

**EARLY MUSLIM SCHOLARSHIP IN RELIGIONSWISSENSCHAFT:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE WORKS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF  
ABŪ RAYḤAN MUḤAMMAD IBN AḤMAD AL-BĪRŪNĪ**

A Dissertation submitted to  
the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)  
in partial fulfilment of the Requirement for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

**KAMAR ONIAH KAMARUZAMAN**

**ISTAC**

November 1996

supervisor

**DR. BILAL KUŞPINAR**

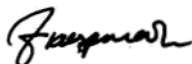


الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية ماليزيا  
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA  
بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND  
CIVILIZATION (ISTAC)

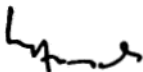
30 July, 1997

We certify that this dissertation is satisfactory for the award of the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy.



Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bilal Kuşpınar

Supervisor



Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud

Member of Examining Committee



Prof. Dr. Seyed Ahmad K. Moussavi

Member of Examining Committee

Certified that this dissertation conforms to the formal academic standards of the  
International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization.



Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas

Director

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work would not have come into existence had it not been for Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the Founder-Director of ISTAC. Not only has he made it possible for me to write this thesis and follow the Ph.D. program of ISTAC, but he is also instrumental in guiding my intellectual and spiritual development.

I first met the learned Professor in 1972. I had then just left my teenage years, and was going through a state of intellectual and spiritual restlessness, confused with myself, with life, with the world. The courses that I attended made no sense, and I saw hypocrisies and double standards in almost everything. I saw life as mere existence devoid of substance and meaning. Like all restless souls, I sought remedies in discussions and intellectual forums. All to no avail - until I attended a talk given by the learned Professor. In that talk he propounded the meaning of Existence, the concept of Justice, and the nature and role of man. It was as if he was answering my questions. From that day onwards, it is always him that I seek for guidance and the answers to my questions. And he has never failed me. He makes the most complicated subjects, simple, and the most complex issues, sensible. As regards this thesis, Prof. al-Attas is one of its Readers, and I wish hereby also to record my gratitude to him on this matter.

The major assistance in the preparation of this thesis, and for which I am indeed deeply grateful, comes from my supervisor, Dr. Bilal Kuşpinar. With patience and wisdom he guides me stage by stage - trimming and expanding thoughts now and then, meticulously pruning sentence structures here and there - until the thesis takes the form that it is now. Dr. Kuşpinar has that rare ability of presenting criticisms in an inspiring manner. May he be supervisor to many more aspiring students.

To Dr. Wan Muhammad Noor too I owe a special gratitude for he too is a Reader of this thesis. He is also the Student Advisor of ISTAC and in his capacity as Student Advisor, he has given me tremendous help over technical details, and indeed, he often goes out of his way to assist me in such matters. I also wish to record here my appreciation of Dr. Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, another Reader of this thesis. Dr. Moussavi has also given me instructions and guidance with regards to selected Qur'anic verses in the field of Religionswissenschaft. Also, I have benefitted much from his lectures at ISTAC.

My gratitude too goes to other lecturers of ISTAC. Dr. Hasan al-Nagar performed an incredible feat when he lifted the standard of my Arabic language. In the field of Arabic language instructions, surely there is no second to him! I have also benefitted much from the teachings and

knowledge of Dr. Alparslan Acikgenç, Prof. Ravan Farhadi, Prof. Mehdi Mohaghegh, Dr. Ghulam H. Asi, as well as other lecturers. Indeed, not only do these personalities possess wide and profound knowledge, they also are deeply committed to Islam and to their works. They are truly men of vision and mission. Certainly, their contributions to the academic world will be well recorded in the hearts of their students and the *Ummah*.

Likewise, my thanks also go to the Administration and Library staff of ISTAC. To fellow students, their warmth and shared experiences will always be part of fond memories. I would like also to record here a special acknowledgment of a very special person whose dedication and support, warmth and inspiration, had seen through the founding and building of ISTAC - Puan Latifah al-Attas, the learned and gracious wife of Prof. al-Attas. Definitely, students and staff of ISTAC will always remember her with affection. I have known Puan Latifah for almost twenty years now. With warmth and kindness she had received my friends and me in their house when we had sessions with the learned Professor.

Behind all these contributions stand the monumental roles of my parents in my personal and academic development, for indeed they have groomed me to be what I am today. My beloved father, may Allah s.w.t. bless his soul, also a lecturer himself, and a lover of knowledge and learning, had always given full support and guidance to all us children in our academic ventures. He, however, returned to the Mercies of Allah s.w.t., just after the submission of the draft of this thesis. This thesis is therefore dedicated to him. May the most Merciful shower blessings on his soul, and may he find a comfortable abode among the righteous.

My beloved mother too, in her affection and sacrifices, is a tremendous support for me. Likewise, other family members - brothers, sisters, in-laws, nieces and nephews - are also pillars of inspiration and each has contributed in his/her own way. My talented brother-in-law, Mohd. Pilus Zambri, in particular, has contributed much to the technical aspect of this thesis. With affection too I thank Datin Badariah Ahmad whose friendship and encouragement kept me going in my academic quests.

To the International Islamic University too I wish to record my gratitude for the study-leave and scholarship that saw me through this program. I pray that I will be able to do justice to the University upon my return.

Above all, it is always to Allah s.w.t. that we dedicate our utmost gratitude for it is only through His Mercies and Blessings that our efforts bear fruits. May His Affection and Benevolence be with us always.

**This work is dedicated to my beloved father,  
Alahyarḥam Haji Kamaruzaman bin Haji Muhammad Yunus.  
May Allah s.w.t. bless his soul and give him Mercy.**

**Al-Fatiḥa**

If such an author is not alive to the requirements of a strictly scientific method, he will procure some superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherents of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it. In such a case, if he be an honest character, he will simply retract and feel ashamed; but if he be so base as not to give due honor to truth, he will persist in litigious wrangling for his own original standing-point. If, on the contrary, an author has the right method, he will do his utmost to deduce the tenets of a sect from their legendary lore, things which people tell him, pleasant enough to listen to, but which he would never dream of taking for true or believing.

Al-Birūnī  
(*Kitāb al-Hind*)

## ABSTRACT

Religionswissenschaft, or Comparative Religion, is a special legacy of the Muslims to man's intellectual heritage. This thesis attempts to look into that legacy, focussing on the contributions and works of one of its prominent scholars, Abū Rayhan Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī (326 H./973C.E. - 443 H./1051 C.E.)

The study is presented here in five chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the role of the Qur'an and Ḥadīth as the inspiration and foundations of this discipline, followed by an enumeration of some of the major Muslim scholars in this field. The various genre under which such studies are made are also highlighted here. In Chapter 2, al-Bīrūnī's life in its geo-political context is portrayed, followed by an exposition of his major contributions in the various fields of knowledge as well as those in Religionswissenschaft. Chapters 3 and 4, in particular, analyze his scholarship in Religionswissenschaft. The thesis concludes with the highlights of al-Bīrūnī's outstanding contributions vis-a-vis modern scholarship in Religionswissenschaft

What makes al-Bīrūnī outstanding in this discipline is the depth and dimension of his scholarship, and the methodology that he formulates. Indeed, a well formulated methodology is especially essential in his case because his was a study based on direct, personal observations and textual analyses. Therefore, he enumerates the prerequisites that a scholar of this discipline ought to have. Only authentic texts should be relied upon, and because of that scholars ought to be able to distinguish the authentic from the false texts. Criteria for appraisals and criticisms are also laid out. As outstanding also is his ability in discussing and analyzing items and phenomena in their global perspectives, hence truly making his scholarship a discipline of *Comparative Religion*. The religious communities and their religions discussed by the scholar are the Hindus, Christians, Jews, ancient Persians, Khwarizmians, Sughdians, Magians, Manicheans, Samaritans, Sabians, and the ancient Greeks. He also gives brief expositions of cults led by such leaders as Budhasaf, Mani, Mazdak, Bahafīd, al-Mukanna, al-Hallaj, and Ibn Abi-Zakaria.

Unlike modern methodologies of Religionswissenschaft, al-Bīrūnī's methodology pays

respect to the adherents' worldviews and their sensitivities, and because of that he is appreciated and admired by many, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In fact, he had also contributed in some practical ways to some of the religious communities that he studied. He was, for example, according to Sachau, the first person to compose a scientific system of Jewish chronology for the Jews. All things considered, therefore, as a conclusion, it is proposed that al-Bīrūnī be called *The Father of Religionswissenschaft*.



**EARLY MUSLIM SCHOLARSHIP IN RELIGIOSWISSENSCHAFT:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE WORKS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF  
ABŪ RAYḤAN MUḤAMMAD IBN AḤMAD AL-BĪRŪNĪ**

**CONTENTS**

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| <b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>  | <b>1</b>      |
| (1) Muslim Legacy to Religionswissenschaft  | 1             |
| (2) Foundations   | 7             |
| (2.1) The Holy Qur'an   | 8             |
| (2.2) The Hadith and Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.)   | 15            |
| (3) Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft   | 20            |
| <br><b>CHAPTER TWO: ABŪ RAYḤAN MUḤAMMAD IBN AḤMAD AL-BĪRŪNĪ:<br/>LIFE AND SCHOLARSHIP</b>     | <br><b>32</b> |
| (1) Al-Bīrūnī's Life and Scholarship  | 32            |
| (1.1) Background and Milieu   | 32            |
| (1.2) Socio-Cultural and Geo-Political Context  | 36            |
| (1.3) Academic Setting and Intellectual Legacy  | 45            |
| (2) An Overview of Al-Bīrūnī's Works in Religionswissenschaft                                 | 54            |
| (2.1) Introduction to Al-Bīrūnī's Major Works: <i>Kitāb al-Āthār</i> and <i>Kitāb al-Hind</i> | 54            |
| (2.2) Objectives of the Books   | 56            |
| (2.3) The Subject-Matters   | 60            |
| (2.4) The Method, Approach and Style  | 63            |
| (2.5) The Islamic Dimension   | 72            |
| <br><b>CHAPTER THREE: AL-BĪRŪNĪ'S METHODOLOGY IN<br/>RELIGIOSWISSENSCHAFT</b>                 | <br><b>79</b> |
| (1) Typology of Religions   | 79            |
| (2) Professional Prerequisites for the Scholar  | 82            |
| (3) The Necessity for Contextual Study  | 86            |
| (4) The Method of Criticism   | 93            |
| (5) The Method of Comparison  | 106           |
| (6) The Exposition of Ideas   | 113           |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER FOUR: AL-BĪRŪNĪ'S KNOWLEDGE AND PERSPECTIVES OF RELIGIONS</b> | <b>119</b> |
| <b>(A) Major Religions And Communities</b>                               | <b>120</b> |
| <b>(1) Hinduism</b>  | <b>120</b> |
| (1.1) Scriptures and Texts   | 120        |
| (1.2) Theology   | 128        |
| (1.3) Religious Philosophies   | 137        |
| (1.4) Idolatry   | 141        |
| (1.5) Basic Doctrines  | 143        |
| (1.6) Social Institutions, Ethics and Laws                               | 150        |
| (1.7) Rites and Rituals  | 157        |
| (1.8) Holidays and Festivals   | 161        |
| <b>(2) Christianity</b>  | <b>164</b> |
| (2.1) Scriptures and Texts   | 164        |
| (2.2) Theology and Doctrines   | 167        |
| (2.3) Denominations  | 172        |
| (2.4) Holidays and Festivals   | 173        |
| <b>(3) Judaism</b>   | <b>180</b> |
| (3.1) Scriptures and Texts   | 180        |
| (3.2) Holidays and Festivals   | 181        |
| <b>(B) Minor Religions And Religious Communities</b>                     | <b>187</b> |
| (1) Ancient Persian Religion   | 192        |
| (2) The Khwarizmians   | 197        |
| (3) The Sughdians  | 199        |
| (4) The Magians  | 200        |
| (5) The Zoroastrians   | 202        |
| (6) The Manicheans   | 204        |
| (7) The Samaritans   | 207        |
| (8) The Sabians  | 209        |
| (9) The Ancient Greeks   | 213        |
| <b>(C) Cults And Their Communities</b>                                   | <b>216</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION</b>  | <b>222</b> |
| <b>GLOSSARY</b>  | <b>232</b> |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>  | <b>238</b> |

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### (1) MUSLIM LEGACY TO ISLAMIC RELIGIONSWISSENSCHAFT

In his preface to Bruce Lawrence's translation of Shahrastānī's '*Ārā' al-Hind*, Franz Rosenthal asserts,

The comparative study of religions has been rightly acclaimed as one of the great contributions of Muslim civilization to mankind's intellectual progress.<sup>1</sup>

This is truly so. Indeed, Muslim intellectual history bears witness to its multi-faceted interests in that it gives serious attention to its internal concerns that pertain to its own *Ummah* (community), as well as to its external affairs that relate to other communities, religions and civilizations, in line with its principle of *ḥablun min al-nās*<sup>2</sup> (relationship among humankind).

However, for the last couple of centuries, "the comparative study of religions," also known as *Religionswissenschaft*,<sup>3</sup> had receded from the attention of the *Ummah*, a fate suffered by many other disciplines including philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, the physical

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions* (Mouton: Mouton and Co., 1976).

Similar acknowledgement is given by Eric J. Sharpe, with specific claim that, "The honour of writing the first history of religion in world literature seems in fact to belong to the Muslim Shahrastānī (d. 1153), whose *Religious and Schools of Philosophy* describes and systematises all the religions of the then known world, as far as the boundaries of China." Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion, a History*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2nd. ed. 1986; 1st. ed. 1975), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> The Qur'ānic phrase *ḥablun min al-Allah wa ḥablun min al-nās* (covenant from God and covenant from man) (3:112) is understood by Muslims as Divine injunctions aimed at instilling social responsibility and commitment toward humanity in general.

<sup>3</sup> This discipline is known by various names, the most common of which are *Comparative Religion*, *History of Religion* and *Religionswissenschaft* ("science of religion"). For the purposes of this thesis *Religionswissenschaft* will be used for this discipline seeing that it is a more proper description of the subject.

sciences, etc.<sup>4</sup> But such indifference as this is to the sciences is not natural to the spirit of Islam, and there are many indications today that the *Ummah's* interest in these subjects is reviving with great enthusiasm.<sup>5</sup> In the particular field of Religionswissenschaft, this revival is reflected in the works of many contemporary Muslim scholars in various languages, including scholars such as Ismā'īl Rāgī al-Farūqī,<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr,<sup>7</sup> M. A. Talib Lubis,<sup>8</sup> H. O. K. Rahmat,<sup>9</sup> Ahmad Shalabi,<sup>10</sup> and others. As profound, if not more so, are also the contributions of the theologian-philosopher, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas whose seminal contributions since the late 1960's have led to reviews in the perception of the *Ummah*, particularly with regard to conceptual matters existing between Islam and the non-Islamic

---

<sup>4</sup> Mainly because of colonialism and western political and ideological expansion. This period was followed by the struggle for independence. After independence, the Muslim nations and communities were caught up with the struggle for self-rule and reestablishment of identities. It is only lately that Muslim nations have begun to reestablish their scholarly enterprises.

<sup>5</sup> The curricula of the newly established Islamic universities and institutes all over the Muslim world are evidences of this contemporary development.

<sup>6</sup> For example, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal: McGill Univ. Press, 1967). He is also the editor of *Trilogie of the Abrahamic Faiths and Essays in Islamic and Comparative Studies*, both published in Maryland by the International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Among his works are "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," *The Islamic Quarterly*, X, 47-68, Nos. 3 and 4, July and Dec. 1979. Themes of Religionswissenschaft also appear in other works of his, such as *Man and Nature, The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Kuala Lumpur: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1968), first published by Mandala, 1976; *Western Science and Asian Cultures* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1976, etc.

<sup>8</sup> In the Malay language, the most important of which is *Keesaan Tuhan Menurut Ajaran Kristen dan Islam* (Selangor: Thinkers Library, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> In the Malay language, *Dari Adam Sampai Muhammad* (Kota Bharu Aman Press, rev. ed. 1976, 1st. ed. 1984)

<sup>10</sup> For example his books *Muqāranah al-Adyān* in several volumes, translated into the Malay Language by Muhammad Labib as *Perbandingan Agama* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1977).

persuasions and civilizations.<sup>11</sup>

The major problem that Muslim scholars of Religionswissenschaft face today is how to be accurate, objective and fair in the analyses of religions other than Islam and at the same time not to indicate any form of compromise with *shirk* (polytheism) or *fāsiq* (falsity or deviation).<sup>12</sup> This is not an easy task, for to understand accurately a religion and a *weltanschauung* (worldview) foreign to one's own is already in itself an intricate job, be it for Muslims or non-Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, in the West, modern scholars of Religionswissenschaft have formulated numerous methodologies aiming at what they considered to be the scientific analyses of religions, such as the *Philosophy of Religion*, the *Sociology of Religion*, the *Psychology of Religion*, the *Phenomenology of Religion*, etc. Unfortunately, these methodologies, with their cold, clinical, morphological analyses have often rid religion of its sense of spirituality and holiness which, in the ultimate, is surely inseparable from the very essence of religion itself. Hence, such

---

<sup>11</sup> Of paramount importance to the field of Islamic Religionswissenschaft is his book, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995). This book establishes the fact that in Islam there is no such notion that *all* religions ultimately reach out to *Al-Haqq* or the Truth, the so-called theory of "transcendent unity of religions." Also in this book, he defines the term "religion" and "revealed religion," emphasizing thereby that Islam is the only religion in its true sense and likewise the only revealed religion. See in particular Chapter 1, pp. 1-14.

Also as profound is his *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978) where he analyses the western concept of secularism and highlights its dangers to the *Ummah*. Another of his major contribution is *The Concept of Education in Islam. a Framework for an Islamic Philosophy Of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1980; 2nd. imp. by ISTAC, 1991) which has led to the establishment of universities and institutions with new curricula all over the Muslim world.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore al-Attas's clarification as found in his *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* as referred to in Footnote 11 above becomes especially helpful to Muslim scholars of Religionswissenschaft.

<sup>13</sup> This is because the religions keep changing with the times. To aggravate the matter, many Muslims too have become ignorant of their religion and have confused their understanding of their religion with the religions of others.

methodologies please neither the adherents of the religions concerned nor the religious scholars of Religionswissenschaft, whatever religion these scholars may belong to.<sup>14</sup>

Realising the urgent need for a contemporary Islamic methodology of Religionswissenschaft, this thesis therefore attempts to look into the foundations and the development of this discipline in Muslim scholarship in the hope that it can assist in the formulation of a methodology for contemporary needs. In this effort, this thesis pays serious attention, and award laudable tributes, to that Muslim scholar *par excellence*, **Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī**, whose scholarship and contribution to this field is truly of great significance, particularly in the field of methodology, surpassing any other Muslim scholars in this discipline.<sup>15</sup>

What makes al-Bīrūnī shine above all other Muslim scholars of Religionswissenschaft is the fact that he provides necessary methods and precise guidelines for future scholars who wish to embark on similar studies. Certainly, his works show every indication that he is developing a methodology for the scientific study of religions and indeed, a well-defined methodology is

---

<sup>14</sup> See among others, Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion, a History* (La Salle, Illinois second ed. 1986, first ed. 1975), in particular Chapters 6, 7 and 13; Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion*, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958) ed. by Joseph M. Kitagawa; Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (eds.), *The History of Religions. Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959) and Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd, 1978), particularly Chapter 4.

One of the principles of these methodologies is that the scholar of Religionswissenschaft should be neutral (almost atheistic) in religion and religious matters for only then, so they claimed, can he be objective in his studies. Another principle is that these studies should encourage the scholar to reassess his own religious convictions, which surely is most unbecoming to any scholar who is committed to his religion, Muslim or otherwise.

<sup>15</sup> The academic world is well informed of his scholarship in the physical sciences, particularly in astronomy and mathematics, and many studies have been made on them. In the field of Religionswissenschaft, however, only a few studies of his work have been done as yet.

See Chapter 2 for further elaboration.

especially essential in his case, as his study is based on primary sources and direct, personal observations.<sup>16</sup> Over and above all, however, is the fact that al-Bīrūnī is able to be objective, sympathetic and even contributory to those religious communities that he studies<sup>17</sup> and yet, like all other true Muslim scholars, there is never a shade of compromise on, nor, dilution of, his firm Islamic conviction.<sup>18</sup> Because of this contemporary Muslim scholars can comfortably take him as a role model in their studies of religions other than Islam.

Therefore, this thesis aims to provide extensive expositions of al-Bīrūnī's contributions in Religionswissenschaft in the hope that such expositions can assist Muslim scholars in their studies and researches related to this field. This thesis will start with a brief exposition of the foundational background of this discipline in Islamic intellectual history, as well as a general view of the early Muslim contributions in this field. For the purposes of this thesis, "early period" is meant that period which began with the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah, Rasūlullāh (s.a.w) (571-632 C.E.), stretching to the end of the seventeenth century C.E., inclusive therefore of Nūriddīn al-Rānīrī (d.1068 H./ 1658 C.E.) of the Malay world, who also contributed to Religionswissenschaft.<sup>19</sup> This will be followed by a chapter on al-Bīrūnī's life, scholarship and the socio-political environment in which he worked. The rest of the thesis will be given to analytical studies of al-Bīrūnī's works in this discipline, including his methodology and his

---

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 3 for elaborations.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapters 2, 3, and 4 for details.

<sup>18</sup> The details can be found in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>19</sup> His book on this subject is *Tibyān fī Ma'rīfat al-Adyān*, written both in the Malay language and Arabic. In the Malay language, it is written in the Arabic script, called the *Jawi* script.

accounts and discourses on the various religions and religious communities that he studied. This thesis will conclude with a brief commentary on how al-Bīrūnī's scholarship can contribute to contemporary Religionswissenschaft.



## (2) FOUNDATIONS

In Muslim scholarship, inspiration and seminal notions for the study of religions and civilizations<sup>20</sup> have their roots in the Holy Qur'an, the *Sunnah* (practices), and *Ahādīth* (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). Guided by such authentic and strong foundations as these, Muslim scholars, past and present, therefore felt comfortable in exploring thoughts, sciences, cultures, and even religious beliefs and teachings of communities other than their own.

In the early age of Islam, such knowledge as had been gathered from these studies was very significant and useful indeed, for not only did it help elevate the Islamic civilization to a level which very few other civilizations have ever reached, but also helped people and communities get acquainted with each other. Consequently, out of this endeavour a more cosmopolitan and universal outlook evolved among the nations.<sup>21</sup> Also, Islamic civilization, in appreciating and treasuring such studies and scholarship, preserved well for posterity the valuable knowledge and sciences of these non-Muslim communities.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in their studies of these sciences and cultures, the Muslim scholars were able to develop them into more sophisticated forms, adding more depth and dimensions to them.<sup>23</sup> Hence, in its turn, Islamic

---

<sup>20</sup> The Qur'an uses the term *dīn* for "religion," whereas *Ummah* and *millah* signify civilizations and nations. For a detailed analysis of the terms, see G. H. Asi, "Muslim Understanding Of Other Religions, An Analytical Study of Ibn Hazm's *Kitāb al-Faṣl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal*." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1982), Chap. I, pp. 1-31.

<sup>21</sup> For proofs of this, see for example Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), Vol. I, p. 71; and Sumiti K. Chatterji, "al-Bīrūnī and Sanskrit," *al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume* (Calcutta: Iran Society) pp. 83-100.

<sup>22</sup> See Sachau's Preface of *Al-Bīrūnī's Chronology of Ancient Nations or Vestiges of the Past*, henceforth to be referred to only as *The Chronology*. (Lahore: Hijra International Publishers, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Hodgson, *The Ventures of Islam*, Vol. 2 and Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1973).

civilization was therefore able to be of service to these communities. At a more confined level, the knowledge of foreign thoughts and religions served the Muslims well in their *da'wah* (missionary) activities, both in the propagation of the religion as well as in defence of it against onslaughts of foreign thought and belief.<sup>24</sup>

### (2.1) The Holy Qur'ān

That the holy Qur'ān, as a sacred scripture, is unique in providing substantial references and information concerning religions and religious beliefs outside its own fold<sup>25</sup> is well illustrated

---

<sup>24</sup> This is especially obvious in the "*al-radd*" (refutation) literature where Muslim scholars go into lengthy polemics in defence of Islam and refutation of truth-claims of the other religions.

See, among others, Ibn Hazm's *Al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal*, ed. Nasr, Muhammad I. and Abdul Rahman 'Umyarah (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1405H/1985C.E), Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's *Radd 'ala al-Nasārā* as found in David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in 'Early Islam. Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'*" (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), *The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch* as found in A. Mingana, "Christian Documents in Syriac, Arabic and Garshuni: The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch Before the Caliph Mahdi," *The John Rylands Library*, 1928, Vol. 12, pp. 137-226, the debates of Ahmad ibn al-Tayyib al-Sarakhsi as found in Matti Moosa, "A New Source on Ahmad Ibn Al-Tayyib Al-Sarakhsi," *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 1972, Vol. 92.1, pp. 119-24, and also the dialogue between Hishām bin al-Hakam and Barīha (a Christian patriarch who later became a Muslim), as portrayed by ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī in his *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, trans. David Thomas, "Two Muslim-Christian Debates from the Early Shi'ite Tradition," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. XXXIII: 53-80, 1988

See next Section of this Chapter for further elaboration.

<sup>25</sup> In the Bible, for example, both the Old and New Testaments bear witness only to their own communities, mainly the Jews and the early Christians. This is because they are based on the guidance of prophets sent to their own people only. This is further proof that these teachings are not *universal nor revealed*.

Likewise, the holy texts of the Hindus - the *Veda*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Patañjali* etc. - only talks about the Hindu faith and ethics. So also are the *Sūtras* of the Buddhists and the *Zend Avesta* of the Zoroastrians. These scriptures take no interest whatsoever in matters outside their own faith and community.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* of the Sikhs, though incorporating some writings of Muslim and Hindu poets as well as some other wise sayings from other communities, does not, however, indicate relationships to other communities. These writings are taken as universal and therefore are incorporated into their faith. In this case, as pointed out by al-Attas, the universals are particularised, and are even "ethnized" to be fitted into the Sikh doctrines and worldview.

by the orientalist H. U. Weitbrecht Stanton when he declares that "No scripture in the world teaches such a 'comparative religion' as the Qur'ān."<sup>26</sup>

Bearing in mind the socio-religious situation of the Meccan pagans during the time of the Prophet, surely these references and information were essential for him, and indeed they proved to be most useful in helping him face and confront the challenges of the heathenish and idolatrous crowds. It comes as no surprise therefore that it is these very pagans that the Qur'ān censures most. Other religious communities that are specifically addressed by the Qur'ān include the *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book),<sup>27</sup> referring to those communities which had received some forms of revelations in the past, such as the Jews, the Christians, and in a couple of instances, the Sabians too.<sup>28</sup>

The themes that the verses in the Holy Qur'ān encompass with regard to beliefs, religions and their communities, other than Islam and the Muslims, may be generally and summarily categorised into:

- (1) Scripture and holy text (*kitāb* and *ṣuḥuf*)
- (2) Faith and belief (*'aqā'idah* and *imān*)
- (3) Ritual and law (*'ibādah* and *sharī'ah*)
- (4) Missionary and social intercourse (*da'wah* and *mu'āmalah*)
- (5) Historical events and narratives (*mubū'ah* and *qasas*).

---

<sup>26</sup> H. U. Weitbrecht Stanton, *The Teaching of the Qur'ān* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969), p. 71. (Original publication, 1919).

<sup>27</sup> The Qur'ān, 2:105,109; 3:64-65; 5:15,59,65,68,77; etc.

<sup>28</sup> The Qur'ān, 2:62, 5:69, 22:17, etc.

Foremost, the Qur'ān clarifies that prophets had been sent to mankind throughout the ages and for all the nations,<sup>29</sup> and that all these prophets called their own people to the one religion of Allah.<sup>30</sup> Of these prophets, some had received scriptures (*kitāb* and *ṣuḥuf*) from Allah s.w.t., i.e. the prophets Abraham,<sup>31</sup> Moses,<sup>32</sup> David,<sup>33</sup> and Jesus (a.s.),<sup>34</sup> but the authenticity of these scriptures was not maintained by their respective congregations, so much so that they are no longer reliable.<sup>35</sup> With this declaration therefore, the Qur'ān nullifies the validity and authority of the extant texts of these scriptures and calls upon their adherents to accept Islam as their religion, the Qur'ān as their scripture, and Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.), as their Prophet, leader and guide.<sup>36</sup>

Along this line, therefore, early Muslim scholars had challenged the Jews and the Christians, through discourses and writings, on the authenticity of their scriptures, particularly the Old and the New Testaments (the Bible). The favourite topic was the discrepancies and contradictions that were found in these texts, particularly those pertaining to historical data, and on this the Gospels suffered most. Biblical versions of events, notions and concepts were

---

<sup>29</sup> The Qur'ān, 10:47, 16:36, etc.

<sup>30</sup> The Qur'ān, 5:59-93, 23:52-54, 6:48, etc.

<sup>31</sup> The Qur'ān, 53:37-38, 87:19; etc.

<sup>32</sup> The Qur'ān, 53:37, 87:19, etc.

<sup>33</sup> The Qur'ān, 17:55, etc.

<sup>34</sup> The Qur'ān, 3:48, 5:110, etc.

<sup>35</sup> The Qur'ān, 5:15, 2:140, etc.

<sup>36</sup> The Qur'ān, 2:106, 61:9, etc.

compared to the Qur'ānic versions and all those that contradicted the Qur'ān were contended.<sup>37</sup> Other than textual comparisons, methods and principles of logic and philosophy were also used as tools in the polemics that issued from these inter-religious debates and studies.<sup>38</sup>

When these scriptures, which formed the very foundation of the religions, were found to be erroneous, it naturally followed that all concepts, doctrines and dogma of these religions became suspect too. Hence, again, taking the lead from the Qur'ān, the early Muslim scholars found fault with many Jewish and Christian concepts and doctrines.<sup>39</sup> With the Jews, these scholars particularly questioned concepts such as prophecy and prophethood, the Chosen People, the Promised Land, ethics and morality, etc. With regard to the Christians, these Muslims strongly refuted their theology and doctrines, especially the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the concept of the Original or Inherited Sin, their creeds, etc.<sup>40</sup>

If belief and faith (*imān*) were founded on dubious bases, it followed therefore that all forms of worship and rituals associated with them would consequently become futile and meaningless, and indeed, the Qur'ān mentions some of these.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, these Muslim scholars challenged the soundness of their rituals and other forms of religious activities, such as baptism,

---

<sup>37</sup> For example, Ibn Ḥazm in *Al-Faṣl fī al-Mīl wa al-Aḥwā' wa al-Nihāl*.

Also al-Bīrūnī in *Kitāb al-Āḥār al-Bāqiyah 'an Qur'ān al-Khāliyah* (edited by C.E. Sachau, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1923); henceforth referred to as *Kitāb al-Āḥār*.

<sup>38</sup> *Kitāb al-Āḥār*, also found in the dialogue between Hisham bin al-Hakam and Barīha (a Christian patriarch who later became a Muslim) portrayed by Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī in his *Kitāb al-Tawhīd* as translated by David Thomas in his article "Two Muslim-Christian Debates From the Early Shi'ite Tradition," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. XXXIII: 53-80, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Ibn Ḥazm, Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq, al-Sarakhsī, etc. For details, see Section 3 of this Chapter.

<sup>40</sup> See this Chapter, Section 3 for details.

<sup>41</sup> The Qur'ān, 2:138-139, 8:35, etc.

celibacy, monastic living, etc. These scholars also questioned the authority of the Jewish rabbi and the Christian clergy in the formulation of their theology, doctrines and laws,<sup>42</sup> as well as the philosophy and the practicality of some of these.<sup>43</sup>

Although a few of these scholars were rather brusque in their arguments and presentations<sup>44</sup> most, however, were quite diplomatic in tone, <sup>45</sup> in line with the Qur'anic ethics on *da'wah* (missionary) activities which urge that people be invited to the religion of Islam with *hikmah* (wisdom)<sup>46</sup> and that the gods of other people should not be ridiculed and insulted.<sup>47</sup> The Qur'an, though denouncing the religions of the Jews and the Christians and threatening them with the Hell fire, nonetheless gives these two religious communities special preference over the pagans and idolaters.

On the social level, Muslims had always worked and lived with non-Muslims, never segregating themselves, and such rapport (*mu'āmalah*) also found its roots in the Qur'an and the practices of the Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.). These Qur'anic injunctions and the Prophet's examples were also adhered to in later history as Islam expanded into non-Arab territories, and

---

<sup>42</sup> For example, Ibn Hazm, *Kitāb al-Faṣl*.

<sup>43</sup> As in the works of Ibn Hazm, *Kitāb al-Faṣl*.

Also seen in the works of al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb al-Hind* or its full title, *Fī Tahqīq Mā li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fi al-'Aqal aw Mardhūlah* (Andhra Pradesh: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau, 1958), translated by Edward C. Sachau as *Alberunī's India*, reprinted edition (New Delhi: Mehra Offset Press, 1983), 2 vols. First published, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ltd, 1910).

<sup>44</sup> For example, Ibn Hazm, *Kitāb al-Faṣl*.

<sup>45</sup> For example al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb al-Hind*, and *Kitāb al-Āthar*.

<sup>46</sup> For example, the Qur'an, 16:125, 20:44; 23:96, etc.

<sup>47</sup> For example, the Qur'an, 6:108.

in fact they became the models for inter-religious, inter-racial and international alliances up to modern times.<sup>48</sup>

The Qur'ān also carries abundant references to historical events (*mubū'ah* and *qasas*) i.e., events which bear religious significance and influence religious conceptions. From the perspectives of Religionswissenschaft, such stories as those of Prophet Adam (a.s.) and Eve, for example, can be seen, among others, to counter the Christian claims of "Original Sin."<sup>49</sup> Also, Prophet Isā's (Jesus) birth, life and death are seen so as to precisely refute the divinity attributed to him by the Christians.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the stories of the Prophet Moses (a.s.) and the other Jewish prophets which are retold by the Qur'ān may be inferred so as to correct misrepresentations and misconceptions, as well as to remind the Jews of their past faults with a warning against future repetitions.<sup>51</sup> Over and above all, these historical narratives in the Qur'ān can be seen as linking up the checkered history of human beings that had its beginning with the Prophet Adam (a.s.), and culminated in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.),<sup>52</sup> thereby underscoring the fact that all human beings come from Allah (s w t), and is of one origin, *salsāl* (a form of clay) or *turāb* (earth/dust), and together with this follow all other implications that relate to right and proper reverence and obligations to Allah Almighty, as well as the appropriate attitude, conduct,

---

<sup>48</sup> For example, these injunctions find echo in the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations.

<sup>49</sup> The Qur'ān, 2:30-39, etc.

<sup>50</sup> The Qur'ān, 3:42-63, 5:75, 9:30, etc.

<sup>51</sup> The Qur'ān, 7:103-171, etc.

<sup>52</sup> The Qur'ān, 33:40, 61:9, etc.

and responsibilities vis-a-vis fellow beings and all other creations of Allah s.w.t.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, the Qur'ān, although firmly refuting truth-claims by these religions, nonetheless seriously acknowledges the realities of their existence and the existence of their religious communities.<sup>54</sup> The fact that so serious an attention is given by the Qur'ān to these religions and communities seem to indicate that Islam and the Muslims will have to live, and reckon with them, as part of the human society,<sup>55</sup> such being, as it were, part of the Divine Design of the Almighty,<sup>56</sup> a Design which acknowledges only *conscious and wholehearted submission* as the *raison d'être* of religion.<sup>57</sup> Such being the situation, the Almighty therefore institutes *da'wah* (missionary) responsibilities upon the *Ummah*,<sup>58</sup> and even insists upon *jihād* (holy wars) wherever appropriate.<sup>59</sup> The Qur'ān, therefore, besides being the cardinal guide for Islamic Religionswissenschaft, is also the first in Islam ever to acknowledge and incorporate inter-religious issues, and thus becomes the main foundation for the discipline of Religionswissenschaft in Islam.

---

<sup>53</sup> The Qur'ān 15:26, 18:37, 22:5, etc.

See al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Chapter III, for elaboration.

<sup>54</sup> The Qur'ān, 5:48.

<sup>55</sup> The Qur'ān, 3: 19-20, 8:72-73, 9:29, 60:1, 7-9, etc.

<sup>56</sup> The Qur'ān, 10:99, 3:86, etc.

<sup>57</sup> The Qur'ān, 39:21-22, etc.

See also al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Chapter III.

<sup>58</sup> See Footnote 46 of this Chapter.

<sup>59</sup> The Qur'ān, 2: 190-193, 4:74-76, 9:29, etc.