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The Ideological Leanings and Comparative Etymology of Max Müller: The Equation Bráhmaṇ = Verbum

More than once in the course of his life, Max Müller (1823-1900) sought to show the unity of thought between the Stoics, neo-Platonists, Christians and Vedantists by means of the equation: Brahman = Verbum. For Müller, the etymological approach or “the Science of Truth” showed that from East to West, philosophers naturally came to the same conclusions regarding the origins of creation: the phenomenal world was born of the λόγος for Greek philosophers, of the λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ or verbum dei for Christians and of the Brahman for ṛṣi and Vedantist philosophers. This paper looks into the historical context of this position, the underlying motives and the methodological processes of the author.

Etymological research as a means of gaining knowledge of the nature of things, which leads to a knowledge of Being, is a method that was used in earliest Antiquity. From Plato's Cratylus to the work of Walther von Wartburg, as well as in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* and Byzantine lexicons, etymology has been presented, without ever winning acceptance, as an “exact science” of language, following the eponymous etymology of this Stoic neologism. Thus, it is not surprising that etymology was used through the centuries to support many theories, especially after the discoveries of languages unknown to Europeans in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Etymology seemed to be an indispensable tool

that allowed researchers to grasp the original meaning of a word, and in some disciplines, it was touted as the scientific guarantor of the comparative approach of the study of civilizations and their religions. Depending on the aims of particular disciplines, etymology has been used for very specific purposes, and at times it has served the cause of partisan ideologies. In the early part of the eighteenth century, for example, Jean-Venant Bouchet, a Jesuit missionary in Madras, used phonetic and morphological analogies to argue that Brahmā was nothing but a mispronunciation of Abraham, and that the name of Brahmā's companion Sarasvatī was originally Sarah, the name of Abraham's wife,¹ thus confirming a belief held by the Church Fathers, that the people of India were descended from Noah's sons. Further, the people of India, being far from Palestine, the cradle of ancient Judaism, were in this construction thought to have forgotten the Mosaic Law (which they were nonetheless supposed to have received at some point in their history), and it was argued that their recollection of ancestral usages and customs had gradually faded in this distant land.² Through linguistic analogies, particularly through arbitrary methods of breaking down phonemes in an excessive manner similar to that of Samuel Bochart a century earlier in his *Geographia Sacra*, scholars thought they might recover from Sanskrit sources the traces of their own Judeo-Christian tradition.

The comparative history of religions as a scientific discipline, born during the nineteenth century, did not abandon such procedures, and continued to use etymology as a justification for certain theses. In the upheaval caused by the new theories of Darwinism and evolutionism, and with the rise of new methods for the classification of species in botany and biology, and indeed unprecedented discoveries in comparative grammar, anthropology and sociology, the comparative

1. "It can be seen that from *Brama* to Abraham there is not much of a distance to cross; but it is desirable that our savants, in the matter of etymologies, should not adopt the least reasonable or the most tendentious techniques." Jean-Venant Bouchet, "Lettre du Père Bouchet, de la Compagnie de Jésus, Missionnaire de Maduré, & Supérieur de la nouvelle Mission de Carnate, à Monseigneur l'ancien évêque d'Avranches." In *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des peuples idolâtres, représentées par des figures dessinées de la main de Bernard Picart: avec une explication historique et quelques dissertations curieuses*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam, 1728), 102.

2. Guillaume Ducœur, *Brahmanisme et encratisme à Rome au III^e siècle après J.-C* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

history of religions, taking inspiration from its comparative methods, hoped at last to discover the common origin of beliefs, and thus arrive at the primitive religious thought of our most distant ancestors. Max Müller was, since his teenage years, very interested by the comparative grammar of the Indo-European languages,³ and throughout his life he considered etymological research to be fundamental, regarding it as “the Science of Truth.”⁴ Through this and the equation *bráhman* = *verbum*, he sought to demonstrate a unity of thought that would encompass Stoics, Neoplatonists, Christians, and Vedāntists. In setting up this equivalence, Max Müller wanted to show that the Greek philosophers, and after them the early Church Fathers, came naturally to the same cosmogonic conclusions as the wise men of India: the phenomenal world was engendered by the *λόγος* for the Greek philosophers, by the *λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ* or *verbum dei* for Christians, and by the *bráhman* for the ṛṣi and subsequently the Vedāntist philosophers. The present article thus seeks to examine not only the historical context of such a demonstration, but also to investigate the methodological procedures used by Max Müller. We will not render our judgment on the value of such an equation, but on the method of setting up such an equation—on the recourse to etymology and the comparative history of religions, both used to serve the purposes of a comparativism directed towards personal interests.

There is no need to review the biography or the considerable accomplishments of Max Müller (1823–1900). He was involved in the diffusion of translations of eastern sources, particularly Sanskrit sources, and his linguistic approach to comparative mythology was influential in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Despite certain valuable contributions, neither Müller’s theory of the disease of language, or his solarism, or even his Vedic henotheism⁶ were able

3. Max Müller, “Nouvelles études de mythologie” in *Mythologie comparée*, ed. P. Brunel (Paris: R. Laffont, 2002), 417–18.

4. Max Müller, *Nouvelles leçons sur la science du langage*, vol. 1, *Phonétique et étymologie*, trans. George Harris and Georges Perrot (Paris: A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, 1867), 307 [back-translated from the French].

5. Concerning the life of Max Müller and his linguistic approach to Indo-European and Semitic languages, see most especially Lourens Peter van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), and Maurice Olender, *Les Langues du paradis* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 157–75.

6. See the refutation by William Dwight Whitney, “Le Prétendu hénouthéisme du Véda,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 6 (1882): 129–43.

to withstand the criticisms of mythologists, specialists in Indian texts, and especially linguists who demonstrated the untenability of his theses, and then went on to discredit the naturalistic approach of the Oxford school. But the purpose here is not to generalize. In other words, what we shall demonstrate concerning the methods used by Max Müller is only valid as regards the etymological equation mentioned above. At any rate, it would be false to claim that this great scholar never expressed any doubt about the results of his own research.

MAX MÜLLER, A CONFIRMED VEDĀNTIST

The equation *bráhma*n = *verbum* is set forth in its most synthetic form⁷ in the third conference, “Similarities and Differences between Indian and European Philosophy,” which Müller presented in March 1894 at the Royal Institution of Great Britain. This presentation was part of a long discourse on Vedāntic philosophy published that same year.⁸ A French version was published in 1899.⁹ The title of this conference is significant. The comparative method employed was intended to be impartial, and to take into consideration the similarities as well as the differences between the two terms in the equation. The two terms, representative of Indian philosophy and European philosophy, represent such vast fields of research that we need to ask how we might define them. They reveal a daring and optimism that was characteristic of a sort of megalomania of the scholars of the nineteenth century, who were repeatedly filled with enthusiasm by the scientific and historical discoveries that took place during that century. In 1870, Max Müller himself claimed that “establishing a science of religions that is based on the comparison of all humanity’s religions, or at least the most important, is only a matter of time.” This points to an obvious paradox: the comparative method should

7. The identification of the *lóyos* with *bráhma*n motivated the research of Max Müller for many years, right up to the time of his death. Its fullest development is contained in the book, *Theosophy or Psychological Religion, the Gifford Lectures* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1893).

8. Max Müller, *Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1904).

9. Max Müller, *Introduction à la philosophie du védānta* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899).

logically take the entire group of objects of study into consideration, but is unable to do so in practical terms, and must be content with an examination of the most typical objects of study. But the selection in this case cannot be justified, because focusing on some religions and leaving some aside involves a value judgment on the part of the investigator. What religions did Müller therefore consider as important? In all likelihood, it was those that had the largest number of adherents across the world, including the three great forms of monotheism, or those that were expressed in important textual sources, such as the Vedic scriptures. The dichotomy between East and West, India and Europe also came into play. This opposition was not only geographical, but also ideological and religious. Did Müller think he could overcome the distance between them, and reconcile the differences that separated these great cultures? He was fascinated by India, and became, so to speak, acculturated without leaving his native culture. He was pulled in different directions by two styles of thought which he wished to reconcile. In his attachment to comparativism, we see the evidence of an encounter in which he displays as much Indo-centrism as Eurocentrism.

Max Müller could not ignore the obvious differences between the philosophical systems of Greeks, Christians, or the people of India. But it seems that focusing on them gives his etymological demonstration greater pertinence. The equation, following Müller's conception, is supposed to overcome the differences and to recover, prior to the philosophical speculation produced within each civilization's intellectual world (inherent in each one's cultural history), a common origin of the foundation of thought. The scholar, in fact, does not at all credit the hypothesis which suggests that Indian sages taught the doctrines of the *Upaniṣad* to the Greeks during the time of Alexander the Great. For Müller, the testimony of Onesicritus (who spoke of the impossibility of translating a philosophical doctrine from one culture to another, because of the difficulty involved in a long chain of translations, all necessary steps in the chain) "shows how difficult it would be to maintain that India exercised influence over the Greek philosophers."¹⁰ Any "resemblances" that exist are

10. Max Müller, *La Science du langage, cours professé à l'Institution royale de la Grande-Bretagne en l'année 1861*, trans. G. Harris and G. Perrot (Paris: A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, 1867), 105.

for Müller located elsewhere, and not in hypothetical historical contacts between the two cultures. The historical method gives way to the etymological method, which is aimed at a definition of the meaning of philosophical terms through the comparative method. In 1899, taking up yet again the equation *bráhma* = *verbum*, Müller states that this linguistic community can only be the reflection of a community of thought, an “Aryan” philosophical thought that existed before the separation of the two cultures.¹¹ Müller went beyond the historical study of philosophical environments in each culture in order to find a single thought of God in human beings, at all times and in all places. This was an underlying cause for the orientation of his research. It is particularly apparent in the pages of his “Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India” (1878), in which he argues that humans are deeply religious by nature, and that the West, caught up in the then-current theological controversies of the Christian churches, would be well advised to draw inspiration from diverse expressions of that which he calls the Infinite (for want of a better term), which the Indian religion allows to be recognized at the same time. Similarly, during the three conferences at which he spoke at the age of 71 (he would live six more years), he could not help but recall to his listeners what Schopenhauer had said regarding his own reading of the *Upaniṣad*¹² and to add:

If these words by Schopenhauer needed any endorsement, I would gladly provide it, as the result of my own experience, the product of a long life devoted to the study of many philosophies and many religions. If one considers philosophy as a preparation for a good death, or euthanasia, I know no better preparation of this kind, than the philosophy of Vedanta.¹³

Müller’s primary aim was to make connections between the Greek notion of the *lógos*, the Christian version of this notion, and Vedāntic thought. His idea was to place Christianity and Vedānta in parallel, and then to point out the theological correspondence, obvious to

11. Max Müller, *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy; Samkhya and Yoga; Naya and Vaiseshika* (London, 1899), 63.

12. “In all the world there is no more profitable study, or any more apt to lift up one’s spirit, than the study of the Upanishads. They have been the consolation of my life, and they will be the consolation of my death.” Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 10.

13. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 10.

his mind, which alone could justify his belief in the Infinite. The conclusion of the *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) is clear on this point:

We live in the forum, and not in the forest, but we can, in their school, we can have differences with our neighbours, we can love those who hate us for our religious convictions, or at least learn to reject hatred and persecution against those whose convictions, hopes or fears, whose moral principles are not the same as ours. This is what it means to live in vānaprastha, a life worthy of a real sage of the forest, and of one who knows what human beings are, what life is, and what it means to learn to be silent in the presence of the Eternal and the Infinite.¹⁴

Max Müller may thus appear as “one who knows,” a vidvān from the *Upaniṣad* who having gained knowledge of his own nature, of the ātman, can dissolve into brāhman, the Supreme Principle, that reminds us (through a common Sanskrit saying) of the Infinite of which he himself speaks. Must we then admit that Müller is influenced by an orientation that is more ideological than scientific? His enthusiasm for Vedāntic philosophy, his determination to demonstrate the truth of the equation brāhman = verbum and his hypotheses about a form of theological thought that is the common intellectual ancestor of both East and West leave little room for doubt. If there was still any doubt about the justification of this conclusion, it would suffice to reproduce this passage from his first conference, which indicates clearly the final place he would give to the Vedānta within his schema of the evolution of humanity’s religious beliefs and those of India, from henotheism to atheism or “adeism:”

It is this treasure of ancient religious thought that the wise men of the Upanishads inherited from their ancestors, and we will now see what use they made of it, and how they discovered at last the true nature of the relationship between what we call the Divine or the Infinite, such as we experience it objectively in nature, and the Divine or Infinite perceived subjectively within the human soul. We will thus be able to understand how they constructed upon this ancient foundation, that which was at one and the same time the most sublime philosophy and the most satisfactory religion, the Vedānta.¹⁵

Müller’s comparativism deserves to be understood in its context if we are to best understand the linguistic obsession that his

14. M. Müller, *Origine et développement de la religion étudiés à la lumière des religions de l’Inde* (Paris: C. Reinwald, 1873), 328.

15. Müller, *La Philosophie du védānta*, 34.

contemporaries and his successors denounced, rejected, and sometimes mocked. He began by assuming that there cannot be, in principle, any separation between language and thought, and he drew from comparative etymology an assurance that he had accurately grasped what our ancestors had perceived of God and the Infinite, by examining their linguistic expressions. He was encouraged by the spirit of his time and by the general enthusiasm for the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages, as well as by positive ideologies like Schopenhauer's, that went as far as pulling Christianity some distance away from its Jewish origins, viewing it as the culmination of Indian thought:

The New Testament, by contrast, must have some Hindu roots; its ethics, which place morality in the context of asceticism, its pessimism, and its manifestation are testimony to this. All of this places it in marked opposition to the Old Testament. The Christian doctrine stemming from the wisdom of India grew over the old trunk, completely heterogeneous to it, of primitive Judaism.¹⁶

He went even further at times regarding the subject of repeated failures to evangelize the Indian people:

Our religions have not and will not take root in India; the primitive wisdom of the human race will not allow itself to be turned in its course by an adventure that occurred in Galilee.¹⁷

After the discovery of Sanskrit sources of Buddhism by Brian Hodgson and the work of Eugène Burnouf on the foundations of the Indian Buddhist doctrine, India in the West had a different appearance. The concept of nirvāṇa, the extinction of the desire for existence, which European philosophers would take to mean the annihilation of Being, dealt a final blow to Indian philosophy in general. In his book, *L'Inde anglaise, son état actuel et son avenir*; Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire, former minister of foreign affairs for Jules Ferry declared that "... the wisdom of India can be reduced ... to a genius for poetry and religion, which must hold a fairly high place in the annals of the human spirit, without equalling Greek genius, and surely without equalling Judaism."¹⁸ Other areas of inquiry would later carry the question forward. For example,

16. Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance Orientale* (Paris: Payot, 1950), 450.

17. Schwab, *Renaissance*, 447–48

18. Roger-Paul Droit, *L'Oubli de l'Inde, une amnésie philosophique* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 162.

H. P. Blavatsky drew heavily upon Müller's etymological research and on the early versions of comparative study of Greek, Christian, and Vedāntic philosophy, in order to provide support for his syncretic doctrine, which appeared in 1888:

Thus in Manu, Brahma (the Logos also) is shown dividing his body into two parts, male and female, and creating in the latter, who is Vach, Viraj, who is himself, or Brahma again - it is in this way a learned Vedantin Occultist speaks of that «goddess», explaining the reason why Eswara (or Brahma) is called Verbum or Logos; why in fact it is called Sabda Brahman.¹⁹

In the same year, Colonel H. Olcott, a fervent leader of the Theosophical Society, went to Oxford to meet Max Müller and to discuss various matters related to Indian religion. Their discussion was extended by a written correspondence that continued until at least 1893. Although the Oxford don was able to commit himself to the difficult and demanding discipline of comparativism between religions from different cultures, he held H. P. Blavatsky in low esteem, and denounced her ignorance of the foundations of various Indian religious movements.²⁰

Max Müller's conferences on Vedāntic philosophy coincided with the international development of the Ramakrishna Mission, under the leadership of Vivekenanda. The latter presented his master's doctrines, and Vedāntic philosophy in general, at the World's Congress of Religions, part of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in September 1893, and went on to tour Europe, speaking at many conferences. Müller became very interested in this great mystical figure from India, and went as far as publishing a book in 1898 on the life and Vedāntic teaching of Rāmākṛṣṇa,²¹ based on documents obtained from some of his disciples, including Vivekananda, whom he met in London in May 1896. Müller, as a strong Vedāntist, was deeply convinced that "God is in all men, but all men are not in God: that is the reason why they suffer."²² At a time when the philosophy of the *Upaniṣad*, made sombre by Buddhism, had lost

19. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine. The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1888), 137.

20. Van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller*, 160.

21. Max Müller, *Ramakrishna. His Life and Sayings* (London, 1898).

22. Müller, *Ramakrishna*, IX.

much of its attraction, Vedāntic philosophy, which gained strength in the West because of the activities of the disciples of Rāmakṛṣṇa, appeared to be best suited to communicate both ancient and contemporary Indian thought, and also best suited to breach the passage between India and Europe, a Europe that still sought its own identity in India.

ETYMOLOGY MAIN

In order to resolve the equation under discussion and prove the convergences between Indian and European philosophy, Müller had to follow a twisting path, and demonstrate that originally the Vedic neuter, brāhman, had a different meaning than the one understood by the Brahmin caste, and that this word did not only mean “sacred formula.”²³ He made use of analogies between the Platonic and Stoic notions of εἶδος and λόγος on the one hand, and the Vedāntic concept of nāmarūpa on the other, affirming that both refer to the idea of form, as well as of thought or speech. Not only were the thought or word of God or of brāhman (since thought and word were not differentiated) at the origin of creation, but, in addition, name-and-form represented the manifest thoughts of God in the created world, which allows humans to perceive their Creator. Müller could not claim a direct etymological identification of the neuter word brāhman as a “creative word,” but he found a substitute, and was able to affirm that vāk or “speech,” the object of the dedication of the Ṛgvedic hymns, was more than a mere representation of articulate language (vāk became an abstract deity later on). He took his distance here from the naturalistic interpretation he would hold some years later in his *Nouvelles études de mythologie*, to the effect that the “vāk” “allows us to see, as if from a distance, that its first origin is in the voice of a storm.”²⁴ In 1865, Albrecht Weber had already undertaken a study comparing the notions of vāk and

23. “The neuter noun ‘Brahman’ is used in the Rig-Veda in the sense of ‘prayer,’ originally as that which issues forth from the soul, and in a certain way, that which is revealed. This is why Brahman is used, later on, as a collective noun to refer to the Veda, the sacred word.” Max Müller, *Essais sur l’histoire des religions*, trans. George Harris (Paris: Didier et Cie., 1872), 104.

24. Müller, “Nouvelles étude”, 682.

λόγος.²⁵ For Max Müller, the Rgvedic vāk was to be understood as “a kind of Logos or primitive Wisdom,”²⁶ which gradually acquired the status of a divinity for the Brahmins.²⁷ This vāk, possessing cosmogonic functions attested in RV X.125, is said by Müller to be closely connected to the ḥōkmāh of Proverbs 8:22, and then linked to the Greek form σοφία, “creative power,”²⁸ following the translation of *the Septuagint* in which he hears an echo in the prologue of the Gospel of John in the words λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ. Such analogies allowed Müller not only to touch an early stage in ancient Judaism, but to reconstruct the links of a long chain of transmission of a concept that has appeared in the forms of the ḥōkmāh, σοφία, λόγος, and finally, following the Latin translation of St. Jerome, the *verbum*. This parallel arrangement for Hebrew and Greek notions is not new. Years earlier, Müller had hypothesized that the meaning of “brāhman, in Sanskrit, had originally been ‘power,’ [and it] had the same meaning as El [‘strong’].”²⁹ Following Müller’s own theory of the disease of language, this “brāhman” was supposed to have been gradually personified and divinized.³⁰

Müller would, therefore, look in the Vedic cosmogonic hymns for elements that would allow him to identify vāk and brāhman. Thus, in considering *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.1.8 he would take the liberty of translating “prajāpati ... brāhmaivā prathamām asrjata” as “[Prajāpati] in the beginning created the Word,”³¹ reckoning that it

25. Albrecht Weber, “Vāc und λόγος.” In *Beiträge für die Kunde des indischen Alterthums*, F.-A. Brockhaus, 1865), 473–82.

26. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 167.

27. “The Brahmins, in the Vedic hymns, raised speech to the level of a divinity, as they did for all the things whose nature was known to them. They sang hymns to speech, in which it is said that it lived with the gods from the beginning, accomplishing marvellous things, and that speech has only partly been revealed to humans. In the *brahmanas*, speech is called the cow, and breath the bull, and the human spirit is presented as their offspring. It is said that Brahman, the greatest of all beings, is known through speech, and speech itself is called the supreme Brahman.” Müller, *La Science du langage*, 98–99.

28. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 169.

29. Müller, *L’Histoire des religions*, 494.

30. “The only name that [the primitive poet] could find for this mysterious power was Brahman; for ‘brahman’ originally meant ‘power, will, desire, and the creative and motive force.’ But this impersonal Brahman, as soon as it is named, also becomes something extraordinary and divine. It is eventually placed among the multitude of gods, becoming one of the persons of the great triad which is still worshipped today.” Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 102.

31. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 172.

was probably a matter of the primitive meaning given by the षि (the “seers”), to the neuter bráhma, at the place where the Brahmins would later substitute “Veda” or “Holy Knowledge,” as is later indicated by the Brahmin commentary “trayómevá vidyām,” “that is, the Three-fold Science.” Given that the “original meaning of bráhma may have been forgotten,”³² he hypothesized the possibility of a linguistic equivalence between the composites Bṛhaspati and Vāhaspati, which would be none other than bráhma, and which he translated as “the Lord of speech.”³³ Thus, he emphasized the phonetic doublets of the labials and the labio-dentals with the roots bṛh- and vṛh-.³⁴ The root bṛh-, which he interpreted as “that which bursts forth in the sense of creation or creator, particularly when creation was understood not as a making, but as an expansion,”³⁵ would have its equivalents in bṛdh- and vṛdh-. Regarding the root vṛdh-, he hypothesized a substantive, *vardha-, which “would transform regularly into Latin as *verbum*.”³⁶ He noted that the Sanskrit “rudhira” could be found in Latin in the form *ruber* because of alternation between the Sanskrit aspirated dental and the Latin labial. But he went even further. In light of the disappearance of the aspiration of the dental in English according to Grimm’s Law, *vardha, which corresponded to the Latin *verbum*, could also be identified with the English “word,” and thus Müller could conclude:

Brahman, verbum, and word proceed from a single root, *vṛh* or *vṛdh*, to burst forth, to emerge from within, and they all have the same meaning, that is, “word.” We cannot, however, conclude from this that *Brahma*, as the source of the universe, was originally thought of as the creative Word or the Logos. That would be too perfect to be true. But the very fact that the same word, “brahma”, referred to the creative power that bursts forth from within, just as words come forth from within, may have led the first thinkers of India to the idea that the original expansion of the world was the word or thought given in and through *Brahman*.³⁷

32. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 172.

33. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 172.

34. Concerning these doublets, see Louis Renou, *Grammaire sanscrite*, vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1996), § 54, 59.

35. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 173.

36. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 174.

37. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 174–75.

In basing himself on the cosmogonic myth in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.2.3, Müller shows that brāhman, having created the three-fold world but remaining outside his own creation, debated with himself on how to enter into it. He “returned there using the couple Name-and-Form,” says the Vedic text. Armed with this observation, Müller translates a passage from the *Maitry upaniṣad* (6.22) in this way: “Two brāhmanas must be meditated upon, the word and the non-word. It is only through the word that the non-word is revealed.”³⁸ The text tells us:

One must meditate, in truth, upon two Brahmanas: the one that is the sound and the one that is the non-sound. It is through the sound that the non-sound is made manifest. Thanks to Om̐, the sound escapes toward what is above, and loses itself in the non-sound. There we see in truth, what the way is; there we see immortality, there is union (with brāhman), there beatitude.³⁹

The *Upaniṣad* teaches that the sound Om̐ identified with the ātman is nothing other than brāhman made manifest within his own creation, rejoining the non-sound, brāhman, thereby assuring “the one who knows this” of deliverance. We would expect Müller here to defend his manner of translating the Sanskrit “śabda and aśabda” as “sound” and “non-sound,” by “word” and “non-word.” In a situation in which he cannot find any further etymological equivalence between śabda and brāhman, he gives the first term the semantic value he had attributed to the second term, without further justification. Müller does not comment on this forced and biased translation, but goes on to deduce the following from it:

Here once again we have the exact counterpart of the Logos of the Alexandrian school. Following that school, the divine Essence is revealed by the Word and by the Word alone. Prior to this revelation, the Word is unknown, and some Christian philosophers called it the Father; as revealed, it was the divine Logos or the Son. From all that has gone before, it seems to me that we are led to admit that the same sequence

38. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 178. He takes up again the translation he had given ten years earlier: “Two Brahmanas have to be meditated on, the word and the non-word. By the word alone is the non-word revealed. Now there is the word Om. Moving upward by it (where all words and all what is meant by them ceases), he arrives at absorption in the non-word (Brahman). This is the way, this is the immortal, this is union, and this is bliss.” *The Upanishads*, trans. F. Max Müller, part II (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1884), 321.

39. M. Müller, *Maitri Upanishad*, trans. Anne-Marie Esnoul (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1952).

of ideas, which after a long period of preparation found its definitive expression in Philo and later in Clement of Alexandria, was worked out in India at an earlier time, beginning from very similar positions, and arriving at almost identical results. However, there is nothing to indicate that there was any borrowing from one side by the other.⁴⁰

This is the same Max Müller, who in 1879, fourteen years earlier, affirmed the following in a note on etymology, and on the subject of the same neuter, bráhmaṇ:

... without trying to follow the later ramifications of Brahman, speech, hymn of praise, prayer, sacrifice, I will simply say that we must take care not to suppose that we have here a sort of Logos. Although the word ends up referring to the cause of the universe, and is frequently identified with the Atman, the supreme soul, its development is not the same as that of the Alexandrian Logos, and in any case from a historical point of view, these are two absolutely independent movements of thought.⁴¹

It must be noted that the connections hypothesized by Max Müller between Greek philosophy and the Vedānta are based more (or entirely) on etymology than on a semantic analysis of philosophical notions. The resolution of the equation bráhmaṇ = verbum was certainly for Müller a way of surpassing what he considered to be the most important discovery of his century, namely Zeus = Dyaus. It was an attempt to demonstrate that beyond morphological correspondences and phonetic modifications in accordance with Grimm's Law, words themselves contained meanings that expressed the primitive thought of our distant Indo-European ancestors regarding what they perceived as the original source of the phenomenal world. Despite undoubted advances in the area of Sanskrit studies over the course of the twentieth century, the term "bráhmaṇ" has always raised many questions regarding its etymology.⁴² Louis Renou put forward the hypothesis of a connection between the substantive and a "root, *brah- / *barh- in the sense of 'speaking in enigmas,' which would lead to rendering bráhmaṇ" as "enigma" or "enigmatic formula."⁴³

40. Müller, *La Philosophie du védanta*, 178–79.

41. Max Müller, *Origine et développement de la religion étudiés à la lumière des religions de l'Inde* (Paris: C. Reinwald, 1879), 322.

42. Jan Gonda, *Les Religions de l'Inde, vol. I: Védisme et hindouisme ancien* (Paris: Payot, 1962), 45–46, and no. 3, 45.

43. L. Renou, "Sur la notion de Bráhmaṇ." In *L'Inde fondamentale* (Paris: Hermann, 1978), 94–95.

CONCLUSION

Max Müller's demonstration is not devoid of interest. It draws our attention to speculation about the *Upaniṣad*, texts which may in certain respects be compared to Neoplatonic philosophy, and which also raise the question of the nature and function to be attributed to language, speech, and thought at the very center of the cosmogonic myths. Many later studies have focused on the convergence between Greek thought and Indian thought, and interest in this subject remains alive today.⁴⁴ But in terms of comparative studies, etymological research is considered unconvincing because it does not take into account the semantic scope of any of the terms (bráhmaṇ, λόγος, verbum) considered in the philosophical or theological context of its period. As François Chenet rightly said concerning the application of the comparative method to Greek or Indian philosophy, "It would be dangerous and quite illusory to categorize things under headings whose names have Greek or Latin origins any sequences of ideas or philosophemes that belong to a culture that is so different from our own."⁴⁵ Max Müller went beyond the historic-critical approach, and attempted, primarily through etymology, to argue that at one time, long ago, the words bráhmaṇ, verbum, and word had the same meaning. But how can we connect "bráhmaṇ" to the Old English "word," derived from the Gothic "waurd," for which we find correspondences to Avestan urvata-, Sanskrit vrata-, Greek ῥήτρα, or Hittite weriga, thus reaching back to a hypothetical Indo-European "*were", expressing the meaning, "the order of things that is given," or "the word of command"? The morphological and phonetic equivalences between verbum and word may be accepted, but not in the case of bráhmaṇ. Etymological research cannot explain everything in this domain, or produce the exact meaning of philosophical terms used in quite specific intellectual circles. The words

44. Kenneth Saunders, *The Eternal Order: Logos, Brahman and Dharma* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007).

45. François Chenet, "Du sens de la philosophie compare." In *Philosophie comparée, Grèce, Inde, Chine*, ed. Joachim Lacrosse (Paris: J. Vrin, 2005), 85. Certain theses put forward in this work illustrate very well the limits and the hazards of any comparative procedure when it is not solidly anchored by a historical approach to the philosophical contexts being studied. The theses referred to above hardly differ, finally, from the analogical connections made by Max Müller more than a century earlier.

chosen to express abstract notions have been loaded by each of the philosophical movements involved with very particular meanings, which can only be grasped by studying them in their proper context. In this particular case, etymology, and indeed philology in general, must either give way, or use the historical-critical method. It is interesting to examine Sanskrit translations of books of the Bible in order to see how Christians, sometimes helped by Indian scholars, tried during the nineteenth century to render the fundamental ideas of the Judeo-Christian texts. We note that the notion of *hōkmāh* in Proverbs 8:22 was translated in Sanskrit by “*buddhi*,”⁴⁶ and the *λόγος* of the prologue of the Gospel of John was translated either as “*vācana*”⁴⁷ or as “*vāda*.”⁴⁸ In each case, the Christian translators did not refer to the *vāc* as it is defined in the Upaniṣadic treatises and in Vedāntic thought. Neither etymological equivalences nor hypothetical connections between Greek Christian thought and Vedāntic philosophy were explored. Christian missionaries tried, more than anything, to render into Sanskrit the semantic scope of the concepts that define the foundation of their religious tradition, by conserving its specific meaning, thus avoiding any risk of syncretism. This same degree of specificity is what historians of religion must try to determine, prior to any interpretation, when they deal with concepts and technical terms used in religious doctrines from time periods and cultures other than their own.

The *λόγος* or *brāhman* appeared to Max Müller to be a bridge extending between the Infinite and the Finite, between the Divine and the Human.⁴⁹ It was a connection between East and West, between religions whose fervent defenders should have realized, at the end of the nineteenth century, that *λόγος*, *verbum*, and *brāhman* are one and the same reality. All the power of his humanism and mysticism might be summed up in this idea. The man who was influenced by the teachings of Meister Eckhart and Rhenish mystics found in the Vedānta confirmation of the universality of the presence

46. *The Holy Bible Translated into the Hinduee Language by the Reverend William Bowley under the Patronage of the Calcutta Auxiliary Bible Society*, vol. 2, I Chronicles to Malachi, 1834), 11.

47. *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Translated from the Original Greek*, North India Bible Society (Secundra Orphan Press, 1849), 235.

48. *ādau vāda āsīt, sa ca vāda īśvarābhīmukha āsīt, sa ca vāda īśvara āsīt*, *The New Testament in Sanskrit*, 1910), 215.

49. Müller, *Theosophy*, 361 ff.

of God before humans, and wished to testify to the same through a scientific approach to humanity—even to propose, before dissolving into the Infinite for all eternity, a new religion at the dawn of the twentieth century. As he spoke to the members of the Royal Institute of Great Britain, Max Müller may have found nothing better to fulfil the goal he set for himself than to demonstrate to them that bráhma, one of the fundamental terms of the philosophy of Vedānta, coming out of one of the many crown colonies, at least had etymological connections to the English language. In this way, he wished to reach the objective he had declared in the introduction to his first conference presentation: “I am aware of the difficulties that I may encounter in attempting to hold your interest, which may be even greater if I attempt to gain your sympathy in favor of an ancient system of Hindu philosophy, the philosophy of Vedānta.”⁵⁰

50. Müller, *La Philosophie du védānta*, 1.