthodox clerics ('Religiously speaking, Müller saw himself as an outsider' [150]). Molendijk offers a dense but vivid picture of that peculiar intellectual environment, in which Georgina Adelaide Grenfell, Müller's wife, offered emotional as much as intellectual support to a husband who was not an easy character, but whom Molendijk rightly characterizes as 'one of the most publicly visible intellectuals of his day' (29).

Together with the Hibbert and the Gifford Lectures, the *Sacred Books* represent Müller's most widely received achievement. Unfortunately, the enormous correspondence and other documents that accompanied the series' inception and development over the last quarter of the century have not been preserved (the Max Müller Library posthumously established in Tokyo disappeared in the great Kanto earthquake and fire of 1 September 1923). But Molendijk has brought together enough evidence to give a vivid account of Müller's conversations and 'power play' with scholars as much as with the Court and representatives of Oxford University Press and of the East India Company. With all his character, Müller could at times be quite a diplomat; after all, he succeeded in getting the support he needed and convinced a handful of companion colleagues to embark on the *Sacred Books* endeavor.

One interesting aspect of the latter is that Müller considered the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures to be foremost amongst the *Sacred Books of the East*, and the writings translated in the series as a set of 'Forgotten Bibles' of humanity (in this he may well have been inspired by the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson [50]). As late as 1898, he still tried to include the Bible in the series but to no avail. A letter from that year is worth quoting here: 'I look forward to the time when those who objected to my including the Old and New Testament among the *Sacred Books of the East* will implore me to do so' (quoted on 87).

Being the product of European philologists whose model was the Bible, the *Sacred Books* series contributed to the textualization of religion (especially 'Buddhism' and 'Hinduism') both in scholarly perception and among Indian intellectuals ('Müller provided the East with purified editions of their own religious traditions' [91]). In many cases, Molendijk notes, "educated orientals" were estranged from their own practices and presented with a presumably more original and thus authoritative version of their religion' (185). Witness this quote from an anonymous Indian visitor at Müller's home:

It is difficult for English people to realize the variety of languages in India, and how little one part of India knows the language of the other part. But we all want to be able to read our Sacred Books. We now widely study English, in order to read our Sacred Books ... (quote on p. 181)

Regarding the strong ties of Victorian scholarship with imperialism, Molendijk has some statements which sound odd to post-colonial and subaltern sensitivities ('Oriental studies contributed to restoring a sense of pride in India' [106] – among whom? which India? one might ask). This said, Molendijk's approach is never apologetic. One rather unfortunate statement by Müller reads: 'The East is ours, we are its heirs, and claim by right our share in its inheritance'

(105). Molendijk's study makes clear that the *Sacred Books* participated in the very construction of that claim in the heyday of the Victorian empire. The very fact that the *Sacred Books* are not just an anthology of Oriental leaves most appealing to Westerners, but qualified translations of entire works, imbued them with academic prestige. Adding philological to religious authority helped install and support, if only for a while, a cathedra of philologists in the new comparative Science of Religion, but also among the educated public.

What would a project such as Müller's *Sacred Books* look like today, in the age of the Internet? Is academic imperialism all gone? 'Many series of sacred books were published in the twentieth century' (167), Molendijk notes, but he does not go on to specify them and ask in what way they may be indebted to Müller's *Sacred Books*. Given Müller's origin, it may be appropriate to mention two German examples: a century and a half after the Königlich-Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften had turned down the project of a *Bibliotheca Sacra* submitted by Müller (see 46), *Diederichs Gelbe Reihe* attempted to produce something similar in Germany in pocket-book format (roughly 180 volumes, among which East Asia is better represented than in Müller's India-biased *Sacred Books*). Ten years ago, the Berlin-based *Verlag der Weltreligionen* set out on yet another such project, for better or for worse. The two projects are witnesses to a *longue durée* effect of Romanticism in German culture. Whatever Müller may have thought of 'world religions' (Molendijk discusses the issue in conversation with Tomoko Masuzawa, among others), there can be no doubt that his *Sacred Books* and comparable series, in which academic ambition join an educated public's religious and intellectual interests, may have a canonizing impact of sorts on the religious field of their time and place, offering food for thought to 20th-century *Bildungsbürger-* or *Intellektuellenreligion*. As for the academic study of religion, it has become critical of scripture-oriented approaches and other Orientalist biases, taking in tools, methods, and theories that help to provide a broader, historically, anthropologically, and sociologically informed perspective on its object of study.

## References

- Girardot, Norman J. 2002. "Max Müller's 'Sacred Books' and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions." *History of Religions* 41 (3): 213–250.
- Sun, Anna. 2013. *Confucianism as a World Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Van den Bosch, Lourens P. 2002. *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*. Leiden: Brill.

Christoph Uehlinger  
University of Zurich

 Christoph.Uehlinger@uzh.ch  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0511-6315>

© 2017 Christoph Uehlinger  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1315630>

