

**MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION :
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ITS BASIC
PREMISES AND METHODS**

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INTRODUCTION:

The Glorious Qur'an is the basis of Muslims' beliefs and actions, be they mundane or otherworldly. It lays down general principles and parameters, which are further elucidated by the noble Prophet Muhammad (May Allah's peace and His blessings be upon him). Muslims live by the dictates of these two sources, which serve as guiding light that prompted the great achievements made for the general progress and prosperity of humanity in different spheres. The Book and the Tradition (al-Kitab wa al-Sunnah) as they are popularly called, gave to the early Muslims their identity and the necessary impetus and strong impulse for the magnificent contributions they made, both in Islamic as well as mundane sciences. The Medieval period seen by the West as an era of theological dogmatics, ignorance and intellectual inertia, was by no means the same in the Muslim world. That was in fact the golden age of Muslim intellectual ascendancy in all branches of learning. A testimony to this is Sarton's *Introduction To The History of Science* (1950).

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MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

One virgin area of Muslim intellectual contributions to knowledge yet to be fully explored, is their study of the religions of others, the discipline that came to be known today as History of Religions or Comparative Religion.

In the Muslims' studies of other religions, as well as in other fields, it is the Qur'anic interest and discussion of those religions and its refutation of some of their beliefs and practices that encourage many of them to take up the serious task of unraveling other religions in a number of works. The first revealed verses of the Qur'an call on man to study and recite in the name of the Lord of all, Allah (Glorified be He) (Surah al-'Alaq). It was this message of scholarship and learning that made Muslims teachers of humanity not only in the Islamic sciences but also in philosophy, the natural sciences and the humanities.¹

The Qur'an has seriously discussed the religious beliefs and practices of many religions of its time and environment, indicating how they strayed, in large or small measure, from the one divine religion sent to all the Prophets in the different nations of the world.² More than 700 of its verses discuss these religions. We can say without any fear of exaggeration, that if not because of this final message of God, we may probably not be able to see humanity as

¹) Smart, N., "Study of Religion" (art), The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Chicago: H.H. Benton, 1973-1974, Vol, 15, P.615 and Kitagawa J.M. (ed), The History of Religions Retrospect and Prospect: New York: Macmillan, 1985, P.125.

²) See Surah al-Shurah:13, Surah al-Nahl: 36, Surah Fatir: 24, Surah Yunus:47 and Surah al-Ra'ad:7

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

one nation religiously, and that Allah, the One True God has sent His chosen Messengers and Prophets to every human nation with the same message of:

"...Worship Allah (Alone), and avoid Taghut (all false deities)...." (Surah al-Nahl: 36).

"We did not send any Messenger before you but We revealed to him (saying): none has the right to be worshipped but I (Allah), so worship Me." (Surah al-Anbiya: 25).

The import of these and similar verses indicates the beginning and end of the history of religion.¹ This explains to us the many similarities we find today not only in the so-called monotheistic religions, but also in most of the man-made and pagan religions. The belief in one Supreme God among many, in the permanence of the soul, in reward and punishment and the afterlife, are found in most of the religious traditions on the globe. The religions that do not entertain to these ideas are very few indeed.² The Qur'anic revelation guides the Muslims into searching for the religious history of mankind, the various developments that have taken place in it, human elements of distortion, interpolation and the forgetting of part of Allah's message sent through the earlier prophets to their nations.³ Examining the Qur'anic interest in other

¹) See Surah al-Baqrah: 213, cp. Surah al-Anbiya:92 and Surah al-Muminun:52.

²) Examples are given here of Buddhism and Jainism, but subsequent developments in both traditions confirm what was said above.

³) See Surah al-Baqrah: 75 and 79, Surah Al-Imran: 78 and

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

religions, which in a large measure drew the attention of many Muslims in the past and in the present, to study some of these religious traditions is the aim of writing this paper. Three models of Muslim study of religion will be critically analyzed at the end. These models represent the three kinds of approaches of Muslims to the religions of others. The paper will attempt to contribute to the debate on the real founding fathers of the 'science of religion'.

2-THE GLORIOUS QUR'AN AND OTHER RELIGIONS:

Allah revealed the Qur'an to His servant Muhammad according to the Muslims' belief, as a watcher over all other revealed books. He states clearly in it that the only religion in His sight is that of total submission to His will as revealed in its most perfected form in the Qur'an. We come across many verses in this book on the beliefs and practices of other nations, including that of its first recipients, some of whom rejected it at the time of its revelation (the non-believers of Makkah).

In discussing the followers of other religions, Allah categorized them into two main categories, namely: Ahl al-Kitab (People of the Book) usually interpreted as the Jews and the Christians or the followers of the revealed religions possessing divine books.¹ The other category is broader and refers to all the followers of other non-monotheistic religions, like that of the Arabs of that time, or the nations of Nuh, Ibrahim, ancient Egyptians and

Surah al-Maidah: 13-14

¹) Surah al-Maidah: 15, 19, 44, 46-G etc.

so on.¹

The Qur'an mentions the beliefs and practices of the adherents of these religions as they hold and perform them. That is usually followed by what we may call today 'constructive criticism' of them, and in a style full of compassion and the hope of attaining guidance through the message conveyed after due reflection.² In the case of divine nature of Jesus (peace be upon him) mentioned in Surah al-Ma'idah for instance, the Qur'an started by asserting that those who believed that Christ was God have really disbelieved, and according to it this is because that goes contrary to the message delivered by Jesus himself to his people. This authoritative statement is made with full force, in line with the Qur'an's claim of divine origin. After this, another aspect directly related to this belief, that is the doctrine of Holy Trinity is treated in a similar way. A plea was then made to those who entertain those beliefs to repent and desist from that, as it is futile. As if the Qur'an wants the Christians after due reflection to realize that if what they believe is not what Jesus taught, then they will do themselves better service by discarding them, and then search elsewhere for the true message of the Christ. After the plea again the true nature of Jesus was explained placing him in his right place among the chosen Prophets of God.³ This kind of treatment of such topics is perhaps unique to

¹) Surah al-Zumar: 3 and Surah Yusuf:37-40

²) A very good example of this is the Christian belief in the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ (A.S.) discussed in Surah al-Nisa: 157-159 so also their faith in the divine nature of Jesus Christ in Surah al-Ma'idah:72-77.

³) Many modern scholarly works today are towing this

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

the Qur'an. By this, it depicts itself as the guard against the distortion of divine revelation, the yardstick, the criterion and the watcher over all, by means of which we know the true revelation of God from the human configurations of it.

The Qur'an has shown that all the previous Prophets were Muslims (meaning, those who submitted themselves to God), their religion was one and Allah, (the One True God) is the source of all. Based on this assumption, the Qur'an has the right to correct any form of this one message not in line with its true, authentic and safeguarded contents. This is the first basic premise, which helps us greatly in understanding many Qur'anic judgments on other religions.

3-THE QUR'AN AND THE MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION:

From the above, it is worth observing that the Qur'an and the Prophetic interpretation of its verses are starting points of the Muslims' study of other religions. The Qur'an opened many vistas and horizons for mankind, part of these being the new idea of how the world of religions operates; whether there is any unity despite the diversity in the world of religion; whether religion is supposed to be one for the whole mankind or each nation or even tribe should be content with its own God, god or gods.

It is indeed the Qur'an, which for the first came with such statements addressed to the whole mankind as the following:

"Indeed Your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens

line, for example 'The Myth of God Incarnate (ed.) John Hick, (London: SCM, 1977) and so on.

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

and the earth in six days and then He rose over the Throne, He brings the night as a cover over the day...surely, His is the creation and commandment. Blessed be Allah the Lord of the worlds." (Surah al-A'araf: 54).

If the Lord of all is one, who is also the Creator of the universe and all that it entails, the way of relating to that Lord should be one, except for the vicissitudes of time and the circumstances of place, for what suits a particular period and place may not suit the other.

The Qur'an exhorts and guides the believers on their relationship with the followers of other religions to:

- relate to them through dialogue in the best way, with the sole desire of arriving at the truth and that they should not be sarcastic, high-handed, or using foul language.

Allah says:

"And argue not with the People of the scripture unless it is in (a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong..."¹

- call for a common platform for this dialogue, which we may call 'the dialogue of truth'. These principles are found in all revealed religions, at least at the time of their revelation, as the Qur'an shows. These fundamental principles are two, namely: taking Almighty God alone as the sole object of worship and the non-association of any partner to him, and

¹) Surah al Ankabut: 46

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

secondly, the non-acceptance of the Lordship of some men or priesthood over the others.

Allah says:

"Say: O People of the scripture! Come to an agreement between you and us: that we shall worship none but Allah and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him and that none of us shall take others for Lords besides Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him)"¹

All the revealed religions testify to these principles because, they are the *raison d'être* for its descent. Any non-acceptance or non-existence of them in these religious traditions shows how they have left their original nature and had been turned into something else.

- seek for evidence and proof of any claim made by any religion, if it contradicts the true spirit of Allah's message as revived in the Glorious Qur'an. This is a requirement, so that all discussions and argumentations will be for the sake of truth and facts, not for the sake of arguments per se. Allah says in Surah al-Naml: 64:

"...is there any God beside Allah? Say: Bring your proof, if you are truthful!"

"Say: Have you any knowledge that you can adduce for us? Surely! You follow nothing but an opinion. Surely! You do but

¹) Surah Al-Imran: 64

guess." ¹

Claims in religion are regarded as very crucial, as they have direct bearing on the whole life of an individual or an entire nation or even the whole of humanity, due to this all claims have to be proved.² The proof or evidence should not merely be the ideas of forefathers or a religious hierarchy, but has to come from strong evidences and/or from divine revelation, as God according to the Qur'an, is the source of religion not society or man or fear etc. as many modern theories conjectured.

In many verses of the Qur'an, Allah compares His Exalted Self with the other Lords and gods, Allah mentions on the tongue of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him):

"O! My two fellow-prisoners! Are diverse Lords better, or Allah the one, the Almighty?" ³

In another chapter of the Qur'an Allah coins a similitude of two servants, one of them has diverse lords, while the other worshipped only one lord He says:

"Allah coins a similitude: A man in relation to whom are several part owners, quarrelling, and a man belonging wholly to one man. Are the two equal in similitude? Praise be to Allah! But most of them know not!" ⁴

¹) Surah al-An'am: 148

²) See Al-Tabari, Ali bin Rabban, Al-Din wa al-Daulah, (ed.) Nuwaihidi, K., Beirut, Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah, 1982, p. 42

³) Surah Yusuf: 39

⁴) Surah al-Zumar: 29

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

A man with several part owners is the one who worships many gods with an unsettled mind; all his energy is being expended in trying to please quarrelling and competing gods. While the other man belongs wholly to one God, he directs all his efforts and worship, hope, trust, etc, to only one God, the almighty Lord of all.

In another Surah Allah asks:

“... Is Allah best, or (all) that you ascribe as partners (into Him)?”¹

All these verses confirm the fact that the Qur'an is the main instructor and guide of the Muslims in their study of and comparison of religions. They learn from the Qur'an its objective and critical study of religion, which shows in the end how illogical and inconsistent are the beliefs and practices of others with the divine revelation through the ages!

4-OBJECTIVES OF MUSLIMS IN THEIR STUDY OF RELIGIONS:

Encouraged by the above-mentioned principles and due also to the existing realities in the expanding Muslim Ummah, especially its according a place for, more particularly the Jews and the Christians, the study of other religions became more imperative for the Muslims. This latter fact was seen by some as the main factor, which led to the inception of the field of Comparative

¹) Surah al-Naml: 59

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

Religion.¹ There were a lot of exchanges between the Jews and the Christians on the one hand, and the Muslims on the other. Not all what the Muslims wrote in this field was in response to the polemical attacks from adherents of other faiths. Their writings fall in three genres, namely *polemical*, *apologetic* and *objective-descriptive*. We are of the opinion that the third type may also be seen as scientific. The aims and objectives of Muslims in their study of religion may vary, but some of the more predominant ones can be discerned by going through their numerous works. Some of these that a reader can easily recognize are the followings:

- They attempt to acquaint themselves with the religions of others, how they conceive God and worship Him. Other religions have been called *din* or religions as Islam was called in the Qur'an.² This helps in widening their scope and in not confining their all their energies to only their religious tradition. An Arabic saying goes that things are better understood in the light of their opposites. Max Muller is famous for his dictum, 'He who knows one knows none'. This interest in other religions was peculiar to Muslims especially in the Middle Ages when the Judeo-Christian world was more concerned with itself. Other religions are only seen as opponents to be subdued.
- With the Qur'an accusing the followers of other religions of distortions and interpolations as regards their revealed books

¹) See Mez, Adam, Die Renaissance des Islam, (trans.) Abu Ridah, M.A., (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta'lif, 1947, p.44.

²) Surah al-Kafirun: 6

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

and the beliefs and practices in their religions, one would expect the Muslims to study these books in their present forms, in order to confirm further what the Qur'an has declared on them. They also attempt to find what happened to those books in terms of their transmission, or their 'chains of narration' from one generation to another. Many verses of the Qur'an accuse the People of the Book (their scholars) for the distortion or loss of the previous messages. Allah says:

"And surely there is a party of them (People of the scripture) who distort the scripture with their tongues that you may think that what they say is from the scripture, when it is not from the scripture. And they say, it is from Allah, when it is not from Allah; and they speak a lie concerning Allah knowingly." ¹

In another place Allah asks the believers:

"Have you any hope that they (those who received the books before you) will be true to you, when a party of them used to listen to the word of Allah, and then used to change it, after they had understood it knowingly." ²

On losing part of the revealed message either by forgetting part of it by abandoning some of its dictates, the Qur'an says:

"...They change the words from their (right) places and have

¹) Surah Ali Imran: 78

²) Surah al-Baqrah: 75

abandoned a good part of the message that was sent to them....”¹

These strong assertions of the Qur'an made more than fourteen centuries ago, are being confirmed today by the modern scientific and critical study of religions in both the East and the West. Many Muslims in the field see this as another side of the miraculous and inimitable nature of Allah's final message (The Qur'an).

Some modern scholars do claim that these verses are not categorical in accusing the Jews and the Christians of distorting and changing their religious texts.² M. Rashid Rida in his famous 'Manar' Tafsir has elaborately proved the contrary. Watt opined that there are only two positions in this matter:

- The belief that either there was a 'wholesale corruption of the text' as Ibn Hazm believed or
- That it was not the texts but only the interpretation that had been corrupted.³

In our opinion there is a third position, i.e. that a considerable part of the text has been corrupted or lost, but there still remain some texts that are intact despite the vicissitudes of time, like the texts on the unity of God, the Judgment, the prophecies, etc. This kind of study aims at uncovering what the Qur'an has authoritatively stated. To a Muslim, there can be no

¹) Surah al-Ma'idah: 13, cp. Ma'idah: 14

²) See Watt, M.W., Muslim-Christian Encounter, Perceptions And Misperceptions, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 30-33

³) *ibid.*, p. 33

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

falsification of the words of God.

- The Muslims in their study of religions tend to observe to what extent those religions conform to the universal message of God to all His Prophets and Messengers (peace be upon them) and to its spirit, as Allah has revealed the same din (religion) to all His Messengers as the Qur'an indicates:

"And verily We have raised in every nation a messenger (proclaiming), serve Allah and shun false gods (Taghut)..."¹

He also says:

"And We sent no messenger before you but We inspired him (saying): There is no God save Me (Allah) so worship Me."²

- In addition to what is seen above, the Muslims study other religious scriptures in order to pinpoint the numerous prophecies about the advent of the last Prophet of God Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated to be in the Torah and the Gospel by the Glorious Qur'an.

Allah says:

"Those who follow the Messenger, the **Prophet** who is unlettered, who they will find described in the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them..."³

¹) Surah al-Nahl: 36

²) Surah al-Anbiya: 25

³) Surah al-A'raf: 157

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

In another Surah, Allah stated:

"And (remember) when Jesus son of Mary said, O Children of Israel! Surely, I am the messenger of Allah unto you, confirming that which was revealed before me in the Torah, and bringing good tidings of a Messenger who comes after me whose name is Ahmad (the praised one)."¹

This is another fertile area in the Muslim study of religion. Many works have been written by Jewish and Christian converts to Islam on this issue, as well as the born Muslims themselves. In most cases it is the abounding and clear evidences they found in the Qur'an that drew them to accepting Muhammad (peace be upon him) as "**the Prophet**" and the "*Paraclete*" or the "Comforter",² mentioned in the Old and the New Testaments respectively.

¹) Surah Saf: 6

²) See for example the following five books, two were written by former Jews and the other three by former Christians:

- 1) Samuel bin Yahya Al-Maghribi, *Ifham al Yahud*, (ed) Sharqawi, Muhammad Abdullah, Cairo: Maktabah al-Zahra, 1990.
 - 2) Said bin Hassan al-Iskandarani, *Masalik al-Nadhar fi Nubuwwah Sayyid al-Bashar*, ed. Al-Sharqawi, Muhammad Abdullah, Cairo: Maktabah al-Zahra, 1992
- The other three books written by former Christians are:
- 3) Ali bin Rabban al-Tabari, *Al-Din wa al-Dawlah fi ithbati Mubuwah al-Nabiy Sallallahu alaihi wa Sallam*, (ed) Nuwehid, Adil, Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jaddidah, 1982
 - 4) Prof. AbdulAhad Dawud (formerly Reverend David Benjamin Keldani - Bisnop of Uramiah), *Muhammad in the Bible*, Lahore: Shirkat Press, No date
 - 5) And of recent a former Catholic scholar, Ruqaiyya Waris Maqsood, *A Muslim Study of the Origins of the Christian Church*, Karachi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002

5- MUSLIM CONCEPT AND METHODS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS:

The driving force of Muslims in their study of other religions comes from their feelings of responsibility towards other sections of humanity, and from the trust Allah has placed on their shoulders, in being the torchbearers of His guidance to the whole of humanity. In other words, they view their perusal of the scriptures of earlier religions as an act of worship as well as an aspect of Da'wah. They do not find in that a deviation from the religion, but rather a fulfillment of their responsibility in explaining to adherents of those religions, - and in the light of certain knowledge of what of they believe and practice- the position of Islam on their religions. They have an unshakable belief that the din (religion) in the sight of Allah is Islam - the religion of all the Prophets (peace be upon them). Due to this, they study other religions from the standpoint of what they believe to be the infallible divine message. This kind of study is different from what the Jews and the Christians undertook in the earlier times. As said above, religions before Islam have been accorded recognition and place in the Qur'an. It claims to be a confirmation of the previous divine messages and a watcher over them, and as a result of that, it explains what happened to those messages and the followers thereof. Based on this, the Qur'an and by that the Muslims, do not study other religions as 'outsiders'! Nor do they regard them as opponents and antagonists that have to be crushed or subdued on first sight. Their example is like that of a person who possesses the authentic document on the history of his

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

forefathers, who as a consequence of that, probe into the various renderings and narrations of that history given by others, and eventually go about correcting the various versions in line with the authentic document he got hold of.

Even though many Western scholars of religion do look down on what Muslim scholars write in this regard, - an attitude not devoid of biasness- and they condemn it as part of the many shades of Medieval theology, it will be gross injustice to categorize all their contributions under one group, like the Jewish and Christian theologies of the Middle Ages, for four reasons. Firstly, there was on the part of the Muslims recognition of and genuine desire to know the other and to search for the truth with them in decent dialogues. Secondly, anyone who had a casual look at various works written by Muslims in this area, will not be honest to himself if he classifies them all under one roof, due the varying dimensions they took. That kind of judgment will either be due to ignorance or gross mischief. Thirdly, the Muslim study of religion is not just to champion the cause of their religion with or without truth, but it is part of their efforts in seeking the sublime and incorruptible truth. Fourthly, even though they passed value judgments in some of their studies, these are not based on self-centeredness, egocentrism, biasness or prejudice, but based on strong rational arguments, historical facts and an authentic Revelation (The Qur'an). The Muslims in most cases describe the other religions as their adherents would, but not stopping there, as Western scholars usually do, they show to what extent they have or have not deviated from the religion of all Prophets (al-Islam). They pass judgments, as mentioned earlier, as they view this endeavor not just a

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

theoretical and intellectual exercise, or study for the study sake, but means of hope of reaching at the truth and of living by it.

It is pertinent here to bring to light the different typologies of Muslim intellectual contribution to the religious heritage of mankind. Broadly speaking, we can group them under three general categories known today in the modern scientific study of religion. The three categories are namely: Apologetic, Polemical and Objective-Descriptive or Scientific study of religion.

- **Apologetic Writings:**

Under this group, we have scholars like Abu al-Hassan al-'Amiri (d.381 A.H.) and Qadi Abd al-Jabbar (d.415 A.H.) and their works, which are aimed at extolling the virtues of Islam, its message and the Prophet who brought it. Other religions are shown in their scriptures, religious beliefs and practices, to be inadequate in providing complete guidance and true success for man both in this life and the life to come. Al-'Amiri for example compared Islam with five other religions, and reached the conclusion that it is the best of them and it deserved the right to abrogate all the rest. A considerable part of Muslim works on religion is of this kind. The many writings of Muslim converts as well as born-Muslims on the prophecies foretelling the advent of Muhammad and Islam fall under this group. Virtues of Islam over other religions and of the Qur'an above earlier revealed scriptures and of Prophet Muhammad as a true messenger of God are presented and in most cases, they are established by means of very strong rational arguments. This may be seen today as an aspect of Philosophy of Religion as a

discipline.

• **Polemical Works:**

As Islam from its inception had a lot to say on other traditions, and these religions especially Judaism and Christianity showed reluctance and in most cases, open enmity and outright rejection of what Islam categorically declared on them that led to many controversies and theological exchanges between them. Many themes were discussed and positions contrary to the opponents were taken. Issues like abrogation of the law, concept of God, prophecies on the advent Prophet Muhammad and Islam, divinity of Jesus and the Trinity, crucifixion of Prophet 'Isa (peace be upon him), the human and divine natures in him, etc. were hotly debated by Muslims on the one hand and the People of the Book on the other. A number of these issues were recorded in the Qur'an itself, as well as in the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet). And after the wonderful spread of the last ring of the long chain of Prophetic religion, the followers of many religions, especially the scholars saw Islam as a serious threat to their very existence. As a consequence of that, offensives and counter-offensives were launched against each other.

Example of two scholars who contributed in this kind of study was Al-Jahiz (d. 255 A.H.) and Ibn Hazm (d. 456 A.H.). Both of them possessed a good knowledge of other traditions, but were more interested in refuting whatever they found in other religions not in line with Islam and the Qur'an. Many Muslim works under this group were in response to works written either by Jewish or

Christian theologians.

• **Objective-Descriptive (Scientific) Works:**

The third kind of Muslim writings on religion is what we call 'objective- descriptive' or scientific works. As said earlier it will be gross injustice to deny the fact that not all what the Muslims wrote in this field can safely be called theological, while other works by other writers not up to their standard of scholarship are viewed as 'scientific'. In this group of works, we see Muslim scholars usually study the history of the religions of the world, describing their beliefs and rituals objectively, and not allowing their Islamic beliefs to interfere or affect their understanding of other traditions.

This kind of approach to other religions, usually frowned at by some Muslims scholars, due to the belief of the latter that one must not relate ideas not in line with the truth and then refrain from refuting them. It is evident that the even modern academic discipline of Comparative Religion was conceived as 'comparative theology' by the one believed to be its founder in the West, (F. Max Müller).

We have under this group outstanding scholars like Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 440\442 A.H.), one of the well-known Muslim scientists of the Middle Ages. His two main works were, 'Tahqiq Ma Li al-Hind...' and 'Al-Athar al-Baqiyah...' Al-Biruni as will be seen below, studied the Indian religious tradition, as well as other traditions in an impassionate and objective manner. He distanced himself from passing judgment on other religions and

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

declared that he intends to present these religions as believed by their adherents. He has been hailed by both Western and Indian scholars for his success in implementing his method as stated above.

Similarly, Al-Shahristani studied all the known religions of his time describing their beliefs and practices objectively. His work has been recognized as the first history of religions by Sharpe (*Comparative Religion, A History*, 1975). Modern scholarship should search for the real origins of the science of religion in such kind of works.

6- SALIENT FEATURES OF SOME MUSLIM APPROACHES TO RELIGION:

A study of books on religion written by Muslim scholars will reveal some of the salient features of their methods in studying other religions. Some of these features are:

- Interest in the true nature of those religions. In attempting to understand that, some of them studied languages like Hebrew, Greek, and Sanskrit etc.
- Observing how the adherents practiced their religions, like the visit of Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni to India.
- Some Muslim scholars of religion sat before the scholars of the religions they study, and sometimes even participate in their rituals. ¹

¹) Aasi, Ghulam Haider, "Muslim Contributions to the History of Religions" (art). The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences: Vol. 8, No. 3, 1991, P-416. Participating in the

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

- They also crosscheck and confirm the different interpretations and the differing levels of the followers' understanding of their religions, so as to come out with the most comprehensive statements on them.
- Comparison is considered vital in studying religious traditions, as they are compared with others and Islam the professed religion.
- The Muslims unlike Western 'non-normative' study of religion have set certain criteria for the study of religion. These include reason, common-sense observation and analysis of socio-economic, political and historical factors that affect religions adversely. Judgments are also passed on the basis of what is considered the 'truth'.¹
- Muslims begin their study of religion not as skeptics or agnostics but as believers in religion as an integral part of the total well being of man in this life. This definitely make them differ from the Westerners who initiated the modern secular study of religion when they lost faith and wanted to be free of both theology and philosophy.²

Some modern scholars may see many of these features as more at home with philosophy of religion than with the

rituals of other religions can be objectionable in Islam, especially if it contradicts an Islamic fundamental.

¹) See Wiebe, Donald, Religion and Truth: Towards an Alternative Paradigm for the Study of Religion: The Hague: Mouton, 1981

²) See for a detailed discussion on this: Wach, J., Introduction To The History Of Religions, Kitagawa, J. and Alles, G.D. (eds.), New York: Macmillan, 1988.

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

science of religion. However some voices are advocating a rethink of the presuppositions of the modern *religionswischer.schaft* (Science of Religion), which were accepted at the time of the inception of this discipline in the West, in the 70 s of the nineteenth century.¹

7-THREE MODELS OF MUSLIM APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION:

Of the numerous Muslim scholars who wrote on religions, we will mention the methods employed by three of them representing the three kinds of writings mentioned above. Each one of them stands for a kind of approach and school in the Muslim study of other religions. We can also see in these three cases some of what we have mentioned above as part of the theoretical aspect of this endeavor. These three scholars are Abu al Hassan Muhammad bin Yusuf al-Amiri al-Nishapuri (C.912 - 992 C.E.), Abu Muhammad Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi (and Abu Rayhan Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Biruni (973-1050 C.E.).

A-ABU AL-HASSAN AL-AMIRI (C.300-381 A.H.)

Al-Amiri² was one of the great Muslim philosophers of the fourth century of Hijrah from Nishapur, and was philosophically affiliated to the school of Ya'qub bin Ishaq al Kindi,

¹) For a perusal of the most important ideas at that time see Smart, N. et. al. (eds.), The Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1985.

²) See Rowson, E.K., (ed) Al-Amad ala al-Abad by Abu al Hassan al-Amiri, Beirut: Dar al-Kindi, 1979. (Introduction)

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

known for its combining a deep Islamic learning with the knowledge of the heritages of former civilizations.

He wrote extensively on philosophy and related fields. One of the most important works of al-Amiri is 'Kitab al-'Ilam bi Manaqib al-Islam'¹ (Declaration on the Virtues of Islam) written in the year 372 AH/982 C.E. He set to compare in it six religions mentioned in a verse of the Qur'an.² These religions are Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Sabaism (the religion of the Sabians), Zoroastrianism and the religion of the pagan Arabs before Islam. He chose the following themes for comparison (a thematic comparative method?). The themes are:

- a. Doctrines and beliefs;
- b. Rituals and worship;
- c. Politico-judicial system;
- d. Social ethics;
- e. Contributions to civilization;
- f. Cultural accomplishment.

HIS METHOD:

Al-Amiri, unlike his contemporary Muslim scholars, did not write his book to refute any one religion. This makes his

¹)The book was edited by Dr. Ahmad AbdulHamid Ghurab, (Riyadh, 1988).

²)Surah al-Hajj:17

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

work an example of the apologetic-philosophical approach to the study of religion. He attempted to compare the religions mentioned above; at the end of the process he arrived at conclusions and then passed judgments. He states clearly in the beginning that he wants to compare between the different aspects or 'dimensions' - as al-Amiri stated - that are similar and alike in these religions. He compared a fundamental aspect of a religion with what is equally fundamental in another religion. He was of the opinion that it is a methodological mistake due perhaps to prejudice and biasness to compare aspects that are unequal from a number of religions.

He also believes that the principles and norms accepted by the majority adherents of a religion should serve as the basis for comparison not those of the minor sects, and doing the contrary, he believes, is a methodological error that borders on inadequate understanding and misrepresentation of the principles and norms in question.

However, al-Amiri like the other Muslim writers believes that Islam is the best of all religions, but he wants his reader to reach the same conclusion by the force of his arguments and comparison. So, his was not a statement of blind faith or dogma but that of a philosopher who contemplated on what all other religions offer and what Islam offers and who realized at the end that Islam has every right to abrogate and supersede all religions because its values are everlasting and not tied to place and time, it transcend the time-space realm.

He saw the aim of his comparative study of religions as

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

an aid to the Muslim to come out of the fold of Muqalidin (laymen) and be of those bestowed with discretion regarding their choice of Islam as their way of life and success in both worlds, and to thank and glorify Allah, who has guided him to it. As far as he could, al-Amiri adhered to his methodological principles. His work is very valuable and shows how he was deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition despite his extensive study of Greek philosophy.

Some of the salient features of al-Amiri's method are his desire to give an honest comparison of the different religions and also to stick to the mainstream of each religion. His comparison like other Muslims, is normative and he wanted to show how Islam, the last perfected message of God excelled all others before it. It is a good example of apologetic but philosophical study of Islam and other religions.

B- IBN HAZM AL-ANDALUSI (384-456 A.H.):

Imam Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi was one of the renowned scholars of Islamic civilization that had contributed immensely and his contributions in both Islamic-legal and human sciences are conspicuous for all to see. A lot of attention was paid to his works in Literature, Fiqh, Jurisprudence, etc., but little or unequal attention was and is being given to his interest and concern with matters of religion. His major work in our area of discussion is his 'Al-fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal', which is a critical study of not only other religions, but also Islamic sects that have deviated from the true path of the Qur'an and the Prophetic

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

traditions. Ibn Hazm devoted a good part of his time in studying almost all existing sects and religions known to him and examining their doctrines critically. There are scholars even in the Western world, who considered him at least the father of Biblical Criticism as a discipline, if not that of Comparative Religion.¹

HIS METHOD:

Imam Ibn Hazm represented an example of the polemical approach in Muslim study of other religions. He was one of the prominent scholars of the Zahiri school of Law in Islam, known for their stance on the outer and apparent meaning of religious texts. His critical study of the Bible in its two parts made him according to some scholars the father of Biblical criticism. His contributions in this regard came from the importance accorded in Islam to any statement coming from any religious authorities. Any statement attributed to a Prophet or Messenger of God has to be established in two ways known in the Science of Hadith as the Isnad (Chain of narration) and the Matn (the internal coherence of the statement). In other words, if you ascribe any statement to any Prophet of God, then you have to prove in very clear terms that that statement reached you from him through a chain of reliable men of integrity. The other aspect of this is to scrutinize the statement in order to establish that it is in line with the other statements of the said Prophet, and is not contradicting any established fact.

¹ Margoliouth, D.S., (art) 'Old and New' Testaments in Muhammedanism, in Hastings, J. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, Latest Imp. 1980, Vol. 9, pp. 480-483.

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

In employing this method, Ibn Hazm studied both the old and New Testaments. With his belief in the Qur'anic accusation of the Jews and the Christians that they have distorted and interpolated the texts of their Holy Scriptures, Ibn Hazm established through a number of evidences that these scriptures have been either lost completely and then restored, or they have been tempered with.

His work -- *Al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa wa al-Nihal* -- established in a forceful polemical way that both the Old and the New Testaments in the hands of the Jews and the Christians from his time, were not the original revelation to Prophets Musa and Isa (Peace be upon them). He refuted many claims of both Christians and Jews on the integrity of their scriptures, as well as responded to many of their attacks on Islam, its revealed Book and Prophet (peace be upon him).¹

From the above we observe one very important principle adhered to by Muslim scholars in their study of other religions, that is, establishing the integrity of religious sources before depending on them in understanding their beliefs and practices.

¹) See Himayah, Mahmud A., *Ibn Hazm wa Manhajuhu fi Dirasat al-Adyan*, Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1983.

**C- ABU RAYHAN MUHAMMAD BIN AHMAD AL-BIRUNI
(362-440 A.H.):**

Abu Rayhan al-Biruni ¹ was one of the greatest scientific minds produced by the Islamic world in the Middle Ages. He is well known in the intellectual circles for his contributions in Geography, Medicine, Astronomy, History, and Religion etc. He hailed from Khwarizm. He traveled to other parts like Afghanistan, India, etc. When he visited India, he decided to study its numerous and complex religious structure. It was an arduous task, but al-Biruni was equal to the task. Two of his numerous works are related to the study of religion and are our concern here. These two works are:

1. Tahqiq ma li al-Hind min Maqulah Maqbulah fi al-Aql aw Mardhulah.

2. Al-Athar al-Baqiyah an al-Umam al-Khaliyah. ²

Even though the second book is on History of ancient nations, it still contains discussions on and a comparative study of the religions of those nations. In the two books al-Biruni studied the religions of India and other nations comparing them with each other

¹) See Said, Hakim M. and Zahid, A., Al-Biruni, His times, Life and Works, Hamdard Foundation, Karachi, 1981 and Iran Society, Al-Biruni, Commemoration Volume, Calcutta, 1951

²) Both the two books have been translated to English by Edward Sachau as Al-Biruni's India, Oriental Publishers, Lahore, 1962 and Al Biruni's, The chronology of Ancient Nations, Hijra International Publishers, Lahore, 1983, respectively.

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

and with Islam. His work is seen as the first great contribution in the field of the 'scientific study of religion'.

Despite al-Biruni's socio-political environment, he expounded a scientific method similar to what we have today in this field. He discussed in his works the religions of the Jews, the Christians, the Greeks, the Zoroastrians, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Manicheans, in addition to his religion-Islam.

HIS METHOD:

Al-Biruni's greatest contribution in the study of religion is in his methodology, which he outlined in the beginning of his two great books. He stated the reason that led him to writing in this field, being his observation of how non-Muslim religions were misrepresented by some Muslim writers of his time. That, he thought was due to lack of adequate material on those religions and sometimes due to prejudiced attitude of some of them towards other religions.

Al-Biruni believes that it is possible to give an adequate account of other religions, and a fair and unbiased description of their beliefs and practices if one follows the right method. But which is the right method for the study of religion? According to al-Biruni,¹ to have correct notions of other peoples' religions, there must be the following steps:-

¹) See Jeffery A., "Al-Biruni's Contribution to Comparative Religion" (art) in Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume, A.H. 362-A.H. 1362, Iran Society, Calcutta, 1951

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

- Collection of their written traditions, ascertaining their values with the adherents of those religions;
- Gathering from the people authentic and true information, interpretation and understanding of their religion, and not through intermediaries; and
- Comparison of the traditions and opinions of one group regarding a certain institution with the traditions and opinions of the other groups of the same religion.

Following these steps, al-Biruni believes, we can bring out the similarities and differences, and achieve a sympathetic understanding of religions other than our own.

According to Jeffery,¹ al-Biruni believes that for the comparative method to arrive at reliable and objective conclusions, it has to conform to certain fundamental principles of investigation namely:

- Completeness - for comparisons based on an inadequate collection of data lead to erroneous conclusions. So there must be as complete an array of facts as possible;
- Accuracy - this is very necessary and for al-Biruni no efforts would be spared in the attempt to attain it, that may include learning the necessary language, procuring the relevant material, etc.;
- Unbiased treatment - to achieve this, al Biruni sees that

¹)As '32' above Pp: 128-134

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

there should be 'no unfounded imputations and ascriptions against other religions even though its adherents are antagonistic to one's religion'. The student of religion should take the statements of the adherents of that religion as they are, even if he did not believe in them. This is what the phenomenological method of the study of religion today is all about.

This is how al-Biruni employed his scientific mind in the study of religion as he did in other fields. His study of Indian religious traditions was hailed as a success, not only in the method employed, but also in the soundness of his knowledge.

CONCLUSION:

From the foregoing, we are able to grasp an idea on the Muslims' study of religion and some of their aims and methods in that endeavor. The Muslims after receiving revelation of God through their great Prophet (peace be upon him), embarked on the exploration and excavation of the previous traditions. In the course of that many principles, ideas, premises evolved. This is an area that needs a lot of research efforts. There is a vast mine of ideas and methodological contributions made by these scholars that need to be discovered. The efforts of the present day Muslim intellectuals to revitalize all branches of learning with the Islamic spirit of Tauhid and of total submission to the Divine plan for the creations,

MUSLIM STUDY OF RELIGION

such efforts are supposed to be put in all areas of learning, including the secularized scientific study of religion, which studies the most sacred of human endeavors in the most profaned manner.

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