Book Reviews


The modern discipline of Comparative Religion, since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, has faced many intellectual challenges. It has had to countenance such problems as coming up with an acceptable definition and theory of religion as well as to devise a deft methodology to study world religions. As a result, there have emerged various methodologies which are generally regarded as scientific and objective. Unfortunately, however, none of these could escape being subjected to criticism from one angle or another.

The book under review aims at establishing a sound methodology for an unbiased study of world religions. It attempts to do so by highlighting classical Muslim scholarship in the field of *religionswissenschaft*. The author of the book, Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, however, is not the first Muslim scholar to take such an initiative. Eminent Muslim scholars such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (d. 1986) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have already treated the question of methodology in Comparative Religion from an Islamic perspective. The difference perhaps is that the earlier scholars did not attempt to bring up any major Muslim scholar to illustrate the Muslim tradition of scholarship in this field. Kamar, however, selects a key figure in classical Islamic scholarship to illustrate a meticulous, scientific and unbiased methodology for the study of world religions, a methodology that ensures fairness to the “other” without compromising one’s religious affiliation.

The scholar Kamar chose for this purpose Abū Rayḥān Al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1047) who requires no introduction. He has been hailed as the father of *religionswissenschaft* and the founder of Comparative Study of Human
Culture by western and non-western academics alike. Several full-scale works have been devoted to highlight the scholastic genius of this unique pioneer in the field of what Kamar chooses to designate as *Religionswissenschaft*.

Originally a doctorial thesis, the book is distributed into four chapters which are followed by a conclusion, a glossary, a bibliography and an index. In the first chapter Kamar gives a brief introduction to the treatment of other religions in the Qur’an and the *Hadith*, thus establishing the roots of *religionswissenschaft* within the Islamic paradigm. The subject, however, has not been dealt with extensively. This is followed by a rapid review of early Muslim scholastic works in the field of *religionswissenschaft* and of the external factors that led the early Muslim scholars to study different religions and philosophies in and around their political domain. This subject, again, has not been treated exhaustively.

Chapter two makes a detailed presentation of al-Biruni’s place of origin, the socio-political milieu in which he thrived and produced his *Kitab al-Hind* as well as an overview of his contributions to the study of world religions. *Al-Athar-al-Baqiyah* and al-Biruni’s *magnum opus, Kitab al-Hind*, are the two major works which contribute, in one respect or another, to the science of religion.

*Kitab al-Hind* constitutes a phenomenological study of Hinduism as practiced during al-Biruni’s days. In order to better acquaint his Muslim readers with Hindu civilization, al-Biruni presents his findings in comparison with Greek civilization. “If you compare these traditions with those of the Greeks regarding their own religion, you will cease to find the Hindu system strange,” says al-Biruni (p. 105). On the other hand, *al-Athar al-Baqiyah* focuses on religious calendars and religious festivals of different nations, thus augmenting the relevant information on the subject. Kamar’s discussion of al-Biruni’s discourse on religions is based on a comparative study of these two works, which is a novel feature of this book on al-Biruni. Kamar applauds *Kitab al-Hind* for its mature methodology and for its original, substantial and detailed information on Hinduism (p. 72).

Chapter three is an attempt to draw out al-Biruni’s methodology in *religionswissenschaft*. The author shows that although al-Biruni did not employ a specific term or title for his methodology, he explains at great length the approaches and criteria selected for the study of an alien religion. This, indeed, for al Biruni “starts with the scholar himself, that is, he explains, what qualities the scholar ought to have, what preparation he has to make, and what

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precautions he ought to take in carrying out his studies,...” says Kamar (p. 75). In this regard she describes al-Bīrūnī’s methodology of comparison, criticism, and format of presentation at great length.

The last chapter illustrates al-Bīrūnī’s scientific methodologies applied by him to study different religions. Kamar has classified al-Bīrūnī’s discussion of religions and cults under two categories: major religions/communities and minor religions/communities. In the first category, she discusses Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism, while the second category is devoted to al-Bīrūnī’s treatment of ancient Persian religions — that is, the religions followed by Khawarizmians, Soghdians, Magians, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Samaritans, Sabians — and the ancient Greek religion.

The book is of special interest and value to students of Comparative Religion. Kamar’s discussion of al-Bīrūnī’s record of major and minor communities provides interesting information on institutions and customs of these ancient communities which are extinct today. Such information is not found in the modern studies made on these religions. Examples can be provided by referring to the information recorded by al-Bīrūnī about Hindu funerals. Al-Bīrūnī reports that in the past Hindus had tower graves like Zoroastrians’ (p. 154). He also shows how the ritual of burning the dead emerged in Hinduism. Al-Bīrūnī’s account of Eastern Christian churches is also invaluable and so is his account of Jewish fasting in commendation of Prophet Moses’ breaking of the tablets, the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebucadnezzar and the wilful rebellion against God (p. 176).

Another but less known fact about al-Bīrūnī is his treatment of the ancient Greek religion. Perhaps he is among the very few Muslim scholars on Comparative Religion who made that a subject of concentrated study. Kamar makes a special reference to al-Bīrūnī’s discourse on Greek theology and eschatology. The account of the concepts of transmigration of souls, retribution, death rituals, burning of dead bodies and even the concept of suicide among the ancient Greeks, quoted by Kamar in this work, is very interesting (pp. 200–206).

In its scope and coverage the book reminds one of a similar work about another Muslim comparative religionist by Ghulam Haider Aasi.2 One of the salient features of Kamar’s work is the great reliance it places on Dr Edward Sachau’s translation of Kitāb al-Hind titled Alberuni’s India. However, the author takes issue with Sachau’s claims about al-Bīrūnī and other Muslim

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scholars at various places in the book (e.g. pp. 42, 71). At times the author is critical of al-Biruni himself for confusing some terminologies (e.g. pp. 137, 150). This criticism, however, is not harsh. (Strangely, however, despite its frequent utilization, Alberuni’s India by Sachau remains unmentioned in the bibliography).

The book at times becomes repetitious especially where Kamar discusses al-Biruni’s methodology of religionswissenschaft. Had the author abstained from discussing Biruni’s methodology at the end of chapter two and taken it over to chapter three which seeks to explore and elucidate his methodology of religionswissenschaft, the academic value of this important work would have been enhanced. Moreover, after describing the attitude towards other religions in the Qur’an and the Hadith and early Muslim scholars’ contributions to this field of study, the author directly jumps to al-Biruni’s life and methodology of religionswissenschaft. In my opinion, a brief reference to the early Muslim studies of Indian religions would have been helpful in highlighting al-Biruni’s scholarship and its distinctiveness on the subject.

One may also make an observation on Kamar’s historical categorization of early period of Islamic scholarship. She has defined “early period” as that which begins with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) and stretches to the end of the first/seventh century (p. 5). This categorization, adopted by Kamar, would obviously exclude both Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1068/1658) and Abū Rayhān al-Biruni for they do not belong to this period. This represents Kamar’s failure to carefully define her categories and rigorously follow them through in the book.

It might be pertinent here to express a personal observation on a statement made by Kamar about al-Biruni: “what makes al-Biruni shine above all other Muslim scholars of religionswissenschaft is the fact that he provides necessary methods and precise guidelines ...” This statement, declaring al-Biruni as “the father of religionswissenschaft” without comparing his methodology with that of his contemporaries or predecessors amounts to a lack of proper appreciation of the contributions of al-Biruni as well as of other Muslim scholars to the field. Special reference should be made here to Abū ’l-Ḥasan al-ʿAmīrī (d. 381/992), a predecessor of al-Biruni in religionswissenschaft, to his Kitāb al-I’lām bi Manāqib al-Islām and to the methodology of comparison and criticism employed by him. Surprisingly, Kamar has not benefited from an important contemporary title that includes useful discussion on al-Biruni, Muslim Perception of Other Religions: A Historical Survey.3

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Furthermore, Kamar has not expressed her views about the substantial comments and criticisms made by different scholars such as Alessandro Bausani on al-Bīrūnī’s approach to study Hinduism⁴.

The footnotes in the first two chapters are pertinent and informative, but they decline, though not radically, as the author proceeds to the last chapters. Certainly more useful footnotes such as no. 56 on page 130 and no. 81 on p. 138 would have been of assistance to the reader. The author also does very little to introduce and identify various personalities, concepts, terminologies and religious communities mentioned in the book (see e.g. pp. 84, 85, 98, 99, 100, 107, 108, 109, 117, 119, 133, 171, 175, 187, 189, 205–208). In a few cases we do find later descriptions of such concepts and personalities in the footnotes, but these should preferably have been mentioned where the term or the concept first appears in the book. There are also some typographical mistakes in the text and the index is not inclusive of all important and major occurrences in the book. Footnotes on p. 217 are dislocated. The index too is quite inadequate.

Notwithstanding a few shortcomings mentioned above, the book is a valuable contribution to the field of Muslim understanding and approach to other religions. It does full justice to bringing out the norms set by al-Bīrūnī to study other religions and civilizations. Kamar not only acquaints the reader with al-Bīrūnī’s methodology in religionswissenschaft but also provides copious information about different religious communities of the past as recorded by him. I am sure that the book will sufficiently whet up many readers’ appetite to go through al-Bīrūnī’s original works, Kitāb al-Hind and Kitāb al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah in quest of more knowledge.

The language is simple and lucid which makes the book a useful source for its readers, especially the non-English speaking students of Comparative Religion. Kamar is indeed to be heartily commended for this valuable contribution on an important aspect of Muslim legacy — Muslim contribution to the methodology of Comparative Religion.

Sadia Mahmood

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