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Understanding the ‘other’: the case of Al-Biruni (973-1048 AD)

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to demonstrate al-Biruni’s originality in the study of religion and the exploration of religious truth, while his firm stance on his religion effectively advocated his need to understand others more accurately.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is a review of al-Biruni’s literature that uses content analysis method in establishing al-Biruni’s approach in understanding other religions through three main methodologies. From these approaches, this paper advocates al-Biruni’s firm stance toward his own faith despite using a scientific study on Hindu, which is in contrary to other phenomenological scholars who find that religious truth is relative in nature.

Findings – Al-Biruni’s methods have proven that researchers are not necessarily required to dispose off their religious identity and commitment to faith, while simultaneously achieving objectivity and accuracy. Al-Biruni’s approach to understanding others may be seen as a remarkable early model of interfaith, intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue seeking, eventually, to promote a harmonious co-existence within a highly polarized cultural and religious context. This inquiry demonstrates al-Biruni’s scholarly depth in his attempt to harmonize his methodology with the study of religious phenomena in compliance with Islam.

Originality/value – This study signifies al-Biruni’s intellectual background with his mastery of first-hand information as a solid basis and grounds for the effective understanding of others in a descriptive, systematic and comparative manner. This paper also signifies al-Biruni’s methods of understanding others without having to dispose off one’s religious identity and commitment to faith which could be exemplified by other religious scholars.

Keywords Al-Biruni, Comparative religion, Interfaith dialogue, Islamic theology, Tahqiq ma li al-Hind min Maqula Maqбуla

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The title of this paper – understanding the other – reminds us that:

No man is an island entire of itself. (John Donne).

Indeed, in a world with a wide range of people, beliefs and cultures all interacting with each other, understanding and tolerance of others is not only desirable but also a dire necessity if tensions are to be avoided.
One source of tension, even aggression, can arise from religious belief particularly if it takes a fanatical form. It should be remembered, however, that if the apparent cause of the tension and aggression is religion, only too often the true underlying cause is social and economic injustice.

That said, as religion is undoubtedly capable of having a negative role in human affairs, it is incumbent on us to understand not only our own religion but also that of others.

2. Modern comparative religion, its weaknesses and creditable exceptions

To that end, it can be noted that, setting aside al-Biruni for the moment, the modern study of religion emerged in the western realm during the nineteenth century. This was done by Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900), who established the discipline of comparative religion using a scientific approach.

However, unfortunately, the discipline has today become negatively sidelined. While it is certainly discussed in interrelated disciplines (e.g. the history, psychology, sociology and philosophy of religion – Ibrahim, 2011), it is discussed in such a way that its core religious importance has been virtually abandoned being replaced by methodologies with uncertain provenance and implication (Yousif, 2011). This can be seen in many contemporary approaches (be they phenomenological, historical, anthropological, psychological, sociological or philological – Szocik, 2015), which claim to be objective empirical studies of religion but which, in practice, contain biased interpretation and criticism diminishing traditional theology and faith (Ibrahim, 2011).

Nevertheless, there are creditable exceptions. Thus, the theologian Rene Guenon (1886-1951) took an inclusive approach by incorporating perennial philosophy into Christian theology. This was to be further developed by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), who promoted the concept of the transcendent unity of religions.

The inclusive approach was then transformed into the pluralist approach by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), who introduced the concept of world theology and he was followed by John Hick (1922-2012). It should be noted that, for these scholars, objectivity in inter-religious studies does not pose an issue as their discourse of religious truth is subjective: objectivity only lies within the discussion of religious contents per se.

Consequently, it is apparent that within the western realm a study is objective about presenting the phenomena whilst, at the same time, refraining from making a value judgment as to what the phenomenological study is all about. This refraining is commonly known as epoché i.e. the act of suspending belief together with the “bracketing” of the phenomena under investigation. The concept of epoché was devised by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who is known as the father of phenomenology.

The pluralist view, embodying epoché, can extend even further. Consider this passage from Ninian Smart a professor in religion:

No religion, it seems to me, contains the whole truth. I think it’s mad to think that there is nothing to learn from other traditions and civilizations. If you accept that other religions have something to offer and you learn from them, that is what you become: a Buddhist-Episcopalian or a Hindu-Muslim or whatever. (Scott London)

This is in line with the Papal Nostra Aetate in 1965 (Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions), which sought to promote unity amidst diverse belief systems (as had also been done by Wolfson, 1943).

With all of these creditable exceptions, it is notable that the inclusive, pluralist approaches to the subject imply at least a partial acceptance of religious truth combined
with a corresponding rejection of religious exclusivity thereby shifting the paradigm of the study of religion in its epistemological evaluation of faith.

3. Al-Biruni’s approach to comparative religion

In Islam, the study of other religions does not necessarily mean that students must be neutral toward their own faith. Indeed, committed people, be their commitment to religion or ideology, can never be completely neutral because they already have preferences for this or that (Kamaruzaman, 2010).

With that in mind, we now consider the case of al-Biruni[1], a Muslim whom scholars of interfaith studies often refer to as the father of religionswissenschaft and who managed to present a scientific study of other religious beliefs whilst, at the same time, remaining committed to his own.

Walbridge (1998) and Ataman (2008) view al-Biruni as one of the foremost scholars who applied anthropological and phenomenological methods to the study of religion. Certain aspects of said anthropological and phenomenological methods, however, differ from al-Biruni’s framework, particularly with regard to epistemological implications. A phenomenological approach (according to the Swiss polymath Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764) emphasizes “articulating of what shows itself.” This is similar to what al-Biruni practiced in his research on Hindu and other religions and it refers to the illusory nature of human experience in an attempt to develop a theory of knowledge that distinguishes truth from error. Nevertheless, Kant later advocated that having a true knowledge of the transcendent (noumena) is not possible and that is opposed to al-Biruni’s stance on religious truth because, according to Kant, acquiring knowledge is only possible through understanding the immanent (phenomena) of human experience (Moreau, 2001).

This is, perhaps, where al-Biruni opted for a path of equilibrium or a form of epoché, whereby he demonstrated a systematic approach to religious inquiry that did not necessarily require him to ignore religious truth and at the same time allowed him to refrain from judgment on others. In short, al-Biruni struck out on a middle path enjoining a scientific approach that neither neglected nor undermined his own religious beliefs.

4. Research objective

Despite the claim of Walbridge (1998) and Ataman (2008) that al-Biruni applied anthropological and phenomenological methods to the study of religion, this paper argues that, although using scientific method, al-Biruni did not adhere to the epistemology of those phenomenological studies, which discard religious truth. Indeed, his typology of religion upholds objectivity and justice toward the subject of his inquiry while, at the same time, allowing him to abide by his own beliefs.

Firstly, this paper examines al-Biruni’s stance on religion and “the other” (i.e. other religions) in which his typology relates to Quranic epistemology. That is important because religious scholars tend to associate al-Biruni with phenomenological methods in studying other religions and deny his Quranic stance.

Secondly, interestingly enough, al-Biruni’s mastery of the natural sciences did not deter him from undertaking religious and theological inquiry. This paper examines the content of al-Biruni’s writings in Kitab al-Hind and al-Athar and identifies the three main approaches that he used in studying the “others”, namely:

1. systematic data collection;
2. historical account and analysis; and
3. comparison.
Thirdly, the paper elucidates al-Biruni’s framework for understanding the “other” through analyzing his methods within the parameters of Islamic epistemological belief.

In conclusion, the paper identifies al-Biruni as a masterly intellectual and early Muslim scholar who introduced the model for interfaith studies and co-existence.

5. Al-Biruni’s stance on religion and “the other”

It should be noted that, when they start, scholars of religion often have a typology in their mind that is usually shaped by their personally held religious views or existing presuppositions. On this, al-Biruni made a clear assertion:

For which is not the truth (haqq) does not admit of any correction (zaygh), and all heathenism (kufr) [whether Greek or Indian] is in its pith and marrow one and the same belief, because it is only a deviation from the truth. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 21)

At the same time, in a spirit of toleration, the assertion is clear that even heathenism contains some element of truth which is why, whilst acknowledging falsehood (deviation zaygh and disbelief kufr) in the beliefs of Greeks and Indians, al-Biruni still persisted in studying them.

The same spirit of toleration is seen where he says:

If the contents of these quotations happen to be utterly heathenish and the followers of the truth (haqq i.e., Muslims) find them objectionable, we can only say that such belief is of the Hindus and that they themselves are best qualified to defend it. (Al-Biruni, 1983, pp. 15-16)

The result of this tolerance is that al-Biruni studies others as objectively as possible (Olgan, 1979) and does not attempt to correct others or make normative criticism. Rather, he leaves criticism to the respective “other” believers themselves. Thus, his stance on belief urges him to be objective in data collection and further stimulates him to try to find common ground with other religious adherents.

Yet, at the same time, al-Biruni’s division of religions into two different types proves his unfailing commitment to his own religion, which is further reinforced in his introductory quotation of those Qur’anic verses reminding researchers of the critical need for reporting the truth (Al-Attas, 1995). Thus, al-Biruni’s religious convictions did not deter him from exploring other religions, but rather made him more determined to establish an objective and unbiased narrative, likely similar to the Qur’anic instruction of holding dialogue with wisdom (Qur’an: 16: 125). The point is spelt out in Kitab al-Hind where al-Biruni says that his work is simply historical and not polemical.

In great contrast is the attitude of other Muslim scholars such as Ibn Hazm (d. 1064 AD) or ‘Issa al-Warraq (d. 862 AD), who sought to study other religions by means of criticism, intense debate and thorough refutation of, e.g. Christian theology (Yousif, 2011).

To his eternal credit, Al-Biruni was not at all like this. Although Shahhrastani (d. 1153 AD) shares a likeness to al-Biruni’s efforts in collating data of religions and reports according to their own belief systems, it can be said that al-Biruni’s writings excel all others in being inclusive and considerate, granting attention to the position of other cultures, religious orientations and beliefs. Al-Biruni’s method, moreover, resonates with the Qur’anic epistemic belief in the following verse:

Verily the Religion (al-din) in the sight of Allah is Islam (Qur’an 3: 19)

In the context, there is no doubt that reference to the religion (al-din) can be to any religion other than Islam, as long as there is total submission to God alone (Al-Attas, 1995) and
shown through Tawhid (oneness of God), which manifests itself in the beliefs and messages of the Prophets (Walbridge, 1998) beginning with Adam to Muhammad (Qur'an 11: 25-26, 50, 61).

5.1 Tawhid
Tawhid certainly plays an essential role in religion, encompassing all human actions with potential for an intrinsic relation to God (Al-Faruqi, 1984). The matter is clearly put by Choudhury (2007) as he points to the absence of Tawhid in the works of contemporary Islamic economists:

Choudhury’s essential point is that contemporary Islamic economics has become trapped in the framework of secular western neoclassical epistemology, which has no conception of Tawhid. The quotation demonstrates that the essence of a true Tawhid transcends all disciplines of knowledge including understanding man’s co-existence. However, while The Tawhidic form of religious study calls for objectivity in religious discussion and research, being unbiased and objective, however, does not necessarily require people to be neutral or indifferent toward their own religion while understanding that of others (Hasyti, 2012).

In addition, that is how al-Biruni viewed his own task. His view is of great relevance today when religious pluralism (as it is understood in contemporary times) is faced with the dilemma of making faith-based compromises in accepting the belief of the other, while, at the same time, also trying to retain the primacy of one’s own.

5.2 Data collection
Al-Biruni’s overall approach is not diametrically opposed to either objective study or uncompromised religious integrity and affirmation. In this regard, it is essential to emphasize that his typology of religion does not in any way affect his objectivity in data collection.

That objectivity has a parallel in the basic foundation of knowledge of conceptualization (tasawwur) and assent (tasdiq), which has undoubtedly been widely employed by Muslim scholars to differentiate between the singular essence and truth-value. Conceptualization, in this respect, is understood as the apprehension of an idea without judgment, whereas assent is apprehension with judgment (Wolfson, 1943). Thus, it can be inferred that al-Biruni’s data collection and apprehension of other religions fall under categorization, which requires no passing of judgment or evaluation. This is parallel to al-Biruni’s approach of allowing the text to speak for itself.

Meanwhile, the second phase of embracing knowledge is the assent (tasdiq), where judgment becomes necessary in this phase of apprehension. Al-Biruni’s typology of religion may be seen adjacent to the assent, where al-Biruni evaluates religion on the basis of belief and disbelief. It may, therefore, be observed that al-Biruni’s twofold apprehension of the “others,” albeit one without judgment and another with it, follows the foundation of logical reasoning in Islamic epistemology (Al-Ghazali, 2008).

5.3 Objectivity and Al-Faruqi
Al-Biruni’s principle of highlighting or enabling the text to speak for itself has a parallel in the work of Al-Faruqi (1984), a modern scholar, who is known for his theory of meta-religion.
and who proposes disengagement in encountering other religions. This is strikingly similar to al-Biruni’s principle of objectivity in data collection. Al-Faruqi seems to hold the same goal as al-Biruni whose firm stance toward his own conviction is capable of viewing other religions with an objective mind.

Akin to this is the approach taken by al-Biruni in his classification of and distinction between, true and false religions, which may be seen as balancing objectivity with evaluation while reconciling neutrality and normativity (Awang and Ramli, 2011). In so doing, therefore, this study is able to propose that al-Biruni’s methodology toward resolving intertwined epistemological issues may be of benefit to contemporary researchers.

6. Al-Biruni’s methodology for the study of other religions

While al-Biruni did not specifically label or categorize his methodology for the study of other religions, it comes under three headings, namely:

1. systematic data collection;
2. historical account and analysis; and
3. comparison.

As seen in his writings on India and The Chronology.

6.1 Systematic data collection

No doubt stemming from his scientific background, al-Biruni’s dedication to collecting first-hand data, combined with his commitment to accuracy and intellectual impartiality, sets him at the fore of the field of religious studies during his own times. However, more than that, his systematic data collection also became the cornerstone of early anthropological studies Sachau (1964).

That said, it appears that there were no first-class resources during al-Biruni’s time. This was especially in the case of Iranshahri (the scholar mentioned in the preface to India) who, while being acclaimed for having written prolifically on India, made many errors. These errors stimulated al-Biruni to write as precisely and accurately as possible and, in his work, mere hearsay and second-hand information are discarded; with only concrete and personally observed practices of Hindu society finding their way to being recorded. Then, whenever records are found to be insufficient, al-Biruni does not hazard a guess, but rather informs the reader frankly of his limitations. The following statement in his preface well-illustrates this point:

Before entering in our exposition, we must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject. The knowledge of these difficulties will either facilitate the progress of our work, or serve as an apology for any shortcomings of ours. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 17)

Al-Biruni’s rigorous reporting of the truth is also shown in his stance against the different classes of pseudo-reporters. As a religious scholar, he acknowledged his own limitations while showing honesty and academic integrity and in the first chapter of his Kitab al-Hind, he describes the limitations he encountered while researching India. In noting the large differences existing between Islam and Hinduism (be they in terms of language, barriers inherent in customs or religious prejudices), he recognized the difficulties in understanding texts, doctrines and scriptures. This is particularly so, where language is concerned and mastery of Sanskrit, for instance, is very difficult for an outsider divorced from the social and historical milieu of its birth (Kamaruzaman, 2003). Moreover, al-Biruni observed that
the available Indian historical sources did not collate well. Impressively, however, and notwithstanding these difficulties, he managed to translate into Arabic two major Sanskrit works, namely, *Pantajali* and *Samkhya* – alongside a number of other Sanskrit texts.

Desiring to be objective and achieve plausible and sound results, al-Biruni knew that it was important to understand others according to their own views (rather than those of the observer) and always to avoid self-referential evaluations of the subject according to the researcher’s own beliefs, mores or value system. This was particularly important because al-Biruni’s intention was to provide the information useful for those who wished to have religious discussions with the Hindus. He wrote:

[...] he incited me to write about the Hindus as a help to those who wish to discuss religious questions with them. (*Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 15*)

Al-Biruni further noted:

This book is not polemical. I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute them as I believe to be in the wrong. My work is nothing but a simple historical record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them. (*Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 5*)

Al-Biruni simply allowed the Hindus to speak freely often recording extensive quotations from their classical writers, instead of offering personal commentary (*Sachau, 1964*) and passages like the one above are truly astonishing when we remember that al-Biruni existed under Ghaznavid patronage with a ruler, Sultan Mahmud, who was inclined to either convert Hindus (to Islam) or, simply, to exterminate them.

Notwithstanding his desire to record, the distinction between true and false reports was a major concern for al-Biruni. Furthermore, he knew the importance of cleansing of the soul from the influences of lingering habits, kinship and rivalries. Indeed, he knew that giving into desire over rational thinking or an inclination to increase influence and control would detrimentally affect objectivity.

Al-Biruni’s humility is apparent in his writing, as witnessed in the admission of his limitations throughout the process of filtering false reports available in many historical anecdotes and, at the same time, he despised those who accept unverified information. He strongly condemned those who imitated blindly or wrote about the traditions of others without having acquired first-hand information or a second opinion from those within the religion itself.

In this regard, it is perceived as critical to sort out sectarian doctrines from mainstream beliefs as a step toward reaching a comprehensive understanding of religious traditions. This is not to be achieved by disregard of or the undermining of religious doctrines, but rather through the acquisition of correct, sound information (*Mir, 1979*). Al-Biruni’s collection of data is a “descriptive success” in nature, reflecting the reality that his systematic and scientific method of data collection did not cause him to suspend his own faith and belief whilst exploring other religious systems.

### 6.2 Historical approach

In describing the accounts of Indians, al-Biruni was intent on objectivity and wrote:

*My book is nothing more than a simple historical record of facts. (*Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 15*)

Indeed, he demonstrated that only via first-hand information is it possible to understand religion in its original context. He stated:
No amount of skills in philosophical deduction or induction from the evidence of our senses, can ever lead to correct notions on the religious institutions of people. It is only by collecting their written traditions on these matters and enquiring from the people themselves, that we can form a basis for understanding. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 25)

Furthermore, he avowed that:

No one will deny that in questions of historic authenticity hearsay does not equal eyewitness; for in the latter the eye of the observer apprehends the substance of that which is observed, both in the time when and in the place where it exists, whilst hearsay has its peculiar drawbacks. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 3)

Consequently, because of his concern for recording first-hand information, al-Biruni is acclaimed as one of the forefathers of anthropology (and, perhaps not surprisingly, his India still contributes much to the study of ethnography in modern works). According to Walbridge (1998), al-Biruni’s work describes a comparative mythology through anthropological methods. Walbridge sums up al-Biruni’s anthropological approach in three central points. First, it exhibits the comparability of religious beliefs and the practices of the Greeks and Hindus. Second, it points to the distinction of popular beliefs and the beliefs of different sects. Third, it provides a historical and rational explanation of polytheism.

In his evaluation of al-Biruni’s works, Ataman (2005) opines that al-Biruni adopted a mode of cross-cultural comparison, inter-cultural dialogue and phenomenological approaches now common in anthropology. This may also be seen in the framework of anthropological studies, as the approach undertakes extensive fieldwork to observe a human condition that is affected by the natural environment and is bound by the “evolutionist axiom” and empirical studies (Rashid and Alwi, 2010).

Al-Biruni’s historical methodology is upheld in Ninian Smart’s sixfold dimension of religion which starts with two main categories, namely, para-historical and historical. Para-historical consists of the doctrinal, mythological and ethical dimensions, while the historical consists of the ritual, experiential and institutional ones. Smart asserts that the para-historical can be studied empirically while the historical must be learnt in dialogical method (Smart, 1968).

Since the study of man is in an important sense participatory – for one has to enter into men’s intentions, beliefs, myths, desires, in order to understand why they act as they do – it is fatal if cultures including our own are described merely externally, without entering into dialogue with them. (Smart, 1968, p. 104)

Al-Biruni himself could not have put the matter more clearly. He, therefore, attempted to comprehend the myths and legends of the Hindus within the context of their scriptural and doctrinal foundations and premises and, moreover, did so in light of the fact that Hindu civilization is scripturally-based and scripture-centered (Khan, 1982). Moreover, he further elaborated on the origin of idolatry and polytheistic pantheons among the Hindus and Greeks. In so doing, al-Biruni exercised the utmost cautious in not associating polytheism with all the people in Hindu and Greek societies because there existed among them learned people who did not worship idols. He traced the origin of idolatry to its beginnings when the Hindus first began crafting idols of King Ambrihsa, who was once connected to Lord Indra and fulfilled His command to sculpt an idol as a token of His remembrance, while giving Him offerings during their separation. For the Greeks, the idols were claimed to be mediators between individuals and the First Cause, and were named after the stars, which were too high to be described by human qualities and were believed to be free from all imperfections (Tahtawi, 1993). In his comparison of the Hindus with the Greeks, al-Biruni
found similarities among their convictions in spite of the fact that they emerged from altogether different geographical continents. He stated:

I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them. For Greek philosophers, although aiming at truth in the abstract, never in all questions of popular bearing rise much above the customary exoteric expressions and tenets both of their religion and law. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 15)

It is nevertheless important to distinguish al-Biruni’s religious study from those of modern anthropologists. The major difference, perhaps, may be found in their respective definitions of religion. Al-Biruni clearly and normatively separates right from wrong, religion from myth. In contrast, the anthropological approach perceives a relationship poised between magical thinking and religion while perceiving religion as a product of human cultural development, manifested through the continuation of a particular tradition from its primitive to its modern form. The following statement of al-Biruni illustrates the point:

I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute them. I believe [it] is wrong. My work is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 15)

A descriptive method may be judged as weak or opposed to analytical criticism. It does, however, provide objective data on the subject of religion which will eventually serve as a valuable primary source of information in the field of comparative studies. This is affirmed with his remark in India:

In most parts of my work, I simply relate without criticizing, unless there would be a special reason for that. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 15)

Nonetheless, al-Biruni’s descriptive method does not in any way undermine his capability for analysis of the Hindu phenomena. Likewise, his objectivity does not hinder him from being analytical in his evaluation of collected data. For instance, al-Biruni’s critical analysis of Hindu resentment toward Muslims using their own religious beliefs, which perceive others as mleecha or “impure” is explained as a consequence of the Muslim invasion of their land. More to the point, al-Biruni’s vast knowledge of the Greeks and Hindus qualified him to distinguish between their learned elites as seen through the credit al-Biruni offers to the Greek scientists for the discoveries they made and which were not bound by superstition, as opposed to the Hindus, who often faced contradictions between logical findings and fallacies within their doctrines. His method further demonstrates that, despite his descriptiveness in his writings, he continued to exercise criticism of certain facts.

In addition, al-Biruni highlights the importance of good, upright ethics and behaviour for delivering factual data to an audience. To him, this requires cleansing oneself from defects and illness. This is understandable in view of the fact that sickness of the heart can only veil discovery of the truth. In Kitab al-Athar, al-Biruni states:

But [bare] that we must clear our mind from all those accidental circumstances which deprave most men, from all causes which are liable to make people blind against the truth i.e. inveterate custom, party-spirit [fanaticism], rivalry, being addicted to one’s passion [following one’s desires], the desire to gain influence etc. (Al-Biruni, 1923, p. 4)

Al-Biruni places considerable emphasis on strong commitment and diligence in the process of obtaining data, as required for setting right from wrong. For him, most of the historical reports he came across were either biased or flawed. The process of sieving through reports at times may have seemed rather daunting, and even a little impossible, as they were more...
often than not haphazard and disorganized. Al-Biruni’s historical approach as used in the context of comparative study of religions should certainly not be compared to a modern history of religious study. The latter for instance, approaches religions on the basis of the theory of evolution as developed by Max Muller, which degrades religion into mere tradition and human experience (Smith, 1958). Conversely, al-Biruni’s goal was instead to describe the religion of the Hindus as perceived through their own historical accounts and socio-cultural understandings. Similarly, the religions of the Jews, Christian, Sabians and Magians were described according to their own ancient calendar systems and festivals, and most importantly, based on their own historical writings, arguments and proofs. In short, al-Biruni wrote an extensive historical account on ancient religions that strongly emphasized reporting the truth and discerning and separating falsity from historical accounts.

6.3 Comparative approach
Nineteenth-century religious discourse took a strong interest in comparative religion as seen in the work of Max Muller, Edward Burnett Tylor, William Robertson Smith, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and Rudolf Otto (Kippenberg, 2001). The comparative approach is widely used in the study of religious traditions and its inter-relation to the way in which religious themes and ideas are being compared in finding similarities and differences. Freidenreich (2004) defines the comparative study of religion as:

The examination, in a unified work, of sources from at least two distinct religious traditions addressing an aspect of religion common to the comparands. (Freidenreich, 2004, p. 81)

Al-Biruni’s method includes both inter and intra religious comparisons as observed in his introduction of Kitab al-Athar, which emphasizes intra-sectarian comparisons. He states:

[...] besides, we must compare their traditions and opinions among themselves when we seek to establish our system [...] (Al-Biruni, 1923, p. 4)

The establishment of a “system” connotes the presence of a “structure” leading one to the understanding and writing of others by means of comparison, which is effectively translated in al-Biruni’s Arabic text as “qiyas” (Al-Biruni, 1923). Al-Biruni mentions the term qiyas three times in separate contexts. As to the exact meaning of “qiyas”, in one context, Sachau translates it to mean cogitation, stating:

I derived strength in exerting my capabilities. to explain the whole subject on the basis of that information which I have gathered either as an ear or eye witness or by cogitation and study. (Sachau, 1969, p. 3. The italic emphasis is Sachau’s)

In another context, Sachau (1969) translates qiyas as the process of induction. Those terms certainly connote the act of reasoning used to analyze two different things and finding relations to one another. In this discussion, it specifies the meaning of comparison between two phenomena, which in present studies is commonly known as muqaranah. The reason al-Biruni applied the term qiyas instead of muqaranah is as at present unknown. One suggestion is that it is, perhaps, out of an existing inclination toward it, resulting from the prevalence of the usage of the word qiyas in Ash’arite theology or science of logic, as mentioned by Al-Ghazali (2008) in his Maqasid.

In his Kitab al-Athar, Al-Biruni (1923) appears to have used qiyas (comparison) in the study of religion, where he compared the celebrated festivals of the Nestorians to those of the Melkites, and those of the Magians with the Sabians by way of outlining the possible similarities and differences of each sect. This arguably demonstrates that Muslim scholarly tradition had made use of the comparative method arguably much earlier than western
scholarship. In comparing theologies in India, al-Biruni also intentionally chose the traditions of the Greek and Sufism in juxtaposed contrast to the Hindus. His endeavor was to draw possible commonalities and differences, which existed between the said three traditions so as to promote an understanding among the adherents of each faith, instead of evaluating their traditions, as they had already been described as heretical (Jeffery, 1951). Al-Biruni’s following statement illustrates the point:

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. Therefore, I like to confront the theories of the one nation with those of the other simply on account of their close relationship, not in order to correct them. For that which is not the truth does not admit of any correction and all heathenism, whether Greek or Indian, is in its pith and marrow one and the same belief because it is only a deviation from the truth. (Al-Biruni, 1923, p. 21)

As far as the Sufis are concerned, al-Biruni has his own opinion on the origin of the term Suﬁ. For him, people have mistakenly adapted the word Suﬁ with the word Suﬁ having originating essentially from Greek, connoting the meaning of wisdom, which relates to the term philosopher; who is perceived as a lover of wisdom. In his view, the Suﬁ should be categorized within the group of philosophers and carries doctrines different from that of mainstream Muslims (Olgan, 1979). Perhaps, because of similar origin of the term, it entices al-Biruni to observe the influence of the Greek on Suﬁ beliefs, particularly regarding the concept of unity of God[6].

Apart from that, it is essential to note that al-Biruni describes idolatry among the Hindus and Greeks rather critically, while nonetheless taking the utmost caution not to associate it with both adherents, especially when he informs his reader that some of their learned men rejected the idea of a polytheistic pantheon (Sachau, 1964). Al-Biruni further runs comparisons between the Greek, Hindu and Sufi on the concept of transmigration of the soul (metempsychosis)[7] liberation of the soul and, also, retribution[8]. Points of similarity may be found among the three traditions, particularly in the context of a soul reaching the highest level of wisdom. This occurs once the soul departs from its lust and desire and turns unattached to the physical needs of the body. Knowledge becomes the main factor resulting in the liberation of the soul, and upon liberation, the soul is believed to have acquired the power to perform wonders.

It may be further observed that Al-Biruni’s, 1983 comparison does not include the religion of Islam. This is likely because he regards Islam to hold the true monotheistic belief, while perceiving others as deviations from the truth. Al-Biruni’s comparative work may also be seen in a threefold approach; as essentially inter-religious comparatives, intra-sectarian comparatives and inter-sectarian comparatives (Kamaruzaman, 2003). On the other hand, al-Biruni only compares the Sufis and the Shi’ites as exceptional groups from Islamic sects. Such a comparative study of theology may, therefore, be divided into two categories. The first is held by means of speculative theology, which examines the differences between religious theologies, while the second is undertaken by means of an agnostic method according to which the researcher would suspend his belief while learning other religions in an objective manner that averts itself of all biases and prejudice (Awang and Ramli, 2011). This, in turn, leads one to the notion of becoming either inclusivist or exclusivist. Inclusivists adopt the view of a shared truth across religious beliefs, while exclusivists claim that the truth exists only within the frame of their religious boundaries. Al-Biruni’s approach in comparison, has certainly adapted the gnostic approach with Tawhid as its core belief.
7. Result and discussion
7.1 Al-Biruni’s framework of understanding “the other”
Al-Biruni sought to demonstrate an Islamic model of studying and understanding the “other” as seen throughout his writings that are no less parallel to the teachings of the Qur’an. For instance, the Qur’an strongly encourages believers to engage with one another in dialogue, and in this manner, motivates them for further exploration of others. The paramount urgency to know one another has been stated in the Qur’an (49: 13), which outlines the purpose of human creation as knowing one another. In both of his treatises, al-Biruni describes diverse religious beliefs and civilizations so as to enlighten his audience on the account of past civilizations. During his writing on the history of India and his interest in promoting its civilization, al-Biruni communicates with the community itself in an attempt to gain experience through social interactions. Yet, because of the animosity projected by Hindus toward Muslims, the difficulties that al-Biruni faced were strenuous and formidable (Al-Biruni, 1983).

In the face of this, being judgmental and evaluative or being apologetic and neutral toward the beliefs of others does not explicitly carry negative implications toward the fact of being an observing Muslim. Al-Biruni’s method in investigating others may be categorized into two aspects, namely, apprehension without judgment and apprehension with judgment. The objectivity in describing other religions lies under the first aspect, while his typology of belief and disbelief falls beneath the latter. The study of other religions falls under conceptualization, which necessitates an understanding of religion in its contextual form without indulgence in any sort of judgmental evaluation. Assent follows with judgment and proof within theological dialectic arguments. Therefore, in his understanding of the other, al-Biruni appears to be continually preoccupied with objective reporting on other religions on the very level of conceptualization. This is where assent is made apparent through his affirmation of Islam as a part of his judgment and conviction. This would furthermore, certainly, demonstrate al-Biruni’s method being in accordance with the prevalent logical reasoning that was widely acknowledged by Muslim scholars such as al-Farabi (d. 950AD), Avicenna (d. 1037AD), al-Ghazali (d. 1111AD) and al-Taftazani (d. 1390AD). In contrast to this, however, claiming that religion owns no exclusive truth-claim leaves one with three possibilities, namely:

1. that all religions are equally true;
2. that all religions only contain partial truth; and
3. that no religion contains truth at all.

This is certainly inconsistent with the paradigm of Tawhid in Islam (Al-Attas, 1995).

The concept of unity in Islam encourages Muslims to co-exist harmoniously with members of other religions. This includes the value of respect and tolerance in daily communications. Nevertheless, Islam clearly distinguishes right from wrong beliefs. Thus, Islam strongly advocates possessing a firm stance of creedal principles without ignoring the sense of respect toward other religious members. It must be understood that being tolerant does not necessarily leads to the disposal of one’s faith. In addition, judgment, as claimed by Al-Faruqi (1984), was an essential aspect in the theory of meta-religion, which disregarded the phenomenological school due to their denial of judgment. The abandonment of judgments entails an epistemological perception of religion subject to verification and error, leading to the possibility of un-attainability of certainty. In this context, religion is viewed as mere experience and perception, and therefore, becomes apologetic in the sense of accepting multiple truths. Within a similar context, Al-Faruqi elaborates on the necessity of judgment,
its desirability, possibility and the benefits, which are denied in the study of the phenomenology of religion. For Al-Faruqi (1984), the true meaning of religion cannot be reached and expressed by means of detachment from religions, which is on the contrary counter-intuitive. This is echoed in al-Biruni’s claim:

For that which is not the truth does not admit of any correction and all heathenism, whether Greek or Indian, is in its pith and marrow one and the same belief because it is only a deviation from the truth. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 12)

This, in turn, would demonstrate the resemblance of the approach used by al-Biruni and Al-Faruqi, which the latter presents beneath a more modern light, compared to the former Islamic traditional approach. Apart from this, al-Biruni indirectly sought to promote the inter-religious dialogue required for harmonious co-existence. His courage to intermingle with other religious adherents and his desire to develop an understanding of their culture through observation and knowledge-sharing in spite of the contextual limitations is undeniably remarkable. As stated in the Qur'an (16: 125), Muslims should interact with others with wisdom and good exhortation. Although the primary goal of interfaith dialogue should not be on proselytizing, one may be drawn to a particular religion through natural instinct or via reception of positive impressions resulting from wisdom and the judicious acts of its adherents. In the case of al-Biruni, however, it was never his intention to compel the faith of Islam unto Hindus. However, it was his work that might change the view of the Hindus toward Muslim, in what was a rather more tolerant approach as opposed to the Ghaznavid’s policies during his time.

The interfaith dialogue promoted by al-Biruni may be exemplified in his dialogue with the Pandits, who assisted him in his research and also through his association with other Hindu scientists and scholars. Al-Biruni, in return, taught them the Islamic sciences. The Hindus’ prejudice toward outsiders was a challenge for him as they regarded Muslims to be impure (mleccha) to the extent that any interaction with them was near impossible, with revulsion or distaste shown to the marks of a Muslim’s seat or used plates or any items once touched by Muslims; being considered as contaminated (Al-Biruni, 1983). This illustrates how inter-religious and inter-cultural communication, at that time, seemed almost impossible. Indians were exasperated with Muslims, as Sultan Mahmud destroyed their temples and shrines and killed people who stood against him during the Muslim conquest of their lands. Kashmir and Benares, two of the most influential centers of learning, were inaccessible to Muslims due to the conflict between the neighboring country of Ghaznah and India (Al-Biruni, 1983). Despite the war and the chaotic conditions, al-Biruni held a strikingly different perspective of India, redefining and describing the Hindus in a neutral fashion without any intent to blemish or misrepresent their religious doctrines or force them to convert to Islam. Consequently, the animosity was effectively dissolved by means of his efforts at bridging the inter-civilizational divide through dialogue held between al-Biruni and the Hindu.

When conversing with others of different faiths, one should possess a sound mind and a firm conviction in one’s own faith, while understanding the other without judgment or bias. Although some claim that this will frequently extend to an apologetic tone, one can certainly delineate falsehood from the truth in this manner. This does not necessarily mean that one is to deny his or her own belief or contradict it. In fact, to avoid biased judgments, people should state their fundamental presuppositions as opposed to hiding them or vaguely noting them. In addition, attempts to learn and understand others eventually result in an increase of the knowledge of the researcher’s own faith as this will indirectly cause scholars and researchers to study their own religion more rigorously. Although the aim of the
comparative study of religion is to discover the truth, the affirmation of one's belief is necessary.

As mentioned above, agnosticism in the comparative study of religions leads to relativism, while a theist will find the truth of reality. Al-Biruni positions Islam as the truth and argues that it cannot be compared to heretic faiths. He emphasizes:

The Others completely differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe and vice versa. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 13)

As stated in his preface, the intention of writing his treatise was not to condemn or justify their doctrines, but rather to provide a simple historical account of facts as illustrated in the title of the book itself The Book on Hindus from the Accepted and Rejected Sayings. Al-Biruni is also seen as a devout Muslim:

[...] with my duties as a Muslim to quote their own words at full length [...] (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 10)

This specific principle may be traced back to an instruction found in the Qur’an regarding the commands of God to speak the truth. The previous statement demonstrates al-Biruni’s strong adherence to fundamental values affirming the truth in Islam and refutation of agnosticism.

It may also be noted that the Muslims’ approach toward other religions has no specific methodology. Yousif (2011) claims that what is important in the study of other religions is a general compromise with Islamic sources and epistemic evaluation. However, numerous methods of religious inquiry should nonetheless be celebrated as with the critical analysis of Ibn Hazm (1064 AD) toward the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospel or Abu Isa al-Waraq (862 AD), Ibn Taymiyyah (1328 AD) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1350AD) in their rebuttal of the Christian theology of trinity, not to overlook Ghazali’s logical approach and deductions in proving the false claim of divinity of Jesus. Early scholars who showed similar approaches in the study of religion to al-Biruni include al-Nawbakhti (922 AD) in “al-Ara’ wa al-Diyanat”, al-Mas’udi (d. 957 AD) in “al-Maqalat fi usul al-diyanat”, Abu Mansur al-Baghdadi (d. 1037AD) in “al-Farq bayna al-Firaq” and al-Shahrastani (d. 1153AD) in “al-Milal wa al-Nihal,” who embarked on encyclopaedic writings in which they identify and list their theological beliefs in a manner rather similar to the method of al-Biruni (Walbridge, 1998).

Contemporary Muslim scholarship would benefit greatly from various methodologies depending on their set objectives, methods and orientations (Ibrahim, 2011). Though Islam does not subscribe to any specific methods such as those proposed in modern disciplines targeting the sociology, anthropology, psychology and phenomenology of religions, Muslims may study and observe different approaches insofar as they are coherent and consistent with the teachings of the Qur’an and its epistemology. In this regard, al-Biruni may be seen as one of the earliest Muslim scholars who founded an inarguably most comprehensive (Kamaruzaman, 2003) religionswissenschaft within a very complicated classical historical context.

8. Conclusion
Al-Biruni’s intellectual background provided him with a mastery of first-hand information as a solid basis and grounds for the effective of others in a systematic, historical and comparative approach, which can be considered as par to the scientific approach in understanding the “others.” In many instances, researchers in the study of religion associate his methods with that of the phenomenological approach. His attention to primary data
collection urges other researchers to present first-hand data as accurately as possible within the context of religious beliefs and practices. This is manifested in al-Biruni’s historical descriptive method, which calls for adherence to objectivity. Nonetheless, the objective manner did not disturb al-Biruni’s analytical criticism of data, as he continually subjects them to filtration according to a criterion of right and wrong as al-Biruni described the beliefs of the Greek and Hindus as deviated from the truth. His typology is made explicit in his claim:

For which is not the truth (haqq) does not admit of any correction (zaygh), and all heathenism (kufr) [whether Greek or Indian] is in its pith and narrow one and the same belief, because it is only a deviation from the truth. (Al-Biruni, 1983, p. 21)

His commitment to the study of others partially demonstrates at least that the teachings of Islamic revelations exhort the knowing of and understanding of one another. Al-Biruni’s methods have proven that researchers are not necessarily required to dispose their religious identity off and commitment to faith, while simultaneously achieving objectivity and accuracy. Al-Biruni’s approach to understanding others may be seen as a remarkable early model of interfaith, intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue seeking eventually to promote a harmonious co-existence within a highly polarized cultural and religious context.

Notes

1. Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Biruni (973-1048AD), known as al-Biruni, though he refers himself as Abu Rayhan, was born to a Tajik family in Khwarizm. According to Said and Khan, there are two opinions as to why he referred to himself as al-Biruni. First, that he was born in a town of Khwarizm named Birun. Second, that in Persian “Birun” means “outsider.” He was an outsider in Khwarizm because he was not born there, but rather in the town of Kath.

Al-Biruni was one of many prominent Muslim scholars who benefitted from patronage beneath the rule of the Ghaznavids (a patronage, which can be traced back to the reign of al-Ma’mun (814-834) of the Abbasid caliphate). His study of comparative religion began with the writing Kitab al-Athar al-Baqiyah ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliyah in the year of 998 CE, effectively completing it within a year at the young age of 27 (Olgan, 1979).


3. Tawhid is a fundamental Islamic creed, which establishes God’s inalienable divinity. Tawhid literally means to declare His Oneness, namely, the demonstration of the unity of God in Himself and in the act of creation. It states that from Him alone all beings are derived, and in Him alone does every purpose come to its term. Unity was the core message of Prophet Muhammad PBUH as reflected in the Qur’an (Abduh, 2004).

4. Meta-religion is an approach used by al-Faruqi in dealing with the divergences of religions. It attempts to find common ground across religious beliefs and values, which al-Faruqi assembles through three basic principles disengagement, higher principles and inter-religious dialogue. Al-Faruqi delineates the “suspension of judgment,” which he explains as widely employed in the study of phenomenology. The meta-religion concludes that it does not condemn a priori any religion, but rather gives every religion the benefit of doubt and more. Islamic meta-religion assumes that every religion is divinely revealed and divinely ordained until it is historically proven beyond a doubt that the constitutive elements of that religion are humanly made.

5. According to Kamaroniah Kamaruzaman (2003), it is important to note that although Sachau is a great admirer of al-Biruni, he does not hold much respect for Muslims in general. Sachau has previously accused Muslim scholars of omitting information describing Muslim intolerance ().
6. As explained by al-Biruni, the Greeks believed that God is the First Cause. Both Indians and ancient Greeks share belief in the same concept, as they think the First Cause is the only one possessed of real existence, in need of no support from others. Moreover, other existence is not real, as it depends on the existence of the First Cause, this is in addition to their belief that the First Cause is immanent in all beings in spite of their original unity. Their beliefs, however, become parallel to Sufism, especially with regard to their belief of unity with God, which can occur when a person meditates through extensive dhikr (glorifying God). Similarly, the Hindus and the Greeks believe that God is inherent in every object of this world, be it animate or not (Al-Biruni, 1983).

7. In Hindu, metempsychosis is regarded as the core of their belief. The soul’s needs rise to the highest absolute intelligence to acquire knowledge through contemplation of the individuals and the species. The migration to the future body depends on their deeds, whether good or bad, and begins from the lowest stages to the higher ones. While for the Greeks, in the book Phaedo, Socrates proclaims the same migration of soul to be the soul migrating to Hades after being unadulterated. As for the Sufis, they believe that this world is a sleeping soul, and that the awakened soul must be found. The transmigration of the soul or metempsychosis leads to liberation through knowledge; which all three dogmas believe in. Liberation for the Hindu is achieved when someone attains Moksha or when the soul unites with God. Hindus believe that Moksha is being united with God after liberation of the soul through knowledge. Sufis also agree on the ability to perform wonders when the eternal soul has become the knowing being. As for the Greeks, they believe that liberation can be achieved through the separation of the soul from the body so that the soul will not be interrupted by the physical senses that it may achieve the knowledgeable being (Al-Biruni, 1983).

8. According to the Hindu, retributions will be experienced by the soul only, which will become free from the body after its death. The soul with good deeds will enter the upper world, heaven (svaraloka) and the soul with bad deeds will enter the low world, hell (naraloka) or the lowest one (patala). There are also souls that will not enter any of them as they do not deserve to rise to heaven or to sink into hell. There are also those who are on their way back from hell to heaven, who must first wander about in plants and animals before reaching the human body and later are allowed to enter heaven. The Greeks believe people will be categorized into three groups after their death depending on their deeds. The first group of people are those who do good deeds. Their soul will meet the companions and gods and likewise inhabit suitable places. The second group are great sinners. Their souls will be attached in every species of being, and later will be thrown to Tartarus where punishments await them. The last group consists of those who lived a middle sort of life where they will be punished for their sins and later will be rewarded for their good deeds (Al-Biruni, 1983).

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