Al- Masʿūdī's Methodology in His Study of Religions Other Than Islam

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Abstract

The study looks into two aspects of al-Masʿūdī's methodology in dealing with religions other than Islam; first, al-Masʿūdī's method of verifying the "reliability" or otherwise of information he gained on the religions he studied, and second, al-Masʿūdī's method of presenting the teachings of these religions. The study focuses on five of the religions dealt with by al-Masʿūdī; Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Sabianism and Hinduism. The method applied in conducting this study is textual analysis of two of al-Masʿūdī's surviving works containing his study of religions other than Islam, the Murūj and the Tanbīh.

Keywords: Religion, Methodology, Objectivity, First-hand Information, Comparative Approach

Abstrak

Kajian ini menumpukan pada dua aspek metodologi al-Masʿūdī dalam menangani agama-agama lain selain Islam; pertama, kaedah al-Mas'udi's dalam mengesahkan "kesahihan" atau sebaliknya, maklumat yang diperoleh daripada agama-agama lain yang dikaji. Kedua, kaedah al-Masʿūdī dalam mempersembahkan ajaran agama-agama ini. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan pada lima agama dalam al-Masʿūdī yakni Judaisme, Kristian, Zoroastrianisme, Sabianisme dan Hindu. Kaedah yang digunakan dalam kajian ini ialah analisis teks terhadap dua daripada karya al-Masʿūdī yang mengandungi kajian beliau tentang agama lain iaitu Murūj dan Tanbīh.

Kata kunci: Agama, Metodologi, Objektiviti, Sumber pertama, Kaedah Perbandingan

Introduction

The study of religions other then Islam had already become a task among several Muslim scholars as early as the 2nd century of al-Hijrah. Many of these works are basically polemics against the beliefs and practices of the adherents of religions other than Islam. However, some others are objective in nature, and in this regard, the historical works of ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Hadhalī al-Masʿūdī (c.287H./900C.E.- 346H./957C.E.) stand up as a unique contribution of an early Muslim scholar in offering a method of analyzing information on the beliefs and practices of the adherents of religions other than Islam.

In many of the works of historians prior to al-Masʿūdī, the *isnād* method is used as an instrument to justify the reliability or otherwise of a news.(Duri 1983) However, in al-Masʿūdī's surviving works, one can easily recognize that al-Masʿūdī does not find this instrument to be useful to cater certain types of information. The study of the beliefs and practices of communities in distant lands is a particular instance where the *isnād* method is not very useful. For a Muslim historian who was living in Iraq or Egypt, it is impossible to gain information on religions of people in India, Persia, China and Byzantine through chains of transmitters.(Khalidi 1975) Thus, throughout al-Masʿūdī's surviving works, one can detect that al-Masʿūdī, in his dealings with religions other than Islam, has his own way of confirming the "reliability" of information.

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Report on Religions: First-Hand Information

Except for the case of the Hindu religion, al-Masʿūdī relied extensively on written documents he gained from the communities of the religions where he conducted his research. In his study on Judaism, Christianity and Zorostrianism, al-Masʿūdī exhibited his familiarity with the main sources that presented these religions: the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels and the Avesta. He also knew other written documents that described the religion. Al-Masʿūdī also had access to the primary sources on the history of Christianity from the perspectives of different Christian sects existing during his day. The same can be said of his familiarity with other authentic written sources of these religions such as the 14 epistles of Paul, the authentic works on the history of Christianity and the authentic works on Zoroastrianism such as the Zand and the Pazend and the popular book on Zoroastrianism among the Zoroastrians entitled *Sikīkīn*.

Al-Masʿūdī's serious attempts to gain first-hand information on religions other than Islam can be seen in his treatment of information he gained on the Sabians of Ḥarrān. In the Murūj, there is an instance where al-Masʿūdī states that he was informed by a Melkite Christian who was a settler of Ḥarrān, al-Ḥārith ibn Sinbāṭ, regarding animals that were slaughtered as acts of worship to bring one closer to God. Here, even though the source of information was a settler of Ḥarrān who saw by himself the practices of the Sabians, al-Masʿūdī took the position of not narrating the information he gained from al-Ḥārith as al-Masʿūdī was worried that the information might not be necessary. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) The point is that if the information was reliable and thus, was important to provide clear perspective of the Sabian, al-Masʿūdī would not have restrained himself from mentioning it; just as the way he dealt with the reliable information he gained on Christianity, where he mentioned them in detail. Thus, the problem here is that al-Masʿūdī was not contented with the information, as its narrator was not one who upheld the Sabian belief.

It was with the Hindu religion that al-Masʿūdī referred to works on the religion written by non-Hindu writers, i.e Muslim writers. To understand this part of al-Masʿūdī's approach, a quick look at the Murūj may help. After describing the assembly of the seven wise men among the Brahmins which ended with seven different views, and each view developed into a sect, al-Masʿūdī says:

"I saw Abā al-Qāsim al-Balkhī's work, *ʿUyūn al-Masāʾil wa al-Jawābāt*, and al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī's translated book, *al-Ārāʾ wa al-Diyānāt*, (where the two writers mentioned) the Indian religion and sects, and the reason why they threw themselves into fire, and they subjected their bodies to physical punishments. These two writers however, did not mention anything that we mentioned (the assembly of the seven wise men)…" (al-Masʿūdī 2000)

Thus, al-Masʿūdī did not refer to the two Muslim works to find statements about the Hindu religion that he can rely on. He indeed criticizes them for not including in their works an important event in the development of the Hindu doctrines: the assembly of the seven wise men.

Apart from the written documents, al-Masʿūdī also gained dependable statements orally. Al-Masʿūdī was concerned about getting information on a particular religion from the adherents of the religions. The oral information he gained from the Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian scholars and representatives, as well as his own personal observations during his travels and visits to the settlements and places of worship of the followers of these religions had provided him with first-hand information.

One interesting example for al-Masʿūdī's serious endeavor to gain eyewitness information is his study of the beliefs of the Sabians of Ḥarān. In the *Murūj*, al-Masʿūdī mentions that he already had a written source to rely on; a book written by Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakarīyā al-Rāzī, who was an exponent of Sabianism, and thus, his knowledge of the religion, should be unquestionable. However, al-Masʿūdī still went to the settlement of this group in Ḥarrān and asked a representative scholar of the Sabians of Ḥarrān, Mālik ibn ʿAqbūn and others in the group regarding al-Rāzī's statements on the Sabians. Al-Masʿūdī found that the representatives among the Sabians of Ḥarrān approved some of al-Rāzī's statements but disapproved some others (Gundus 1994). Here al-Masʿūdī's reference to the Sabian representatives, not only reflects his attempt to gain information from reliable sources, but it also shows that al-Masʿūdī was meticulous about gaining reliable information. Some aspects of a religion might be recorded by the adherents of the religion in previous times, but certain changes had taken place on that aspect in the religion, and records of the past may not provide true picture of the religion in its

current state. Among al-Rāzī's statements that the representatives of the Sabians of Ḥarrān disapproved was regarding the black bull. It is wrong, says al-Masʿūdī, to say that the tradition among the Sabians of Ḥarrān was to pour salt on the face of the animal and when its eyes injured the animal was slaughtered, and that the movements of the animal at that moment reflect what will happen in the year. (al-Masʿūdī 2000)

Thus, it can be deduced from the aforementioned paragraphs that, according to al-Masʿūdī, a student who engages himself in the field of Comparative Religion must always rely on first-hand information in order to reach at reliable information about religions.

> "The adherents of a religion are the most rightful people to describe their own religion, be that description written, oral or observed."

In his study of the Persians, al-Masʿūdī recognizes that the information he gained regarding their genealogies, kings and the length of time the kings were on throne differ from one source to another. This information, al-Masʿūdī mentions, came from the Israelites, the Greeks the Romans and the Persians themselves. In this regard al-Masʿūdī says that "the Persians (their views) are the most rightful to be considered" (al-Masʿūdī 1993), as the Persians were definitely the eyewitnesses of their own history.

Religious Representatives

In gaining information, al-Masʿūdī was not contented to receive it from a layman. As observed, he indeed met the representatives and scholars of the religions he studied. Here it is important to state that al-Masʿūdī considered oral information to be reliable only if it came from the specialists and representatives of the religion. Laymen's statement on their own religion cannot be reliable as their understanding of their own religion might not concur with the true teachings of the religion. An example from the Tanbīh may help to make the point clearer. In the Tanbīh, al-Masʿūdī criticizes the *Mutakallimūns* for their statement on the Zoroastrians' belief regarding the origin of evil. The point that the *Mutakallimūns* highlighted, according to al-Masʿūdī, must had come from the laymen among the Persian community. "I think this must had come from the laymen among them" (*Arā dhālika ḥikāyatan ʿan ʿawāmihim*).

Here the study comes to another important concept that al-Masʿūdī relied on when studying and describing the religions of "the others":

"The scholars and the religious representatives are the most rightful people to describe their religion. As for the laymen, in spite of their adhering to the religion, their reports do not represent a true perspective of the religion."

Handling of Information: Comparing Elements in the Teachings of Religions

There are several instances in the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh* where al-Masʿūdī makes comparisons among the teachings of several religions and sects. These attempts are made to explore the relationships among different elements in the teachings of religions.

For example, al-Masʿūdī compares the religion of the Chinese to that of the Qurāysh during *Jāhilīyah*. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) In the Murūj, al-Masʿūdī states that the Chinese religion is the religion of their ancestors, a form of Sabianism called *al-Samnīyah*. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) According to al-Masʿūdī, they directed their faces to idols during their worship. For the learned among them, the idols were just intended like the *qiblah* to the Muslims. However for the laymen, they associated the idols with God in the worshiping. In this comparison, al-Masʿūdī tries to deduce the significant elements in the beliefs of the *Samnīyah*. These elements are then compared to the belief of the Qurāysh. Here, al-Masʿūdī's purpose of making the comparison is to see the relation among elements in a religion, and how this relation existed in other religions too. By comparing a religion unfamiliar to him and his community with one he and his community were familiar with, al-Masʿūdī was able to bring the picture of the religion of "the other" closer to himself and the readers of his works.

A second example is Al-Masʿūdī's usage of the term "Sabians" (*al-ṣābi'ah*) to describe the members of many different groups, ancient and contemporary, among the Chinese, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Romans and the Greeks. After comparing the beliefs of these different groups with the beliefs of another group of people, known as the Ḥarrānians, who lived during al-Masʿūdī's time in settlements in southern Iraq, al-Masʿūdī found that all of the aforementioned groups shared in one important concept in their beliefs, that is, the heavenly bodies, i.e. planets and stars, had power over the movements and fates of the entire universe. (al-Masʿūdī 1993) As al-Masʿūdī noticed that the Ḥarrānians were known

by the title "Sabians", he used the same title to describe all the groups of different nations that shared the same concept of belief with that of the Ḥarrānians.

A third example is his attempt to clarify the Maronites' Christology. In the Tanbīh, al-Masʿūdī makes comparison among the Christology of the Maronites, Jacobites and the Nestorians. Here the comparison is likely taking the following steps: first, al-Masʿūdī pointed to the elements in the Christology of the three sects. The Jacobites' Christology said that God is of one nature; the Melkites' Christology viewed God as of two natures; and the Maronites' Christology said that God is of two natures, but only one "will" operating. Second: al-Masʿūdī made comparison among the three schemes of Christology and he came to the conclusion that Maronites' Christology is "God is two essences (thus, He has two natures) and one hyposthesis (because there is only one 'will' in Him)", a Christology in the mid (*mutawwassiṭ*) between the Christology of the Melkites and that of the Jacobites. (al-Masʿūdī 1993, Gardet and Anawati 1979, Braaten and Jenson 1984)

From the examples provided, it can be deduced that in his attempt to make the beliefs of people of other religions clear to himself and the readers of his works, al-Masʿūdī made several comparisons among the elements in the beliefs of these religions. This method can also be seen in the works of al-Bīrūnī. (Kamaruzaman 2003) Like al-Bīrūnī, al-Masʿūdī's comparisons sometimes took the form of comparing the beliefs of two religions, one familiar to him and his community, and the other was not; and sometimes the comparison can also take the form of looking at different views on certain elements in a religion.

Looking into the Development in Religious Thoughts
It is obvious from the *Murūj*, that al-Masʿūdī sees events in the natural phenomena as developments that can be described logically. For example, in his introduction of the *Murūj*, al-Masʿūdī highlights the topics he discussed in his first work, the *Akhbār.* *"*We mentioned the beginning of creation, the origin of people, differences in nationalities, rivers that turned to seas, rivers that turned to lands and lands that turned to seas…"

Interestingly, al-Masʿūdī in many instances apprehends belief issues as a kind of development too, and this can be seen through several points in al-Masʿūdī's works. For example, when he describes the fire worshiping among the Persians, he mentions that

Afridūn was the first among the Persian kings to introduce this teaching among the Persian community. That was when Afridūn found people offering their worship to a fire. After knowing their reason for doing so, and was convinced with it, Afridūn directed his people to built a house for fire worshiping in Tūs and Bukhārā. This, according to al-Masʿūdī was the beginning of the fire worshiping in the Persian community. (al-Masʿūdī 2000)

Furthermore, al-Masʿūdī's descriptions of the development Christian theology through the decisions of the Christian councils, the development of Hindu beliefs through the meeting of the seven wise men, the formation of the splinter group called the Samaritans out of the main Jewish community, and many other examples show that al-Masʿūdī is offering a method in studying religions: "elements in a religion should be understood along with a clear perspective of the development of these elements within the religion".

Finally, it can be seen in the Murūj that al-Masʿūdī finds that connotations of terms that describe the teachings of religions also pass through phases of developments. Throughout its development one community may capture certain meanings for a term, and another community may capture the same meanings for the term along with some additional meanings. An example is al-Masʿūdī's analysis of how the term *zandaqah* was introduced into the Arab society. According to al-Masʿūdī, it started when Mānī, the dualist prophet. It was known in the community during that time, that the Zand (*Zind*), represented an exegesis (*ta'wīl*) to the original Avesta. The connotation of the term *Zind* then developed, and it began to carry negative implications covering all those who made attempts to deviate from the original teaching of the Avesta and they were called, according to al-Masʿūdī, *Zindī*. As Mānī came with a teaching deviated from the teaching of the original Avesta, his teaching was then included under the term *Zindī*. When the Arabs came, they borrowed this term, and another development took place. Not only that they used the term *Zindī* to describe those who deviated from the original teaching of the Avesta, but in their usage of the term, it covered all those who believed in the eternity of the world. (al-Masʿūdī 2000)

Reporting: Strong Knowledge as Requirement before Writing

Al-Masʿūdī is of the view that a researcher who reports on religions other than his own should not start writing unless he has adequate information on the subject he is writing. This, being one of the reasons for his travels around the world, had made al-Masʿūdī a unique historian of his time.

For that reason, one sees al-Masʿūdī at a place praises al-Jahiz as an outstanding literary figure, but at another time criticizes him for writing in a field which was not within his specialty. (ʿĀṣī 1993) In the chapter "news on the transforming of seas, and some news on the major rivers", al-Masʿūdī says:

> "'Amrū ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ asserted that the river of Mahran which was the river of Sind, originated from the Nil, as there were crocodiles in it, and I do not know how he came to this conclusion…." (al-Masʿūdī 2000)

Al-Masʿūdī continues his critique, by saying that the reason why al-Jāḥiẓ went into this mistake was because al-Jāḥiẓ did not travel on seas, and he did not have much travels, and he did not go into cities. Al-Masʿūdī uses the phrase "a woodcutter at night"(*Ḥāṭib al-Layl),* which indicates that the man worked by guessing (Khalidi 1975, 1994). At another place al-Masʿūdī criticizes Sanān ibn Thābit ibn Qurah for writing in a field which was not within his specialty and ending in verifying news without eyewitness testimonies Khalidi 1975, 1994). According to al-Masʿūdī, Sanān could have done better if he wrote in Philosophy with all its branches, which was his field of specialty. (Murūj 2000, ʿĀṣī 1993).

Arrangement of Presentation

Al-Ṭabarī presents history in chronological sequences of the events. He puts together the events that took place in a certain year, and after mentioning the events that took place in that year, he moves to the next year, and the phrase used is such as "then the sixth year of hijrah enters…."(al-Ṭabarī 2005) In this sense, al-Tabari is said to be a true historian who wrote history objectively, without trying to shape it according to his own interest. (Rasul 1968) However, the problem with this method is no other than the disturbance of the flow of thought that is taking place in the mind of the reader. A historian who writes using this method will only mention the events that took place in a particular year and in the case of an issue continued to take place for several years, the historian will mention the issue in a scattered manner,

and this will cause a disruption to the reader.(ʿĀṣī 1993)

As for al-Masʿūdī, in both the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh*, he arranges events according to the dynasties and empires where the events took place. (Rasul 1968) As he is mentioning the kings, he introduces themes that describe significant issues that took place during the reign of the kings. Among these issues are issues related to the religions of the kings and the people.

For example, when al-Masʿūdī mentions the Roman emperors, he comes across the reign of Constantine I. Under the heading of Constantine I al-Masʿūdī discusses several themes which were issues and events that took place during the emperor's reign. Among these themes were the Christian councils, the reasons for the emperor's embracing of Christianity, and the sciences that prospered during the emperor's reign. Under each theme Al-Masʿūdī provides descriptions, and he even, in some cases, provides discussions on the theme. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) By using this thematic arrangement, al-Masʿūdī was able to describe an issue with a relatively in-depth description. In presenting complex themes related to religions, al-Masʿūdī sometimes provides descriptions on the issues from comparative perspectives.

Objectivity

Several steps are identified to have been taken by al-Masʿūdī to ensure objectivity in his descriptions of religions other than Islam.

1. In many instances in both the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh*, al-Masʿūdī informs his readers that he is only narrating from what he knew from people. An example is his description of the genealogy of Zoroaster. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) In the *Murūj*, when presenting the Jewish sect known as the Samaritans, al-Masʿūdī avoids himself from discussing in detail the beliefs and practices of this sect, as his book (i.e. the *Murūj*) is meant for narratives and not for discussing views – "*kitāb khabar lā kitāb al-ārā' wa niḥal*". ((al-Masʿūdī 2000)

2. When describing religions, in many cases al-Masʿūdī does not only mention the beliefs and teachings of the religions, but he tries to bring the picture closer by describing the prevailing situation while the belief or teaching was initiated. For example, he provides the reader with the story of the conversion of Constantine I into Christianity. He also mentions some of the events surrounding the

Christian councils; at another place in the *Murūj* he mentions the story of the hardship faced by the apostles when promoting Christianity. All these stories provide the reader with clear picture about the formation of the beliefs and practices of Christianity. When describing the Zoroastrians belief, al-Masʿūdī presents the situation how the Avesta, Zand and the Pazend were written, and when describing the Hindu beliefs he brings forward a picture of the event of the burning of a corps in Sri Lanka and he also provides his reader with the story of the council of the seven wise men of the Brahmins.

3. Al-Masʿūdī uses the original technical terms in the language where the term was introduced, and to provide clear perception to his readers, al-Masʿūdī provides the meanings of these terms in Arabic. Examples for this practice are numerous, but here are some of the examples. Al-Masʿūdī mentions the term *ĀzarJawī,* a term in the ancient Persian. He explains that this term comprises of two words: *Āzar*, one of the names given to fire, and *Jawī*, is one of the terms referring to river. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) When al-Masʿūdī describes the highest position in the church hierarchy he uses the term *Baṭrīrak* -Patriarch, and he says that in the Roman Language it is pronounced as *Baṭrīraks*. (al-Masʿūdī 1993) When he introduces the Roman Emperor Theodosius I, al-Masʿūdī provides the meaning of this Roman name in Arabic. He says the meaning is "the gift of God" (*ʿAṭiyat Allāh)*(al-Masʿūdī 1993) and when al-Masʿūdī introduces the Christian council he uses the term *al-Sanhawdas* – Synods, the original Greek word referring to the ecumenical council. (al-Masʿūdī 1993).

4. In many instances in both the *Murūj* and the *Tanbīh*, al-Masʿūdī avoids himself from providing detail accounts on issues he had already mentioned in his previous works. The *Murūj* according to al-Masʿūdī is a book of narratives and not meant to discuss issues. Here are some examples: When describing the Indian astrology, al-Masʿūdī describes it briefly as he does not want to repeat what he had mentioned in *al-kitāb al-awsat*. Al-Masʿūdī says, the *Kitāb al-Awsat* is meant to discuss issues, whereas the *Murūj* is just for narratives. (al-Masʿūdī 2000) At another place in the *Murūj*, al-Masʿūdī mentions the *Akhbār al-Zamān* where he

provided a detail account of the Hindu politics. He also mentions the *Kitāb al-Awsat* where he mentioned the Aryan's calculations for the movement of planets. (al-Masʿūdī 2000)

Conclusion

It is obvious from al-Masʿūdī's study of religions other than Islam that his surviving works in this field represent a serious attempt of an early Muslim scholar who offered a scientific method of verifying the "reliability" or otherwise of information, and an objective way of presenting the beliefs and practices of "the others". Al-Masʿūdī's concern of providing first-hand and eyewitness information on the religions of "the others" is indeed a unique contribution to the field of Comparative Religion during his time.

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