

## Preface

### (I) *Religionswissenschaft* and its Philosophical Antecedents

The Germanic imprint on religious studies is considerable: Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) has been acknowledged as “the founding father”<sup>1</sup> or “one of the founding fathers”<sup>2</sup> of the discipline. If Müller was an indubitable pioneer, many other Germanic names could be added to those who contributed to the consolidation of religious studies as an academic discipline. The primordial monotheism advocated by Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954), the numinosity ascribed to the phenomena of religion by Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), or the impassioned ecumenism of Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967): these were all vital contributions. Schmidt had shown that the schematism according to which religion develops along teleological lines from polytheism to monotheism is by no means as self-evident as it might appear at first sight;<sup>3</sup> Otto had delineated the sacred, the ultimate datum of religious studies, as something unique, and the uniqueness of this datum could serve as the *raison d’être* of religious studies as an autonomous scientific discipline;<sup>4</sup> Heiler, for his part, viewed one’s vocation as *Religionswissenschaftler* as being conjoined with one’s obligations towards humanity.<sup>5</sup>

If Schmidt, Otto, and Heiler had made significant contributions to religious studies, it is worth pointing out that some of their themes had already been explored by Max Müller; this applied in particular to the ecumenism of Heiler and to a limited extent to the primordial monotheism of Schmidt.<sup>6</sup> As he reflected on the

<sup>1</sup> D’Costa, Gavin, “Theology and Religious Studies OR Theology versus Religious Studies?”, p. 49. In: Bird, D.L. & S.G. Smith (eds.), *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education*, pp. 44-54. Continuum: London, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Waardenburg, Jacques, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, p. 14. Mouton: The Hague, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432.

<sup>5</sup> According to Heiler, “the barriers between religions must fall,” and instead of myriad sectarian religions that exclude one another, there ought to be a religion of authentic catholicity; such a universal religion would nourish the spirit of “mutual love among men” and it would be “nothing less than the visible manifestation of God.” It is Heiler’s view that the realisation of such a universal community founded upon mutual love is “{o}ne of the most important tasks of the science of religion.” Heiler, Friedrich, “The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Co-operation of Religion”, pp. 151-155. In: Eliade, Mircea & J.M. Kitagawa (eds.), *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, pp. 132-160. UCP: Chicago, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Here it is worth pointing out that Schmidt never advocated an *Urmonotheism*; this term was attributed to him by his adversaries. What Schmidt did advocate was a monotheistic tendency to be encountered among primitive cultures; this prompted Schmidt to speak of a “*Monotheismus der Urkultur*”. Cf. Brandewie, Ernest, *Wilhelm Schmidt and the Origin of the Idea of God*, pp. 41-42. UPA: Lanham, 1983. Similarly, Müller claimed to be able to discern pre-reflective and primitive monotheism among the ancient Aryans: “The earliest known religious form of the Aryan race is, as nearly as possible, a pure monotheism – yes, that is perfectly true. But it was an undoubting monotheism, in one sense perhaps the happiest monotheism – yet not safe against doubts and negation. Doubt and negation followed, it may be by necessity, and the unconscious, defenceless monotheism gave way to polytheism. That religious form, however, contained within itself the germs of future growth, and by a new negation the polytheistic form gave way again to

modern expressions of Brahmanism, Müller was inclined to view its polytheistic elements as anomalies<sup>7</sup> at variance with the monotheistic spirit of the Vedas.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Schmidt had viewed polytheism as a deviation from the primordial monotheism.<sup>9</sup> According to Müller, the elements of polytheism and superstition would have to be excised from a future Vedic religion. Whereas Heiler had endeavoured to bring about the ecumenism of the high religions,<sup>10</sup> Müller had the ecumenism of the Aryan peoples in sight: thus the Hindus of modern India would have to undergo a “pan-Aryan reformation” that would result in a reversion to the “pre-Turanic, pre-mythological Vedic original religion”.<sup>11</sup> In undergoing this purgative process the Hindus would be reunited with their long-lost Aryan cousins in Europe.

It is perhaps easy to scoff at the utopianism of all ecumenical endeavours, as indeed was done by those who said of the Parliament of Religions, inaugurated in Chicago in 1893, that it “could only have been held in brash, sentimental, pluralistic America”.<sup>12</sup> If we wish to pursue this path of cynical derision, we would need to keep in mind that also international bodies such as the League of Nations, the Bretton Woods Conference, the United Nations, and the European Union have had their fair share of detractors.<sup>13</sup> The Parliament of Religions was in many respects the precursor to the international bodies that were to follow: during an age in which segregation along ethnic lines was still the norm in some parts of the world,<sup>14</sup> a platform that facilitated a dialogue of equals between the representatives of different religions was something of a novelty with revolutionary implications. The ecumenical vision of the Parliament of Religions would engender the related vision of racial

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conscious, determined monotheism.” Müller, G.M. (ed.), *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller* (vol. 1), p. 480. Longman’s: London, 1902.

<sup>7</sup> “In India, the Vedic religion’s Brahmanic guardians fought against the mythopoeic tendencies, but their defense was finally broken by invading Turanic tribes. The Indian religion therefore became more and more ensnared in mythopoeic language, until all that was left was corrupted Hinduism.” Arvidsson, Stefan, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, p. 82. Tr. S. Wichman. UCP: Chicago, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding Vedic monotheism: Cf. Müller, F.M., *Physical Religion: the Gifford lectures*, pp. 44-45. Longman’s: London, 1891. Cf. also: Müller, F.M., *Anthropological Religion: the Gifford Lectures*, p. 76. Longman’s: London, 1891.

<sup>9</sup> Waardenburg, Jacques, op. cit., pp. 264-265.

<sup>10</sup> “All high religions are distinguished from the lower nationalistic religions of mankind. They have realized only imperfectly, however, the concept of humanity towards which they strive because they have detached themselves from other religions striving for the same goal and because they have looked upon one another as competitors or even enemies instead of brethren and children of the same family of God.” Heiler, Friedrich, op. cit., 158.

<sup>11</sup> Arvidsson, Stefan, op. cit., pp. 97-98.

<sup>12</sup> Sharpe, E.J., *Comparative Religion: A History*, p. 139. Duckworth: London, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> The presence of more than a dozen Latin American, Asian, African, and minor European countries at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 inspired the British economist J.M. Keynes to take recourse to the field of zoology: “Twenty-one countries have been invited which clearly have nothing to contribute and will merely encumber the ground {...}. The most monstrous monkey-house assembled for years.” Cf. Abrahamsson, Hans, *Understanding World Order and Structural Change*, n. 1, pp. 187-188. PM: Basingstoke, 2003. Quoted in: Hermele, Kenneth, *Världens oordning: 60 år med Världsbanken och IMF*, p. 17. Agora: Stockholm, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Füredi, Frank, *The Silent War: Imperialism and the Changing Perception of Race*, p. 97. PP: London, 1998.

equality, but if the equality of religions could be accommodated, the notion of racial equality would prove to be a stumbling block:

At the 1919 {Paris Peace} Conference, Japan proposed that the clause in the League of Nations' Covenant providing for religious equality be extended to include the equality of races. The Japanese expected that for reasons of international diplomacy their request could not be rejected. To their surprise, the Anglo-Saxon nations – in particular Australia, Britain, and the United States – took strong exception to the Japanese amendment.<sup>15</sup>

The ecumenical vision that found its formal expression in the Parliament of Religions had been inspired in part by Max Müller,<sup>16</sup> whose authority was duly invoked during the welcoming address.<sup>17</sup> Müller's written contribution to the Parliament was the reaffirmation of a decidedly philosophical approach to religion. Müller stressed that "all religions are natural" and that among the Church Fathers there were those "who were philosophers first, Christians afterward."<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on his personal relationship with religion, Müller pointed out that he "never was frightened or shaken by the critical writings of Strauss or Ewald, of Renan or Colenso."<sup>19</sup> The critical engagement with matters of religion had left intact the edifice of his childhood faith, and such was Müller's confidence in the faith inculcated in him by his mother that he considered himself "richer and safer than many a Cardinal and many a Doctor of Divinity."<sup>20</sup> Coupled with this certitude of faith was an unremitting commitment to rationality:

Arguing when reason meets reason is most delightful, whether we win or lose; but arguing against unreason, against anything that is by nature thick, dense, impenetrable, irrational, has always seemed to me the most disheartening occupation.<sup>21</sup>

Müller's advocacy of a religiosity circumscribed by reason was inspired by the man whom he considered his life-long companion in spirit: Immanuel Kant. In *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* Kant had argued that whatever is statutory qua prescribed ritual in a religion is accidental to the objective of bringing about the moral perfection of man; hence those who ascribe paramountcy to ritual are in fact descending into "*Religionswahn*, dessen Befolgung ein *Afterdienst*, d.i.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> "The ecumenical spirit in religion scholarship that Max Müller represented inspired initiatives like the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago {...}. Scholars in Max Müller mold saw the scientific or rational comparison of religions as a means to a divine end, a field of study that would pave the way for the future realization of a common religion for all humanity that would be truly universal." Adcock, C.S., *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom*, p. 68. OUP: Oxford, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Houghton, W.R. (ed.), *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition*, p. 42. Neely: Chicago, 1894.

<sup>18</sup> Hanson, J.W. (ed.), *The World's Congress of Religions: The Addresses and Papers Delivered Before the Parliament*, p. 217. IPC: Chicago, 1894.

<sup>19</sup> Müller, F.M., *My Autobiography: A Fragment*, p. 305. Scribner's: New York, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 310.

eine solche vermeintliche Verehrung Gottes ist, wodurch dem wahren, von ihm selbst geforderten Dienste gerade entgegen gehandelt wird.”<sup>22</sup> Such a *Religion-swahn*, according to Kant, consists in “die bloße Vorstellung einer Sache mit der Sache selbst für gleichgeltend zu halten” and it is the equivalent of madness proper, because those poor souls who are confined to the mental asylum are into the habit of “eine bloße Vorstellung (der Einbildungskraft) für die Gegenwart der Sache selbst zu nehmen”.<sup>23</sup> In believing that ritual observances are conducive of salvation, man inverts religion by concocting an *Afterdienst* from its historically contingent components;<sup>24</sup> whereas the purpose of authentic religiosity is to guide man *towards* that higher, invisible, and ecumenical church, the commitment to a lower, visible, and sectarian church drags man *away* from his true objective.<sup>25</sup>

What becomes clear from these Kantian reflections on positive religion is that “kein historischer oder statutarischer Glaube den Menschen erlösen könne.”<sup>26</sup> This positive religion can at the most serve as the auxiliary of man’s endeavours to arrive at moral perfection, but positive religion is in and of itself decidedly dispensable.<sup>27</sup> The indispensable religion, on the other hand, is circumscribed by reason, and this “Vernunftreligion” has the establishment of an “ethischen Staat auf Erden” as its objective.<sup>28</sup> Two important ideas can be drawn from these reflections: (i) on the one hand a *Vernunftreligion* committed to the moral betterment of man is posited and (ii) it points towards the establishment of a formal framework qua ethical state that is in adequation with man’s dignity as a moral being. In such an ethical state religion will have overcome its accidental properties: the “Überganges des Kirchenglaubens zur allgemeinen Vernunftreligion” shall once and for all rid religion of all its confessional elements.<sup>29</sup>

The Kantian ideas of (i) a religion within the bounds of reason and (ii) an ecumenism that obliterates the historical and statutory elements that set religion against religion were embraced by Max Müller. We have already seen the impact of these Kantian ideas on Müller’s treatment of modern Hinduism: the Hinduism of the future would have to abandon its polytheistic and irrational elements and this

<sup>22</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, AA. 6:168. Reimer: Berlin, 1914.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kant chastises “die Diener einer Kirche {...}, die Anhänglichkeit {...} an den historischen und statutarischen Theil des Kirchenglaubens für allein seligmachend erklären.” Ibid., 6:153.

<sup>25</sup> “Da eine reine Vernunftreligion als öffentlicher Religionsglaube nur die bloße Idee von einer Kirche (nämlich einer unsichtbaren) verstattet, und die sichtbare, die auf Satzungen gegründet ist, allein einer Organisation durch Menschen bedürftig und fähig ist: so wird der Dienst unter der Herrschaft des guten Principis in der ersten nicht als Kirchendienst angesehen werden können, und jene Religion hat keine gesetzliche Diener, als Beamte eines ethischen gemeinen Wesens; ein jedes Glied desselben empfängt unmittelbar von dem höchsten Gesetzgeber seine Befehle.” Ibid., 6:152.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer, Kuno, *Immanuel Kant und seine Lehre: Zweiter Theil*, p. 349. CWU: Heidelberg, 1899.

<sup>27</sup> “Wer also die Beobachtung statutarischer einer Offenbarung bedürftigen Gesetze als zur Religion notwendig und zwar nicht bloß als Mittel für die moralische Gesinnung, sondern als die objective Bedingung, Gott dadurch unmittelbar wohlgefällig zu werden, voranschickt und diesem Geschichtsglauben die Bestrebung zum guten Lebenswandel nachsetzt {...}, der verwandelt den Dienst Gottes in ein bloßes Fetischmachen”. Kant, Immanuel, op. cit., 6:178-179.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6:122.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

procession towards greater rationality would usher in an Aryan ecumenism. The idea of an ecumenism is present not only in the Kantian notion of an invisible and non-confessional *Weltkirche*; it is implicit also in his notions of *Weltbürgerlichkeit* and *Weltfrieden*. Once we become conscious of these universalist ideas expounded by Kant, it could dawn on us that the Parliament of Religions may not have been a byproduct of the “brash, sentimental, pluralistic America” after all. Through the channel provided by Max Müller, the ecumenism of the Parliament of Religions leads us back to Kant.

Müller’s Kantian connections have by and large been forgotten, but it is worth remembering that Müller gave us an eminently readable English translation of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*; Müller seemed convinced that only a German<sup>30</sup> could accomplish such a task in a proficient manner and he expressed his doubts about the ability of Englishmen to comprehend Kant’s philosophy in its fullness.<sup>31</sup> Of Kant’s first *Kritik*, Müller said that it had served him as a “constant companion through life.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, he acknowledged that “whatever purpose or method” there was to be discerned in his output was owing to its Kantian well-spring.<sup>33</sup>

What these Kantian antecedents alert us to is that if monographs on religious studies typically identify Müller as a founding father of the discipline, there are legitimate grounds for exploring the worldviews of the thinkers who went before him. These explorations are not to be carried out for sake of mere curiosity, but because they would serve to shed greater light on the thought of the founders of the discipline of religion studies. And once we traverse this path, there is also the possibility that the frontiers will be pushed farther back in time: even if Müller was the founding father of religious studies, its building blocks had been provided by Kant and those who often claimed to speak in his name. Of this lineage of thinkers Müller had the following to say:

The great systems of Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, {...} and Schopenhauer branched off from Kant, and now, after a century has passed away, people begin to see that those systems were indeed mighty branches, but that the leading shoot of philosophy was and is still – Kant.<sup>34</sup>

In each one of these cases we are dealing with a prodigious thinker who also wrote extensively on religion. The danger with the invocation of such formidable thinkers

<sup>30</sup> “What I feel convinced of is that an adequate translation of Kant must be the work of a German scholar.” Müller, F.M. “Translator’s Preface”, p. v. In: Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason* (First Part), pp. I–lxii. Tr. F.M. Müller. Macmillan: London, 1881.

<sup>31</sup> “I hear so little of Kant here now. The philosophers in England are against him – he does not suit them. However, that cannot be helped, they will have to hear of him. The difficulty lies with the public – if that is lazy, as it is here, how can one expect that they will read Kant? They read Mill and Spencer; that is less weighty and is also called philosophy. Well, we must not expect the impossible.” Müller, G.M. (ed.), *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller* (vol. 2), p. 127. Longman’s: London, 1902.

<sup>32</sup> Müller, F.M. “Translator’s Preface”, p. xiii. In: Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason* (First Part), pp. I–lxii. Tr. F.M. Müller. Macmillan: London, 1881.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>34</sup> Müller, F.M., “Translator’s Preface”, p. xv. In: Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason* (First Part), pp. I–lxii. Tr. F.M. Müller. Macmillan: London, 1881.