

Al-Bīrūnī: Father of Comparative Religion

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Abstract: Abū Rayān al-Bīrūnī is famed as a great scientist and a polymath. The intellectual world, however, is less familiar with the fact that al-Bīrūnī is a great scholar of comparative religion. The religions he studied and the methodology he formulated for a “scientific method” of studying religion are impressive. That his works took place very early in the history of the discipline of comparative religion, and the fact that no other works of his contemporaries came near in dimension and depth, indeed set him up as the forerunner of this discipline. Abū Rayān al-Bīrūnī should, therefore, be declared the *Father of Comparative Religion* or *Religionswissenschaft*.

The Muslim polymath, Abū Rayān al-Bīrūnī, is highly respected by the intellectuals of the East and the West for his significant contributions to the field of the physical sciences. But his contribution to, what Arthur Jeffery calls, “the sciences of the spirit” has not yet been fully appreciated. This study attempts to fill in this gap. It is based on two of his monumental works on comparative religion entitled *India* and *Chronology*. He was unique in that he presented his views on other religions in an unprejudiced manner, studied them from the original and the best available sources, and was very much concerned about devising a method to make this branch of study rigorous and systematic.

It is conceivable that his greatest contribution to learning was not in the field of the more exact sciences but in the field of the sciences of the spirit.¹ His legacy is pronounced in the aspects of

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methodology, textual and empirical studies, depth and dimension of subjects covered, comparative analysis between religions, documenting and preserving historical data, empathy and sympathy to the adherents, accuracy of presentation and the like. In fact, he went so far as to come up with a chronology for the Jews which according to Sachau is the first of its kind.² He did all these, as he said, for the sake of accurate knowledge. He was a conscientious scholar whose religious convictions did not allow him to belittle or minimize the achievements of others from a different milieu.³

Background

Abū Rayān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī was born in Bīrūn, a village in Khawārizm (Persia) on Thursday the 3rd of Dhū al-Ḥijjah 362 A.H.⁴ He came from a ruling family and thus was exposed to politics and governance early in life. At the age of twenty-three, al-Bīrūnī was forced to leave his hometown because of political disorder in Khawārizm. He went to the prestigious town of Rayy, which was then known for scholarship in the physical sciences and acquired knowledge in many sciences in particular astronomy and mathematics. However, life in Rayy was not easy for him and hence after three years he left for Jurjān. He was in Jurjān for ten years and here saw the inceptions of most of his major works. It was also here in Jurjān that he developed his interest in the religions and the practices of the non-Muslim communities. The result of this was his work, the *Kitāb al-Āthār*, dedicated to the then ruling monarch of Jurjān, Sulṭān al-Ma‘ālī bin Qābūs, a book on the festivals and holy days of the various religious communities of his time.

He returned to Khawārizm which then was governed by the Ma‘munid ruler, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī (1009-1010 C.E.), and became acquainted with the famous Ibn Sīnā and Abū al-Khayr Khummar. Khawārizm later fell to the renowned Ghaznawid ruler-conqueror, the Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghaznah who brought al-Bīrūnī, along with five thousand prisoners, to Ghaznah with him. It was here that al-Bīrūnī’s genius and scholarship reached full maturity. Although Sulṭān Maḥmūd was generous and respectful towards the scholars, al-Bīrūnī never quite forgave Maḥmūd for “capturing” him and this can be seen in his sharp remarks on the Sulṭān.

When Maḥmūd conquered neighbouring lands of India, al-Bīrūnī took the opportunity to reside there for sometime and to study the

Hindus and their religion. The result was an impressive piece of scholarship on the Hindus and their civilization. Al-Bīrūnī lived through the reigns of Maḥmūd's successors and died during the reign of Sulṭān Maḥmūd who honored the elderly scholar. Generally, it is accepted that Al-Bīrūnī died about 443 H/1051 C.E., although the exact date and place are still debated by his biographers.⁵

Al-Bīrūnī personally wanted to be known as a mathematician and astronomer. His contributions to the other physical sciences, however, are also very impressive. Ghulam Rabbani Aziz, listed some 16 accomplishments including trisection of an angle, and solution to some complex problems without the use of protractor and scales; accurate determination of latitude and longitude of a large number of places, specific gravity of 18 precious stones and metals, the circumference and diameter of the earth by using spherical trigonometry, and the sun's declination and zenithal movement and heights of various trees. Al-Bīrūnī also explained the flow of springs, the phenomenon of fire visible at the time of sun eclipse, and the forces of gravity; pointing to the existence of the American continent and geographical changes in the Sindh valley, and the like.⁶

However, as stated above, al-Bīrūnī's excellence in the study of the "spiritual sciences," particularly that of comparative religion, has not been fully appreciated. The discipline of comparative religion is also technically known as "the History of Religions," "the Science of Religion," and "*Religionswissenschaft*." In the case of al-Bīrūnī, this would be his study on the non-Muslim religious communities of his days. The number of religious communities that he covered is impressive and the methodology that he outlined and adopted in his work is unique to the discipline of comparative religion.

Al-Bīrūnī's Works in Comparative Religion

As Jeffery pointed out, the only two books from which al-Bīrūnī's work in comparative religion can be appraised are his *Kitāb al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah'* (*Kitāb al-Āthār*), and his *Tahqīq Mā li al-Hind Maqūlah Maqbūlah fī al 'Aql aw Mardūlah* (*Kitāb al-Hind*). These two books have been translated into English by Edward C. Sachau as *The Chronology of Ancient Nations or Vestiges of the Past* or in short, *The Chronology and Albīrūnī's India*, respectively. There is no indication by al-Bīrūnī himself that he had

written any other work on religion and religious communities other than Islam. The gap between the writing of the two books was more than twenty-years; however, the two works are similar in terms of type of interest, concern and scholarship.

There is hardly any difference between the two books in terms of methodology both emphasizing objective study and accurate presentation. The studies were based on facts and information, taken from authentic sources, coupled with empirical observations of the religions in practice – a work format he termed as “a strictly scientific method.”⁸ In contents, however, the two differ greatly. *Kitāb al-Āthār*'s significance is in dimension for it deals with a large number of religions and religious communities of his days, in particular that of the Persian religions, some of which were already dying out.⁹ The *Kitāb al-Hind*, on the other hand, is a work on the Hindus, their religion and civilization. Other religions were brought in to facilitate a comparative analysis. Thus, al-Bīrūnī discussed the Greek religion because of its similarities and congruences with the Hindu religion, particularly in their rites and rituals, and popular beliefs and practices.

The reasons and events behind the writing of the two books also differ, so is the targeted readership. *Kitāb al-Āthār* was composed for the general reader and was written at the request of a friend:

A learned man once asked me regarding the eras used by different nations, and regarding the difference of their roots, i.e., the epochs where they begin, and of their branches, i.e., the months and years, on which they are based; further regarding the causes which led to such difference, and the famous festivals and commemoration days for certain times and events, and regarding whatever else one nation practices differently from another.¹⁰

Thus, the book supposedly was to be on the chronology of the nations with data and history. In the course of his study, al-Bīrūnī, however, came across many interesting anecdotes and folklores revolving around the festivals and commemorations. These he documented and presented to the world, making *Kitāb al-Āthār* an invaluable treatise and source material for the religions of his era. The book also contains discussions on the theologies as well as the rites and rituals, customs and laws, popular practices and superstitions of the religious communities. These coupled with his sharp observations and remarks made *Kitāb al-Āthār* a monumental work in the

discipline of comparative religion. The book is highly informative and reads extremely well.

Kitāb al-Hind was written to correct Muslims' misperceptions and misunderstanding of the Hindus, their religion and culture, because up to his time, al-Bīrūnī lamented, all information on the Hindus were inaccurate and misleading. Al-Bīrūnī reasoned that Muslims are required to be free and fair and that a proper knowledge of Hinduism would enable them to have a meaningful dialogue with the Hindus who were living among their midst:

We think now that what we have related in this book will be sufficient for anyone who wants to converse with the Hindus, and to discuss with them questions of religion, science, or literature, on the very basis of their own civilization.¹¹

To make a scientific study of Hinduism, al-Bīrūnī studied and eventually mastered Sanskrit, the most difficult scriptural language of the Hindus. This he accomplished despite Hindu scholars being "by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know" even among themselves and despite rigid caste regulations and their considering the Muslims as the avowed enemies of the Hindus.¹² Thus, he read the Hindu texts in their original language and translated two of their religious texts, the *Patāñjali* and the *Sāmkhya*, into Arabic. It was thus possible for him to compare texts with texts and thus was able to point out the discrepancies and inaccuracies of information found in these works. Yet, the *Kitāb al-Hind*, in the words of Sachau,

... scarcely reminds the reader of the incessant war between Islam and India, during which it had been prepared, and by which the possibility of writing such a book had been first given. It is like a magic island of quiet, impartial research in the midst of a world of clashing swords, burning towns, and plundered temples.¹³

Kitāb al-Hind not only documents information on the Hindus, Hinduism and India of his time, but it is an encyclopedic exposition of the Hindus and their civilization. It includes the Hindu religion, scriptures and texts, language and literature, rites and rituals, social structure and systems, laws and governance, customs and popular practices, philosophy and science, mathematics and astronomy, geography and history, folklore and religious anecdotes, etc. As

rightly observed by Sachau, “certainly, we do not know of any Indianist like him, before his time or after.”¹⁴

Religion and Religious Communities

Kitāb al-Hind concentrates only on one religion and community, the *Kitāb al-Āthār*, however, deals with many religions including the Christians, Jews, Sabians, Samaritans, the ancient Persians, Khawārizmians, Sughdians, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Magians, and also a few other cults. Because he was writing on so many religions, and his purpose being to enumerate only on their festivals and commemorations, he did not study them in depth, but dwelt only on what was necessary for his purpose. He also wrote on the ancient Greek religions, but this appears in the *Kitāb al-Hind* only as a means to serve comparative evaluation. To get a view on his accounts of these religions, perhaps it is best to enumerate them one by one.

Hinduism

Of all the religions and religious communities that al-Bīrūnī studied, his masterpiece was on Hinduism and the Hindus. They cover the whole of the *Kitāb al-Hind*. Al-Bīrūnī was well aware that Muslims of his age would find it very difficult to understand the Hindus and their religion, mainly because, he said, everything about the two religions, Islam and Hinduism, was so different from each other. To help his readers, he brought in parallel beliefs and practices from the ancient Greek religion. This is because, as he rightly pointed out, the Muslims were more familiar with the Greek religion and thoughts. Thus, he thought, the Muslim readers would understand the Hindus through the Greeks.

According to al-Bīrūnī, the Hindu elite, like the Greek philosophers, were basically monotheistic in their belief. For example, the concept of the Greek First Cause also prevailed in the belief of the upper caste Hindus. He summarized the Hindu theology as follows:

The Hindus believe with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and ending, acting by freewill, almighty, all-wise, living, giving life, ruling, preserving; one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything nor does anything resemble him.¹⁵

To prove his point, he quoted from the Hindu scriptures, the *Gītā*, the *Patānjali* and the *Sāmkhya*, “lest the reader should think that our account is nothing but hearsay.”¹⁶ He further noted that the Hindus were pantheistic, as seen below:

To speak accurately, we must say that all things are divine; for Vishnu made himself the earth that the living being should rest thereupon; he made himself water to nourish them thereby; he made himself fire and wind in order to make them grow; and he made himself the heart of every single being. He represented them with recollection and knowledge and the two opposite qualities, as is mentioned in the Veda.¹⁷

This, of course, was the belief of the Brahmins and the educated Hindus. As for the masses, al-Bīrūnī pointed out, they believed in numerous conceptions of god, even anthropomorphic in essence and character, with families and human activities. But then, he remarked such a tendency often existed among the uneducated, uninformed groups in other religious communities as well. Thus, al-Bīrūnī concluded, only the educated should be made the spokesmen for their religion, and only their understanding should be taken as the authentic version. He, however, realized that the Hindus were quite receptive and accommodative to varieties of versions and understanding pertaining to their theologies and doctrines. Even their books, he noted, were replete with such varieties.¹⁸

Thus, al-Bīrūnī referred to the scriptures of the Hindus to support his discourse. He often quoted from the *Gītā*, the *Patānjali* and the *Sāmkhya*. He elaborated on the four Vedas – the *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and the *Atharvanaveda* – the metrical forms, the various recitation techniques and the regulations pertaining to the readings. He did not, however, quote from these sources. Perhaps, he could not have a copy of the Vedas for they were too sacred a text of the Hindus. Indeed, the Vedas were prohibited even to the Hindu lower castes. Other books he listed were the *Vishnu-Purāna*, *Vishnu-Dharma*, *Vayu-Purāna*, *Vishnu-Purāna*, *Samhitā*, *Nyāyabhā Shari’ah*, and *Bhārata*, two of which, the *Patānjali* and the *Sāmkhya*, as noted earlier, he had translated into Arabic.

Al-Bīrūnī also discussed Hindu religious philosophies and doctrines, their conceptions of the First Cause, the *intelligibilia*, the *sensibilia*, the three primary forces, the soul, spirit, sense, intelligence,

power, matter, compound, action and others. The fundamental doctrine of the Hindus, he stated, was the doctrine of rebirths or metempsychosis. This doctrine was based on the belief-premise that the human soul was part of the Divine Soul and thus it always longed to be reunited to the Divine Soul. The Divine Soul was also the Highest Absolute Intelligence, though some believed that the Highest Absolute Intelligence was only the vehicle, not the Divine Soul itself. Therefore, the human soul had to travel stage by stage, from one body into another, through life after life, seeking and gathering experiential knowledge along the way, until it acquired enough, if not all, true knowledge to qualify it to be reunited with the Highest Absolute Intelligence. Through the Highest Absolute Intelligence, the human soul reunited with the Divine Soul.

Rebirths, for the Hindus, explained al-Bīrūnī, were also a form of retributions to their deeds in their current lives. A higher birth signifies a reward for leading a divinely prescribed life, a lower birth therefore indicates a punishment. Thus, rebirths were actually a form of bondage to the human life cycle. The quest of the Hindus, pointed al-Bīrūnī, was therefore to break away from this bondage, to attain liberation, termed as *moksha*. The normal way to attain liberation was through the chain of rebirths and thus the acquiring of experiential knowledge. However, al-Bīrūnī also noted, from the *Patānjali*, four other ways to attain liberation: through (a) practical works or exertions, (b) renunciation, (c) worship, and (d) purity of intention.

Al-Bīrūnī also dwelt at length on the caste system. According to him, in the beginning, there were only four castes: the *Brahmin* (priests and scholars), the *Kshatriya* (rulers and aristocrats), the *Vaisyas* (workers and professionals) and the *Sudras* (labourers and servants). The other sub-divisions were added later. He illustrated some of the regulations pertaining to the system and the various stages of life – from that of the child (student), the adult (family life), old age (religious concentration), and the final stage known as *renunciation* where all earthly matters were absolved from attention. Al-Bīrūnī's discussion revolves mainly around the *Brahmins* since they formed the elite and represented the religion.

Al-Bīrūnī also noted that the Hindus had a sound legal system with laws dealing with contracts and other needs. He discussed also

their religious rites and rituals, and idolatry and the making of the idols. Unfortunately, they were not elaborated upon, probably because he was not allowed to study these closely. He, however, was able to capture the mood involved in the Hindu celebrations, holidays, birth and funeral rites, and popular customs and traditions.

Christianity

Unlike Hinduism which has been dealt with in *Kitāb al-Hind*, al-Bīrūnī's account of the religion and religious communities are scattered in *Kitāb al-Āthār*. His discussion on the Christians and Christianity was confined only to those of eastern churches, or the Orthodox churches of today. This is because these were the churches found in the Muslim world at that time. It must also be noted that Christendom had not yet officially broken into Catholicism and Orthodoxy though the schism was already in evidence.

Al-Bīrūnī mentioned that there were many versions of the Gospel during his time. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, he said, were codified. There were discrepancies in these four Gospels especially those pertaining to the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Other than these, there were the Gospels of the Marcionites, the Bardesanes, and the Manicheans. These differ in some parts from the four codified Gospels. The Gospel of the Manicheans was radically different from the rest. Additionally, there was *The Gospel of the Seventy*, which was attributed to Balamis but was considered a forgery by the general Christian body. After a thorough scrutiny of these Gospels, al-Bīrūnī concluded "... that among the Gospels there is no book of the Prophets to be found, on which you may on good faith rely."¹⁹

Al-Bīrūnī believed that the Gospels "have been altered from their proper meaning."²⁰ He, nonetheless, respected these for whatever divine texts it retained. Occasionally, he quoted the Bible and parallel verses in the Qur'ān to support the former. An interesting item he discussed, and related to the scriptures, was the *Ḥisāb al-Jummal*, a method of exegesis applied by both Christians and Jews based on computations of letters. He noted that each group would give different values to the numbers so that the computations would support their claims. He brushed the *Ḥisāb al-Jummal* off saying that it was unscientific, arbitrary, concocted and manipulated to fit into the readings of the communities.

Al-Bīrūnī did not write much on the Christian theology per se but he did, however, highlighted the history of the Trinity when he wrote on the Synods. It was at these Synods that the Trinity doctrine, the foundation of the Christian religion, was formulated and enforced upon all Christians. On the Synods, al-Bīrūnī wrote:

Synods means a meeting of their wise men, of their priests, bishops, and other church dignitaries, for the purpose of anathematizing some innovation, and for something like cursing each other, or for the consideration of some important religious subject.²¹

He gave some explanations on six of these synods held at: Nicea in 325 “convoked on account of Arius...for the purpose of perpetuating the dogma which they all agreed upon regarding the two Persons of the Father and the Son”; Constantinople in 381 was “convoked ... for the purpose of perpetuating their dogma regarding the *Third Person*; Ephesus in 432, “convoked on account of Nestorius”; Chalcedon in 451 on account of Eutyches who had “taught that the body of the Lord Jesus consisted before (Ascension) of two natures, afterwards of only one nature”; the Synod of 553 “convoked for the purpose of condemning the bishops of Mopsuestia, of Edessa, and others, who opposed the Church in its fundamental dogmas”; and Constantinople in 680 “convoked on account of Cyrus and Simon Magus.”²²

In the *Kitāb al-Hind*, al-Bīrūnī dwelt upon the terms *father* and *son* as used in Christianity. He explained that the Christians used the term *son* in reference to Jesus as well as themselves. In the Bible, Jesus referred to himself as *the Son* and *the Son of Man*. As regards the father, Jesus prayed to the *Father* and would return to the *Father*. Al-Bīrūnī maintained that Jesus was a mortal, not the Son of God as the Christians believed.²³

Al-Bīrūnī also argued that “there is no original legislation in Christianity” but that “their laws are derived and developed by their most venerated men from the canonical sayings of the Messiah and the apostles.”²⁴ In the *Kitāb al-Hind* he alluded to the similarities of the Christians and the Hindus on the philosophy of law and penalty, that of virtue and abstinence from wickedness, and of mercy and compassion rather than punishment or deterrent. Al-Bīrūnī believed that “this is a noble philosophy; but the people of this world are not all philosophers,” adding that ever since Constantine, the whip had

been used without which, he said, it would be impossible for governments to rule.²⁵

Al-Bīrūnī discussed at some length various “sects,” or what are now called “churches.” These were the Melkites who resided mainly in Greece and the adjacent lands, the Nestorians mostly living in Syria, Iraq and the Khurasan, and the Jacobites in Egypt and neighbouring areas. He discussed the Melkites and Nestorians at some length but apologized for not being able to write much on the Jacobites owing to the lack of authentic information on the sect. He was aware of many more other sects than these but “this is not the place to enumerate on them.”²⁶

Regarding their festivals and commemorations, al-Bīrūnī said that most of them were linked to Jesus’ life and his mother, Mary. He enumerated on these with supporting anecdotes and expositions of their celebrations – that is, the Epiphany, the Feast of the Tabor, the Lent, the New Sunday, the Ascension, the Whitsun Day, among others. Al-Bīrūnī, however, was of the belief that Jesus’s birthday was Thursday the 26th and not Thursday the 25th and he supported his contention with astronomical details pertaining to the position of the star that the wise men sighted. Of those related to Mary, he covered the Wax Feast, the Annunciation, the Feast of the Roses, and the commemoration of her death. He also highlighted commemorations related to other prophets, and venerated figures in the religion. He made a pertinent observation that a number of the Christian holy days were related to events in the Jewish history.

Judaism

Al-Bīrūnī was in contact with a number of Jewish scholars. His discussions on the Jews, however, were very much technical and a lot of space was given to computations. Thus, his accounts on the Jewish religion were very skimpy and mostly pertain to their holidays and festivals.

Interestingly, al-Bīrūnī related a Jewish version on the tragedy of the calf which implicated Prophet Aaron as partly responsible for the molding of the golden calf. Also, he noted that the Jews believed that Prophet Isaac was the son for the Sacrifice and not Prophet Ishmael. On the Torah, al-Bīrūnī remarked: “Of the Jewish copy people think that it is free from confusion.”²⁷ However, the Jews

claimed that the Christian copy of the Torah was tampered with during the process of translation into the Greek language at the order of the Greek king, Ptolemy the Great. The Jews who translated it had agreed to alter the contents and this adulterated copy was known as the *Torah of the Seventy*.

In narrating the Jewish festivals, al-Bīrūnī presented many anecdotes mostly related to events in the Torah. Indeed, the Jewish joys and sorrows were almost all scripture-centred. Going by al-Bīrūnī's account, the Jews seemed to have many unhappy events in their history, most of which were the result of the wrath of the Almighty over their rebelliousness and stubbornness. Among the events enumerated by al-Bīrūnī include: the Sabbath, Fasting of Punishment, Fasting of Kippur, Feast of the Tabernacles, Feast of the Congregation, Feast of Benediction, Feast of Hanukka, Fasting of Rebellion, Fasting of Alburī, and the Passover. He also described the variations in the observation of these events by the different sects.

The Ancient Persian Religion

Al-Bīrūnī also gave invaluable information about minor communities residing in the eastern part of the Muslim world, the Persian lands of pre-Islam. Ancient Persia is very interesting to scholars of comparative religion in that it was the birthplace of many religions. Indeed, ancient Persia reflected everything that was accommodative, resilient, adjustable, open-minded and receptive to novel thought-patterns and belief-structures. Thus, any new religion could find sympathies and space in ancient Persia. It was a sort of melting-pot for religions of the ancient world.

The common identity of the religions that grew from, and around, the ancient Persian religion, was the concept of creator god and creation. Basically, God is the creator of the world. In the act of creation, he created the *Gayomath*, "a living, rational, mortal being."²⁸ There were other names for *Gayomath* such as *Girshah* (king of the mountain) and *Gilshah* (king of clay), denoting his status as the origin of creation. From this *Gayomath*, other creations and creatures sprouted out, and then multiplied accordingly. Another version denoted that man and woman were from the descendent of Noah after the Deluge. Perhaps this means that from the original

stock, all mankind were wiped out except the descendent of Noah, and so the new stock came from Noah's descendants. Al-Bīrūnī noted also that there were numerous versions to how creations and creatures originated and propagated through the *Gayomath*. He also enumerated a version similar to the Biblical story on the temptation of Satan over the first human couple. These concepts – that of the creator God, the *Gayomath*, the process of creation, the concept of evil – became the foundational beliefs in all religions related to Persia.

Among al-Bīrūnī's favorite items in his accounts on the Persian religions are "the tales of origin," e.g., the anecdotes and folklore related to the festivals and celebrations. One such story was the Persian New Year, the *Nawruz*, that had many versions to its origin, as well as many *do's* and *dont's* associated with it. Not only did al-Bīrūnī related the various versions, he also illustrated the celebrations, the rituals performed, and related the special narratives associated with the occasion. The same style of presentation is observed in his enumeration of other Persian festivals and commemorations.

Al-Bīrūnī also highlighted the significance of zodiacal readings on the Persian communities, for these readings influenced and permeated their pattern of living. They divided the calendar into good days and bad days, and accordingly, into lucky days and unlucky days, celebrating the former and performing rites and rituals seeking refuge from the latter. Since there were so many of such days in a year cycle, the Persian communities seemed to be in a celebrating and ritualistic mood all year round.

The Zoroastrians

Al-Bīrūnī's presentation on the Zoroastrians is very much scattered in the *Kitāb al-Āthār*. He rightly observed that Zoroastrianism bore a great influence on many other religions, including Magians, Manicheans, the religion of the Khawārizimians, and even some Christian sects.

Al-Bīrūnī noted that the Zoroastrian communities lacked proper organization and in religion, they imitated their elders. Zoroaster had given them their laws including the prohibition of fasting. They also had numerous festivals and commemorations. In addition, Zoroaster had also computed their calendar, and this calendar was adopted by many of the other Persian communities.

The Khawārizmians

Al-Bīrūnī's enumeration of the community and belief of Khawārizmians is very brief because this community has left very few records behind for scholars to read into. He attributed this to the works of Qutaybah bin Muslim who had "extinguished and ruined in every possible way all those who knew how to write and read the Khawārizmī writing, who knew the history of the country and who studied their sciences."²⁹ As a result, he added, "these things are involved in so much obscurity that it is impossible to obtain an accurate knowledge of the history of the country since the time of Islam...."³⁰

Among the items that al-Bīrūnī related was that the Khawārizmians believed strongly in astrology and had deep interest in the lunar stations. Their festivities thus were related to such beliefs and readings. There were also festivals they believed to have been mandated upon them by God, as well as those related to their ancestors and the history of their country and people. Many of them were also festivals of the ancient Persian religion.

The Sughdians

Al-Bīrūnī's account on the Sughdians is very skimpy and his narration on them appeared dispersed among the other Persian religious communities. Like many other Persian communities, said al-Bīrūnī, the Sughdians were influenced by the teachings of Zoroaster, but they kept their own calendar. They, too, had many festivals and holy days set with the rites and rituals, and among the famous ones were the *Agham* and *Khwara*. They also had a day of observation remembering the departed, during which there was a lot of lamentation, crying and scratching of faces in mourning and grief.

The Magians

Like the Sughdians, the Magians, too, had come under the influence of Zoroastrianism. Al-Bīrūnī indicated that they did "not particularly care for their religion" and that they knew "nothing of it except its outward forms" and that they did "not inquire into its spirit and real meaning."³¹ They shared many of the festivals of the other Persian communities. Al-Bīrūnī explained that:

The ancient Magians existed already before the time of Zoroaster, but now there is no pure, unmixed portion of them who do not practice the religion of Zoroaster. In fact, they belong now either to the Zoroastrians or to the Shamsiyya sect (sun-worshippers). Still they have some ancient traditions and institutes, which they trace back to their own original creed; but in reality those things have been derived from the laws of the sun-worshippers and the ancient people of Harran.³²

The Manicheans

Al-Bīrūnī's accounts on the Manicheans and Mani, the founder of their religion, are found both in the *Kitāb al-Āthār* and the *Kitāb al-Hind*. In the *Kitāb al-Āthār*, he discussed them under the "Pseudo-prophets" indicating perhaps that he considered Mani as a pseudo-prophet. Still, he refuted the popular contentions that Mani and the Manicheans were involved in homosexuality and other base acts, saying that there were no records pointing to such conduct.

Al-Bīrūnī explained that Mani was well-versed with the doctrines of the Magians, the Christians and the Dualists. Mani considered himself as the Paraclete in the Christian belief, and that he was the seal of the prophets.³³ Other than writing a Gospel of their own, Mani, too, had written his own scriptures, formulated his own teachings and had developed numerous theories. Mani believed that light and darkness are "without beginning and ending," and talked about "the empire of the worlds of light" and of "the spirit of life."³⁴ Al-Bīrūnī, however, commented that Mani's teachings in connection with the existence of the world contradicted scientific facts.

The Manicheans, Al-Bīrūnī clarified, divided themselves into two groups – the *Siddiks* or the elects, and the *Sammā* or the masses – each having its own set of laws and regulations. The *Siddik* were to abandon the world, to live in poverty, fast regularly, avoid lust and sensuality, give alms every time possible and to preach the teachings all over the world. The *Sammā* were to befriend the *Siddik*, be monogamous, pay taxes, and to fast for a specific period. Both the *Sammā* and the *Siddik*, however, should not "hurt the fire, water and plants."³⁵ Al-Bīrūnī stipulated, too, that their "qiblah" was the North Pole, as they believed that it was "the middle of the dome of heaven and its highest place."³⁶ Al-Bīrūnī also narrated accounts of Mani's gory and humiliating death. During al-Bīrūnī's time, the Manicheans

in the Muslim world were widely scattered. In Samarkand, he noted, they were even called *Sabians*. The teachings and laws of Mani had also found home among the eastern Turks, some Chinese and Tibetan communities, and even among some Hindu sects.

The Samaritans

According to al-Bīrūnī, the Samaritans had their own copy of the Torah. Their doctrines, al-Bīrūnī observed, were an amalgam of Zoroastrianism and Judaism. With the Jews, the Samaritans at times had conflictual relationship. Al-Bīrūnī discusses the Samaritans' conspiracy with the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to overthrow the Jews. In reward, the king took over Palestine from the Jews and handed it over to the Samaritans. Another case, cited by al-Bīrūnī, was the Samaritans' tricking the Jews over their New Year.³⁷

During the time of al-Bīrūnī, the Samaritans were mostly found in Nablus, a town in Palestine. They ended their lineage of prophets with Prophet Moses and thus did not acknowledge any other prophet after him. They were particularly annoyed with Prophet David for transferring the holy temple from Nablus to Jerusalem. As such, they never entered Jerusalem, and were not seen anywhere near it. They also observed a special tradition of not touching people, and when they did, they had to purify themselves.

The Sabians

Al-Bīrūnī's account of the Sabians is of special interest to Muslims because this is a group mentioned in the Qur'ān and regarded as *Ahl al-Kitāb* (people of the Book) together with the Jews and Christians. There were many groups known as "Sabians" and al-Bīrūnī attempted to identify the "authentic" Sabians.

One group, the *al-Harrāniyyah*, was quickly dismissed because to al-Bīrūnī, they were associated with Budhasaf, a prophet of India, and worshipped celestial bodies. Al-Bīrūnī also agreed with the scholars who said that the Harrians could not be the Sabians because the Harrians were heathens and idolaters. The Harrians, according to him, were followers of the ancient religion of the Greeks who believed that some of their philosophers were prophets. These Harrians adopted the name Sabians in 224 AH to attain the status of *dhimmi* under the Abbasids. Some scholars contended that the real

Sabians were the Jewish tribes who remained in Babylonia when the rest returned to Jerusalem. These remaining tribes eventually adopted the teachings of the religion of Nebucadnezzar and Magism. As for their genealogy, there were two versions: one was from Sābī, son of Methuselah, and another was from Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam.

To al-Bīrūnī, the real Sabians (i.e., of the Babylonian Jewish stock) were totally disorganized spiritually and geographically. They professed monotheism and described God by negative statements such as God is invisible, indeterminable, and not unjust. These Sabians believed that the celestial bodies were living beings and they venerated fire. Al-Bīrūnī also asserted that the mosque of Damascus originally belonged to the Sabians, then it became a Jewish synagogue, then a Christian church, and finally a Muslim mosque. So also were the images in the Ka'bah before the coming of Islam – they were the Sabians.

They named their temples and images after the celestial bodies. Their priests made offerings to these images and also to the stars. They had rituals including prayers, three obligatory and three supplementary, that involved inclination and prostration. The North Pole was their *qiblah* and so they prayed facing towards it. They had ritualistic washing and purification, and they had dietary restrictions. However, they did not practice circumcision. Some teachings were similar to that of the Muslims and the Jews. They may have observed Magian festivals and holy days. Al-Bīrūnī mentioned these Sabians while discussing the Magian festivals under the chapter on the Magian festivals.

The Ancient Greeks

Al-Bīrūnī's accounts on the ancient Greeks are mainly found in *Kitāb al-Hind* but they also appear in *Kitāb al-Āthār* grouped together with the Romans. Of special importance in *Kitāb al-Āthār* is al-Bīrūnī's attention to the *Era Alexandri*, which is used by many nations as the starting point for computations of their calendars. Al-Bīrūnī himself used this *Era Alexandri* as a reference point.

Al-Bīrūnī explained that the Greek used the word "god" in three senses. Firstly, in the general sense, with reference to everything that is praiseworthy and noble. Secondly, in the specific sense, to

refer to the First Cause, the angels and the souls. Finally, the word “god” refers to the celestial bodies.

Al-Bīrūnī pointed out that some of the Greeks, not the intellectuals, were involved in idol-worshiping. Thus, al-Bīrūnī pointed out that Aristotle refused to respond to Alexander’s queries on the Greeks belief in idolatry, stating “of all these we have no knowledge, and we cannot give a sentence on a subject we do not know.”³⁸ There is also an understanding of pantheism, monism and anthropomorphism similar to the Hindus in the ancient Greek religious philosophy.

The ancient Greeks believed that the souls were many in number and they existed independently of each other before they entered human bodies. There were also the lands of retributions - the Hades and Tartarus. Al-Bīrūnī said that in general the Greeks thought it improper to commit suicide. Interestingly, he argued that the great philosopher, Socrates, rejected the legitimacy of suicide but had to succumb to it in the end in order to maintain his belief.

The Cults

In the *Kitāb al-Āthār*, in the chapter entitled “Pseudo-prophets,” al-Bīrūnī gave a brief account of the cults in existence during his period. His discussion of the cults mainly revolved around their leaders. Thus, he discussed such figures as Budhasaf, Mani, Mazdak, Musaylimah, Bahafirid bin Mahfuruddin, Al-Mukannā, al-Ḥallāj, and Abī Zakariyyā. Admittedly, there are glaring gaps in his account of these groups. He ought to have included many more groups and dwelt at length on these cults.

Al-Bīrūnī said that Budhasaf invited people to the religion of the Sabians; Mazdak preached Dualism and common ownership of women and property but rejected many of Zoroaster’s teachings; Musaylimah claimed prophethood during Prophet Muḥammad’s time and was killed by Kālid bin al-Walīd; and al-Ḥallāj was a Sufi from Persia who preached the coming of the Mahdī.

Bahafirid lived during the period of the ‘Abbāsids and had many followers among the Magians. He believed in Zoroaster and upheld all Zoroastrian institutions. This cult prayed seven times a day facing the sun, prohibited intoxicants, and kept their hair long and disallowed sacrifices of cattle except when they were decrepit. People

complained against them to the Caliph and Bahafīrid was captured and killed. His followers, however, believed that he would descend again.

Al-Mukannā, said al-Bīrūnī, claimed to be the incarnation of God. His followers were among the Mubaiyyidah sect and even some Turks. This cult upheld the laws and institutes of Mazdhak. For fifteen years this group fought against Caliph al-Mahdī. When Al-Mukannā faced defeat, he burnt himself in the hope that his body would be annihilated as proof of him being God but his corpse was found in the incinerator.

Al-Bīrūnī narrated that ibn Abī Zakariyyā also proclaimed himself to be God claiming that the Holy Ghost resided in him. He also imposed lewd rites upon his followers including homosexuality, and filling the stomach of a dead person with wine. Among his followers were the Karrāmātians who were involved in killing the Muslims during their circumbulation of the Ka‘bah and throwing their bodies into the *zam-zam* well. They destroyed the Ka‘bah and carried the black stone to Kūfah. This cult, however, lasted only for eighty days.

Methodology

Al-Bīrūnī started writing on the methodology of studying religions at the age of twenty-six at Jurjān, in the year 999 C.E. in his *Kitāb al-Āthār* and completed it some thirty years later, at about 1030 C.E., in his *Kitāb al-Hind*. His main concern was proper understanding and accurate presentation without distortion befitting the men of faith (*īmān*). This conviction was further enhanced by his training in the sciences.

His methodology is meticulous and, as he said, “is by no means easy to act upon that principle and that method, which we have laid down, that on the contrary from its recondite nature, and its difficulty, it might seem almost unattainable.”³⁹ Still, he insisted that studies ought to be carried out in objective scholarly fashion following what he termed a “strictly scientific method.” Or else, scholars will end up procuring some superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherents of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it.⁴⁰

The methodology al-Bīrūnī subscribed to:

...cannot be obtained by way of ratiocination and philosophical notions, or of induction based upon the observations of our senses, but solely by adopting the information of those who have a written tradition, and of the members of the different religions, of the adherents of the different doctrines and religious sects, by whom the institutes in question are used, and by making their opinion a basis, on which afterwards to build a system.⁴¹

The methodology al-Bīrūnī adopted required of scholars on other religions to have the proper attitude and aptitude to handle the subject without any prejudice. He must be fair in his study which is an Islamic injunction and recommended in the Bible. In addition, a fair person gains dignity for himself. He said, “That man only is praiseworthy who shrinks from a lie and always adheres to the truth, enjoying credit even among liars, not to mention others.”⁴²

To ensure fairness, the scholar should have the ability to identify authentic data and work only on authentic reports and materials. The scholar should rely only on sound historical facts and data. He must assess reports meticulously since there exists “numerous lies which are mixed up with all historical records and traditions.” Furthermore, the scholar should not speculate or theorize but rather present things as they are and as they are believed and practiced by the communities.

Typology of Religion

Al-Bīrūnī classified religions into only two categories – *al-ḥaqq*, by which he meant Islam, and *al-inḥirāf*, or deviation, which included all forms of unbelief (*kufīr*). He said:

For verily that which exceeds the proper limits of the truth, *al-ḥaqq* (the truth), is *al-inḥirāf* (deviation); and *al-kufīr* (unbelief) in form and essence is one and the same in point of swerving from it.⁴³

Thus, al-Bīrūnī did not classify the religions into other categories such as *Ahl al-Kitāb*, etc., since for him they were all deviations anyway. Also noticeable is the fact that he did not forward any *fatwā* or injunctions whatsoever related to the other beliefs and communities. Of the practices and religious institutions of the other religions, he said:

We have here given an account of these things in order that the reader may learn by the comparative treatment of the subject how much superior the institutions of Islam are, and how more plainly this contrast brings out all customs and usages, differing from those of Islam, in their essential foulness.⁴⁴

Despite his belief in the superiority of Islam and the Islamic institutions, al-Bīrūnī, at times, did express his wonder and admiration for the culture and civilization of other communities. He used to compare the religions before arriving at a conclusion. His comparisons were not selective. Rather they were made upon sound facts and data taken from the traditions and texts of the communities themselves, many times with quotations, direct and complete. He did not feel that quoting other religious scripts interfered with his *īmān* (faith). He did not consider, in his own words, "... it inconsistent with my duties as a Muslim to quote their own words at full length when I thought they would contribute to elucidate a subject."⁴⁵

Contextual Study

Thus, al-Bīrūnī believed that religions must be studied through their own texts and traditions. They should speak for themselves. This is because:

There are, however, certain expressions which are offensive according to the notions of one religion, whilst they are admissible according to those of another, which may pass in one language, whilst they are rejected by another.⁴⁶

This is indeed a very modern notion, now accepted as a principle in the discipline of comparative religion.

It is clear from the above that al-Bīrūnī considered textual study essential for comparative religion. He elaborated that "... it is becoming not to admit any account (of a similar) subject if it is not attested by a book, the correctness of which is relied upon, or by a tradition, for which the conditions of authenticity, according to the prevalent opinion, furnish grounds of proof."⁴⁷ It was with this understanding that he ventured to study Sanskrit to understand Hinduism from original and authentic sources.

Given the emphasis on textual study, it was natural for al-Bīrūnī to insist that religions should be represented by their scholars or the

educated people. The masses are usually careless in their understanding of religion, incorporating the popular beliefs, folklore and superstitions. In his study of Hinduism, al-Bīrūnī took pains to check out his understanding of the Hindu texts, theologies and doctrines from the Hindu pundits. This forms the basis for his classification of religion into “orthodox religion” versus “popular religion” – again something very modern by standard.

Notwithstanding his insistence on textual study, al-Bīrūnī carried out empirical study on the communities. He recorded the rites and rituals, and habits and celebrations of the communities. This was especially noticeable in his study of the Hindus, and thus he was able to portray their festivals in all their gaiety as he was able to illustrate the beauty of their architectural patterns. Thus, in al-Bīrūnī’s methodology, study on the religion per se should not be made through textual study, but on the religion as practiced; it ought to be by empirical study.

It must be noted that al-Bīrūnī’s insistence on letting religions and their adherents speak for themselves did not mean non-critical appreciation of other religions. Still, his criticisms often revolved around facts and figures, not on belief and doctrine. He did point out the discrepancies found in the scriptures of the religions he studied.

Comparative Approach

Al-Bīrūnī recognized that the Muslim of his time would encounter serious difficulties in understanding foreign religions such as Hinduism. He advocated the comparative approach for ease of understanding. He suggested comparing a foreign religion with religions people are familiar with. In the case of Hinduism, he picked the Greek religion with which Muslims were somewhat familiar. This is because, he said, “if you compare these traditions (Hinduism) with those of the Greeks regarding their religion, you will cease to find the Hindu system strange.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, he noted,

The heathen Greeks, before the rise of Christianity, held much the same opinions as the Hindus; their educated classes thought much the same as those of the Hindus; their common people held the same idolatrous views as those of the Hindus.⁴⁹

Thus, al-Bīrūnī made inter-religious comparisons wherever he found parallel notions and practices among certain religions. At times he also made intra-religious comparisons where he highlighted the different understanding of concepts held by various sects of the religion. Even in such cases, accurate presentation is necessary so that impartiality is maintained. To do this he had "... to put forward the methods of each of the two sects according to their own theory as well as that of others, so as to show to each of them the *pro* and *contra* of the case."⁵⁰

Thus, al-Bīrūnī's works are comparative in nature attempting to find similarities and differences among and within religions. These comparisons are not superficial for he quoted from scriptures and texts and let the facts speak for themselves. Comparisons make it easier to understand foreign religions. It also helps increase knowledge of one's own religion. Indeed, comparison is the outstanding feature of al-Bīrūnī's works. His is truly a study of *comparative religion*. In this, he surpassed his contemporaries, and in fact excelled many scholars of this discipline throughout the ages.

Conclusion

Abū Rayān Muḥamad Ibn Aḥmad Al-Bīrūnī wrote on three major religions and religious communities, Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism, and also some minor ones including the ancient Persians, the Zoroastrians, Khwarismians, Sughdians, Magians, Manicheans, Samaritans, Sabians and the ancient Greeks. He also discussed albeit briefly some othert cults by way of comparison. However, his discussion on the Hindus and Hinduism was undoubtedly the best. Not only was it an original account, classic in depth and dimension, but he also put into effect the methodology he propounded for the study of religions other than one's own. He insisted that studies ought to be carried out in objective scholarly fashion following what he termed a "strictly scientific method." They must rely upon authentic traditions and facts. It should be textual without neglecting the empirical data collected from the field. Finally, it must be comparative for comparison broadens one's knowledge about oneself and of others. As is his discourses on the Hindus and Hinduism unmatched even by today's standard, so also is his methodology, remarkable in vision and precision, elevating him to be indeed a scholar of comparative religion par excellence.

Al-Bīrūnī's contribution to comparative religion both in terms of content and dimension and in terms of methodology and depth is undoubtedly profound. His works are characterised by objectivity, fairness and sensitivity to the religions and their adherents. Considering the fact that these accomplishments came very early in the history of comparative religion, it is appropriate, in all fairness, to proclaim Abū Rayān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī as the *Father of Comparative Religion*.

Notes

1. In *Al-Bīrūnī's Commemoration Volume* (A.H. 362 – A.H. 1362) (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951), 160. For further readings see, K. O. Kamaruzzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft: The Works and Contributions of Abū Rayān Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Al-Bīrūnī* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2003).
2. Preface in Edward C. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, 2 vols (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corp), 1983; 1st pub. By Kegan Paul, Trench (London: Trubner and Co., Ltd), 1910.
3. Suniti K. Chatterji, "Al-Bīrūnī and Sanskrit," *Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume*, 83.
4. From his books, *Risālah al-Fihrist and Maqalat fī Hikāyah Ahl al-Hind fī Istikhrāj al-ʿUmar*– taken from F.A. Shamsi in "Abu Commemoration Volume (A.H. 362 – A.H. 1362) (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951), 160; from his books *Risālah al-Fihrist and Maqalāt fī Hikāyah Ahl al-Hind fī Istikhrāj al-ʿUmar* taken from F.A. Shamsi in "Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al-Bayruni, 362/973 – c. 443/1051" in *Al-Bīrūnī's Commemorative Volume*, ed., Hakim M. Saʿad (Karachi: The Time Press, 1979).
5. For further readings into al-Biruni's life, see Said Hakim and Ansari Z. Khan, *Al-Bīrūnī and His Times, Life and Works* (Delhi: Renaissance Publishing House, 1990).
6. Ghulam R. Aziz, "Al-Bīrūnī and His Academic Conquests" in *Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume*, Hakim M. Said ed. (Karachi: The Time Press), 1979, 158-159 (from the English synopsis).
7. E.C. Sachau (ed.), *Kitāb al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah ʿan Qurūn al-Khāliyah*, (Leipzig: Otto Harrasowitz), 1923. This book is translated by Sachau as *Al-Mukannā's Chronology of Ancient Nations and Vestiges of the Past* (Lahore: Hijra International Publishers), 1983.

8. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol. 1, 6.
9. Sachau, *The Chronology*, xi-xii.
10. Ibid., 2.
11. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol. 2, 246.
12. Ibid., vol.1, 23.
13. Ibid., xxiii.
14. Ibid., xxiv.
15. Ibid., 27.
16. Sachau, *The Chronology*, xi-xii.
17. Ibid., 40.
18. Thus their famous principle: "There are many paths to the same Truth," "All religions lead to the same Reality", etc.
19. *The Chronology*, 24.
20. Ibid., 23.
21. Ibid., 291.
22. Ibid.
23. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol.1, 94-95.
24. Sachau, *The Chronology*, 287.
25. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol.2, 161.
26. Sachau, *The Chronology*, 282-283.
27. Ibid., 24.
28. Ibid, 17-18, 107-108.
29. Ibid., 42.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 223.
32. Ibid., 314.
33. Ibid., 190.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 329.

37. It was the practice of the Jews to sight the moon of the New Year from the mountains. When the moon was sighted, they would build a smoke signal as a means to inform their community about the sighting. A group of Samaritans built the smoke signal a day earlier and so the Jews were beguiled and thus celebrated their New Year a day earlier. For this, the Jews never forgave them.

38. Ibid, 123-124.

39. Ibid., 3.

40. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol. 1, 6.

41. Sachau, *The Chronology*, 3.

42. Ibid., 4

43. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol.1, 6.

44. Ibid., 110.

45. Ibid., 7.

46. Ibid., 36.

47. Sachau, *The Chronology*, 17.

48. Sachau, *Albīrūnī's India*, vol. 1, 95.

49. Ibid., 24.

50. Ibid., 319.