

The Significance of Indian Religions for the Science of Religion

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It will probably be known to the readers that the *jubilaris* of the present *Festschrift*, Professor Michael von Brück, spent part of his academically formative years in India and also taught in the University of Madras; and ever since then, the religions that have originated in India have figured prominently in his writing and teaching. This comes quite naturally to a scholar of *Religionswissenschaft*: whether the famous Indologist Friedrich Max Müller should be recognized as the actual founder of the modern science of religion may be a matter of debate,¹ but it is clear that Müller's work has greatly contributed to the early development of the science of religion. In the present essay I wish to elaborate somewhat, as an Indologist and a student of religion, on the role which the study of Indian religious traditions ought to play in the science of religion. The place of these religions already is quite prominent, but I will attempt to clarify what still needs to be done for the science of religion to benefit more from the study of the Indian traditions.

There are important reasons for the prominence of the Indian religions in the science of religion. South Asia is the birthplace of numerous important religious traditions, including two religious complexes that are commonly counted among the world religions. From the point of view of diversity and quality of religious ideas, and of the seminal importance of those ideas, one could easily argue that South Asia is the religiously most important part of the world. But irrespective of how one may judge that question, it is beyond all doubt that South Asia should be seen as the source of the most important religious alternatives to the ideas and practices that originated in West Asia. Therefore, a comparison of the West Asian Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions on the one hand and the Indian traditions on the other provides the student of religion with the most important broadening of awareness possible concerning the forms which 'religion' can assume.

The diversity of Indian religious thought is astounding, in comparison with

¹ Although Müller very significantly contributed to the birth of the new academic discipline of the science of religion, one could argue that the scientific turn took place in the work of the Dutch scholar C.P. Tiele. See WIEBE 1999 (b) and 1999 (c).