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**THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE
STUDY OF RELIGION: A CASE STUDY
OF AL-ĀMIRĪ AND AL-BĪRŪNĪ
AND SOME SELECTED MODERN
WESTERN APPROACHES**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Allah Says in His last Revealed Book:

“Surely those who believe (in the Quran) and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians and the Magians and the Polytheists, Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgement, for Allah is witness of all things”.

Surah al-Hajj:18

“We have surely revealed unto you (O Muhammad) (Our Message) as We revealed it unto Noah and the ~~Prophets~~ after him. And We revealed (it) unto Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, (so also) to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some Messengers We have already told you the story; of others We have not; and to Moses Allah spoke direct”.

Surah al-Nisa:163-164

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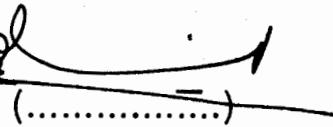


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The Viva-voce of this thesis took place on 21st day of Sha'ban of 1420 A.H
which is the same as 29th day of Noy. of 1999.

DEDICATION

This humble work is dedicated to:

My noble and loving parents as a token of love;

My family as an appreciation of support;

My ^{teachers} colleagues and students in the Department of Aqidah and Comparative Religion as an encouragement towards advancing this discipline further.

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It is with deep sense of gratitude to Allah my Creator and Fashioner that I admit of His uncountable favours on me, especially of guidance to Islam, and of the pursuit of knowledge of that wonderful religion. We ever remain thankful for all His bounties and for the success He grants us in all our life endeavours.

At the human level, I have to acknowledge with appreciation the opportunity given to me by the International Islamic University, Islamabad – Pakistan and the Faculty of Usuludin to study both M.A and Ph.D programmes in that unique institution of learning. My gratitude also goes to all the teachers of the Faculty of Usuludin past and present, its Dean and especially my first supervisor in this work Dr. Mohammad Abdullah al-Sharqawi, whose efforts and advices I can never forget.

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There are indeed many others who helped in one way or the other to make this work a success. To all I express my thanks.

In the end, I will have to also admit the help and understanding of my family throughout the years of this work, that served as a support that I needed most for the successful completion of this humble work.

I.M. Malshanu.

ملخص البحث

إن الحمد لله تعالى وحده، والصلوة والسلام على من لا نبي بعده سيدنا محمد وعلى أهله وصحبه أجمعين.

عنوان البحث:

"منهج المقارنة بين العامري والبيروني وبين بعض علماء الغرب
(في دراسة الأديان)"

إن تصور هذا البحث جاء نتيجة للإحساس بحاجة ماسة إلى معرفة جهود علماء المسلمين في حقل دراسة الأديان، والمناهج التي استخدموها في تلك الدراسة، حتى تقارن بما يوجد في ساحة علم الأديان في الغرب اليوم. اخترنا علَّمَين من أعلام علم الملل والنحل أو علم الأديان عند المسلمين وهما: ابوالحسن محمد بن يوسف العامري (ت. ٥٣٨هـ) وأبوالريحان محمد بن أحمد البيروني (ت. ٤٤٠هـ). وقد ركز البحث على محاولة الكشف عن ما قاله هذان العالمان في مفهوم دراسة الأديان، وفي المنهج أو المناهج التي تدرس الأديان بها ونظرياتهم في غريزة الدين لدى البشر. وخصصنا لدراسة كل واحد منها فصلاً واحداً.

وفي التمهيد لخضنا ما يتعلّق بنشأة علم الأديان وما توصل إليه اليوم في الغرب حيث يهتم به أكثر ويُطّور في هذا العصر، مع إشارة خفيفة عن تجاهل أو ترکها ذكر جهود المسلمين في مثل هذه الدراسة. وقد أشرنا فيه أيضاً إلى المناهج التي تستخدم عند الغربيين، وقد أخذت من فروع المعرفة الأخرى، وأيضاً الإنتقادات التي وجهت إلى هذه المناهج.

وفي نهاية التمهيد ألمحنا إلى منهج المقارنة كمنهج سمي به هذا الحقل في وقت تأسيسه ، الأمر الذي يشير إلى أهميته في هذا التخصص.

وفي الفصل الذي بعد التمهيد درسنا جهود العاشرى في مقارنة الأديان ومفهومه ونظرياته وتطبيقه لمنهج المقارنة. وقد استخدم العاشرى العقل كمعيار للحكم على صحة أو بطلان الأديان وقد أثبت خلال دراسته للأديان الأخرى أن الإسلام أفضل الأديان جميما وإنه لحرى بأن يكون خاتماً ونا سخاً لكل الأديان. وكان العاشرى أصلاً فيلسوفاً. وأما في الفصل الذي بعده ^{فقدم} ركزنا على مجهودات العالم الموسوعي - البيرونى في دراسة الأديان المختلفة وبالأخص أديان الهند. وتتبعنا كتاباته العلمية في علم النجوم والرياضيات وغيرها بحثاً عن أية إشارة إلى الأديان ومنهج دراستها. ودرسنا مفهومه لهذه الدراسة ونظرياته وتطبيقه لمبدأ 'الموضوعية العلمية' الذي أخذه كمنهج في دراسة أديان الآخرين ولم يحاول البيرونى الرد على الأديان اذا وجد فيها ما يخالف الحقيقة لأنه قصد تقديم معلومات صحيحة ودقيقة عن الهند ~~وغيرها~~ لكن يعاملهم من يريد على أساس ما يعتقدونه وما يطبقونه من شعائر دينهم كما هي عندهم. ومع هذا نرى أن البيرونى أيضا في بعض الأحيان لجأ إلى العقل والطبيعة وحكم على بعض المعتقدات وبعض الممارسات الدينية بالبطلان، مثل الوثنية وبعض أنواع الزواج عند الهندوس.

وفي الجانب الغربي اخترنا من يُعتبرون عالميّين في حقل دراسة الأديان اليوم. وهو 'يوافقيم واخ' Joachim Wach (1898-1955م) 'ومرسيا الياد' Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) وهو معاصران لنا. يعتبر 'واخ' مؤسساً لعلم الأديان في جامعة شيكاغو (Chicago) التي تعتبر اليوم أهم مركز لدراسة الأديان في الغرب. و 'الياد' يعتبر من أكثر الناس تأليفاً في هذا التخصص وقد اختير ليشرف على أحد ث وأكبر موسوعة للأديان في العصر الحديث. وقد حاولنا استخراج عناصر منهج المقارنة عندهما ومفهومها لهذا المنهج وتطبيقاتها للمقارنة في دراساتهما. وفي نفس الفصل قبل دراسة

هذين العالمين، درسنا مفهوم منهج المقارنة في علم مقارنة الأديان في الغرب عموماً والتطورات التي تمت في ما يتعلق باستخاله كوسيلة لإثبات نظرية التطور في الأديان وغير ذلك.

وفي الفصل الأخير قارننا بين مبادئ المسلمين ومبادئ الغربيين في استخدام منهج المقارنة في دراسة الأديان، وقد دار الحديث حول أربع قضايا وهي: استخدامهم واعتمادهم على المصادر الأصلية، وال موضوعية، والحكم على الأديان، ومعاير هذا الحكم، وأخيراً قضية الحق في الأديان.

وقد رأينا أن المسلمين الذين درسناهم اتفقا مع الغربيين في الاعتماد على المصادر الأصلية قدر المستطاع، وأيضاً في البحث عن الحقيقة في الأديان، وإن لم يصرح الغربيان ماهذه الحقيقة. ورأينا أيضاً أن المسلمين اتفقا علىأخذ العقل كمعيار للحكم على الأديان بينما رفض الغربيان هذا المعيار بصرامة لما يعتقدونه من وجود عناصر غير عقلية (Irrational) في الدين. وفي الأخير رأينا أن البيرونى امتنع عن الحكم بصرامة على الأديان. وهذا الموقف يعتمد علماء الأديان حالياً وخاصة في أوروبا. ونحن نرى أنه على علم الأديان أن يراجع نفسه في قضية عدم استخدام العقل كمعيار للحكم على الأديان، لأن الدين أمر أساسى في حياة الإنسان، ويتعلق بسعادة الدارين، ولهذا لابد من الحسم في هذه القضية الخطيرة.

ونسأل الله تعالى أن يتقبل منا هذا العمل المتواضع، وأن يجعله في ميزان حسناتنا يوم القيمة، إنه ول ذلك القادر عليه وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه وسلم.

عيسى محمد ميشانو

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SYNOPSIS

The breakdown of the chapters and their arrangement are as follows:

1- INTRODUCTION:

| | | |
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| ONE | - | Purpose of the Study |
| TWO | - | Method of Study and Problems faced. |

2- CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

A Review of the Important Ideas and Methods Applied in the Study of Religion including the definitions of some major terms employed in the Study

3- CHAPTER TWO

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING/AL-ĀMIRĪ:

To
Abu al-Hassan Muhammad bn Yusuf al- Āmirī (C.300-381 A.H.)

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| ONE | - | Al- Āmirī's Life and Contributions in the Study of Religion |
| TWO | - | The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion according to Al- Āmirī (Conceptions And Basic Principles) |
| THREE | - | Evaluation And Criticism of Al- Āmirī's Comparative Method in the Study of Religion. |

4- CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO AL-BĪRŪNĪ:

- Abu Reyhan Muhammad bn Ahmad al- Bīrūnī (362-440/442 A.H.)

| | | |
|------------|---|---|
| ONE | - | Al-Bīrūnī's Life And Contributions in the Study of Religion |
| TWO | - | The Comparative Method In The Study of Religion According to Al- Bīrūnī (Conception And Basic Principles) |

THREE - Evaluation And Criticism of Al- Bīrūnī's Comparative Method in the Study of Religion

5- CHAPTER FOUR

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN MODERN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP:

ONE - A Brief Outline of the Comparative Method in the Modern West.

TWO - Two Modern Western Models of the Application of the Comparative Method

1 - Joachim Wach (1898-1955)
2 - Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

THREE - Evaluation and Criticism of the Two Western Model of the Comparative Method.

6- CHAPTER FIVE

A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN THE MUSLIM AND WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE COMPARATIVE METHOD:

ONE - Treatment of Original Sources

TWO - Objectivity And Value Judgement

THREE - Criteria of Judgement

FOUR - The Problem of Truth

7- CONCLUSION

8- SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.

INTRODUCTION

All praise be ^{to} Allah, the undisputed Lord and Creator of this magnificent universe and all that exist in it. May His peace and blessings shower on His chosen and final Messenger, the best of His creations Muhammad (P.B.U.H), his family, companions and all those who follow the path of guidance to the end of time.

It is indeed a favour from Allah and a unique opportunity which He bestows on scholars to partake in the message communicated between the heavens and earth, by studying, understanding, expounding and interpreting it for the sake of those who did not have a similar opportunity. Scholars are heirs to the Prophets (P.B.U.TH.) in terms of spreading their light and guidance to everyone and to all parts of the world.

The last perfected and preserved message of Allah to mankind--al-Islam-- came to the world at the time when it needed Divine guidance most. At the time when the different religions of the world have degenerated and were formalised. At the same time they were competing with each other by means of conflicting truth-claims. The Quranic guidance expounded all the issues at stake, due to which adherents of different religious traditions differ. It called on them to accept the last perfected version of what they have received long ago, which has passed through different phases and has thus been affected by the vicissitudes of time. This unique Quranic call was not heeded to by the adherents of most religions. Their response to it was that of open hostility and controversy, and at best of indifference.

On the intellectual level, these Quranic facts were outlined and explained by scholars of Islam. The scholars of other religions, especially Judaism, Christianity and Manichaeanism on their part, wrote books in order to counteract this Islamic plea of returning to the base, and to the origin. Thus the controversy between Islam and other religions started and the ball was set rolling in what was to become later, the field of 'al-Milal wa al-Nihal' (i.e. the study of religious systems and schools of philosophy). The immense contributions made by the Muslims in this field are yet to be discovered and highlighted. Even the history of such a study has not been written-to our knowledge-

except one work which focussed on only the Islamic response to the controversy between Muslims and Christians upto the 4th / 10th century, entitled Al-Fikr al-Islami fi al-radd ala al-Nasara (1986) by Abdul Majid al-Sharafi. The methods they employed, the underlying principles and presuppositions in their study of other religions are yet to be studied academically from all their sides, except brief treatments in articles published in academic journals like the articles of Ismail R. al-Faruqi in Numen, those of Dheen Muhammad in the Hawliyah of International Islamic University, Islamabad, ^{so also Ghurab's work} and another article by Ghulam-Haider Aasi in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences. There are - as far as we know - two works that focussed particularly on Imam Ibn Hazm and his contributions to the understanding and study of religions, one by Mahmud Himayah and the other by Ghulam-Haider Aasi. Among the Westerners we have also articles written in professional journals by scholars like Allesandro Bausani, Jacques Waardenburg etc.

On the general contributions of Muslims to the study of religions, only four Western scholars made - mostly casual - mention of that. They are, H. Gibb, Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, E.J. Sharpe and M. Eliade.

For us to know the real and elaborate contributions of Muslim scholars and especially the methods they employed, we have to look forward to when it will be written, but for the establishment of the Department of Aqidah and Comparative Religion in the International Islamic University, Islamabad. It gave the Muslim students rare opportunity to focus on such works as written by their scholars in order to discover the rich mines of ideas and theories on man's religiosity on earth.

One - Purpose of the Study

It is out of that desire to know how the Muslims conceived their study of religion, and to discover the various methods employed by them that the idea of this humble work evolved. The difference in perspective and in worldview between the Islamic or rather Muslim and Western worlds is so glaringly clear, most particularly in the intellectual sphere; where their concepts of man, his role in this universe, his

authoritative encyclopedia of religious phenomena. His way of studying and comparing religions was hailed by many, with some even suggesting that it should serve as a core theory in the study of religion the world over.

Two - Method of Study

We have attempted in this humble work to study all the relevant writings of the scholars to be studied, pertaining to their application of the comparative method. We took it upon ourselves to look for relevant primary sources in all the sections of the thesis, and this to some extent took a considerable part of our time. In the first chapter I have to search for the works written on the history of this discipline and the methods employed in it. Some of the important references were found only in the Library of Quaid-Azam University, Islamabad. Many relevant articles were sought for from the libraries of Europe and America and ^agood number of them were received from United States of America through the efforts of a colleague. Scores of books and articles were consulted as the footnotes there show.

As for the second chapter on al-Āmirī, it consumed more of our time and efforts than the other chapters. We have to look for all the extant works of al-Āmirī most of which were not published, in order to see if there is any mention any where however brief, of religions. We demanded for the micro film on al-Āmirī's work Al-Fusul fi al-ma'alim al-ilahiyah (The only manuscript copy available), from Sulaimaniya Library in Istanbul which we received. The same was the case of two other works of al-Āmirī whose micro film we secured from Princeton University Library in the United States of America (being also the only copies), the works are Al-Tagrir li awjūh al-Tagdir and Inqadh al-Bashar min al-Jabr wa al-Qadr. I received from Egypt, thanks to the efforts of my respected teachers, the only exhaustive scholarly study on al-Āmirī and at the same time the edition of his philosophical treatises written by S. Khalifat, and another work of al-Āmirī Al-Sa'adah wa al-Is'ad edited by Ahmad A. Atiyyah, and other works on al-Āmirī still. An article written by Franz Rosenthal on al-Āmirī was also diligently sought for from the West as all search for it here proved abortive. I

received copies of that article from both Germany and the United States.

The study of al-Bīrūnī seems to be a bit easier as many scholars have written on his thought, and many of his scientific works have been edited and published. Two commemorative volumes were also dedicated to him, which shed much light on his life and thought. Even in these volumes his general study of religions especially in the Al-Athar al-Baqiyah were rarely mentioned.

As for the Western models we depended mostly on their masterpieces in which they expounded the different aspects of their theories on religion and its comparison, while not neglecting their other works and particularly the works or articles written on them and their thought.

We have tried throughout the work to allow the facts speak for themselves, explaining them by means of other works of the scholar or some other works written by others. As is clear, especially in the works of al-Āmirī, and to a lesser extent in those of al-Bīrūnī, their principles and theories are not clearly defined, so we have to exert all effort to bring something out, trying at the same time our very best not to put in their mouths what they did not say.

The work as a whole is an attempt at discovering, as said earlier, the contributions of these two Muslim scholars , the thing that made us look into virtually all their works on philosophy, Ilm al-Kalam, Geography, Astronomy, Mathematics, Natural science, History etc, in the hope that we get the faintest of hints as to their concept of or theories on religion. The work is not a study of philosophy or sociology, but a study in the field of the science of religion as humbly conceived by the present writer. The Western study of religion has come of age now, and no one can claim to give a thorough survey of that in a single volume. On our part we selected models which were compared with the Muslim study of religion in the last chapter, in which some similarities and differences were discovered, which we hope can help the case of the study of religious phenomena.

We are not and will not claim perfection or even of being exhaustive in this humble work. If the work has even in the least of measure, helped in discovering part

of Muslims' efforts at studying and comparing different religions of the world, our efforts could not have been in vain.

In the end, it is our hope that further researches be conducted in this fertile land of Ideas on man's religiousness, which is still untilled.

Isa M. Maishanu

October 21, 1999

CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

CHAPTER ONE - REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

A Review of the important ideas on the methods applied in the study of religion including the definitions of the major terms employed in the study.

A REVIEW OF THE IMPORTANT IDEAS ON THE METHODS APPLIED IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION:

1- Introduction:

Religion is such an important aspect of the life of man on earth, that it has been with him from the first day. Among the revealed monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is believed that religion started with the first man on earth - Adam (on whom be peace). Even modern studies of religion, despite their skeptic and secularistic approach, tell us of the existance of one form of religion or the other in every society or culture.¹ It is also seen as forming a part of human nature.

The study of religion and man's endeavour to understand its nature and mysteries is often regarded as old as man himself. Western scholarship traces the origin of several fields of study to its Greek heritage. Names like Democritus (b: 460 ? BC), Plato, Euhemerus (who flourished around 300 BC), Thales, Anaximander, Xenophanes, Chrysippus, etc. are mentioned as pioneers in this field.² Even the methods employed today are said to have been employed in the ancient Greek world.³ Living together in an environment, commercial interactions, travels, technological advancement are part of the reasons that make people study the religion of others. Our world of today is a 'global village' with people from different cultures, religions and

¹ See Wach, Joachim, The Comparative Study of Religion: (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1958), p.38, where he quoted anthropologists like, Marett, Malinowski, Bergson and Firth, all confirming this fact. cp. Bolle, K. (art) 'Myths, and other Religious Texts' in Whaling, Frank (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, (Berlin: Mouton, 1983), vol. I, Pp.315 and Waardenburg, Jacques Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), Pp.528 & 546 and also Cain, Seymour, 'Study of Religion' (art) Eliade, Mircea (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion: (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 14, P.65), see also Wilhelm Schmidt's opinion as quoted by Allen, Douglas, Structure and Creativity in Religion: (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), P.46.

² Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 14, Pp-67-69, See also Sharpe, Eric J. Comparative Religion: A History: (New York: Charles Scribner's 1975), P. 26.

³ Sharpe, E. J. Comparative Religion: A History: op. cit. P. 2-6.

orientations in constant dialogue with each other. Another evident fact of our time is the resurgence of almost all religions ("fundamentalisms") contrary to the stark materialism that was the norm some decades back⁴. All these show how relevant and important is the study of religion today.

In this review of the important ideas on the methods of the study of religion, it is important that we first address ourselves to the general definition of the science of religion or comparative religion. This will be followed by a brief survey of this field in the past and in the modern world including the circumstances at its inception in the modern West. There will also be a brief mention of the aims of this study, the problems of method and the different ways religion has been studied especially in the modern times, and in conclusion the current methodological issues being faced in the scientific study of religion today will be discussed.

2- **Definition(s) of the Study of Religion/Religionswissenschaft:**

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The discipline of the study of religion has been named differently by different scholars in view of their special interests:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Religionswissenschaft | 2. Science of religion(s) |
| 3. Comparative (study of) Religion(s) | 4. History of Religions |
| 5. Religion | 6. Religious studies |
| 7. Religiology | 8. Comparative History of Religions ⁵ |

This variety is one of the very evident facts in the study of religion. There is no consensus among its proponents on its title, method(s), even the definition of religion itself is problematic! Why are there numerous titles for this field? The controversy seems to be between the normative study that searches for the essence of religion and

⁴ Originally a Christian phenomenon, the term fundamentalism is more frequently used to be synonymous with Islamic resurgence of recent years. For studies on this phenomenon in the different religions see Marty, Martin E. and Appleby, R. Scott, (eds.) Fundamentalism Observed, (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1991) and Caplour, Lionel, (ed.), Studies in Religious Fundamentalism, (London: Macmillan, 1987).

⁵ Wiebe, Donald, Religion and Truth: (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), P.47, cp. Allen, D., Structure and Creativity in Religion: (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), P.3.

even gives value judgments - the 'Comparativists', and those who are concerned with the descriptive history of religions and their developments - the 'Historians of Religions'.⁶

The title "Comparative Religion" is most popular in Europe and elsewhere despite its having been used normatively, even though the academic students of religion agree to name the discipline, "History of Religions" and their association as the International Association for the History of Religions.⁷ Some of the scholars, in trying to solve this issue came up with the idea of the different levels for the academic study of religions. J.G. Platvoet⁸ and others saw that there are two main levels of this study:

- 1- a descriptive level of the history of religions, where single religions are studied as more or less self-contained historical entities, this is the "History of Religions";
- 2- a comparative level, where religions that have been historically investigated or more usually, certain elements of them are compared. This, according to him can be termed "Comparative Study of Religions".⁹ This opinion is a sort of a compromise on the part of the students of religion. However, both the two titles have been criticised separately. Comparison, they say tends to be odious and normative, while history suggests "a study of the past only".¹⁰

The discipline has been defined differently, in this study we will refer only to two different definitions to show the two tendencies mentioned above, in this field, in the modern scholarship which started in the seventh decade of the nineteenth century. One of the oldest definitions was given by Louis Henry Jordan in 1905:

⁶ See Kitagawa, Joseph M., (ed.) The History of Religions: Restrospect and Prospect: (New York: Macmillan, 1985), Pp. 32-33 cp. Allen, D. op. cit. P.3.

⁷ See Sharpe, E.J. Comparative Religion: A History: (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1975), P. 269 and see (6) above.

⁸ Platvoet, J.G. Comparing Religions: A Limitative Approach: (The Hague: Mouton, 1982), P. 3.

⁹ cp. Smart, Ninian, Concept and Empathy: (London: Macmillan, 1986), Pp.131-132 and 196-199, 212-213; see also Waardenburg, J., Classical Approach to the Study of Religion: op. cit. P.475 and Wach, J. Introduction to the History of Religions: (New York: Macmillan, 1988), P.xix, who called the two levels: 'historical' and 'systematic'.

¹⁰ See Parrinder, Geoffry., Comparative Religion: (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), P.11.

"Comparative Religion is that science which compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various Religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one, to another, and their relative superiority or inferiority when regarded as types." ¹¹

Exactly seventy years later, and may be due to further refinement of the field and discussions, another definition was given by Eric J. Sharpe in 1975 - in which the inclination towards non-normative historical tendencies can be discernible. He said:

"Comparative religion implies the serious and, as far as possible dispassionate study of material drawn from all the accessible religious traditions of the world....." ¹²

Elsewhere he added that it is "the historical, critical and comparative study of the religions of the world" ¹²

Sharpe also quoted another definition given by another scholar of religion, Ugo Bianchi, indicating the historical aspects and almost completely abandoning the comparative aspects! He defined it as ".... a science which, using accepted historical method and with the support of psychology, sociology and phenomenology, establishes and examines facts in order to identify historically integrated religious worlds and to study their respective character". ¹³

This is his definition of the 'History of Religions' given in 1966 and as mentioned above it became the accepted nomenclature of this field of study especially in America. In our humble opinion, the field should be called 'The science of Religion' for its using scientific methods, or the title of 'Comparative Religion' for the simple fact that comparison is almost always involved in the study or preferably it can be simply termed 'The study of Religion'. But the term 'The History of Religions' makes the study a branch of History and also suggests a concern with the past, as seen by Smart to be 'a complication of matter', because it does not suggest its independence

¹¹ Jordan, Louis Henry Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth: (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clarke, 1905), P. 63.

¹² Sharpe, E.J. Comparative Religion: A History, op. cit. Pp.xiii-xiv and P.1

¹³ Sharpe, ibid. P.282.

3- The Study of Religion in the Past:

Many scholars are of the opinion that the scientific study of religion started as a result of the Enlightenment¹⁵ and that before 1500 C.E., "the science of comparative religion was absolutely non-existent"¹⁶. However, some of the Western researchers - see the study of religion to have started as far back as the period of the ancient Greek world.¹⁷ Mention was made of Ionic philosophers like Thales, Anaximander (fl.585. BCE) and Xenophanes about their criticisms of the religions of their days. Herodotus (C.484-425 BCE) was a "much - travelled historian...who described many of the religious customs of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Persians." With the advent of the Stoics, the study of religion became, in a real sense, cosmopolitan. Euhemerus (C. 330 -C. 260 BCE) after whom 'Euhemerism'¹⁸ was coined, is famous for his idea "that the gods had been men and women of ancient times, who had distinguished themselves in various ways and had come to be worshipped as gods....."¹⁹

In the authoritative source of the science of religion - 'The Encyclopedia of Religion', Seymour Cain opined that Democritus (b. 460 ? BCE) ascribed popular gods to personifications of impressive natural phenomena and of abstractions, such as

¹⁴ See Smart, N., Concept and Empathy: op. cit. P. 213.

¹⁵ From the German 'Aufklaring' - an 18th century philosophical movement characterised by a reliance on reason and directed to freeing religion and morals from tradition and prejudice. (The New Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary).

¹⁶ Jordan, op cit. P. 16 cp. Waardenburg, J., Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit. P. 7. See also James, E.O. Comparative Religion: (London: Mutheun, P. 15).

¹⁷ See Sharpe, op. cit. Pp.2-6 and Cain, S. 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion: vol.14, P.67-69. See also Smart, N., 'Study of Religion' (art) The New Encyclopedia Britannica: (London: H. H. Benton, 1973-74), vol-15, P. 614-615. See also Eliade, M. The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion: Trask, W.R., (trans), (New York: Harvest, 1959), P. 219-223.

¹⁸ Euhemerism is a concept in the study of religion meaning that gods were men and women who because of their good works were deified by their people.

¹⁹ See Sharpe, op. cit. P. 4-6. This idea is similar to what has been ascribed to the famous companion of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), Abdullah bin Abbas in explaining verses 23-24 of Surah Nuh, as mentioned in Tafsir of Ibn Kathir. It is reported by al-Bukhari in his Sahih. See Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Vol-4, Surah Nuh verses 23-24.

wisdom,.....²⁰ Plato was seen to have held the idea that religions had been purer and truer in earliest times, and that belief in divinity was a universal phenomenon...²⁰. These were seen as the beginning of theorization in the world of religion.

Generally, Western scholars in the review of philosophical literature and in trying to write the history of any discipline during the post-Greek period, tend to skip the whole of the Medieval era, as if nothing of substance and importance had been contributed, either in the Western world or elsewhere to the study of that discipline.²¹

Even though the Medieval period was seen as a dark age, it was only Europe that happened to be in the "dark age" during that period. Conversely, this was the period when Islamic civilization was at the zenith of its contribution to the intellectual world. At that time the Western world was dependent on the world of Islam, not only intellectually but even in such things as "foods, drinks, drugs, and medicaments".²²

Some of the Western scholars confess to this fact regarding the study of religion. For instance, Smart in 'The New Encyclopedia Britannica', after mentioning the impact of Islamic 'theology' on Western Christianity, especially in maintaining the values of both reason and revelation says, "Muslim knowledge of other religions was in advance of European knowledge, notably in the work of the 'theologian' Ibn Hazm (994-1064 C.E.)"²³.

Mention must be made in this regard of scholars who contributed immensely to the study of religion from among the Muslims:

²⁰ Cain, S. 'Study of Religion', (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P. 67.

²¹ See for example Copleston, Frederick C., A History of Medieval Philosophy: (London: Methuen) pp. 1-3.

²² See Kitagawa, J.M. (ed.), The History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect: (New York: Macmillan, 1985), P.125.

²³ Smart, N. 'Study of Religion', (art) The New Encyclopedia Britannica: (London: Helen Hemingway Benton, 1973-74), vol. 15, P. 615. This shows that not only two scholars, Sharpe and A. Malefijt, mentioned Muslim contributions in this field as G.H. Aasi claimed in his article 'Muslim contributions to the History of Religions': (art) American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, vol. 8, No. 3, 1991. Others include M. Eliade in his The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religions, (New York: Harvest, 1959), Pp. 225-226.

- a. Abu Uthman, Amr bin Bahr al-Jahiz (d.225 A.H.)
- b. Abul Hassan Al-Amiri (b. before 322 A.H./934 C.E.-381 A.H./C.E.)
- c. Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (362 A.H./973 C.E.-440 A.H./1050 C.E.)
- d. Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi (d. 456 A.H./1064 C.E.)
- e. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (450 A.H. - 505 A.H.)
- f. Al-Shahristani (479 A.H. - 548 A.H.)
- g. Taqiuddin Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (661 A.H. - 728 A.H.)

Of special mention is Abu Rayhan al-Biruni who tried to implement an empirical method in the study of the Indian religions. His was the first real account of the Indian religions, and both Western and Indian scholars alike have admitted his success, impartiality and his scientific approach in the field.²⁴

As seen by Jeffery, Al-Biruni's method is scientific in that he was concerned with 'the assembling of facts about the beliefs and practices of various religious groups, arranging them, classifying them, comparing them with one another, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the significance of religions.....²⁴. Jeffery went further to describe the method as characterized by 'completeness, accuracy and unbiased treatment.'

Undoubtedly, there were many Muslim scholars who had made meaningful contributions to the study of religion apart from the few mentioned above, but their important contributions are very often neglected whenever a historical survey of the contributions made to the field is given for reasons best known to the Western writers themselves.

4- The Study of Religion in the Modern West:

On the question of the founder of the study of comparative religion as a subject a lot of opinions abound with some of the researchers attributing that honour to Muslim scholars. For instance Hitti, due to the great contributions of Ibn Hazm (994-1064 C.E.) of Andalus (Spain) especially in Biblical criticism, described him as the

²⁴ See Al-Biruni Commemorative volume: A.H. 362 - A.H. 1362. (Calcutta: Iran society, 1951), Pp.125-136.

founder of Comparative Religion. ²⁵

Another scholar in the West, among the pioneers of this field , Pierre D. Chantepie de la Saussaye mentioned that some people used to refer to Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Akbar as forerunners of this science, but to him their study of religion was not scientific. ²⁶ However, the statement of M. Eliade seems to support the attribution of that honour to Ibn-Rushd (Averroes), when he says:

"But it was especially Averroes (Ibn-Rushd, 1126-1198) who, after profoundly influencing Islamic thinking, was destined to give the first impulse to a whole intellectual trend in the West. In interpreting religion, Averroes employed the symbolical and allegorical method...". ²⁷

All these point to the fact that Muslims from the beginning showed great interest in the religions of other people and this is due to the encouragement they receive from the Qur'an itself. ²⁸

As regards the founder of this field in the West, there is a sort of consensus that Frederick Max Muller (1823-1900) was the one who strove seriously to see that the study of religion has become an independent scientific discipline. ²⁹ However, there are very few scholars who see Charles de Brosses (1709-1777) as the real founder of the study of religion. ³⁰ De Brosses, being an anthropologist who studied the religions of West Africa and elsewhere is more readily accepted as the forerunner of the anthropological school of Comparative Religion especially due to his famous theories

²⁵ Hitti, Phillip, History of the Arabs, (Macmillan, 1970), 9th edition, P.558.

²⁶ Waardenburg, J., Classical Approaches to the study of Religion: op. cit. P.106.

²⁷ Eliade, M., The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. Pp. 225-226.

²⁸ See for example Surah Al Imran:64, Surah al-Ankabut:46, and Surah al-Nisa: 157-161. These verses and others mention the other religions and call their adherents to come to terms with truth through intellectual discussions. Something unique to the Quranic message!

²⁹ See Eliade, M, The Sacred and the Profane: op. cit. Pp.229-230, Waardenburg, op. cit. Pp.3-14, Smart N. Clayton, John, Katz, Steven, and Sherry, Patrick, (eds.)The Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), vol. III P. 179 and Allen, D., Structure and Creativity in Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), P.3 etc. and also Sharpe, E. J., op. cit. P.35 etc.

³⁰ Smart, N., et. al, (eds.), Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), vol. III, P. 186.

that influenced many after him.³⁰

F. Max Muller was a philologist that had fervent call to establish comparative mythology and comparative religion according to the model of comparative linguistics.³¹ He was the first to use the term 'Religionswissen-schaft' or the science of religion' in 1867 in his "Chips from a German workshop".³²

His role has been seen as having created or 'at least epitomized an excitement or impulse toward it (the science of religion). He organised it and subjected it to a method and treated it scientifically'.³³ His efforts have been recognized by Kitagawa and Strong in the following words:

".....he created or at least epitomized an excitement, an impulse toward a new field of enquiry".³⁴

Furthermore, they stated that Max Muller was:

"Prolific, he pushed, called for, wrote on and lectured about the possibilities of the new science....".³⁴

Overall, his contributions as seen by researchers are acknowledged in the following words:

- a. his insistence on the academic and scientific character of the study of religion, impartially and openly;
- b. his not accepting the split between science and religion and his belief that there should be a science of religion which would do justice to both;
- c. his promotion of comparison between religions 'as the character of scientific research in our age is preeminently comparative,' for 'he who only knows one religion knows none';
- d. his over-emphasis on scripture which was seen as unfortunate by critics;

³¹ Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit. Pp. 13-14, cp. Sharpe, Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 38.

³² See Allen, D. op. cit. P. 3.

³³ Smart, N., et. al., (eds.), Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. vol. III, P. 204 and 206.

³⁴ Smart, et. al. (eds.) Nineteenth Century Religious Thoughts in the West: ibid. Pp. 206-207 and P. 14.

- e. his concern with history and the inception of the historical method; and
- f. his editing of the 'Sacred Books of the East' in fifty volumes.

Despite this, Max Muller/^{was} criticised of being insensitive to fine arts, ethnology and archeology, and has been accused of focusing ^{on} language only, and of stripping mythology of belief, so also his theory of language, his reduction of gods to names, etc.³⁵

Other pioneers of the field in the West include: C.P. Tiele (1830-1902) who is sometimes seen as a contender of Muller in initiating the study of comparative religion as a discipline.³⁶ Tiele is credited for his literary contribution to the field. His particular contribution was the "Outlines of the History of Religion" which he wrote in 1877. In addition, he wrote many other *works* on the subject of religion.³⁷ Another western scholar that deserve mention is Pierre D. Chantepie De La Saussaye, who defended the autonomy of the nascent discipline, and he wrote 'Manual of the Science of Religion' ".....one of the disciplines, great historical documents."³⁸ Finally, there are a number of scholars from different disciplines who made significant contributions to the scientific study of religion. They include Ernest Renan (1823-1892), W.R. Smith (1846-1894), William James (1842-1910), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), E.B. Tylor (1823-1917), James George Frazer (1854-1941), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Max Weber (1864)-1920), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) etc. etc.³⁹ *h h*

5- Circumstances at the Inception of the Science of Religion:

Inquiry into the nature of religion, its basis and its truth or lack of it usually takes

³⁵ ibid. P. 209, cp. Waardenburg, Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit. P.14.

³⁶ Sharpe, Comparative Religion: op. cit. p.35.

³⁷ Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 96 ff.

³⁸ ibid., P. 105 ff, See also Waardenburg, J., 'Chantepie de la Saussaye' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion, Op. cit. vol. 3. p.202

³⁹ See both Waardenburg's Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit.. and Whaling, F.. Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion: (Berlin: Mouton, 1983 and 1985), 2 vols.

place due to any of the following situations:

One - When rival religions confront each other, each advancing its claim as the ultimate truth.

Two - At the time of crises and breakdown of a religion due to the onslaught of the enemy, especially the intellectual war.

In the case of the 'Science of Religion' in the West, Charles J. Adams saw the second situation as the *raison d'être* for its inception and evolution.⁴⁰ That was the time of intense attack on religion, or the period of Enlightenment.⁴¹ Some of the underlying ideas of that period did influence the Scientific study of religion both negatively and positively. Few of these ideas are given below:

- a. the emphasis on individual reason which led to the formulation of subjective theories of religion;
- b. The interest in the objective world, which led to the phenomenological study of religion;
- c. The emphasis on history in the sense of the study of both the origin and the historical development of religions;⁴²
- d. The stressing of the universal nature of religion and its critical study;
- e. The advocates of the natural religion - the Deists who hold to only those beliefs "which they considered to be rationally warranted".⁴³
- f. The rejection of all forms of religion including the authority of revelation

⁴⁰ See Allen D., Structure and Creativity, op. cit. P. 6.

⁴¹ See Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.), History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect, op. cit. P. 128. Also Eliade, M. and Kitagawa, J. M., (eds.), History of Religions: Essays in Methodology, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), Pp. 17-18, cp. Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 14, P. 65, and Waardenburg Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, op. cit. P.502.

⁴² See Kitagawa J. M. (ed.) History of Religions, Retrospect and Prospect, op. cit. P. 128.

⁴³ Hinnells, John, R. Dictionary of Religions, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), P. 104.

and denigrating the homo religiosus as a slave of superstitions, and the seeing ^{of} religion as the 'the lowest state of the development of man' (Auguste Comte - 1798-1857). ⁴⁴

g. The belief in evolutionism, which formed at the inception of this discipline, the chief method of inquiry; ⁴⁵

The other aspects of the circumstances at the inception of this discipline which led to a skeptical, naturalistic and even agnostic outlook towards all religions are:

- a) - The German Romanticism - which emphasized individuality feelings and imagination.... ⁴⁶
- b) - The emphasis on separating science from religion and on the separation of religious studies from theology. ⁴⁷
- c) - The time of the inception of this discipline was "the very height of materialistic and positivistic propaganda" ⁴⁸ against anything sacred and immaterial.
- d) - At the time of the Enlightenment and the obsession with science and its discoveries there was "a tremendous enthusiasm and confidence in the unlimited possibilities that scientific progress in this field would yield." ⁴⁹

As regards ^{the} intellectual sources that provided impulse for the advent of this science C. P. Tiele saw the influence of philosophy and the historical science cultivated after strict methods and laws of critical research. ⁵⁰ Some scholars even confess the

⁴⁴ See Allen, D. Structure and Creativity in Religion, op. cit. Pp. 6-8.

⁴⁵ Sharpe, E. J. Comparative Religion: A History, op. cit. Pp. 27-32.

⁴⁶ Cain, S. 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 14, P.65

⁴⁷ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches, op. cit. P. 425

⁴⁸ Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. Pp. 8 & 9

⁴⁹ Kitagawa J. M. (ed.) History of Religions: Restrospect and Prospect, op. cit. P. 128

⁵⁰ See Whaling, F. 'Introduction' in Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of

domination of 'Western categories' in the study of religion due to the circumstances at its inception.⁵¹

J. Samuel Preus credited David Hume (1711-1776) "with the intellectual completion of the paradigm - shift from a religious to a naturalistic framework for the study of religion especially when he tried to refute "the religionists "most fundamental legitimating claim that all humans are endowed with an innate sense of the divine".⁵²

This picture of the circumstances at the inception of the so called scientific study of religions which determined the Western conception of it, can explain to us why that concept must be different from the Eastern conception in general and the Islamic style of the study of man's religions in particular.

6- Aims and Nature of the Study of Religion in the West:

The aims of the Western study of religion are numerous due to the different conceptions the scholars have about it. The inception of the science of religion was in the era of Enlightenment when severest attacks were directed towards religion in general and Christianity in particular. Due to this, the aims of the numerous students of religion at the time might not really be different from the overall trend of belittling and even deriding religion.

With the clear idea of rejecting revelation, transcendence and various religious claims at the back of their minds, the Western scholars of that time categorically mentioned that they aimed at the study of man, not the study of nature or transcendence. It is an anthropological discipline which studies the religious phenomena as "a creation, feature and aspect of human culture"⁵³ which means it has nothing to do with God or the Absolute, being a materialistic and secularistic study of the sacred! This is why they insisted that it has to be independent of theology and philosophy. It is

Religion: op. cit. vol. I, Pp. 10-11.

⁵¹ See Preus, J. Samuel., Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987) P. 207.

⁵² Kitagawa J. M. (ed.) History of Religions: Restrospect and Prospect: op. cit.. P. 128.

⁵³ Whaling, (art) 'The Study of Religion in a global context', Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P. 441 and P.380. See also Wiebe, D., Religion and Truth, op. cit. pp. 50 and 224.

"scholarly (positivistic?) inquiry into the nature and structure of the religious experience of the human race and its diverse manifestations in History." ⁵⁴ Max Muller, who is considered the founder of this field in the West, saw the aim of this study as trying "to find out what religion is, what foundations it has in the soul of man and what laws it follows in its historical growth". ⁵⁵ This is one of the earliest elucidation of the aim of this study which might have served as a guiding principle for those who came after him.

Other aims of the study of religion, especially when it was first identified as a scientific study are:

- a. to observe, treat and interpret the historical religious data taking interest in the empirical and the tangible aspects of religion; ⁵⁶
- b. to explore, understand and portray the empirical religions both with regard to their development and with regard to their being, i.e. trying to study the historical, socio-economic and political circumstances of its development; ⁵⁷
- c. to attain to a synoptic grouping of religions and religious phenomena, that is after the comparative - historical study of religions, we can group them according to similarities and differences; ⁵⁷
- d. to establish facts, real facts, historical or social in a critical way or being critical and trying to reach at real facts. ⁵⁸

From these aims mentioned above, we can have an idea of the nature of the study of religion in the West. It is a study of man and what he creates as part of his culture, which he calls religion. Even though some of the scholars claim showing interest in man's belief in the transcendence, the general trend excludes all religious

⁵⁴ Quoted by Sharpe, E. J. in Religion, vol. I, Number 1, spring 1971, article entitled "Some problems of method in the study of Religion": P. 10.

⁵⁵ see Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches: op. cit., P.14.

⁵⁶ Wach, J. Introduction to the History of Religions: op. cit. P. 96 and 161-162

⁵⁷ See Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit.. vol. I, P. 226.

⁵⁸ Waardenburg, J.. Reflections on the Study of Religion: (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), P. 12.

claims regarding God, His existence, His Powers, and Revelations, etc.⁵⁹ Even among these scholars, anyone who showed some interest in what believers believe in, is branded as a 'theologian' doing theology not the 'scientific study of religion.'⁶⁰

As Kitagawa has precisely stated, scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds (as we shall see) who abhorred transcendental justification, church authority, dogmas, but who recognised humanity's natural inclination and deeply rooted need for religion...." felt that religion has become obscured by historical accretion - so they became committed to the reformation and education of humanity by rediscovering the original - the natural and universal (religion)...."⁶¹

When we compare this, with the Islamic or Muslim study of religion, very briefly, we see that the Muslims being guided by the Qur'an in all their endeavours including the study of the religions of others, start their study as believers in God and in religion and in the Qur'an as the authentic, incorruptible and final revelation of Allah to all mankind. In it many religions known to the environment in which it was revealed were mentioned, confirmed and corrected accordingly. Numerous verses of the Qur'an of this nature have given brilliant guidance to the Muslims in their study of religion.⁶² The Muslim study of religion is not entirely polemical, biased or prejudicial, as any objective investigator can see.

7- The Different Ways by which Religion has been Studied:

The issue of the method(s) by which to, appropriately and adequately, study religion has been the bone of contention among the numerous students of religion from several disciplines, from the advent of this field to the present day. This fact is very strongly related to another fact, that of the nature of religion itself. The study of

⁵⁹ Whaling, F., op. cit. vol. I, P. 441.

⁶⁰ See the survey of scholars in this field in Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit. and Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion: op. cit. in two vols. More of this will be explained subsequently.

⁶¹ Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.), History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect: op. cit. P. 129.

⁶² See Surah al-Baqrah: 21-22, 62, 89, 101, 136, 137; Surah Ali Imran: 59-64, Surah Al-Nisa: 150, 156-159, Surah Al-Ma'idah: 15-19, 44-48 etc.

religion in the Western world is the study of man, his beliefs and actions directed to what he takes as his object of worship. As we cannot know or understand the religious activities of a believer without knowing what is in his mind and his motives, regarding his object of worship, our study has to be dependent on the externals of religions which *may be* unconnected with the inner convictions that prompted them. This is the crux of the matter! Is there any unique method for the study of religion then? To this question Waardenburg stated that the answer has to correspond to what is understood as religion.⁶³ Considered on this ground, that method can be of a divinatory intuition; or of a phenomenological contemplation of essence and forms; or the methods of cultural anthropology; or the requirement of faith in the researcher.⁶⁴ This shows the importance of research on methods in the study of religion especially that, some scholars have noted that a lot of harm has been brought to the study of religion through ignorance of its methodological issues.⁶⁵ Others however, in explaining the importance of a good knowledge of the methodological issues in this field have opined that it can have "a salutary effect on the conduct of research" for it encourages them (the students of religion) to think more critically their observations and findings and to be more self-conscious of "the potentially distorting roles of their own points of view and personal needs."⁶⁶

8- Numerous Methods in the Study of Religion:

Due to the confusion, variety and speculation involved in the discussions on methods, two conflicting opinions can be seen. J. Wach saw the discussions on the problems of method as one of the two ultimate questions that the history of religions (or the study of religion) cannot answer with the means at its disposal. He saw that they require the help of the philosophy of religion, logic and epistemology. The

⁶³ Waardenburg, J., Reflections on the Study of Religion: op. cit. P.73. See Wiebe, op. cit. P.53

⁶⁴ ibid. P. 68 and 73, cp. Wach. J. The Comparative Study of Religions: op. cit. Pp.14-15, he suggests adequacy and unity for any such method.

⁶⁵ See Wiebe, Religion and Truth: op. cit. P. VII, cp. Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion: (Berlin: Mouton, 1985), vol. II, P. 74.

⁶⁶ ibid. Pp. 73-74.

philosophy of religion should, according to him, examine and prepare the methods of this discipline.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the writer of the article 'study of religion' in 'The Encyclopedia of Religion' said that 'some scholars view ' any deliberate concern with theory and method as a speculative matter that does not contribute to the concrete advance of knowledge'⁶⁸

In our humble opinion one has to know the scope of what one wants to study, its 'nature' and the best way of reaching at and understanding it, otherwise one may end up employing a wrong or irrelevant method(s) in the study, with the end result being completely wrong! If, on the other hand, one has a good knowledge of the methodology of a field, and the willingness to employ it, that can help greatly in reaching the right results, prejudice and biasness excepted.

With the numerous methods and approaches in the field as an existential reality, the questions to be asked are: Are all the methods equally important? Or are some more indispensable than the others? Is there any single method that is so crucial and which lays the foundation for all others? Is there any one method that is so unique that it best suits the material?⁶⁹

Before delving into these speculative issues it is pertinent to give a brief account, of the numerous ways by which religion' as a phenomenon has been studied. There are chiefly two main types of studies: the normative judgmental and the objective value-free study of religion.

9- The Normative Study of Religion:

There are two main disciplines referred to here: The Philosophy of Religion and The Theology of Religion or Theological studies.

1- *Theology* or discourse about God or the science that treats the divine and is "often implicitly limited to its Christian form....."⁷⁰ It has been

⁶⁷ See Wach, J., Introduction to the History of Religions: op. cit. Pp. 97-100.

⁶⁸ Cain, S. 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P. 64, cp. Schmid, Georg, Principles of Integral Science of Religion: (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), P.68.

⁶⁹ See King, U., (art) 'Historical and Phenomenological Approaches, Whaling, F. (ed.), op. cit. vol. I, P.36, cp. Waardenburg, J., Reflections on the Study of Religion: op. cit. P.73.

⁷⁰ Hinnells, J. R., Dictionary of Religions: (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), P. 328.

in the West from the very first day the Christian religion reached it. It is 'a systematic expression of beliefs, an account of their sources and authority.' ⁷⁰ It has to be within the framework of the overall Christian revelation and its judgments are based on what they believe as the 'truth'. This kind of study was rejected by the scientific study of religion from its inception, and as mentioned earlier, any attempt by a scholar to mention in his study, anything about God or his religion's truth - claims will be accused of doing theology'. ⁷¹ This is not considered a part of the science of religion.

2. ***The Philosophy of Religion*** : Philosophers showed great interest in the study of religion especially 'natural religion' on the basis of the Chinese religion. ⁷² This was in the 18th century at the time of Enlightenment, when Western scholars came face to face with other religions as a result of the discoveries of new continents and the European colonial expansionism. Those philosophers who made substantive contributions to the study of religion at that time included: Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646 - 1716), David A. Hume (1711 - 1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

⁷³ The era of the enlightenment is characterized by individual freedom of intellectual inquiry and personal commitment to reason. ⁷³

As a reaction to this excessive rationalism, another group of philosophers from Germany took interest in the study of religion. These are the Romantics like, Herder (1744-1803) and Hegel (1774 - 1803) who were of the opinion that instead of interpreting religion purely in terms of reason, 'religion is to be seen as an inward experience, self-authenticating, conditioned subjectively and determined by feeling'. ⁷⁴

⁷¹ See F. No. 60 above.

⁷² See Sharpe, E. J., Comparative Religion: op. cit. P.17.

⁷³ See Whaling, F. 'Introduction' Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P.7, cp. Sharpe, op. cit. Pp. 16-19. See also Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, Pp.65-66.

⁷⁴ Sharpe, ibid. P.20. See also Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion: ibid. vol. 14, Pp. 65-66.

They tried to do this philosophically exploring all the remote corners of the world. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) on his part did the same while exploring European past.⁷⁴

Also, included among these philosophers was Schlegel (1772-1829), who together with them reflected on global history of the world and tried to place the different religions 'in a historical and logical sequence'.⁷⁵

These kinds of studies, even though they provided some underlying principles for the study of religion,⁷⁶ they were rejected later on as normative and value-laden.⁷⁷ The reason for the rejection of the above two disciplines, as claimed by one scholar is because: "..... to accept the self-understanding of the faithful as a criterion for truth and falsity in the history of religions that surrenders the foundations of science to the object of investigation."⁷⁸ Another says : "Religious explanation therefore is a falsification of reality, and can only be described as a 'mystification' of reality".⁷⁹

With statements like these, there is every justification for the theologians' skepticism and hesitation regarding the so-called science of religion. In 1919 Anglican Bishop Frank Weston claimed that 'The comparative study of religion is, like psychology a new obsession of the liberal mind..... to account for them (religions) all by labelling them products of the human mind.'⁸⁰

⁷⁵ See Whaling, F. 'Introduction' (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P.9, cp. Sharpe, Comparative Religion: op. cit. Pp.20-22.

⁷⁶ See Wach. J. Introduction to the History of Religions: op. cit. Pp. 21, 182. See also Smart, N. Concept and Empathy: op. cit. P. 210.

⁷⁷ See Kitagawa J. M. (ed.) History of Religions: op. cit. Pp. 128 and 129. See also Smart, N., et. al. (eds.) Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. vol. III, P. 195, Allen, Structure and Creativity: op. cit. P.3, Wiebe, Religion and Truth: op. cit. Pp., 48-49 & 53.

⁷⁸ See Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.) op. cit. P. 113.

⁷⁹ Wiebe, op. cit. P. 109.

⁸⁰ See Sharpe, op. cit. P. 151.

The view of the Bishop which points to the inner intentions of those early rationalists who were affected by the positivistic philosophy is basically acceptable and reasonable. With all the tall claims of objectivity, scientism and rationalism of the Western scholars, they cannot see that the realm of the sacred and the spirit is different from the realm of the profane and the material.

3. A third possible normative discipline is the Comparative Religion itself at its inception. For instance, Muller's science of religion has been described by Kitagawa as embracing, both Comparative theology and theoretical theology. ⁸¹

10- The Non-Normative Study of Religion:

The science of religion or 'religionswissenschaft' identifies itself with the non-normative, value-free objective study of the phenomenon of religion. ⁸² And it is often stated that the science of religion has no method of its own, but the different methods of the various academic disciplines that study religion from its different perspectives.⁸³ This began at the inception and continued for almost a century, when scholars or specialists in religion who took it as their sole object of study started distinguishing between religionswissenschaft (The History of Religions) and the Scientific or Social Scientific Study of Religion carried out by the Social Sciences. ⁸⁴ Kitagawa even opined that for each of the social scientific approaches to the study of religion, like sociology of religion, psychology of religion etc. two types of it do exist. That is, there are two psychologies of religion for instance, one views the data psychologically as part of the discipline of psychology, while the other views the same data religio-scientifically being an aspect of The History of Religions or Comparative Religion. ⁸⁵

⁸¹ See Eliade, M., and Kitagawa J. M., (eds.) History of Religions: Essays in Methodology: (Chicago: Univ., of Chicago Press, 1959), P. 17.

⁸² See F. N. 77 above.

⁸³ See Platvoet, J. G., Comparing Religions, A limitative Approach: op. cit. P. 225 F. No. 35, cp. Wiebe, D., Religion and Truth: op. cit. P. 44.

⁸⁴ See Smart, N., in Wiebe's Religion and Truth: P. 46. See also Schmid, G., Principles of Integral Science of Religion: op. cit. P.168.

⁸⁵ See Eliade M. and Kitagawa, J. M., (eds.) History of Religions, Essays in methodology, op. cit. P. 21.

It is a fact that at the inception of this field two main broad types of study were carried out, on the vast religious data, viz:- the theological - which we have seen how it was rejected as normative and the other one is the historical scientific study.⁸⁶ Later however, anthropological, sociological, psychological, phenomenological....etc. approaches were applied on the material.⁸⁷ This also separated later to form two partly overlapping disciplines, that of the social scientific studies of religion and the History of Religions or Comparative Religion as explained above. We will now discuss very briefly these methods and how they were applied on the religious data.

ONE - The Historical-Scientific Methods:

This method can be identified with most of the founding fathers of 'religionswissenschaft' e.g. F. Max Muller, C. P. Tiele, Pierre D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, etc. Max Muller advocated for the application of the rules of critical scholarship and for determining the most ancient form of religion.⁸⁸ He wanted the scholars to look deep into the annals of history so as to see how 'the finite mind has tried to pierce further and further into the infinite...' ⁸⁹ C. P. Tiele believes the science of religion is not only historical (so its being ahistorical precluded), as understanding and explanation is sought.⁹⁰ But as Sharpe stated, before 1869 - the year Darwin published his "Origin of Species" - there was a clear lack of methods, even though pseudo-scientific approaches or studies by Philologists, Archaeologists, Ethnologists were carried out. After 1869 - the evolutionary method was in vogue.⁹¹

With the acceptance, of the evolutionary method whether in its unilinear or diffusionistic form, it then provides the framework for the study of religion and

⁸⁶ The philosophical study can be seen as part of the theological for being speculative and not empirical.

⁸⁷ See Waardenburg, J, Reflections on the Study of Religion: op. cit. P. 73.

⁸⁸ See Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 14.

⁸⁹ Smart, N. et. al. Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. vol. III, P. 195.

⁹⁰ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 100.

⁹¹ See Sharpe, Comparative Religion: A History, op. cit. P. 27 cp. Waardenburg Classical Approaches, op. cit. P. 639.

especially the search for its origin.⁹² This is considered the second stage of the history of this field i.e. 1870s - 1920s, the time when Anthropologists dominated the study of religion.

Even though there is no clear demarcation between these two stages and moreso, no clear specification of when a method was or was not applied, the nineteenth century study of religion is characterised as rationalistic, evolutionistic, historical, scientific or empirical and positivistic.⁹³ The concern of these scholars were:

- accumulating religious facts;
- looking for common elements or parallels (by comparison);
- locating and translating the original sources;
- assuming a critically rationalistic attitude marked by personal detachment;⁹⁴

Some of the positivistic and empirical assumptions taken as axioms in the scientific study of religion in the West include: the belief in the existence of an external world, which can be described fully in scientific language; that data is ascertained by means of observations and experiments based upon our senses; building up scientific theories through induction of factual data; being objective; and that the knowledge arrived at is a proven knowledge of the world etc.⁹⁵

A Critique of the Historical-Scientific Methods:

A lot of objections were raised against the rationalistic, evolutionistic, positivistic approach of these earlier scholars which can be summarized in the following points:

1. Their theories were seen to have rested upon a very narrowly-conceived rationalistic approach e.g. the assumptions as to the uniform reaction of the human mind to the phenomena of nature;

⁹² Sharpe, op. cit. P. 94.

⁹³ Almost all the works cited above confirm this.

⁹⁴ See Allen D. Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit.. P. 25, cp. Waardenburg, J. Reflections on the Study of Religion: op. cit. P. 56 and his Classical Approaches, op. cit. P. 502.

⁹⁵ See Whaling (art), 'Additional Note on Philosophy of Science and the Study of Religion' in Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P. 380.

2. they combined positivism with historical and cultural evolutionism placing themselves and their religion (Christianity) at the top of the ladder;
3. religion was usually identified with the earliest, lowest and most primitive stages of culture;
4. they were seen as strong reductionist who were not sensitive to the specific demand of their subject matter;
5. despite claiming objectivity, highly normative and speculative judgments were given by them. etc. etc. ⁹⁶

TWO - The Anthropological Methods:

Even though Charles de Brosses (1709-1777) is considered as a forerunner of the anthropological school of Comparative Religion due to his theories on the unity of the evolutionary development and on the idea that contemporary primitive cultures provide a key to the religions of early man, the impact of the domination of anthropologists on the discipline of the study of religion came later. Scholars like Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), James G. Frazer (1854-1941) Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), etc. etc. showed great interest in the study of religion and did contribute immensely to it. Anthropologists, with their emphasis on the study of primitive culture and its other components including religion, which to them is a creation of man, were more prone to searching for the origin of religion or the first form it has taken. ⁹⁷ Many theories were formed in explaining the origin of religion and how all the religions can be fitted into the evolutionary ladder of progress.

Influenced by the evolutionary theory they try to take their data from 'primitive societies' to conform to that ladder of development and advancement. This endeavour has been seen as pure prejudice and ethnocentrism of the Europeans. ⁹⁸ The evolutionary school of the anthropology of religion was countered by the

⁹⁶ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit.. Pp. 395-399. See also Allen Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. Pp. 25-26, Wach., J. Introduction to the History of Religions: op. cit. P.31.

⁹⁷ See Waardenburg Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 29, cp. Sharpe, E. J., Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 94. See also Lessa, William A., and Vogt, Evon Z., Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach, (New York: Harper and Row, 4th ed., 1979).

⁹⁸ See Bianchi, Ugo, The History of Religions: E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1975, P. 2. See also Smart, N. et al. Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. Pp. 221-223.

diffusionist school of Germany also called the 'Culture-historical school'. It held that similarities in cultures in different regions are to be ascribed to diffusion from an original site, due to migrations or other contacts going back to primitive times, (or even earlier). ⁹⁹

E. B. Tylor (1832-1917) for instance, generally regarded as the founder of the anthropological study of religion, was one of the first scholars to apply evolutionary concepts to the study of religion. ¹⁰⁰ And in line with the general trend of scientism, he formulated the notion of studying religion 'not for revelatory content and value, but as human ideas, part of man's natural evolution.' ¹⁰¹

He was famous for his theory of 'Animism' from the importance of the 'soul', how this concept was created from attempts at interpreting dreams, hallucinations and so on. He saw the early man extending this idea (of soul) to animals, plants even to stones and other inanimate objects. ¹⁰² Hence the name, 'animism'. He believes that the 'primitive man' of prehistoric times 'is represented to a large extent by present day primitive man'. ¹⁰³ This was why great emphasis was given by scholars or rather anthropologists in searching for the primeval religion (the unreligion) in the contemporary primitive or uncivilized societies. Herbert Spencer, a contemporary of Tylor, whose contributions in the sociology of religion are more substantial than in the anthropology of religion, used the anthropological method when he investigated the cult of ancestral spirits. ¹⁰⁴ He stated that the evolution of religions takes place to the

⁹⁹ See Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P.71.. See also our unpublished M. A. thesis where we compared the similarities and differences between the Hindu and the Christian conceptions of God and the historical links between the two religions.

¹⁰⁰ See Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14 P. 69, cp. Lessa, W. A. and Vogt, E. Z, Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach, op. cit. 4th ed.1979, Pp. 9-19.

¹⁰¹ See Tylor, Edward B., Primitive Culture: 1871, P.427 as quoted in Nineteenth Century Religious Thought: op. cit. P. 227. See also Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P.31.

¹⁰² See Lessa W.A. and Vogt, E.Z. Reader in Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 9.

¹⁰³ Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit., P. 29.

¹⁰⁴ ibid. P. 198.

degree to which man develops intellectually and increases in knowledge.¹⁰⁵

His theory on the origin of religion which he saw in ancestor - worship, is suggesting that religion had originated in propitiation of the soul of the dead.¹⁰⁶ It was one of his contributions in this regard. Other theories on the origin of religion included Fetishism - '...attributing to all external bodies...a life essentially analogous to our own, but nearly always more vigorous and in their actions more powerful'.¹⁰⁷ This term was first used by the Portuguese to mean any kind of charm, amulet or sanctified relic. It was also used in the same sense by de Brosses in 1760.¹⁰⁸ Tylor related fetishism with 'Animism'.¹⁰⁹

The other theory which was famous but was later seen to be neither universal nor precise was 'Totemism', first studied by McChennans in 1869-1870. Later on Frazer, and Durkheim managed to make it the proto-type religion of all primitive societies. James G. Frazer elsewhere in 'Golden Bough' opined that 'magic' was from 'a pre-religious stage of human thought' and this is because it is the opposite of religion, in fact, it (religion) emerged from magic when magic was discovered to be ineffective.¹¹⁰

The theory of 'Mana' was introduced as 'pre-animistic' religion by Marett. It was seen by Sir Edmund Leach as '...ancestral to Otto's concept of 'the holy...' '¹¹¹, with the assumption here that, '...a sense of 'awe' is an innate, almost universal,

¹⁰⁵ ibid. P. 29.

¹⁰⁶ See Smart, N., et. al, (eds.) Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. P. 234.

¹⁰⁷ See Ellade, M. Nostalgie des origines 1969 and 1971, The chapter on 'The History of Religions: from 1912 to the Present day' (trans-Hasan Qubaysi) 'Al-Fikr Al-Arabi' Journal, 1987, 8th year Issue No. 46, Pp. 332-351.

¹⁰⁸ See Smart, N., et. al, (eds.) Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. Pp. 232-233.

¹⁰⁹ Smart, N., et. al. (eds.) Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West, Op. cit. P. 231.

¹¹⁰ ibid. P.243.

¹¹¹ ibid. P.238.

attribute...shared by man'.¹¹²

The study of myth, symbol, and rituals was carried out by anthropologists and others. Levi-Strauss' structural method in the study of myth considered them as modes of communications.¹¹³ In the interpretations of symbols two approaches, according to Leach, obtain:

1. the empirical, developed on the functionalist tradition of Malinowski and Firth, is concerned with recording directly-observed behavior of people; while
2. the structural or rational, takes symbols as expressive and communicative.¹¹⁴

Bronislaw Malinowski brought in the study of religion, a functional interpretation of religion as that of the societal institutions. Religion to him is basically an emotional response to the needs of cultural survival of a given community. His works on the study of rituals show how rituals function "in allaying anxiety and inspiring confidence in men faced with an unbridgeable gap in their empirical knowledge".¹¹⁵ Radcliffe-Brown's work on 'Taboo' is another example of the functional approach of the anthropology of religion. Emile Durkheim, seen as a co-founder of sociology of religion, is also seen as an anthropologist of religion who saw religion 'as a vast symbolic system which made social life possible by expressing and maintaining the sentiments of values of the society.'¹¹⁶ His famous axiom of classifying all things into sacred and profane is part of his methodological contribution to this field which influenced many after him.¹¹⁷ One general feature of this method is the tendency to

¹¹² Ibid. P.238.

¹¹³ See Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the study of Religion: op. cit. vol. II, P.195.

¹¹⁴ ibid. vol. II, Pp. 191-192.

¹¹⁵ See Lessa, W. A. and Vogt, E. Z. Reader in Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 57, and Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P.66.

¹¹⁶ ibid. P. 49 and see Lessa and Vogt, Reader in Comparative Religion: op. cit. P.28.

¹¹⁷ An example is M. Eliade, he wrote a book with the same title "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion": op. cit.. See also Smart, N., et. al. (eds.) Nineteenth Century Religious

generalise theories based on data from a small section of humanity.¹¹⁸

A Critique of the Anthropological Methods:

It is a very clear fact that anthropologists, especially of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were obsessed by the evolutionary theory, based on which they were searching, in their study, for beginnings and origins. But we all know that asserting anything in the pre-historic times, is at best speculation and conjecture. And as Muslims, we believe that the events at the beginning of this universe, or the creation of man or his first religion is part of 'ghaib' (the unseen), on which man has no accurate knowledge or the tools to discover them, at least for now. Allah (S.W.T.) tells us categorically in the Qur'an:

"I (Allah) made them not to witness the creation of the heavens and the earth and not (even) their own creation, nor was I to take the misleaders as helpers"¹¹⁹

Some scholars in the West also considered the issue of the origin of religion is a metaphysical question.¹²⁰ For instance E. O. James criticised the quest for beginnings and bygones, because the evidence is scanty and precarious and 'a good deal must be in the nature of conjecture or disciplined scientific inference' and this is why it is not surprising if these attempts required "a considerable amount of revision in the light of fuller knowledge".¹²¹ This was what happened to almost all the above theories as pointed out by Eliade.¹²²

Evans - Pritchard criticised earlier anthropologists maintaining that since each anthropologist can only study one religion at a time and in one place 'all speculations

Thought in the West: op. cit. P. 247.

¹¹⁸ See Allen Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P. 26.

¹¹⁹ Al-Qur'an; Surah Al-Kahf: 51. See also al-Biruni, Chronology of Ancient Nations (Arabic version), (Baghdad: al-Muthanna, N.D.), P-14.

¹²⁰ See Eliade, M. and Kitagawa, J. M. (eds.) History of Religions: Essays in Methodology: op. cit. P. 25. Allen Douglas openly said that, they do not have any means to investigate this 'primordial religion' because 'our oldest documents are relatively recent.....' See Allen, D. Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P.47.

¹²¹ See James, E. O., The Beginnings of Religion: An Introductory and Scientific Study: (London: Hutchinson's Univ. Library, (without date)) P.9.

¹²² See Eliade, M. Nostalgie des Origines: op. cit..

about the origin or essence of religion, considered as a universal phenomenon are meaningless, unverifiable verbiage'. ¹²³ They were also accused of lack of direct field experience, because many of their methods and theories were unreliable and based on secondhand data; they had inauthentic comparisons and haphazard syntheses as well as holding pre-conceived theories, and so on. ¹²⁴

THREE - The Sociological Methods:

The social scientific methods in the study of religion were seen by many historians of religions as studying religious phenomena 'without quitting their special science' that is studying religions in the very spirit of their fields. ¹²⁵ The main examples of these are the sociology of religion and the psychology of religion to be discussed later. The sociological study of religion like its co-disciplines is concerned with the outward, the empirical, positivistic, rationalistic and even 'theological' for having very strong anti-theological stance. ¹²⁶ For instance, Max Weber (1864-1920) the founder of one of the main schools of sociology of religion, described himself as religiously tone-deaf and concerned with demystification. ¹²⁷ There was a sort of competition between sociology as a field and the discipline of religious studies, especially in the 19th and early 20th century on which among them has the right to interpret the world and the society. ¹²⁸ This might have led to its antagonistic stance on religion.

The main leading figures here were Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Max

¹²³ Quoted in Nineteenth Century Religious Thought: op. cit. vol. III, P.225.

¹²⁴ ibid. P. 223 and see Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P. 73.

¹²⁵ Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 639., cp. Eliade in Allen's Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P. 82 and Otto's statement P. 61.

¹²⁶ See Smart, in Wiebe's Religion and Truth: op. cit. Pp. 54-58. See also Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 188.

¹²⁷ ibid., vol. II, P. 98.

¹²⁸ Robertson, R. The Sociological Interpretation of Religion: (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), P. 25, cp. Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 97 and Cain, S., 'Study of Religion, The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P. 79.

Weber (1864-1920), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Marcel Mauss (1873-1950), Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939). Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) and Joachim Wach (1898-1955). As Michael Hill has shown, there are three main schools or traditions of sociology of religion that exist and these are: the American, the British and that of other European countries, especially France,¹²⁹ and each has its own different approaches and emphases. Despite their differences, we can group them into two main approaches in the sociological study of religion:¹³⁰

- a- The empirical-comparative, that is concerned with the collection of relevant data and analysing it while comparing the different data.
- b- The theoretical approaches that are concerned with theoretical analysis and reaching at socio-religious theories on human societies. The theoretical approaches according to Nottingham are three:
 1. The functional approach of B. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and others, to them religion "possess certain universal functions like explaining evil, death etc. sanctioning social norm, providing super empirical answers to men's ultimate questions" This approach "aims at providing a rationale for the exploration of those functions of religions within the framework of 'total societies'".¹³⁰
 2. The evolutionary theories of Comte, i.e. the three evolutionary stages, man has passed through - the theological, the philosophical and the scientific - positivistic stages. Spencer applied these theories on man and his entire life and institutions, believing that all things are progressing 'from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous'.¹³¹ Even though the influence of these approaches declined later as we have seen before.

¹²⁹ See Whaling F. (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 9.

¹³⁰ Nottingham, Elizabeth K., Religion: A Sociological View: (New York: Univ. Press of America, Laiham, 1971), Pp. 292-294.

¹³¹ Nottingham, Religion: A Sociological View: Pp. 294-295, cp. James, E. O., The Beginnings of Religion: op. cit. P. 9.

3. The third major approach in the theoretical approach to the sociology of religion was the 'Developmental approach' of T. Parsons, influenced by the evolutionary theory, he views religious movements as going 'through certain typical developmental stages; at each stage certain typical problems/situations must be faced and solved, if the movement is to survive'. ¹³² This approach has been termed by some scholars as the "structural-functional". ¹³³

The empirical approaches rely on large-scale survey techniques like interviews, questionnaires, etc. These are classified into four main categories:

- i. Studies of specific behavior, trait, or attitudes that are thought to have links with some particular religious traits;
- ii. Studies of religious groups and their developments;
- iii. Studies of roles played by religious personnel; and
- iv. Studies in the contents of religious beliefs of individuals as distinct from the official creed. ¹³⁴

If we view the field of sociology of religion holistically, we will see that there are two main trends ¹³⁵ to which belong earlier and later schools or in other words two main conceptions held by the founders of this approach in the study of religion are still being followed in this field:

One - Durkheim school, who saw religion as a source of collective consciousness and of the categories and meanings which man necessarily share - this leads to a stable society, so religion is serving as a maintainer of society. Durkheim believes that the origin of the ideas of the sacred is the society. He said 'if religion has given birth to all that is essential in the society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion'. ¹³⁶

¹³² Nottingham, op. cit., P. 296.

¹³³ See Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 155.

¹³⁴ See Nottingham, op. cit. Pp. 301-302.

¹³⁵ See Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 116.

¹³⁶ As quoted in Structure and Creativity in Religion, op. cit. P. 34, cp. Whaling (ed.) Contemporary

Two - The other trend of Max Weber and his pupil Troeltsch 'stemming from Marxian analysis of religion stresses on the dimensions of power and social change. They focus on the dialectical relationship between religion and society. Weber, seen to have contributed more than anyone else to the formation of a sociology of religion ¹³⁷ used the comparative method to reach at the high degree of sensitivity to the nature and social impact of these belief systems...'. ¹³⁸ These scholars saw that '....the ideas contained in a religious system could themselves exert an independent impact upon society and could thus influence the course of social change....' ¹⁴⁰ As is more likely with sociologists they saw the society as not only influencing religion but also its source, as shown earlier. Or in a word, they are emphasizing on how religion shapes and is being shaped by the society, especially the political and economic factors therein. ¹³⁹

J. Wach also made valuable contributions in analysing religious groups comparatively etc. ¹⁴⁰

A critique of the Sociological Methods:

The main criticism directed against the sociological approach is that of reduction, especially that of the Marxian and other theories, and that is due to their insistence on 'a rational, scientific account of the laws underlying the social fabric', while obliterating the 'mythical' (religious?) basis of social order. ¹⁴¹ Weber was seen as a possible exception, as his studies "reflect his spiritual critique of modern culture". ¹⁴²

Another point of criticism of this approach is the way it saw itself as the sole

Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 98. See also Smart, N. et. al. (eds.), Nineteenth Century of Religious Thought in the West: op. cit. vol. III, Pp. 247-248.

¹³⁷ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 488.

¹³⁸ See Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 98 and Pp. 117-118.

¹³⁹ ibid. P. 95.

¹⁴⁰ See Whaling (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, Pp. 232-234.

¹⁴¹ Same as 130 above.

¹⁴² See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. Pp. 44-45 and Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P. 36. See also Waardenburg, J., "Weber, Max" (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion, Op. cit. vol. 15, p. 366.

authority in interpreting the world. The advocate of the sociological approach saw their task as that of uprooting 'fictitious and immature world views - those associated with magic and religion...'.

However, by the end of the 19th century, the positivistic stance of sociology was greatly modified though not completely obliterated.¹⁴³ Most sociologists of religion study religious phenomena from the stand-point of sociology, while trying to incorporate it into general sociology. This is why many scholars stress the existence of two kinds of inquiry as shown earlier.¹⁴⁴

In addition, there is a general tendency in the sociology of religion for projection theories. For example, God or other beliefs were seen by some, as social projections which act reflexively upon the society and the individual. And while looking for ideal forms of say, ritualistic function, the sociologist of religion may end up imposing his own pattern and by so doing, distorting history. Bianchi stated that the social sciences, studying religion and here sociology of religion, has its own specific object of study, not religion but the society and due to that, it does not cover the area of the History of religions, nor does it ask questions or present problems either. There is also in these 'auxiliary disciplines' lack of consideration of religion's understanding of itself and an assumption of the superiority of the intellectual world of the researcher.¹⁴⁵ The sociological method has also been criticised of reducing man's spirituality to its socio-economic determinants especially Karl Marx's (1818-1883) idea of religion being due to class conflict and that men's consciousness is determined by socio-economic relations.¹⁴⁶

FOUR – The Psychological Methods:

The discipline of psychology of religion is one of the social scientific disciplines that study religion. Even though the common trend of rationalism, empiricism and

¹⁴³ See Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, Pp. 97-98.

¹⁴⁴ See page 20 of this study.

¹⁴⁵ See Bianchi , U., The History of Religions: Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975, P. 21 and Nottingham, Religion: A Sociological View: op. cit., P. 297, cp. Smart, N. (art) 'The Scientific Study of Religion in its Plurality' in Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P. 373 and Smart, N., Concept and Empathy: op. cit. 215.

¹⁴⁶ See Cain, 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P. 79.

evolutionism was noticed at its inception,¹⁴⁷ it seems to be more related to religious circles and motives than the other auxiliary disciplines, especially in America where it was linked, at its inception, with Protestant theologians.¹⁴⁸

This kind of study is after the knowledge of the interior aspects of religious experience wherever, and whenever that experience may occur' as Wach defined it.¹⁴⁹

This is one aspect of the psychology of religion, the other being the study of the cumulative materials and religious contents in history. This is another rich mine of data for psychological analysis.¹⁵⁰

Some of the outstanding contributors to this field of psychology of religion include: Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950), William James (1842-1910), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Carl G. Jung (1875-1961), Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) etc. Gerardus van der Leeuw for example used psychology as an experiential method to guide intuition. He also classified religious phenomena (Phenomenology of religion) by means of ideal types that are constituted by psychological technique of re-experiencing religious meanings'. He also advocated psychological self-education...¹⁵¹ Freud, who was anti-religion and who represented the rationalists saw religion as an attempt" to master the sensory world by means of wishful world'. He saw the different theories on the beginnings of religion as meeting in the 'Oedipus Complex' and that God is the sublimated physical father, who is sacrificed (Christian belief in the vicarious sacrifice of Christ?) whenever the totemic animal is sacrificed. To him religion is 'a provision of an imaginary fulfillment of man's infantile desires and needs, it is the 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.¹⁵¹ This shows how destructive these

¹⁴⁷ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 67 and P. 534, cp. Whaling (ed.), = Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 45. For example, R. H. Lowie (1882-1957) saw that psychology showed moreover, that what made a particular object religious was a subjective attitude rather than any external factor. Thus ruling out any kind of external revelation. See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 67.

¹⁴⁸ Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. vol. II, Pp. 21-22.

¹⁴⁹ Wach, J., The Comparative Study of Religions, op. cit. P. 23.

¹⁵⁰ Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 71.

¹⁵¹ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 57 and 367. cp. Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, Pp. 28-29 and Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. Pp. = 39-40.

methods can be to religion. Claiming to be studying both the psyche and religion, the problems of their meanings being well-known, this approach has naturally been of two main trends:

- a. that of those who describe themselves as religious and their study as a direct expression of their beliefs; and
- b. that of those who are hostile to religion, attack it openly and are out to destroy it.¹⁵²

Other general ideas in this approach include: the primacy of experience over reflective thought in matters of religion, so also the primacy of the individual (religious experience) over the institutional (William James). C.G. Jung considers collective unconsciousness and religious expressions to be authentic needs of man, and religion to be a normal and necessary psychic function. Paul Radin (1883-1959) believes that religion emanates from fear of economic insecurity and is 'a compensatory phantasy' etc.¹⁵³

As for the methods generally followed in this school, as Wulff stated, there have been two main trends, namely ; the descriptive, objective approach-where emphasis is on sympathetic phenomenological analysis; and the explanatory, interpretive trend-where scholars seek "to uncover the causal connections presumed to be responsible for the experience and conduct of religious persons, some of whom at least, are thought to be deluded."¹⁵⁴ Joachim Wach one of the leading theorists in the History of Religions saw the psychology of religion as depending methodologically, on individual and group feelings and stressed the role of the schools of depth psychology and psychoanalysis in offering clues for the understanding of the unconscious and its workings where Freudian and Jungian theories are applied to the study of religion.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 26.

¹⁵³ Whaling (ed.) 'Contemporary Approaches': vol. II, P. 29. See also Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), The Encyclopedia of Religion: op. cit. vol. 14, P. 77 and Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 65 and Allen, Structure and Creativity: op. cit. P. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. II, P. 22

¹⁵⁵ Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions: op. cit. P. 23.

One of the earlier methods employed is the individual-psychological investigation of religion, where religious individuals are studied.¹⁵⁶ Other methods employed, especially in contemporary times are:

- a. emphasis on quantitative research using social scientific research methods like introspection, interview, open-ended questionnaire, projective methods etc. etc.
- b. humanistic psychology concerned with models of nature that accord with liberal theology;
- c. transpersonal psychology interested in studying altered states of consciousness like mystical experience, meditation....; and
- d. the study of religious development while noting the capacities and needs of each age group....etc.¹⁵⁷

One of the major issues debated in comparative religion is whether a religious person can really be studied successfully? Psychologists of religion answered in the affirmative based on their 'successful' study of animals, human infants and the mentally ill, whose subjective experiences are unknown to normal adults, and that is by means of careful observation, experimental manipulation and cautious interpretation.¹⁵⁷ The fact is that a normal religious person can not be compared with any of the three kinds. In Islam none of the three is responsible religiously. And as psychologists of religion study only the externals of religion this may be why they compare methodologically a religious person with these three groups/are completely different!

A critique of the Psychological Methods:

Psychology of religion has been criticised of reduction, especially Freud's reduction of religion to infantile wish-fulfillment. Some scholars (W. C. Smith and Fouler) saw that 'every psychology of religion... is a statement of faith...' As we have seen the two main trends in contemporary psychology of religion are, either the apologetic which may be based on 'narrow theological outlook' or 'psychologism'

¹⁵⁶ Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 466.

¹⁵⁷ See Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol.-II, Pp. 25-27.

being parochial in its conceptions.¹⁵⁷ Smart saw it as having only a 'superficial grasp of the multiple structures of religious faith'.¹⁵⁸ Naturistic, positivistic and evolutionistic influences can be noticed especially among the pioneers, so also unconscious projection theories¹⁵⁹ that cannot be proved empirically were part of their 'subjective judgments' on religion despite claiming neutrality and objectivity.

FIVE - The Phenomenological Methods:

Scholars of religion in the beginning of the twentieth century and especially after the first world war had a paradigm shift and a change of attitude in their overall academic study of religion.¹⁶⁰ There was a new perspective of studying a reality on its own terms.¹⁶¹ This may not be far from being a reaction to the reductionistic trends in studying religion especially in the sociology and psychology of religion. There was a need for 'personal participation, sympathetic understanding, empathy, adequate emotions and a feeling for the religious data'.¹⁶² The study of religion which has been mainly descriptive and positivistic was seen as no more a purely descriptive discipline. As pointed out by Max Scheler, its proper place is between the positive science of religion and the essential phenomenology of religion.¹⁶³

That attempt at achieving an integral understanding of the religious data, using refined and precise methods culminated in the phenomenological approach to the religious data. It aims at eliminating implicit value-judgments of previous scholars and

¹⁵⁸ Smart, N., Concept and Empathy: op. cit. P. 206.

¹⁵⁹ ibid., P. 205. See also Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P. 42.

¹⁶⁰ See Sharpe, Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 220. Also Bianchi, The History of Religions: op. cit. P. 2 and Wiebe, Religion and Truth: op. cit. Pp. 59-60. cp. Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. Pp. 94-95. Also Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P. 10 (Introduction).

¹⁶¹ See (The Introduction) in Eliade and Kitagawa (eds.) The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology, op. cit. P.viii, cp. Sharpe, Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 220.

¹⁶² See Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. Pp. 87-88.

¹⁶³ Quoted in The History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect: op. cit. P. 136.

allowing the believer to speak for himself!¹⁶⁴ Or in other words, it aims at studying religious phenomena on its own terms of reference. Was this a sort of realisation on the part of the students of religion of how far they have desacralized and securalised religion?¹⁶⁵

As regards the pioneers and the great contributors to this approach they include: Pierre D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920), Gerardus van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto, William Brede Kristensen (1867-1953), Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883-1959), Max Scheler (1874-1928) and Joachim Wach, etc. etc..

The 'real milestone' of this approach was laid in 1933 with van der Leeuw's book 'Religion in Essence and Manifestation'.¹⁶⁶ Despite the fact that many scholars took up this method, there is no agreement among them as to its precise meaning. For example, Waardenburg gave five different definitions of the concept (phenomenology of religion) as understood in the Dutch study of religions alone.¹⁶⁷ Some of the more general and commonly used definitions are:

1. Phenomenology of religion has been defined 'as a classification of objectively religious phenomena from different traditions, with emphasis on comparative research and general categories of classification'
2. It has been defined also 'as being the distinction, discernment and subsequent understanding of connections between religious data within the framework of what is held to be a basic structure of the religious man';¹⁶⁷ and
3. A third definition given by C. J. Bleeker is that it is 'a systematization of historical facts with the intent to understand their religious meaning'.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Sharpe, op. cit. P. 220.

¹⁶⁵ See Nasr, H. Knowledge and the Sacred: Edinburgh: (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1981), P. 304, F. No. 3.

¹⁶⁶ Sharpe, op. cit. Pp. 220-221.

¹⁶⁷ Waardenburg, J. Reflections on the study of Religion: op. cit. Pp. 119-120.

¹⁶⁸ As quoted in Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P. 58.

As this concept was borrowed from E. Husserl's phenomenology in philosophy, some of its aspects have been incorporated into the phenomenology of religion. Bleeker has mentioned two main procedures of this approach namely 'epoché' which means temporary suspension of all inquiry into the problem of truth; and the second being 'eidetic vision' which has been seen as a form of subjectivity, meaning - a search for essence, but later taken to be a search for structures.¹⁶⁹

Other ideas which helped give the method some weight are:

- a. classification of religious phenomena by means of ideal types, use of anthropological structures (Gerardus van der Leeuw);
- b. conscious use of intuition, analysis of religious experience while doing justice to both the subjective and the objective sides (Rudolf Otto);
- c. reliving experience and understanding it approximately, making use of generalisations of comparative research, forgetting yourself so as to surrender yourself to others (empathetic study of the religion of others), understanding from the viewpoint of the believers, (Kristensen);
- d. religious manifestations seen as purely historical phenomena (Pettazzoni);
- e. allowing religious phenomena speak for themselves (Scheler); and
- f. finally, the description of religious phenomena seen not completely as value-free, for it has to be evocative and must involve suspension of belief and world view (Smart).¹⁷⁰

With these ideas in mind, phenomenologists of religion study the various religions of the world, some of their principles become common place in the study of religions. As a result of their phenomenological study varieties of phenomenologies of religions emerged. The following are few examples of them:

¹⁶⁹ See Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions: op. cit. P. 25. cp. Sharpe, op. cit. P. 224.

¹⁷⁰ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. Pp. 57-59 and Pp. 391-393. Also P. 110. cp. Wach, The Comparative Study of Religion: op. cit. P. 24 and P. 65. see also Smart, N., The science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions: (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), P. 21, See also Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. Pp. 65-66 and Jurji, Edward J. (ed.) Religious Pluralism and World Community: (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), P. 242 and Bianchi, The History of Religions: op. cit. P. 199.

- a. typological phenomenology attempting to anatomise the forms of religion in a comparative manner and then group them according to types;
- b. descriptive phenomenology or systematization of religious phenomena; and
- c. phenomenology in the specific sense of the word, which makes inquiries into the essence, the sense and the structure of religious phenomena. ¹⁷¹

A Critique of the Phenomenological Methods:

The school of study has been criticised by many scholars. ¹⁷² Such criticisms can be summarised as follows:

- a. It has been accused of turning religion and phenomenology of religion, by its structures and typologies, into a pure ideal and something abstract;
- b. Accused of lack of reflection and reflective self-criticism as to the epistemological status and the possibilities it has assigned to itself;
- c. It has been ahistorical, separating religious phenomena from their historical and cultural contexts for comparison sake and thus missing their complete meanings;
- d. It has intuitionistic and subjective tendencies which cannot be verified, and this has been seen as an idealistic-essentialist reduction of religion, because the experiential (which they emphasize) is only one aspect of religion, which means that the other aspects will require other methods;
- e. The contradiction in the two main principles of 'epoché' and eidetic vision or objectivity and subjectivity at the same time; and
- f. Wide generalizations that are not always right or accurate and this can only lead to dilettantism as Von Harnack ¹⁷³ has warned.

¹⁷¹ See Smart, Concept and Empathy: op. cit. P. 211. Also Waardenburg, Reflections on the Study of Religion: op. cit. Pp. 105-106 cp. Allen, Structure and Creativity in Religion: op. cit. P. 58.

¹⁷² See Bianchi The History of Religions: op. cit. Pp. 7, 10, 170, Waardenburg, Reflections on the Study of religion: op. cit. P. 58. Also Smart, The Science of Religion: op. cit. P. 55 and King, U. (art) 'Historical and Phenomenological Approaches' in Whaling (ed.), Contemporary Approaches: op. cit. vol. I, P. 136, also Waardenburg, Classical Approaches: op. cit. P. 644.

¹⁷³ Sharpe, Comparative Religion: op. cit. P. 127.

SIX – The Comparative Method:

As the comparative method is the main focus of our study, we will only mention some basic features of this method very briefly. We shall expantiate on how this method was employed both in the Western scholarship and among the Muslims in subsequent chapters of this work. Comparative method has been employed not only in the different schools of Comparative Religion, as well as in all disciplines in the field of humanities, but also in the natural sciences like biology, anatomy etc.¹⁷⁴ The comparative method in the study of religion has its own merit, as it is based on a wide basis of data, and is vital as an 'instructive research tool'.¹⁷⁵

As regards its inception, Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, is said to be the founder of the comparative method in the study of religions. He first applied it in biological studies, and later on in other areas.¹⁷⁶ Another opinion puts the founder to be Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who, even before Darwin's 'Origin of Species', employed the comparative method in the study of social and religious institutions in order to establish his 'Law of the Three Stages'.¹⁷⁷

Among the Muslims, the work of Abu Al-Hassan al-Amiri (d. 381 A.H./992 C.E.) (al-Ilam bi manaqib al-Islam) can be seen as the first substantive use of the comparative method in the study of religion. The importance of the comparative method was also stressed by the founder of the science of religion in the West, F. Max Muller, who said that all higher knowledge is acquired by comparison for he 'who knows one, knows none'.¹⁷⁸ The method was widely used by anthropologists like Tylor, de la Saussaye, and especially James Frazer, etc.¹⁷⁹ So also other scholars who

¹⁷⁴ See Jordan, L. H., Comparative Religion, Its Genesis and Growth, op. cit. P.30-58.

¹⁷⁵ See Cook, Stanley A., 'Religion' (art) Hastings, James, (ed.) Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Edinburgh,....vol. 10, P. 665, cp. Wach, J., Introduction to the History of Religion, op. cit. P. 134 and 162. See also Sharpe, op. cit. P. 31.

¹⁷⁶ Cain, 'Study of Religion' (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 14, P. 68.

¹⁷⁷ James, E. O., The Beginnings of Religion, op. cit. P. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Muller, F. M., Introduction to the Science of Religion, extracts in Waardenburg's Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, op. cit. P. 93.

¹⁷⁹ ibid. P. 52, cp. James, E. O., Comparative Religion, (London: Mutheun, 1961), P. 23. See also Kitagawa (ed.), History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect, op. cit. P. 131.

studied religion. The initial name of the discipline (comparative religion) which is still used in many quarters also seems to show it as the sole method employed in Religionswissenschaft. Even of recent, there is a renewed call for comparison as its use has been seen as critical for understanding religious phenomena.¹⁸⁰ Due to the frequent and widespread use of this method a lot has been contributed by scholars towards its refinement as we will see in this humble work.

The comparative method as employed in the study of religion has been defined as that method which".....emphasized the necessity of constructing conceptions of religion upon a wide basis of data, while indicating resemblances between the different religions and peoples whether in single environments at some given time, or in the course of their historical development".¹⁸¹

There is an indication in the above definition that more emphasis is given to similarities than to differences in this comparison. This is one of the criticisms directed against this method.¹⁸²

Some of the general ideas on comparison between religions which will be explained at length, Allah willing in subsequent chapters are:

- a. the suggestion that comparison should be careful and critical;
- b. not to ignore the distinct and particular aspects of a religion;
- c. knowing thoroughly what is being compared;
- d. the result of a comparison should be intelligible within at least two traditions being compared;
- e. not to compare between the ideal of one religion and the empirical (distorted) form of another;
- f. that comparison should be between comparables; and

¹⁸⁰ Smith, Jonathan. Z., 'Divine Drudgery on the Comparison of early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity', reviewed by Eilberg - Schwartz in the Journal - History of Religions, No. 3, Feb. 1993, P. 302.

¹⁸¹ Cook, S. A. (art) Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 10, P. 665.

¹⁸² See Smart, N. (art) 'The Scientific Study of Religion in its Plurality' in Whaling, F. (ed.) Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. vol. 1, P. 371 and Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. P. 136.

g. to abstain from any value judgment....etc. ¹⁸³

A Critique of the Comparative Method:

Comparison seems to be mostly odious especially in religion which can easily degenerate into 'competitive religion'¹⁸⁴. It can also be a form of furthering and extolling one's revered values with or without truth. Because of the tendency to look for similarities and parallels, one can easily 'concoct facile similarities and analogues'. There is also a danger of falling into errors, premature conclusions and mistaken theories. As understanding a religious phenomena is important and also difficult, the researcher can easily miss its unique nature and so compare it with what is dissimilar to it. The method has also been accused of extracting religious phenomena from their historical and social contexts which give more meaning to it, and thus, the possibility of misunderstanding it etc. etc. ¹⁸⁵

All these various approaches to the study of religion are Western in matter and in spirit. As for the Muslims and their contributions in the study of religion and its methodology, very little has been done by scholars and mostly in form of articles, rather than in published books as in the case with the Western authors.¹⁸⁶ This is one of the reasons why our research aims at studying two examples of Muslims' contribution to the study of religion, so as to see and analyze their methodologies.

¹⁸³ See Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions, op. cit. Pp. xi and 163, Schmid, Principles of Integral Science of Religion, op. cit. P. 75, Eliade and Kitagawa (eds.) History of Religions: Essays in Methodology, op. cit. P. 52 etc. etc.

¹⁸⁴ See Smith, Huston, The Religions of Man, (Lahore: Sohail Academy, 1983), P-5.

¹⁸⁵ See Whaling, F. (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Whaling, (ed.), Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. vol. I, Pp. 166 and 371 and Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. vol. II, P. 210, Waardenburg, Reflections on the Study of Religion, op. cit. P. 38 and 95. cp. Eliade and Kitagawa (ed.), The History of Religions, op. cit. P. 17, Wach, Introduction to the history of Religions, op. cit. Pp. xviii-xxi, and 134-135. See also, Bianchi, The History of Religion: op. cit. P. 7 etc.

¹⁸⁶ See for example Aasi, G., 'Muslim Contributions to the History of Religion': (art). The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences: vol-VIII, No. 3, 1991, Pp. 409-421. See also another article in Arabic by Dr. Deen Muhammad, 'Some of the Muslim Methods in the Study of Religion': (art) Hawliat Al-Jami'ah Al-Islamiyyah, Issue No. 3, 1415 A.H.-1995, Pp. 79-123.

Any Integrative, Encompassing and Adequate Method for the Study of Religion:

Two writers separated by a period of more than eighty years of active work in this discipline, suggested one method (the historical method) as the most appropriate for the study of religion. The short-comings of these suggestions are evident despite the fact that they tried to include whatever is necessary in their formulations of the method.

Morris Jastrow in 1901 as quoted in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, showed that the solution to the numerous problems of this field is to adopt the historical method (according to his definition) - "which consisted of gathering data from all time and places (historical?) *, arranging them systematically (phenomenological?), interpreting them (hermeneutical?) within a strictly natural and human framework (positivistic and reductionistic?), exploring their inner, emotional aspects (psychological?), and doing a comparative study (comparative?) to discover the essential laws of the development of religion (evolutionistic?).¹⁸⁷

In our humble opinion, Morris Jastrow was only trying to put together all the methods used in this study into one! It is a very good attempt at bringing all these aspects together, what remains is only whether it can be implemented or not. The other scholar writing in 1983 believes that only the History of Religions (the historical method?) 'is capable of studying religion fundamentally, irreducibly, comprehensively and scientifically'.¹⁸⁸ He explained further what he meant as follows:

- a. Fundamental - because religion is the sole object of investigation and that is primary, central and basic;
- b. Irreducible - because it attempts to devise categories of description and analysis that are religiously referential, categories that preserve, reflect and convey the integrity, autonomy and experience of religion;
- c. Comprehensive - for it examines it culturally, diachronically and synchronically; and
- d. Scientifically - because it grounds all analyses in the palpable data of the

¹⁸⁷ See Cain, S., 'Study of Religion' (art), Eliade, M. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit. vol. 14, P. 64.

¹⁸⁸ Kitagawa, J. M., *The History of Religions: Retrospect and Prospect*, op. cit. P. 156.

* Brackets and what is in between them added by us.

various religions.¹⁸⁹

This is also another attempt at reviewing and refining all the previous methods in this study, the problems of which are numerous. The following are the major ones:

Problems of Religionswissenschaft

The varied problems of this discipline stemmed from the very motives behind it, and the circumstances that led to its establishment. Religion, as is well known, is related to the supernatural, the spiritual side of man. However, the science of religion in its initial stages, was a clear rebellion against the supernatural as has been shown. This is the paradox of this discipline in the West!

Some of the major problems, scholars have been grappling with since the inception of this kind of study include:

1. The Transcendental or the Supernatural whether it should form part of the study or not? For as some try to include it, most of the students of religion see this discipline as a human and not a super human study.
2. Whether this discipline is a science, a pseudo-science or an art? A lot of opinions abound but most scholars see it as a science in the broad sense of the term.
3. Whether there should be in this field a methodological atheism, agnosticism or confessionism? Scholars are divided on this issue seriously, especially with the phenomenologists' desire to study religion on its own plane of reference.
4. Whether this study should be of all or of particular religions? Here some see that it is not possible to be well-versed in all the religions of the world, it can only lead to 'dilettantism'.
5. The issue of objectivity, value judgment and pre-suppositions. Whether this study should judge religions or not and whether a scholar can be really without any presuppositions.
6. Whether this study is descriptive or interpretive and explanatory? As regards this, some desire a sort of an integration of all these.
7. The issue of affirming the truth or abandoning it completely? See No. 5

¹⁸⁹ ibid. Pp. 156-157.

above.

8. The relationship between this field and the other academic disciplines, especially theology, philosophy and the social sciences,? A lot has been written on these relationships, but without a consensus.
9. The issue of theorization in this discipline and the best method for studying religion? The greatest question has been that of a search for the best method in this field, but there is no consensus here also.
10. The problem of sympathy and empathy while studying the religion of others? How the student of religion is supposed to conduct himself as he studies other religions, his attitudes and so on form an important part of the discussions on methodology in this field.
11. The issue of the outsiders' understanding of the religion of others, whether that is possible at all or not? A lot of discussions have taken place on this difficult issue with some seeing the impossibility of understanding a religion other than your own.
12. The problem of the requirements and prerequisites for anyone who wants to get involved in this kind of study? Are there special requirements or not, are they psychological or otherwise?
13. What are the criteria for some of the judgments found in this field? Any criteria in this study? If yes what are they?
14. The issue of reductionism and the so called claim of a scientific study of religion. The reduction of religion in almost all approaches to the study of religion, how it can be eliminated.

These issues and many others like the definition of religion, the nature of religious experience, whether religion is part of human nature, is universal etc. are still being discussed in the learned circles of this field. This is why our topic has become more interesting and very pertinent. Our study of the comparative method as employed both by the Western and the few Muslim scholars, will no doubt be a useful contribution to the vast and seemingly endless academic exercise in the overall study of religion . It is hoped that this humble contribution will pave way for further researches in this important field.

CHAPTER TWO

**THE COMPARATIVE METHOD
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION
ACCORDING TO AL-AMIRI**

CHAPTER TWO - THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO AL-AMIRI

Abu al-Hassan Muhammad bn Yusuf
al-Amiri (C.300-381 A.H.)

- ONE** A brief sketch of al-Amiri's life and times and his contributions to the study of Religion
- TWO** The comparative method in the study of religion according to al-Amiri (Conception and basic principles.)
- THREE** Evaluation of al-Amiri's comparative method in the study of religion.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO AL-ĀMĪRĪ:

INTRODUCTION:

We have given in the previous chapter an outline and a review of the issues related to the scientific study of religion, from the time of its inception, or the time generally believed so, to the present time. It can be discerned from the analysis in the previous chapter, that the study of religion was not only confined to the western scholarship, but was also carried out by Muslim scholars for various reasons. Often owing to the influence of the Qur'ān on them, especially its references to the old religions, and its attacks on some of their beliefs and practices, some Muslim scholars criticise and refute some religions, especially Judaism and Christianity.

In this chapter we will, Allah willing, focus on the contributions made by one Muslim scholar in the field of Comparative Religion, with special emphasis on the method generally seen as the main method of the study of religion, at least at the time of its inception in the West. It is the method due to which the discipline took its name of Comparative Religion - the Comparative Method. As evident from the title of this chapter, an analysis will be made of one Muslim scholar who employed the comparative method in his way, while being guided, by some Islamic principles that are different from those accepted by the western scholars of religion.

This personality is that of Abu al-Hassan Muhammad bin Yusuf al-Āmīrī (d. 381 A.H./992 C.E.), who wrote a number of works in which he purposefully used the comparative method, in his study of the different themes in different religions, like belief-system, worship, eschatology, angelology, prophecy etc. He seems to be an obscure but a great Muslim philosopher from Khurasan. Attempt will be made to give an outline and a brief sketch of his life and times, and this will be followed by a critical

analysis of his study of religion, his investigations and findings following his comparative study of a broad number of religious topics.

Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī was one of the great philosophers of the 4th A.H./10th C.E. centuries in the Muslim World, especially in the region of Khurasan (Iran), a famous center of learning in those years. Being a philosopher, he showed great interest in the study of religions. He used his intellect and experience in trying to understand religion. In his extensive study of comparative religion, he gave the world probably the first systematic and thematic comparison of the religions of his time. These religions are Islam, Judaism, Sabianism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and the pagan religion of the pre-Islamic Arabia.

Al-Āmīrī is being studied first before al-Bīrūnī in this chapter for two reasons: firstly, his being chronologically earlier than al-Bīrūnī and secondly, his extensive use of the comparative method in a number of his works. Even though, some of his works related to our study are lost, his extant books speak clearly of his special interest in comparative study of various religious topics. His study of other religions was not like that of other Muslim scholars, who came before or after him in all respects. Most of them were interested in refuting their opponents, in scoring points in their polemics with the people of other religions or in criticising the sacred scriptures or beliefs and practices of people of other religious orientations. Al-Āmīrī followed a different course. He was deeply interested in other religions and wanted to compare them, and to understand them better.

Before proceeding to make a critical analysis of his comparative study of religion, it is imperative to give a brief sketch of his life and times.

ONE

AI-ĀMIRĪ HIS LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

a- A Brief Sketch of al-Āmīrī's Life and Times:

Abu al-Hassan Muhammad bn Abi Dhar Yusuf al-Āmīrī was born in about the year 300 A.H./912 C.E. in Nishapur, the then capital of Khurasan¹. Not much is known about his early life, similar to many a celebrity or a renowned scholar. However, it is believed that he spent his early life in the pursuit of knowledge within the Khurasan region.² It was unfortunate that extant Khurasani sources mentioned little about him. He was not given an entry in 'Tarikh Khurasan' of Ibn al-Bayyi al-Hakim al-Naysaburi (d.405 AH/1014 C.E.), it was only by chance that his death was mentioned in it.³

However, two of his younger contemporaries told a lot about him. Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d.414 A.H./1023 C.E.) considered as his student, mentions him frequently in at least three of his works : 'al-Muqabasat', 'al-Imta' wa al-Muanasah' and 'Akhlaq al-wazirain'. The other scholar was Abu Ali Ahmad bn Muhammad Maskawaih, in his 'al-Hikmah al-Khalidah'. So also in 'Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikmah' which is in a manuscript form written by an unknown writer.⁴ Al-Shahristani included al-Āmīrī among the great Muslim philosophers.⁵ His importance and place among the Muslim philosophers have also been stressed in other sources.⁶ He was called the

¹ The north-easternmost part of Iran today, its present capital is Mashhad. In early Islamic times, it included also parts of the Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan. See Bosworth, C.E. et. al (eds.) The Encyclopedia of Islam, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), New Edition vol. VIII, p. 63 and vol. V, pp. 55-56.

² See Minovi, Mojtaba (ed.) al-Sa'adah wa al-Is'ad by Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, (Weisbaden, 1957-8), P-IV (Introduction).

³ So also the major biographical works like that of Ibn Abi Usaybia, Yaqut al-Rumi, Ibn Khalliqan and Ibn al-Nadim's Fihrist, did not mention him specifically.

⁴ Badwi, A, (ed.), al-Hikmah al-Khalidah by Abu Ali Ahmed bn Miskawaih (Cairo:Maktabah al-Nahdah, 1952) p. 347, so also Siwan al-Hikmah wa Thalath al-Rasail by al-Sijistāni (Tehran: 1974) quoted by Badawi in al-Hikmah al-Khalidah.

⁵ Al-Shahristani, al-Milal wa al-Nihal, (Cario, 1948-49) vol.III, p.38.

⁶ Husein M.T. (ed.) al-Muqabasat by al-Tawhidi, (Baghdad: Matba'ah al-Irshad, 1970) pp. 116 and 353. See also Mojtaba, M., op. cit. p.iv and Rowson, E.K. (ed.) al-Amad ala al-abad by al-Āmīrī (Beirut:Dar Al-Kindi, 1979). P.8; Ghurab A., (ed.) al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam by al-Āmīrī, (Cairo, 1967) p. 9 cp. Khalifat, S, (ed.) The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, (Amman, 1988) where a detail biography of al-Āmīrī was given.

'Philosopher of Nishapur who was recognized as the chief philosopher of the Moslems in the period between the death of al-Farabi and the flourishing of Ibn Sina, in the fourth century H., the 10th century A.D.⁶ He was believed to be well-versed in Greek Philosophy and had thorough Islamic knowledge.⁷ Al-Āmīrī did make efforts, similar to most of Muslim Philosophers to reconcile between Greek philosophy and the revealed message of Islam. This is why it is surprising to see how al-Āmīrī was neglected - perhaps unjustifiably - by students of the history and the study of philosophy among the Muslims.⁸

Al-Āmīrī was known to have traveled to many cities of the Islamic world in search of knowledge, like al-Rayy, Baghdad, al-Bukharah etc, and was described as some one who wandered a lot in the different parts of the world and who by that, has gained a good knowledge of the secrets of Allah's creations.⁹ His most influential teacher was the geographer cum philosopher, Abu Zaid Ahmad bn Sahl al-Balkhi (d.322 A.H./933 C.E.); under whom he studied philosophy in Khurasan. Al-Balkhi in turn, was a student of the great philosopher of the Arabs - Abu Yusuf Yaqub bn Ishaq al-Kindi.¹⁰ Al-Āmīrī is believed to have studied fiqh of Hanafi school and the ilm al-kalam of al-Maturidiyyah sect from Abu-Bakr Muhammad al-Qaffal al-Shashi.¹¹

Dr. Khalifat in his erudite study of al-Āmīrī's life and times suggests other teachers of al-Āmīrī, who he either met or was influenced by them or by their writings. These include: Abu Nasr al-Farabi, Abu Ja'far al-Khazin, Abu al-Hassan al-Tabari, Abu-Abdullah Muhammad bn Ahmad al-Khawarizmi. Other prominent scholars of al-Āmīrī's time with whom he studied, accompanied, debated or discussed include, Abu

⁷ See Rowson, op. cit. P. 17 and Ghurab, op. cit. p. 8.

⁸ See Minovi, op. cit. P.IV and Ghurab, op. cit. P.8 and Rowson, op. cit. p.8 .

⁹ See al-Tawhidi, al-Imta' wa al-Mu'anah, op. cit. vol.III p. 95. Also vol. I p. 36 Cp. Margoliouth, D. S.(ed.). The Irshad al-Arib ila Ma'rifat al-Adib, by Yaqt al-Rumi (London: Luzac & Co., 1927) vol.III pp.124-125.

¹⁰ See Ghurab, A, (ed.) al-l'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam by al- Āmīrī, op. cit. p.8 and Rowson, op. cit. p. 17. This is what made some scholars to affiliate al-Āmīrī to the Kindi tradition or school of muslim philosophy. See Ghurab, op. cit. P.7.

¹¹ Khalifat S, (ed.) The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, op. cit. pp. 182-183.

partly be explained as a result of the imperfection of al-Āmīrī in the philosophical sciences in the beginning as the writer of Siwan al-Hikmah pointed out. The import of his statement shows that al-Āmīrī went to Baghdad, and although he disliked their manners, he returned to his native Khurasan a perfect philosopher.¹⁶ This explains to us, at least, one reason why al-Āmīrī did not take his rightful place in the hierarchy of Muslim philosophers.

Another aspect of the times of al-Āmīrī is the attitude of some scholars towards philosophy and philosophers, especially at those times, when Muslim scholars frequently attack those who study philosophy deeply, a period considered as the first period of philosophy in the Muslim world by the Encyclopedia of Islam.¹⁷ Ghulam Ibn al-Tarrarah al-Hariri (d. 360 A.H.) accused al-Āmīrī of attempting to undermine the authority of Shariah. He said that al-Āmīrī was after the favours of one ruler or the other and that he was accused of heresy (ilhad) and that he discussed. "...such nonsense (philosophy) which was neither sent by God in His book, nor recommended by the Prophet, nor pursued by his community.... But my opinion is that the authorities from whom he (al-Āmīrī) takes and borrows, like Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato, are a pack of infidels, who spoke in their books about the 'exoteric' and the 'esoteric' - and such (talk) is woven only by those who disparage Islam while hiding the suspicious (position) they are themselves in".¹⁸

Despite all these accusations, many of which al-Āmīrī might not be guilty of, he was an authority in his field of philosophy and had gone a long way in trying to reconcile his philosophical ideas with the Islamic Revelation. He contributed immensely in the defence of Islam and in proving, by means of rational and factual evidences, its superiority over all other religions. He was also seen to have greatly influenced his

¹⁶ Badawi, A. (ed.) Siwan al-Hikma wa thalath al-Rasa'il, by Abu Sulayman at-Tantiqi al-Sijistani (Tehran: 1974) as quoted by Rowson, op. cit. p. 35 F. No.2..

¹⁷ Lewis, B. et al, (eds.), The Encyclopedia of Islam, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965) vol. II, pp. 771-773.

¹⁸ Amin, A. and al-Zain, A. (eds.) al-Imta' wa al-Muanasah by al-Tawhidi, (Cairo:Lajnat al-ta'lif, N.D.) .

Balkhi, for at least two years in order to be affiliated to al-Balkhi as his student.

b. the confirmation of the year of his death, i.e. 381 A.H. If his well-known teacher was al-Balkhi (d.322 A.H.) and he (al-Āmīrī) died in 381 A.H., it means he lived a very long and productive life.

May Allah have mercy on him.

b- Al-Āmīrī's Works:

Abu al- Hassan al-Āmīrī mentioned a list of his works in the preface of his book "al-Amad ala al-Abad". Seventeen titles were cited as major works as he excluded short treatises, commentaries and works in the Persian language. Of these seventeen books only four are extant. This is just like a drop in the sea of the lost books of Islamic heritage. The extant works are:

1. al-I'lām bi Ma'āqib al-Islām;
2. Inqādhu al-Bashar min al-Jabr wa al-Qadar;
3. al-Taqrir li Awjūh al-Taqdir; and
4. al-Ibsar wa al-Mubṣar. ²⁵

The other extant works include, of course,

5. 'Al-Amad ala al-Abad', in which these works were mentioned. Others not mentioned in 'al-Amad' are:
6. Fusul Fi al-Ma'alim al-Ilahiyyah
7. al-Sa'adah wa al-Is'ad - on which there is a little disagreement on whether it was al-Āmīrī's or not. However, it has been seen as one of his earlier works. ²⁶

Of these extant works of al-Āmīrī, our study will pay greater attention to only such works in which al-Āmīrī studied the religions and philosophies of different people. Focus and special emphasis will be made on his use of the comparative method. For this reason, our study will be basically on his following important works namely: (1)

²⁵ See Rowson, E.K. (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad by al-Āmīrī, (Beirut: Dar al-Kindi, 1979) pp. 55-57.

²⁶ ibid. pp. 15-17 cp. Ghurab, A (ed.) Al-I'lām bi Ma'āqib al-Islām, by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p.15 where a different opinion has been cited. See a long study of the work by Khalifat who confirmed it was al-Āmīrī's. Khalifat, S. (ed.) The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī (Anṣār: 1988) pp. 104-124.

The book of 'al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam' (Declaration of virtues of Islam) and (2) The book of 'al-Amad ala al-Abad' (The fixed end of eternity). In these two works, al-Āmīrī compared religions and philosophies in different topics like belief - systems, rituals or types of worship, political systems, eschatologies etc. Greater part of his contribution has been in this kind of religious study. Other areas in which al-Āmīrī has contributed include his commentaries on the philosophical works of Aristotle. Three of such works were:

1. Sharh Kitab al-Burhan;
2. Sharh Kitab al-Nafs; and
3. Tafsir Ma'ani Alfaz Aristutalis fi Kitab al-Maqulat. ²⁷

These writings give us a glimpse of al-Āmīrī's interest in Greek Philosophy and support ^{the} view that he was a great commentator on the works of Aristotle. He has written on 'Tasawwuf' also and al-Tawhidi quoted excerpts from al-Āmīrī's work entitled 'al-Nusk al-Aqli wa al-Tasawwuf al-Milli'. ²⁸

c- His Philosophy:

Anyone studying the works of al-Āmīrī will notice his ardent interest in religious topics. He studied Greek philosophy, but he was more inclined towards what we may today call the 'Philosophy of Religion' and this may not be unconnected with his orientation and training, as both his teacher al-Balkhi (d.322 A.H.) and his teacher's mentor, al-Kindi, had had that interest as pointed out by scholars. ²⁹ Their interest in this area, which is solely studied by the discipline of 'Religionswissenschaft' or 'the science of religion' is evident in the kind works they produced.

²⁷ Al-Tawhidi, al-Basa'ir wa al-Dhakha'ir vol. I p. 515 as quoted by Rowson, (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad. op. cit. P. 38, F.No. 26.

²⁸ Husain, M.T., (ed.) al-Muqabasat by al-Tawhidi, (Baghdad: Mataba'ah al-Irshad, 1970) pp. 340-353.

²⁹ See Rowson (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad, op. cit. Pp. 17-20 Cp. Ghurab, A, (ed.) al- I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam, by al-Āmīrī op. cit. pp. 7-9.

Al-Kindi, for instance, known as "the philosopher of the Arabs" wrote treatises on the refutation of the Manichaeans and the Dualists, so also the atheists and the Christians, and was "the direct source for the epistle on the Sabians by his pupil Ahmad b. al-Tayyib al-Sarakhsī (d.286/899). Another sometime pupil of al-Kindī's wrote a history of the temples of the world."³⁰ Al-Balkhi is known to have written a work entitled "Shara'i al-Adyan" (the legal systems (or Divine codes) of the different religions). The greatest contributor to this kind of study (the study of religion) among them all was Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, who has to his credit four scholarly works in this area. Of these four works two have been lost:

1. The book of "Al-Irshad li Tashih al-l'tiqad", in it al-Āmīrī made a comparative study of the resurrectional and eschatological beliefs of the Magians (Zoroastrians), the Manichaeans, the Jews and the Christians. As he also discussed the concept of Prophet hood.³¹
2. The other book is entitled 'Al-Ibanah 'an 'ilal al-Diyanah'. In this lost work of al-Āmīrī, he compared the Islamic legal code (Shari'ah) with those of other religions especially in what pertains to human transactions and ordinances.³²

The other two works have been published and in one of them entitled - "al-l'Ilam bi Manaqib al-Islam"³³, al-Āmīrī drew out a method for comparing six religions of his time in different issues. This is perhaps the first thematic comparison of religious topics, not only in the Muslim world, but also in the world at large. In the other published work - "al-Amad ala al-Abad".³⁴ Al-Āmīrī compared the concepts of reward and

³⁰ See Rowson, E.K. (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad, by al-Āmīrī op. cit. p. 17. Cp. Ghurab, A, al-l'Ilam bi Manaqib al-Islam, op. cit. P. 8.

³¹ See Rowson, E.K., (ed.) al-Amad ala-Abad by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. P. 152. See also Khalifat S. (ed.), The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 472.

³² See Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-l'Ilam bi Manaqib al-Islam by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 150. See also Khalifat S. (ed.), The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 473.

³³ ibid.

³⁴ Rowson, E.K. (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad, by al-Āmīrī op. cit. pp. 57, 151-153, 163.

punishment as found in the different religions, using the Islamic position as the standard. From these works we can see how al-Āmīrī tried to prove himself as a student of not only Islam, which he professes, but also of other religions. His interest in other religions and his comparing between them tend to depict him, as if he were envisaging a new discipline hitherto unknown to the scholarly world. His efforts in this regard seem to foreshadow the efforts of F. Max Muller (1823-1900 C.E.) in the second half of the 19th century in trying to evolve a new discipline of the science of religion. As far as we know, no scholar before al-Āmīrī and after him upto the modern times, has shown more interest in comparing religions in a wide range of topics like Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī of Nishapur.³⁵ This interest of al-Āmīrī in this field and his numerous works, in a way, refute the allegation that, his ‘al-īlam bi Manaqib al-Islam’ and ‘al-Amad ala al-Abad’ were written purposely to appease the religious scholars, who were at loggerheads with al-Āmīrī and others like him, due to their interest and study of the Greek philosophy. We see al-Āmīrī’s interest in religion as a genuine interest aimed at arriving at the religion that is closest to reason and is the best in many ways, according to his own criteria.

d- Al-Āmīrī and the Study of Religion:

1- His Interest In The Discipline:

As mentioned earlier, the interest of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī in the comparative study of religion is enormous and it, in a way, surpasses that of his mentors. He has a strong belief that before one accepts a religion wholeheartedly, one should weigh it on the balance of reason, after which one can accept, reject or even criticise it.³⁶ Not only this, one should compare it with the other religions, so that with the help of reason, one can easily arrive at the noblest and the highest form of religion which could

³⁵ The only person that might have had a similar interest and whose writings might have influenced al-Āmīrī, was al-Nobakhti. See Khalifat S., (ed.) The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, op. cit. 473.

³⁶ See Ghurab, A., (ed.) al-īlam bi Manaqib al-Islam by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 122.

Al-lbanah an ilal al-Diyanah. Even though the comparison is seldom severe, but the choice of the themes very much shows the efforts of a serious mind trying to understand the secrets of the world of religion. In some of these themes, he resembles modern writers in both Islam and the Science of religion.

In a second book of al-Āmīrī entitled, 'al-Fusul fi al-Ma'alim al-Ilahiyyah', he, in the course of explaining the general human belief in the creator,⁴⁰ mentioned one of the more recent issues discussed in the philosophy of religion. The issue was taken up also by some comparative religionists, - it is that of the diversity of religions with their different conceptions of the same deity and how the diversity is being explained. After mentioning the different conceptions of God among the different sections of humanity, without specifying them, al-Āmīrī opined that these differences occurred not due to the Being believed in, (God), but due to those who believed in Him or due to the differences in their way of thinking. However, al-Āmīrī was not ready to accept these differences as natural or acceptable. Rather, he blamed those who fell short of arriving at the lowest acceptable level of the conception of the deity, because they did not make the necessary efforts in this regard.⁴¹

In yet another book 'al-Amad ala al-Abad', al-Āmīrī compared different religions in their conceptions of reward and punishment and their eschatologies.⁴² The interest of al-Āmīrī in various religions and his effort to compare them has made him one of the few scholars in the Islamic world - from his time till just before the modern times - who possesses sufficient knowledge of more than three religions. Three religions, because, most of the Muslim scholars who gave some time for the study of other religions, usually restricted themselves to the study of Judaism and Christianity while comparing them with Islam.⁴³ Another aspect of his interest in the study of

⁴⁰ See Khalifat S., (ed.) The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 374.

⁴¹ ibid. p.374.

⁴² Rowson, E.K., (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. pp. 151-153, 163.

⁴³ Scholars like al-Qadi Abdu'l Jabbar, Imam al-Ghazali and Imam Ibn Taymiyyah and others.

religion can be seen in his defence of 'ilm al-Kalam' (scholasticism), which is believed to be the father of the present study of religion among the Muslims, as was the case with the West, as shown in the first chapter of this study. Al-Āmīrī shows that debate and argument in a scholarly manner is never condemned, but rather encouraged in Islam, and that the companions of the Prophet (S.A.W.) did participate in such discussions in order to clear some misinterpretations and misconceptions.⁴⁴ Since this branch of study deals with the fundamental beliefs of religion, al-Āmīrī saw it as very vital to the overall life of a religion, and that the task of those who study it is as important as that of the armed defenders of Islam.⁴⁵ Al-Āmīrī even suggested the qualities or prerequisites of those who should undertake this kind of study.⁴⁶ All these show to what extent al-Āmīrī was involved in the study of religion.

2- His Methodological Contribution:

In the beginning of his comparative study of religions, al-Āmīrī mentioned in his book "al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam", what he believes as the guidelines for true comparison. He believes these guidelines can save the student of religion from falling into error or biasness. He believes that comparison, as is clear from the word, leads to affirming the superiority of one thing over another or others.⁴⁷ In doing that, one can be right or wrong but according to al-Āmīrī's judgment, there are two important issues that can guarantee correct comparison:

- a. that the things being compared should be on the same level (of importance in the eyes of the adherents of those religions) so that a superior act of worship or belief in one religion is not compared with an act or belief inferior to it from another religion. In other words, a

⁴⁴ See Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam, by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 111.

⁴⁵ ibid. pp. 111-112.

⁴⁶ ibid. p. 180.

⁴⁷ ibid. p. 125.

fundamental in one religion must be compared with another, equally fundamental from another religion.⁴⁸

Here, al-Āmīrī addressed one of the difficult issues in the comparison between religions. Modern students of religion can question this suggestion by asking al-Āmīrī how one can determine the importance or non-importance of an act, especially if it is in the religion of the other. Subjectivity is bound to play a very important role here.⁴⁹ So, unless one party believes that the issue is as important as the other party considered it to be, the comparison will be seen as incomplete and biased.⁵⁰

The idea of comparing something superior in one religion with an inferior subject matter in another religion can take another from. For example, when an adherent of a religion, for instance Islam, compares the ideal form of Islam with that of another religion, say Christianity in its present form, he will then fall into the kind of error that al-Āmīrī wants us to avoid.

- b. the second guideline for a correct comparison as seen by al-Āmīrī is that, the student of religion should not take an issue as described by a sect which does not constitute the majority adherents of a religion (not from the mainstream of that religion), he should not take that and ascribe it to all its adherents.⁵¹ In other words, if one wants to compare two religions, in one particular issue, one should depend on, and accept that issue as described by the majority adherents of the two religions being compared.

⁴⁸ ibid. P. 125.

⁴⁹ See Kitagawa, J. M., et al (eds) Introduction to the History of Religions by Joachim Wach, (New York:Macmillan, 1988), p. 117.

⁵⁰ Smith, W.C., On Understanding Islam, Selected Studies (Delhi: Idarah - I Adabiyat - I Delhi, 1985), pp.235-236.

⁵¹ Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-Islam bi Manaqib al-Islam by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 125.

This may be because the minority views or sects of a religion tend to entertain ideas or present explanations and interpretations of an aspect of this religion which are not in line with the general philosophy or thought-form of that religion. Popular religious belief may contain a great deal of innovations (bid'ah) which is generally not accepted as correct articulation of the concerned religion. The majority opinion referred to here by al-Āmīrī is the experts' explanation on the issues of that religion as accepted and practised by the majority adherents of that religion. Al-Āmīrī might have arrived at this point due to the environment in which he experienced religions and studied them.⁵² This is yet another great contribution of al-Āmīrī to the methodology of the study of religions which emphasizes the important requirement of objectivity and honesty when commenting on the religion of other people. Al-Āmīrī added that, whenever reason tries to maintain these two important guidelines, it becomes easy for the investigator to achieve a true and honest comparison.⁵³ Other methodological insights of al-Āmīrī include, his suggestions of means by which a student of religion can be objective. First, he emphasized the need for the student of religion to have good knowledge of the laws of logic, especially the scale by which a religious belief or act is judged.

Secondly, a comparative religionist, according to al-Āmīrī, must know the principles of analogical deductions, in order to avoid invalid analogy that can lead to wrong conclusions. The investigator should also be able to construct correct premises that will lead to correct and acceptable arguments. He should also have commitment and dedication to his beliefs and possess deep insight and a good knowledge of his religion, because superficial knowledge and uncertainty can create methodological problems for the student of religion.⁵⁴ Al-Āmīrī also advises students of religion to be humble before a clear evidence and not haughty.⁵⁴

⁵² See Khalifat S., (ed.) 'The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī', (Amman: 1988), pp. 31-42.

⁵³ Ghurab, A., (ed.) *al-Ilām of al-Āmīrī*, op. cit. p. 125.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 118.

As part of al-Āmīrī's methodology, and before he began comparing some aspects of religions, he tried to outline what he believed to be the dimensions of all religions, in the same way the modern leading scholars in the discipline of the science of religion have done.⁵⁵ Al-Āmīrī mentions four dimensions of religion and these are:

- a. A belief in a being that is worshipped (i.e. a deity); these are called doctrines or the intellectual aspect of a religion. In al-Āmīrī's view, this is the most important dimension of religion;
- b. A system of devotion, by means of which obedience of the adherents is affirmed for the object of worship (i.e. forms of worship or rituals);
- c. A code of conduct which regulates human dealings and transactions and which organises their lives (i.e. some legal code or divine law);
- d. Some decrees or ordinances for restraining the evil ones and putting a halt to their vices (i.e. religious or divine punishments).

Al-Āmīrī outlined these dimensions so as to facilitate a correct comparison between the different aspects of them as they applied to different religions. He further expantiate on these four dimensions to give their sub-divisions as will be shown latter. However, it is very clear that al-Āmīrī gave these dimensions and sub-dimensions only from an Islamic stand point as will be discovered later. Despite his knowledge of other religions, he found it easier to start from the Islamic position and then try to find the reflection of that in other religions. What modern psycho-analysts will call a 'projection'. ⁵⁶

Another aspect of al-Āmīrī's contribution to methodology in the study of religion, shows how concerned he was with the comparative method upon which he reflected a great deal. It was reported by al-Tawhidi in his "Akhlaq al-Wazirain" that al-

⁵⁵ Scholars like Joachim Wach and Ninian Smart both gave their own views on what are the essential aspects of all religions.

⁵⁶ See Sills, D.L., (ed.) International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, (New York: Macmillan, 1972) vol. 11 and 12, pp. 561-562. See also Wiebe, D. Religion and Truth, (The Hague: Mouton, 1981) pp. 108-110.

Āmīrī was asked why the soul/self seeks for differences (even) in things that are similar or alike? Al-Āmīrī answered that, this is because the soul/self naturally and according to its essence, is averse to plurality and craves for unity, it accepts all that will help it get easy access to that, for distinction paves way to unity; the more the similarity, the subtler the distinction; and the subtler the distinction, the more the self searches for it, and the more passionately it seeks for it, and its achievement the more enjoyable.⁵⁷ This shows how serious al-Āmīrī believes in comparison as a way of arriving at true knowledge. And as the human being craves for unity, he tries to get a true understanding of similars by going deep into their essences. Many scholars of religion today, who attack the comparative method and those who employ it, accuse the comparativists of capitalising on similars and stressing on them, instead of emphasizing on the differences.⁵⁸ In so doing, they use to err in taking some aspect of one religion and declaring it similar to an aspect of another. This usually leads to wrong conclusions and wrong judgments. From the above, we can see how al-Āmīrī expounded this delicate and complicated issue in the comparative study of religion.

Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī believes in an objective, honest and serious search of truth of the different issues as can be seen in some of the premises he mentioned at the openings of some chapters of his "Al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam". He said, "The correct statement holds its realisation and confirmation within itself, and a liar is disgraced by his very mouth"⁵⁹ He also said, "Serious investigation is a freedom from deceit"⁵⁹ He also added, "If not because of error, the light of the truth (the right) would not have shone"⁶⁰ From the above statements, it is clear that al-Āmīrī always wants to reach at the truth and declare it, without the fear of being embarrassed or failed by his

⁵⁷ See Al-Tanji, M.T., (ed.) Akhlag al-wazirain by al-Tawhidi (Damascus: Majma al-'Ilm al-Arabi, N.D.) pp.446-447.

⁵⁸ See James, E. O., Comparative Religion, (London: Mutheun, 1961) p.24. See also Whaling, F.(ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, (Berlin:Mouton, 1983), vol. I, p.166 and 371.

⁵⁹ Ghurab, A, (ed.) al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam, p. cit. P.179 .

⁶⁰ ibid. p. 185.

own efforts. To him, you have to be honest if you are investigating a fact and that will make you free of any deceit, because you stand by the facts as they reveal themselves to you, not as you want them to be. This is objectivity in a very high form.

Al-Āmīrī believes in clear reason as the arbiter, even in comparative religion, because he believes that the true religion will never contradict reason. He opined that what evidence has confirmed and reason has imposed will never be in contradiction with the religion of truth,⁶¹ (din al-haq).⁶² In implementing his methodological idea of reason being made as the final arbiter in comparing religions, al-Āmīrī stated regarding the belief in the resurrection and the last day, that: "If we were to compare what the Muslims say with what the people of other religions say in the resurrection and the next life, and we made reason as an arbiter, the superiority of Islam emerges."⁶³ He believes that if a Muslim studies religion (Islam) in the light of reason while comparing it with that of others, he increases in faith and he has more reason to be loyal and dedicated to his religion, and that can serve as a safeguard against being misled away from it.⁶⁴

True to his tradition as a philosopher of the tradition of al-Kindi, al-Āmīrī saw that there is no contradiction between philosophy (reason) and religion (revelation). This may be peculiar to the religion of Islam. We see the students of religion making sweeping statements that all religions contain the non-rational.⁶⁵ Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) was seen as one of the scholars who stress the non-rational aspects of the religious experience, even though he didn't abandon completely the rational dimensions of religion. From his 'idea of the Holy' to that of the 'numinous', Otto, arrived at the

⁶¹ ibid. p. 83.

⁶² Perhaps al-Āmīrī is here using the Qur'ānic statement on the only religion that is acceptable to Allah. See Surah al-Taubah: 29.

Al-īlam,
op. cit. P.133.

⁶³ ibid. P. 123.

⁶⁴ See for example Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) p. 59 and pp. 62-63.

belief, that the numinous experience is non-rational and it evades precise formulation.⁶⁶ We can say without exaggeration, that Islam is the only world religion, whose basic foundations (the fundamental doctrines) are based on revelational injunctions that can be explained and subsequently understood by the human intellect.

3 - Al-Āmīrī's Contributions On Theorisation On Religion:

Any serious investigator into the diverse world of religions with its conflicting claims and contradictions will be faced with many problems, which show the complexity of the world of religion. The sheer number of these religions and their strange differences, despite their claim that they are all moving towards the Truth and are trying to satisfy the one spiritual urge in man, are enough to confuse a student. A great deal of information has been collected today by the students of religion, explaining the complicated realm of religion, and new secrets continue to be uncovered.

Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, as a student of various religions has stated, in his books, many of his findings that he collected as a result of his study of religions and his observations of the 'homo religiosus'. In one of his works - 'al-l'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam', he declares that atheism (al-Ilhad) is a rare phenomenon in human societies, as rare as the existence of a perfect man who can differentiate between truth and falsehood in conflicting narrations (without clues?)⁶⁷ This is true, especially in al-Āmīrī's times and the subsequent centuries before the modern times, when "...atheism has been rooted in a vast array of philosophical systems".⁶⁸ Philosophical schools like those of Machiavelli, Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jeon-Paul Sartre etc. explain one aspect of atheism or another.⁶⁸ We can say, without the fear of exaggeration, that our present time is the first time in the history of man's sojourn on this planet, that a large portion of humanity, reject the metaphysical beliefs in God or spiritual beings. So al-Āmīrī was right, when he

⁶⁶ Eliade, M. (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion, (New York: Macmillan, 1987, vol. II, p. 140

⁶⁷ Ghurab, A (ed.) al-l'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam, op. cit. P. 60.

⁶⁸ The New Encyclopedia Britannica (Micropedia) (Chicago, 1985 vol. I, p. 666, cp. Eliade, M. (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 486-490.

claimed, based on his knowledge of human society at that time, that atheism was a very rare phenomenon indeed. Modern scholars of religion tend to confirm that ancient societies were, in a way, religious societies, unlike what obtains today.⁶⁹

Al-Āmīrī also opined that no religion was established on the basis of personal benefit, selfish ends or for the good of some sections only.⁷⁰ This may be true, to some extent, for the existing religions of al-Āmīrī's time. It is a very evident fact of today's societies that many new religious movements appeared and there are vested interests in establishing them. A near example is Qadianism of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad al-Qadiyani (1839-1908). His links with his British colonial masters are well documented. He presented himself to them, as an obedient servant at their service. He abandoned Jihad in his new movement, so that the Muslims will not fight the British out of their country.⁷¹

In al-Āmīrī's study of the history of religion and how they fared in history, and the story of their flourishing and decline he offered an explanation and a theory, the import of which is that for a religion to endure and last long while remaining at the centre of human affairs, it has to conform to the principle of moderation and equilibrium between extreme form of flexibility and gentleness on the one hand and the extreme rigidity and austerity on the other.⁷² This, according to al-Āmīrī is necessary in order that people of all natures and dispositions can find what best suits them in their worldly affairs, and what can guarantee them bliss in the next life within that religion. So the religion that is characterised by moderation and by following the middle path is best suited according to al-Āmīrī to be the final religion of humanity that will supercedes all religions for ever. Naturally al-Āmīrī found those qualities in the Islamic religion, but it is evident that he arrives at this judgment due to his observations of the different religions and their philosophies and worldviews. This is another insight of al-

⁶⁹ The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 12, pp. 284-285.

⁷⁰ Ghurab, A., (ed.) al-īlam, op. cit. p. 101.

⁷¹ Ansari, Z.I., (trans), Qadianism - A critical study by S. Abul Hasan Nadwi, (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1982) pp. 76-83).

⁷² See Ghurab, A., (ed.) al-īlam, pp. 137-138.

Āmīrī on the nature of the religious existence and its continuation. In our humble study of the western writings on religion and its nature we did not come across any similar statement, perhaps simply, because they (the western scholars) are more interested in the religion's end, rather than what can lead to its perpetuation, especially in this secular age. ⁷³

Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī like a scholar writing in this age to refute the claims of skeptics and agnostics, indicated in his 'al-I'lām' that some people used to raise doubts on the efficacy of supplication and prayer directed to God, and who claimed that the result of a prayer is due to mere coincidence or as a deceit. In replying them al-Āmīrī asserts that the followers of all religions believe that, the more sincere a person is in his prayer to God, the more there is hope for its acceptance by God. ⁷⁴ He also believes that the majority followers of religions used to exhort each other to prayer, which shows their conviction in its efficacy.

In one of al-Āmīrī's attacks on one of the Batini sects (esoterics), possibly the Isma'ilis, and on their claims that the scholar doesn't have to perform his religious obligations, 'except in so far as this helps him to control the masses.....' ⁷⁵. Al-Āmīrī has pointed here to people with similar ideas to the Marxists and others who denigrate religion.

Al-Āmīrī also stated that there is a consensus among the followers of religions that anyone who disputes all forms of worship and abandons all kinds of transactions and denies all kinds of (religious) penalties, neither this world, nor the next will be good for him. He will not find life easy, because, he chooses to live indifferently to the order, harmony and arrangement placed in this world. ⁷⁶

⁷³ See Jordan, L.H., Comparative Religion, Its Genesis and Growth, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1905) pp. 351- 353.

⁷⁴ Rowson, E.K. (ed.) al-Amad Ala al-Abad by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 101 and p. 101. See the Qur'ānic mention of the different prayers answered by God: Surah al-Anbiya:83-90.

⁷⁵ See Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-I'lām, op. cit. p.77f and p.103f.

⁷⁶ ibid. p. 99.

Al-Āmīrī's contributions to the objective and rational study of religion need to be explored more. His statements on religion and religiosity are similar to what the modern students of religion are making. However, his contributions would have to be viewed in the light of his time and environment and also in the light of the accumulated intellectual data that prevailed during his life.

e - **Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī and the Comparative Method in the Study of Religion:**

Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī was a philosopher cum comparative religionist, whose interest in other religions has been explained above, and can be seen in some of his works especially "al-I'lām bi Manaqib al-Islam". This book will form the basis of our analysis of al-Āmīrī's contribution to the comparative study of religions. Al-Āmīrī was well aware of the religions around him and having been raised and trained intellectually in the Khurasan region, a region replete with all kinds of religions and with all shades of opinions within one religion, his interest in other religions should come as a no surprise. There were, at that time, Muslims living side by side with Jews (a sizeable proportion), Christians, Zoroastrians, Manichees, Sabians and so on.⁷⁷ Within the Islamic religion, Khurasan was the first centre of concentration and subsequent activism of the different sects of the Shiite and other Batini (esoteric) sects, like the Imamiyah, Isma'iliyyah, Qaramitah (a sect of the Isma'iliyyah) ⁷⁸ and so on.

Before proceeding to analyse the contribution of al-Āmīrī in the field of comparative religion, it is important that an overview of his methodological approach is adequately given. As a systematic intellectual with philosophical orientation, al-Āmīrī strongly believed that for a successful comparative study of religions, a sound knowledge of the religions was necessary. Similarly, he believed that anyone who wants to compare religions must clearly explain his methodological guidelines and this according to al-Āmīrī, will guarantee true and unbiased comparison.

⁷⁷ Khalifat, S (ed.) The Philosophical Treatises and Fragments of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. See also Browne E.G., A. Literary History of Persia, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909), pp. 391-415 and p. 301.

⁷⁸ See Eliade, M. (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 12, pp. 126-128.

A - The Religions To Be Compared:

Al-Āmīrī stated clearly that he was aiming at comparing major 'world religions' of his time. He identified them as those religions 'having territories and kingdoms'. ⁷⁹ Evidently, al-Āmīrī meant the religions of the leading civilizations of those centuries. He quoted the Qur'anic verse which mentioned all these religions together. Allah, The Most High says:

"Verily, those who believe (Muslims), and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Magians, and those who worship others besides Allah, truly, Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Verily! Allah is witness over all things." ⁸⁰

It is evident from al-Āmīrī's quotation of this verse, even though he didn't give exclusive mention of the religions he wanted to compare, that the religions in mind are Islam, Judaism, Sabianism, Christianity, Magian religion (Zoroastrianism) and the religion of the Arab polytheists (those who worship others besides Allah), and by implication all other religions based on polytheism.

As regards Islam, it is al-Āmīrī's professed religion, one of the greatest religions of the world influencing the lives of more than one billion followers, with great potential of *expansion*. It is the last of a series of prophetic revelations from God. Al-Āmīrī as a philosopher, saw in Islam every reason why it is superior to all other religions, as it is the most rational of the compared religions, and the most likely to endure and last long because of its inherent nature and naturalness. This belief of al-Āmīrī which he tries to prove rationally is most probably the basis, for his choosing the dimensions of this religion as his bases of comparison.

As is clear from the title of the book (al-I'lam.....), al-Āmīrī was also trying to prove the superiority of Islam over other religions, a process which, even though justified by Muslim scholars, is not acceptable in the modern science of religion as earlier pointed out. The modern science of religion, as we are constantly reminded, is

⁷⁹ See Ghurab, A, (ed.) Al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam, op. cit. p. 21.

⁸⁰ Qur'ān: Surah al-Hajj: 17.

value-free, it does not aim at confirming or proving the superiority of one tradition over others.

The second religion in the list of religions compared by al-Āmīrī is Judaism, the religion of the Jews (al-Yahud), which is the earliest of the existing prophetic and revealed religions. Despite the fact that Judaism was not having an existing kingdom and sovereign territory at the time of al-Āmīrī and much earlier before, it had greatly influenced the history of religions since time immemorial. Since their dispersal and the destruction of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus in 70 A.D. ⁸¹ In accordance with the promise of God the Most High, ⁸² the Jews could not organise a state of their own till around the middle of 20th century, with the establishment of the state of Israel on occupied lands of the Palestinian Muslims. The Jews were scattered into almost every corner of the globe. There was a considerable number of them in the region of Khurasan during the days of al-Āmīrī as mentioned above. The Jews have been the most antagonistic people towards Islam and the Muslims. ⁸³

The third religion to be explored and compared is one of the greatest problem of the Muslims scholars interested in the study of other religions. It is the religion of the Sabians. Who are the Sabians? A lot of conflicting, but yet insufficient and inconclusive opinions have been found in the different Tafsir literature. It is so confusing that one has to refer to other sources to see whether any precise identification of the Sabians can be found. In the modern researches on religious communities, their beliefs and practices, some light has been shed on the whereabouts of these people and their beliefs and religious observances. ⁸⁴ In a nutshell, they have

⁸¹ Over one million Jews perished then, and 100,000 were sold into slavery. See Grolier Encyclopedia (New York: The Grolier Society, 1958) vol. 19, p. 156.

⁸² Allah, The most High declared that He will be sending against them one who will inflict on them a humiliating torment and that He will scatter them on earth after that. See Qur'ān: Surah al-A'raf: 167-168.

⁸³ Surah al-Maidah:82.

⁸⁴ There are at least three religious sects that seem to identify with the Sabians, the Sabians of Manda or 'Mandaean', the 'Elkesaites' and the 'Mughtasilah' (the bathers). For all of these, baptism is their most important religious practice, and they seem to have Jewish origin. Our opinion is that =

been identified as existing presently in southern Iraq and parts of Iran. An early Encyclopedia of Religions (1921) identifies the Sabians as another name for the Mandaeans. And that the ".....word means, "Baptists" and they were so called, because they paid special reverence to John the Baptist (Prophet Yahya A.S.) and made baptism their most important rite." ⁸⁵ Their present religion has grown as a syncretistic religion combining Babylonian, Persian, Jewish and Gnostic elements. The name Mandaeans has been derived from Manda which means gnosis. ⁸⁵

Not much is known about the Mandaeans in Islamic sources. One statement attributed to Imam Abu Hanifah that seems to give a precise and general definition of the adherents of this religion is that, they are people who believe in the religion of a Prophet, they believe in a (revealed) book and they revered the stars as the Muslims revere the Ka'bah. ⁸⁶ From this statement alone it is difficult to know whom they consider as their Prophet, or which book they believe in, talk less of their beliefs and practices. However, another Muslim writer interested in Jewish studies has recently mentioned that al-Sabi'ah that was mentioned in the Qur'an believe in: Moses (A.S.) and the Torah; they believe in Allah and the Angels and Jin while attaching some importance to the stars and perform some rituals for them. They also believe in messianism, the last Day and in John the Baptist and the awaited messiah; they perform the ritual of baptism taken from Prophet Yahya (A.S.); they also believe in a number of religious myths on the relationship between man and the stars, the flood etc. ⁸⁷ The Sabians were mentioned three times in the Qur'an, one of them is the verse of Surah al-

they are the remnants of the followers of John the Baptist (Yahya (A.S.)). See Eliade, M, (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol.9, pp. 150-153 cp. Bleeker, C.J., et. al (eds) Historia Religionum (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969) vol. I, pp. 543ff. See also Hastings, J. (ed.) Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics, (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1960) vol.5, pp. 267-269 & vol. 8, pp. 380-393, Ibn al-Nadim, Fihrist, (Beirut: Dar al-Marifah, N.D.), pp. 442-456. Buck, C. (art) 'The Identity of the Sabiun:An Historical Quest', The Muslim World, vol. 74, NO. 3&4, pp. 172-186. Etc. etc.

⁸⁵ Canney, M.A., An Encyclopedia of Religions, (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1921), p. 310 and 230. See also Nasr, S.H. 'Islam' in Our Religions, (ed.) Sharma, A. (San Francisco : Harper, 1993), P. 520.

⁸⁶ See al-Tihanawi, M.A., Kashshaf Istilahat al-funun (Beruit: Dar al-Sadir, N.D.) vol. 2, p. 806.

⁸⁷ Dhadha, H., Al-Fikr al-dini al-Yahudi (Damascus: Darul Qalam, 1987), pp. 241-243.

Zoroastrianism.⁹¹ Students of Zoroastrianism have confirmed that dualism was not part of the original message of Zarathustra. It was a later addition or corruption.⁹² So the term 'Majus' as mentioned in the above Qur'anic verse refers to the Magi or Magians, as the custodians of the Zoroastrian religion and its true representatives.

The sixth and last religion compared by al-Āmīrī is the pre-Islamic religion of Arabia, or the polytheism of the Arabs, or rather the religion of pre-Islamic Arabia. Ibn Hazm in one of his works 'Jamharat ansab al-Arab' mentioned 25 gods worshipped by the Arabs. Each idol of a god is worshipped by one or more different tribes. The four major idols are al-Lat, al-Uzzah, al-Manah and Hubal.⁹³ Part of the belief of the pre-Islamic Arabs and their practices were mentioned by the Qur'ān, being one of the few sources available for knowing the religious beliefs and practices of the Arabs before Islam. Al-Āmīrī seems to depend more on these Qur'ānic references in this issue.

From the above, it can be observed that al-Āmīrī's intention of comparing all these religions, even though he specified his intention of comparing some aspects of them - is somewhat impossible. For to know the belief of these religions in the selected themes is not ^{an} easy task, especially in the days of al-Āmīrī, when religious traditions were not only exclusivistic in terms of truth claim, but also in terms of open contact and communication with the others. This may be one of the reasons why al-Āmīrī's comparison between religions has been described as "...seldom rigorous".⁹⁴ It is a known fact in this discipline that systematic and large scale study of all religions was not done till the second half of the 19th century. This was a period when a lot of data on religion was collected and studied scientifically.

⁹¹ Gnoli, G. (art) 'Magi' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. p. 81.

⁹² Zaehner, R.C. (art) 'Zoroastrianism' in The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths ed. By Zaehner, (London: Hutchinson, 1986), pp. 202 and 205ff.

⁹³ Haroun, A.M. (ed.) Jamharat ansab al-Arab by Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1962) pp. 491-494.

⁹⁴ Rowson, E.K. (ed.) Al-Amad ala al-Abad by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 22

B- The Themes Of Comparison:

After outlining the religions that al-Āmīrī undertook to compare, it remains for us to elaborate on the areas or themes he had selected for this comparative study. In the beginning of his work 'al-I'lam' he explained aspects of epistemology in philosophy, and his classification of the sciences into religious and philosophical sciences. After that he explained what he believed to be the essential aspects or ingredients of all religions. As mentioned above, they are the doctrines or belief systems, forms of worship, injunctions related to human dealings and conduct and finally injunctions on the ways to curb evil and contain it (penalties). These aspects, according to al-Āmīrī, form the essence of religion, or are the basic elements that are found (or are supposed to be found) in each religion.⁹⁵ The Islamic approach of al-Āmīrī in identifying the basic elements of all religions is very lucid, for in each aspect, he gave its sub-divisions, and what he believes to be these sub-divisions and his classification is clearly what is found in Islam. It is pertinent here to mention that a lot of scholars have been trying to arrive at what should form the essential universal elements in all religion, but the efforts can be described, at best, a failure, and at worst, futile. To arrive at elements common to all religions is an impossible feat, especially in the modern scientific study of religion, with its unique way of classifying religions and identifying them. This particular issue leads to another serious question that has not yet been answered to the satisfaction of scholars of religion - what is religion? Numerous definitions have been given by experts from the different disciplines that study religion. The task of arriving at a common denominator for all religions has led some scholars to give very loose definitions of religion described as 'meaningless generalities' that can, hardly define precisely any one religion.⁹⁶ These definitions are so numerous that '.... even a partial listing would be impractical'.⁹⁷ Al-Āmīrī defined the essential elements of religions as under:

⁹⁵ See Ghurab, A., (ed.), al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam, op. cit. p. 22

⁹⁶ See Clarke, P. and Sutherlands, S. (ed.) The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religions, (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 5-20, cp. Bianchi, U., The History of Religion (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp 1-8.

⁹⁷ ibid. p. 283.

1- The Doctrinal Dimension of Religion:

Al-Āmīrī believes that every religion has some beliefs regarding something(s) towards which it struggles, or doctrines regarding a diety/dieties.⁹⁸ For almost all of the ancient religions, al-Āmīrī's statement is valid. But, even much before al-Āmīrī, the Buddhist religion was existing with its original atheism. It is still an area of controversy whether Buddhism is to be considered a religion or an ethico-philosophical system.⁹⁹ Religion, according to the Semitic religions' view-point must begin and end with the belief in God or in a diety. The followers of these religions, more than half of the human kind, cannot think of a religion worth the name, without a belief in the creator, before whom all must submit. This may be why al-Āmīrī believed this to be the most important aspect of religion,¹⁰⁰ which is considered, in some religions at least, as the foundation of religious life. This aspect of religion, according to al-Āmīrī, is in lieu of the knowledge or the theoretical side of religion, while the other aspects of religion form the practical side of it.¹⁰¹ And again this doctrinal aspect is like the cause, while the others are like the effect.¹⁰¹ Al-Āmīrī believes that if the cause of a thing is faulty then that thing cannot attain perfection.¹⁰¹ In explaining further the importance of this dimension of religion, al-Āmīrī said the compatibility of these beliefs/doctrines (with the nature of man and reason) is one of the strongest reasons that lead an adherent of that particular religion to be loyal to it and is one of the most influential means of being infallible and steadfast. Not only this, it is also one of the reasons why all forms of sufferings are tolerated and no sacrifices can be higher than sticking to such a religion.¹⁰² Al-Āmīrī, to our knowledge, is the first among those who study religion in the past to mention this fact of great consequence. If the beliefs/doctrines concerning

⁹⁸ Ghurab, A. (ed.) *al-I'lam*, op. cit. p. 121.

⁹⁹ See Zaehner, R. C. (ed.) *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths* (London: Hutchinson, 1986) (Introduction) pp.xvi-xvii.

¹⁰⁰ *al-I'lam* of al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 123

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p. 123.

God are the most important aspect of religion, in fact its foundation, then we can easily identify a religion from a non-religion going by that criterion. Then those systems that do not believe in God and are believed to be 'religions' today will be out-rightly rejected and expunged from the religious world. They can be called pseudo-religions or philosophical or ethical systems.

Al-Āmīrī, true to his orientation as a Muslim, saw that the essentials of this doctrinal dimension in all religions are: the belief in and acceptance of God as the creator; the belief in the angels of God, the belief in His (revealed) books; the belief in the prophets and the belief in the last day.¹⁰³ These are called in the Islamic sciences as the articles of faith. It is worth mentioning here, that al-Āmīrī mentioned only these five articles leaving out the belief in destiny. This, in our opinion, may be for one of the two reasons given below or for both:

- 1- That this belief (in destiny) is not found in almost all the religions al-Āmīrī was comparing, at least in the elaborate manner, it was explained in Islam;
- 2- That this belief was not mentioned explicitly in the Qur'anic verses that mention the others,¹⁰⁴ including the verse al-Āmīrī used as his support in this point. The verse being the statement of Allah in Surah al-Nisa:

"O' you who believe! Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and the Book which he has sent down to His Messenger, and the Book which He sent down to those before (him), and whosoever disbelieves in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, and the Last Day, then indeed he has strayed far away."¹⁰⁵

In this verse, Allah declares that anyone who disbelieves in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers and the Last Day, he has really gone astray, pointing to the fact that these are the basic essentials of belief in Islam and in fact in all religions. The

¹⁰² ibid. p. 124.

¹⁰³ ibid. p. 122.

¹⁰⁴ See Surah al-Baqrah:177, 287 and Surah al-Nisa:136.

¹⁰⁵ Surah al-Nisa: 136.

Qur'an is very explicit in showing that Islam is the one religion of the whole of humanity, the variations, corruption, interpolations of the messages excepted. ¹⁰⁶

2- The Devotional Dimension of Religion:

Under this section, al-Āmīrī put the different ways by which the religious man expresses his devotion and reverence towards his diety and Lord. Al-Āmīrī believes this also, to be an essential part of religion, by which obedience and servitude of the religious man is affirmed for God or his other diety. ¹⁰⁷ This is next in importance to the doctrinal aspect according to him. Al-Āmīrī saw the forms of worship in the different religions as ways of expressing the gratitude of the worshipper for the favours of the Lord on him and are features of humility before the diety. ¹⁰⁸ Al-Āmīrī believes it is found in all religions as a way of glorifying the Lord.

As mentioned earlier this aspect of religion (worship/rituals) forms the practical face of religion, that testifies to the adherent's religiosity. In view of this, al-Āmīrī pointed, as examples, to the consequence of the neglect of these acts and their importance in the eyes of the followers of the different religions. He opined that if a ruler of the Muslims, for instance, tries to abandon and obliterate a limit of the limits of Allah, his act will not be viewed as grievous, as if he were to abstain from attending one Jum'ah prayer. Similarly will be the disapproval from the society for a Christian ruler who will abandon the sacrament of baptism, or a Jewish leader that will abandon or rather violate the holiness of Sabbath. ¹⁰⁹ This is because, these acts alone confirm a person's loyalty to a religion. The doctrinal aspect despite its importance, is something within the bosom of a person, we have no way of reaching at it. From this fact, we can understand the inadequacy of the modern scientific study of religion, which limits itself

¹⁰⁶ See the Qur'an, Surah al-Baqrah:213, al-Anbia :25, Surah Yunus:19.

¹⁰⁷ Ghurab, A., (ed.) al-īlam, op. cit. p. 121.

¹⁰⁸ ibid. p. 124.

¹⁰⁹ ibid. p. 124.

to what the 'homo religiosus' said or did. And even his sayings or statements are not usually accepted by science.¹¹⁰

Al-Āmīrī saw that the forms of worship found (or supposed to be found) in all religions are:¹¹¹

- a) **Meditational Worship** like prayer (al-Salah) that involves liturgical devotion;
- b) **Physical and Bodily Worship**, like fasting; which purifies the body and the soul together;
- c) **Financial Worship**, like Zakah or alms - giving. Al-Āmīrī mentioned that this is not to be found in Christianity and Manichaeanism, for Christianity is based on pure asceticism regarding wealth. While Manichaeanism followed it, because it is a mixture of Christianity and Zoroastrianism.¹¹²
- d) **Political Worship**, like Jihad or holy war for the supremacy of God's religion over all others, and this is for the securement and protection of the borders of the state. Holy wars are found in many religions whether sanctioned by those religions or not.
- e) The last kind of worship, according to al-Āmīrī is the one that combines all the other kinds, what we may call a religious festival, when adherents of a religion gather at a holy site to affirm their loyalty to the deity and participate in unison in all the above forms of worship together like Hajj.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ See Waardenburg, J. Reflections on the Study of Religion, (The Hague: Mouton 1981), p. 83, Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.), The History of Religions, Retrospect and Prospect, (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 113. For a contrary view, see Wach, J. Introduction to the History of Religions, (New York: Macmillan, 1988) P. 109, Allen, D. Structure and Creativity in Religion, (The Hague : Mouton, 1978), p. 93, cp. Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), pp. 393-394 and p. 471.

¹¹¹ Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-ī'lām by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 122.

¹¹² ibid. p. 143.

3- Transactional Dimension of Religion:

Al-Āmīrī believes that every religion has to have some code of conduct that regulates and organises the day to day activities of its adherents, some kind of a legal system that is supposed to solve the problems of human interactions in the different aspects of life. In other words, the relationship between a person and his fellow human-beings in the society. The different relationships that are there, like, the marriage relationship; or that of a person and his parents and elders; or that of a ruler and the ruled etc. This is the third in importance in the hierarchy of religion's dimensions.

As for the essential elements of this dimension, al-Āmīrī classified them into five categories,¹¹³ namely:

- a) Commercial transactions, and he gave example of sale, hire and lease. By nature, people depend on each other for their daily needs as no one can be self sufficient and provide for himself all his basic needs; he definitely needs others in the same way other people need him and this is how the society is designed by nature to operate. Each religion should regulate this important area, according to al-Āmīrī;
- b) Family relationship being the only known lawful coming together of the two sexes. Marriage has been known as a human institution since time immemorial, as a means of 'regulating the relations between the sexes; and it furnishes the mechanism by means of which the relation of a child to the community is determined.'¹¹⁴ Since marriage is one human institution found in all societies, all religions must definitely provide some regulatory guidelines regarding it. Examples given by al-Āmīrī are marriage and divorce laws.
- c) Litigations and dispute: Human society is made up of people of different characters and temperament, hence, disputes and misunderstanding are bound to occur among human societies. So, each religion must have a

¹¹³ ibid. p. 123.

¹¹⁴ Rivers, W.H.R. (art) 'Marriage (Introductory and Primitive)', Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (ed.) Hastings, op. cit. vol. 8, p. 423.

• Another terminology of 'Hudud' is used today for this.

mechanism of settling disputes among its adherents. Examples of this aspect given by al-Āmīrī are, claims and evidences.

- d) The fourth category of the transactional dimension, according to al-Āmīrī is the trust which is given to or taken from another person. This is what he terms as deposit and loan.
- e) The last category is what a person leaves after his death i.e. (heritage), in the form of will or inheritance. Al-Āmīrī believes that all religions (or at least, the six he chose to compare) contain or have these categories and their breakdown.

4- The Penal Dimension of Religion:

Al-Āmīrī opined that in addition to the above dimensions, the six religions also have the penal dimension by which, those adherents as commit injustices against others or against the religion, are punished. People are made to taste part of the punishment in this life, so that it can serve as a deterrent measure for others, so that they do not commit the same mistake. This may be the reason why al-Āmīrī used the word 'Mazjarah' (مجزرة) * from 'Zajara' which means to frighten someone away from doing something or to prevent him from committing it due to what he knows and sees in terms of the consequences of falling into it. In other words, this serves as a means by which a religion protects its followers from the iniquities of the evil ones, and it deters the undesirable elements from spreading vice and insecurity in the society. In this section al-Āmīrī seems to have recognised the general aims of Islamic Shari'ah (legal code), being the protection of the religion, life, wealth, honour (descendants) and reason,¹¹⁵ and keeping that in mind, he mentioned the penalties against any violation of these vital things.

Under this dimension, al-Āmīrī recognised again five kinds of penalties:

¹¹⁵ Ghazali, al-Mustasfa min ilm al-usul, (Baghdad: Muthanna, 1970) vol. 1, pp. 286-287 as quoted by Masood, M. K., Islamic Legal Philosophy, (Delhi: International Islamic Publishers, 1989), p. 152-153. (Except for the last objective, these objectives are what can be discerned from al-Āmīrī's statement in al-I'lām P. 123).

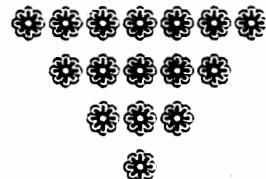
- a) Penalty against the killing of a person, like 'Talionis' (retaliation) or 'Qisas' and 'blood-money'. This according to al-Āmīrī, together with others to be mentioned, are part of the essentials in all the six religions, he tried to compare.¹¹⁶ But as mentioned earlier, al-Āmīrī believes Islam to be the most perfect of these religions, so he always turns to it for guidance, especially in matters related to methodology and the outlining of the process of comparison and its themes;
- b) Penalty against theft (of one's wealth), like the cutting of hands and crucification. This is because a person's wealth is to be protected against those who cannot strive through lawful means to get theirs. Al-Āmīrī stated such legislation is found in these six religions being compared;
- c) Penalty against violating one's privacy*, that is when a woman is attacked sexually by someone not her legitimate husband or master if she happens to be a slave woman. Examples of the penalties here are lashes and stoning (to death);
- d) Penalty against defamation of one's honour, with the intention of causing damage to his dignity and repute, like lashes and excommunication;
- e) Penalty against rebellion from the community and the religion, that is when someone rebelled against the religion and rejected it, most likely, for some worldly reasons. The example given by al-Āmīrī here is, like the death penalty for the apostate.

These are the four different dimensions al-Āmīrī recognised in the six religions he studied, together with their various aspects. It can be seen that al-Āmīrī, in a way, was not stressing that, all the twenty aspects he had identified must be found in all the six religions. The expression he repeated i.e. "...its scope, according to the people of (these) six religions will not be, except of five categories...", clearly gives the idea that, these are the maximum aspects that can be found in these religions, nothing more, but

¹¹⁶ Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-Islam bi Manaqib al-Islam by al-Āmīrī, op. cit. p. 123.

* Privacy here means the offence of fornication, adultery and so on.

may be something less in some religions. Occasionally, one finds al-Āmīrī being faced with the problem of the non-existence of particular aspect or concept in one of the six religions, he was comparing; so he just skipped it without giving any reasons. One automatically realizes that the aspect under discussion is just not treated or not found in that religion.



TWO

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO AL-'ĀMIRĪ (CONCEPTION AND BASIC PRINCIPLES):

Abu al-Hassan al-'Āmirī, as was shown earlier, had a great interest in comparing religions. His conception of comparative religion is clearly different from what obtains today among other intellectuals in the field. Al-'Āmirī's study of other religions had a purpose and an aim. He mentioned in the preface of his book *'al-Ilām bi Manaqib al-Islam'*, that the person he is dedicating the work to, has bright intelligence and a very good use of reason, together with an acute sense of awareness.¹ He was a person who is not satisfied, in the doctrinal dimension of religion, with being of the followers (*al-Muqallidin*).² Nonetheless, he struggled to be amongst those endowed with insight and deep understanding of issues. Al-'Āmirī also knew of the same person, his genuine desire and interest in the superiority of Islam over all other religions. This, in a way, is the main underlying idea of al-'Āmirī's comparison of Islam which he calls many times "al-Millah al-Hanifiyyah"³ (the Hanifi religion) with the other five religions. Al-'Āmirī wanted to prove rationally first, and then by means of practical demonstrations his idea of the supremacy of Islam over the other religions. This was the reason why he had clear-cut areas, or dimensions of religion, within the framework of which he tried to compare those religions. His efforts may be looked down upon today as theology, which is generally regarded as unscientific among the religious studies circles of this modern age. However, as mentioned elsewhere, this kind of study is not

¹ Al-'Āmirī mentioned that one Abu Nasr had bestowed a lot of favours on him, and as part of his gratefulness he wrote this book. It is likely that he was Abu Nasr bn Abi Zaid, a vizier in the court of the Samanides - see Ghurab, A. (ed.) *al-Ilām*, op. cit. p. 70, cp. Rowson, E.K. (ed.) *al-Amad ala al-Abad*, by al-'Āmirī, qp. cit. p. 12 (Introduction) where two other personalities were suggested.

² Ghurab, A., (ed.) *al-Ilām bi Manaqib al-Islam*, op. cit. p. 70.

necessarily theology in the western sense of word.⁴ Even though every religion claims uniqueness, there are a lot of areas of the phenomenon of religion, where Islam conspicuously stands *above all*. Being the latest of the semitic-prophetic tradition of religion, revealed in the 'full light of history', Islam enjoys a kind of a privileged position in the religious world. These points of uniqueness can be recognised rationally - reason being one of the widely accepted sources of knowledge. The identification of some of these points of the uniqueness and sublimity of Islam is what al-'Āmirī tried to do in his important work - 'al-I'lam'. Al-'Āmirī being a philosopher will never accept things that are irrational, and by implication, he will never judge something as superior to another, without a clear-cut reason? So, his was a comparative study of Islam and other religions, putting reason, in a way, as his supreme tool to enable him make a judgment.

Al-'Āmirī had a concept of the 'religion of truth'⁵ born out of an authentic revelation, and never in contradiction with material evidence and clear reason. He said, '...what evidence has confirmed and reason has imposed will never be in contradiction with the religion of truth'.⁶ Al-'Āmirī as a philosopher, has a strong belief in reason and its efficacy. For that, he declares that the rational faculty will never accept falsehood. In view of this he advises the thinking man to put across his beliefs from the imagination faculty before the rational faculty, so as to sift the grain from the chaff of his different beliefs.⁷ We will notice that, al-'Āmirī believes in intuition as a source of knowledge, especially what pertains to the fundamentals of religiosity. To al-'Āmirī, just as Allah (God) has guided man in the sphere of his subsistence, in knowing what is nutritionally valuable from what is harmful, He has guided him also in knowing the fundamentals of religion.⁸ So, this intuitional knowledge together with the intellect

⁴ Maishanu, I.M., (art) 'The Study of Religion Among the Muslims: Some Aims and Methods' Dawah Highlights, vol. VIII, Issue: XII, Dec' 1997, pp. 12-24.

⁵ Ghurab, A, (ed.) al-I'lam of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 83 and 101.

⁶ ibid. p. 83.

⁷ ibid. p. 79.

⁸ ibid. p.116.

bestowed on man can help him, in his genuine and sincere efforts to find the religion of truth'. Al-'Āmirī opined in this important issue that, anyone who strives sincerely in search of the truth, will never be led astray (away from it). ⁹ From the above we can say that, al-'Āmirī is trying to establish the naturalness (*fitrah*) of religion in man, a much debated issue in the science of religion especially at its inception. ¹⁰ He said in another of his works (*al-Amad ala al-Abad*), that man being a rational being, is protected from loosing the efficacy of his intellect and from becoming like an animal, by means of the religious norms and values, so that he will seek to rise above the animal nature, to the spring of wisdom. ¹¹ In line with the above, he believes that man has been created by God, who (through the medium of revelation) wanted man to perfect his soul by being divine - oriented ('*rabbaniy*') not nature - oriented or naturalist. ¹²

It is worth noticing here that, al-'Āmirī, like a true Easterner ¹³, believes in religion being part of man's nature. The spirituality of the East and their deep belief in religion is one thing that distinguishes it from the West. ¹⁴ Let us expantiate further on the issues raised here.

1- Al-'Āmirī's Conception of the Comparative Method and its Underlying Principles:

Al-'Āmirī's study of religion can be briefly described as the rational confirmation of the superiority of the Islamic religion over the other five religions. He has tried, where possible, to demonstrate that superiority. In his study of the six religions, which

⁹ ibid. p. 121.

¹⁰ See Jordan, L.H., Comparative Religion, Its Genesis and Growth (Edinburgh:T&T Clarke, 1905) p. 141, 212 and pp. 230-234.

¹¹ See Rowson, E.K., (ed.) Al-Amad ala al-Abad of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 93.

¹² ibid. p. 101.

¹³ East - here refers to Eastern world including the Islamic, Indian, Chinese and other civilizations of this part of the world.

¹⁴ See for example Wach, J., Introduction To The History of Religions, (New York: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 104-105.

we see as objective, al-'Āmirī wanted to arrive at the superiority of Islam over the rest of the religions, not unjustifiably, but by referring to reason. His intention was not to show the greatness of Islam and that it is more perfect than the other earlier religions rightly or wrongly, and by hook or by crook. He clearly outlined his purpose and his method and the religions he wanted to compare with Islam, including an elaboration of the minute divisions of the aspects of religion. The purpose was, to compare, aspect by aspect, one religion with a corresponding aspect of Islam, so as to see the perfection in Islam, by virtue of which it rightly abrogated other religions.¹⁵ Even though, there are areas where reason will have to stand by the side and allow religion (revelation) to advance and lead,¹⁶ al-'Āmirī believes religion can be understood and accepted or rejected on the authority of reason. This idea is new to the scientific study of religion as it obtains today. As explained earlier in the modern secularist and positivistic West, religion is always a suspect and nothing good or right is expected from it, except such things that are in line with the West's general pragmatic philosophy. But for al-'Āmirī, the religion of truth is itself a reality and it is not in conflict with reason and intuition.¹⁷ It is the standard and the yardstick, because it is the incorruptible truth from revelation. Revelation is another source of knowledge according to al-'Āmirī. It is superior to human sciences because of two unique qualities,¹⁸ namely:

1. Revelation is an authentic knowledge that is immune from doubt. No doubt can accrue to it, as long as it is a true revelation from the Omniscient Lord of this universe, whose knowledge is unlimited, all-encompassing, most profound and certain.

Knowledge of man is as limited as man himself, except such knowledge as has come to him from the All-Knowing Creator, or what he is able to discover in the universe, which in real sense is a discovery or uncovering of the laws of nature as placed in the universe by its All-Wise Designer.

¹⁵ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 71.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 98 and 100.

¹⁷ Rowson, E. K., (ed.) Al-Amad ala al-Abad, op. cit. p. 93 cp. Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 79.

¹⁸ Al-I'lam by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 102 cp. Rowson, E. K. (ed.) Al-Amad ala al-Abad by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 22-23.

2. As this knowledge comes from Allah, we must conceive it within the framework of our conception of Allah, i.e. what we attribute to Allah, we must attribute to His different actions in terms of perfection, sublimity, magnificence.....etc. So, this (revealed) knowledge, we believe, comes from Allah who knows the specifics of action most beneficial to us, and the specifics of the creation of this world including the circumstances of the After-life. ¹⁸ Al-'Āmirī believes that not only human knowledge is limited, but also human intellect. It is only revelation that can explain, with certitude, areas where the intellect has no access. For Allah, in revelation expounded things human reason cannot recognise. These are things related to the metaphysical world or '*alam al-ghaib*' in Qur'anic terminology. Revelation from Allah is the sole authority in this area, it has the final say in all issues of this realm.

From the above, we can understand that al-'Āmirī wants to affirm in a very strong way his belief in the necessity of taking revelation into consideration in any study of religion - idea generally accepted by believers in religion, but generally rejected in one way or another by the modern students of religion in the West. There is a world of difference between the one who studies religion believing in religion and another who studies it, while rejecting it or being skeptical of it.

Superiority or Value-Judgment in the Study of Religion

According to Al-'Āmirī:

One of al-'Āmirī's most important concept in his comparative method is the arrival at a judgment after a true comparison. It is especially so in comparative religion that whenever things are compared, it is most appropriate that a judgment is announced at the end of the process. Otherwise how can we say that in issues related to beliefs, morals, rituals, gratefulness and so on, there is no superiority or preferment, while in other aspects of man's life there is a clear assertion and acceptance of that norm. Al-'Āmirī, who wanted to establish the fact of value judgment and the preference of one religion over another declared that the feature of preference or superiority of something

over another is found in all things.¹⁹ He gave example of the Throne of Allah (*al-Arsh*) and the '*Kursiy*' which are superior to all other creatures of lower essences. In the animal world he saw that the falcon is superior to the worm, while in the plant world he believes that grapes are superior to apricot.²⁰ Al-'Āmirī supported his claim of the reality of superiority in the different spheres of things with Qur'anic verses.²¹ The import of the verses is that, of Allah's creation He has preferred man and that He has, among men, raised some above others. Even among Allah's chosen servants (prophets) some have been raised above others. Some other references can also be added.²² In one of the verses (*al-Nahl*:71) Allah says He has raised some men above others financially (in wealth), while in the other, Allah declares that He has made some fruits to excel others, in taste after sending the same rain water on their mother-trees. This is part of the natural laws operating in this universe. Al-'Āmirī further said that, some places and times have been preferred to the others, but that can change by a divine decree.²³ Al-'Āmirī saw this phenomenon (of superiority) as part of an in-built mechanism for the overall smooth running, and harmony of this worldly life.²⁴ If it were to be completely removed, a lot of discrepancies would appear. He also saw that superiority in the world of things can be due to the nobility or greatness of purpose of a thing, or due to the effectiveness of the power of that thing above others.²⁵

Al-'Āmirī is trying to show that just as superiority or preferment of something over another is a fact in different spheres of this world, in the same way, there must be

19 *Al-I'lam* by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 95.

20 *ibid.* p. 95.

21 Surah Isra:70 and Surah al-An'am:165, Surah al-Baqrah:253.

22 Surah al-Nahl:71 and Surah al-Ra'ad:4.

23 *al-I'lam*, op. cit. p. 96.

24 Imagine when there is no master/servant relationship or that of the rich/poor, what will be the consequence of that in this life.

25 *Al-I'lam*, op. cit. p. 96.

superiority or preferment in matters of religion. Then what are the bases of superiority of one religion over the others according to al-'Āmirī?

3- Criteria for Superiority (Value Judgment) According to Al-'Āmirī:

Abu al-Hassan al-'Āmirī believes that a religion can be superior to another religion, not based on prejudice and subjectivity but based on a series of evidences or rather criteria. It is a well-known fact in Islam, that all the prophets of Allah from the first of them to the last, were sent by the same God, with more or less the same message of the unity of God and His worship. It means that all the prophets brought the same kind of religion i.e. the religion of Islam. Most of the numerous names we do find of religions are the different versions of that one message. The Islamic religion as revealed to Muhammad (S.A.W.) is the final ring of that long chain of Allah's communication with man. So, it is only natural that this final form of religion, should be the most perfected and the most compatible with the human nature. Moreso, the religion of Islam, which is the final form of God's religion has come with sufficient measures to ensure its absolute preservation as the God's chosen religion. Al-'Āmirī believes this, but he wanted to prove it by an in-depth analysis of the Islamic religion while comparing it with other religions of influence in his time. The following four criteria give a clear picture of the superiority of one religion over the others *according to him*.

1. Belief System and its Relationship to Reason:

As mentioned earlier, al-'Āmirī saw the existence of a very important relationship between aspects of religion, especially the belief-system and their conformity to reason on one hand, and the loyalty and strict adherence to the religion on the part of the believer on the other.²⁶ In other words, whenever religious beliefs are incompatible to reason and cannot be understood by man, the religious man remains perplexed and at a loss. This situation is not to be contented with, according

al-'Āmirī. To him, a person should not remain perplexed, but must strive, by means of research, to understand the truth of any issue. He further advises that, one should not succumb to beliefs that lead to perplexity and not peace of mind.²⁷ Al-'Āmirī therefore believes that the religion that is superior to all others is the one with very transparent and understandable belief-system. The instrument or tool by which we understand beliefs and their truth or falsehood is the rational faculty. This leads to the belief that a religion's belief-system or doctrinal dimension must conform to reason, and the superiority of the religion is based on the extent of that conformity. In other words, the more the belief-system of a religion conforms with the rational faculty, the more it is superior to other religions. Al-'Āmirī demonstrated that in his comparison of the belief in Allah (God) in the different religions.²⁸ He declared that the position of the Muslims, and by implication of Islam, is superior to that of others in this issue when viewed from the following three angles :-

First - Al-'Āmirī mentioned that none of the followers of religion were concerned with the establishment of rational evidences leading to rational conclusions that establish the unity of God, and free it from all the doubts of the obstinates, and the errors of those misleading others, as the Muslims have done. He believed that they attained all heights in that, to the extent that even philosophers did testify to the success of Muslims in establishing rational evidences in this issue.²⁹ It is clear from the above that al-'Āmirī believes that the followers of other religions, even though they have made contributions in this regard, their contributions fall far short, when compared to the Muslims efforts. From the statement of al-'Āmirī, it can be understood that the Muslims have not only presented arguments for the existence of God, but they have also augmented them with other arguments that show that God is

²⁶ ibid. p. 122. See also Rowson E.K. (ed.) al-Amad ala al-Abad by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 163.

²⁷ Al-I'lām, op. cit. p. 97.

²⁸ ibid. pp. 128-129.

²⁹ ibid. p. 128. The times of al-'Āmirī (d.381 A.H.) and the following century was the period of great scholastic debates between the different schools of *ilm al-Kalam*, especially between the *ahl al-Sunnah* (*al-Ash'ariyah* and *al-Maturidiyyah*) on the one hand, and *al-Mut'azilah* on the other.

a unity, and is described in the attributes of perfection and glory that is due for Him alone. It is regrettable however, that al-Āmirī did not mention some of these arguments presented by the Muslims, perhaps due to his desire for brevity;

Second - Al-Āmirī saw that it is only the Muslims who remain as true and absolute monotheists, because all others are not free from holding wrong concepts and beliefs regarding the Most High Lord of the universe.³⁰ The Jews have fallen into anthropomorphism (al-tajsim) or the 'style of thought and language that ascribes to the deity human form and attributes.'³¹ Modern biblical criticism has shown that the narrations of the old Testament are a description of a cult legend, with obvious incongruities and irregularities in the text, due to additions and alterations made in the course of time.³² These narrations seem to be of primitive and childish nature, depicting God in human attributes and written over a long period of time. The anthropomorphic features of the old Testament, have been discovered to be mostly found in what modern scholars have termed as 'Jahvist narrative'. Anthropomorphism here is more pronounced, than in the 'Elohist narrative'.³³ A picture of this form of describing God is, given below. God (*Yahweh*) is the 'one who plants the garden', who 'walks in Eden during the cool of the evening' who 'closes the door on Noah as he goes into the ark', who 'appears in human form to Abraham, and eats with him', who 'wrestles with Jacob', 'who meets Moses and seeks to kill him', who 'goes to make inquiries about the iniquity of Sodom, etc. etc.³⁴ Al-Āmirī believes that any people who describe God in such terms, do not make a just estimate of Him. This concept is regarded today as a lower conception of God, because of its 'crude, and at times,

³⁰ ibid. p. 128.

³¹ Canney, M. A., An Encyclopedia of Religions, (London:George Routledge and Sons, 1921) p. 24.

³² See for instance, Rowley, H.H., The Old Testament and Modern Study, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) pp. 63-76, cp. Gigot, F.E., Special Introduction to the Study of the Old Testament, (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1901), part 1, pp. 98-106.

³³ ibid. p. 98.

³⁴ The references of these quotations are given respectively: Gen 2:8; Gen 3:8; Gen 7:16; Gen 18:1-5; Gen 32:34; Exo 4:24 and Gen 18:20-24.

regards their rational interpretation of Trinity became obvious in the two main trends of interpretation. The Greek approach, because of their emphasis on the 'monarchical' role of the Father, who is the sole principle of divinity, and who, in turn, imparts it to the other two persons (The Son and the Holy Spirit), led to 'Subordinationism' * and in some version, even to tritheism.⁴¹ On the other hand, the Latin approach "tends towards modalism ** (which obscures the distinctiveness of each person)"⁴² Al-'Āmirī did not elaborate how these conceptions of the deity are incongruent to reason, and that could have enriched us a great deal.

Al-'Āmirī defined the Zoroastrian concept of God as dualism, which today is described as a doctrine 'that posits the existence of two fundamental causal principles underlying the existence of the world.'⁴³ It entails the existence of two co-equal and co-eternal principles (*deities*), one of light (or good) and the other of darkness (or evil). Each one of the two is in perpetual struggle for the control and overcoming of the other. This was the doctrine of the later day **Zoroastrianism** and **Manichaeanism** and other Gnostic traditions. But, as explained by experts in the History of Religions, **Zarathustra**, the founder-prophet of this religion was a monotheist. The explanation of that as found in the **Avesta** (their holy book) is that, the most Holy spirit of **Ahura Mazdah** (God) was the source of two spirits, the Holy Spirit and the Evil one, but the two were so, by choice. One chose the good, while the other chose the evil. These two are in perpetual conflict.⁴⁴ The choice between one of the two, faces each person in his life, however **Ahura Mazdah** chooses righteousness

* Subordination: The belief of early Christian theologians, that the Father is the root of Diety, while Son and the Holy Spirit though co-equal and co-eternal are subordinate in rank.

** Modalism: The belief of some Christian theologians that, the names of Father and son corresponded only to different aspects of the same person, playing transitory parts, and not to divine realities.⁴⁵ See the Qur'ānic rebuke on this in Surah al-Nisa : 171 and al-Mā'idah:73.

⁴¹ La Cugn, C.M. (art) 'Trinity' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 15, p. 55.

⁴² Bianchi, U. (art) 'Dualism' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 4, p. 506.

⁴³ See Zaehner, R.C. (ed.) The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, op. cit. p. 204, cp. Smart, N. The World's Religions, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 216-217.

and goodness and He utterly condemns the evil. Here, the Evil one is inferior and subordinate to the good, so it is a sort of a dualistic manifestation of monotheism.⁴⁵ To this extent the Zoroastrian religion has not been corrupted. But later on, their dualism became as is being defined today, where they posits two first principles one good and the other evil, and the Evil one is believed to be co-eternal with God and independent of Him. This is clearly in violation of the unity of God and has turned to *ditheism* as is found in *Manichaeanism*. The existence of two principles or Gods will really create disorder and disharmony in this universe, unless one of the two overcomes the other. This proves that the latter (who was subdued) was not God, and so has no right of being worshipped. So, al-'Āmirī was right in saying that the Zoroastrians (of his time) were *dualists*, who in a way worship two deities and that, their belief is incompatible with what reason has affirmed in the unity of God.

It is pertinent to mention here that al-'Āmirī did not say anything explicit about the *Sabians* and their concept of God. But there are reasons, to make us believe that, he considered them to be dualists also. The *Sabians*, as explained above have been influenced by the currents of thought surrounding them: the most important of which was dualism. Our belief on the dualistic view of the *Sabians* is supported by the frequent mention of Zoroastrians and dualists by al-'Āmirī whenever he explained their position on an issue.⁴⁶ We arrive at this belief because of the fact that *Sabians*, as stated by al-'Āmirī in his introduction, are one of the principal members in this comparative process.

The polytheists believe in and pay obeisance to a number of deities who are 'quarreling' among themselves for their loyalty and devotion.⁴⁷ Their position is very clear from what has been said above regarding the proximity or otherwise of their concept of God to reason. Since the number of their deities were many, and they created them and then sought help from them, they seem to be the farthest away from reason.

⁴⁵ Bianchi, U. (ed.) 'Dualism' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. p. 506.

⁴⁶ Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-Ílam by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 131 and p. 167 and p. 181.

⁴⁷ See the Qur'anic pointer to this in Surah al-Zumar: 29.

While the Christians, the Zoroastrians and the Sabian have problems about the unity of God, Islam does not have such problem at all. Its belief in the unity of God is clear, simple and straightforward.

Third - Another angle of the superiority of Islam over other religions, in the issue of the belief in Allah (God) as seen by al-'Āmirī, is in the Muslims' practical life and in their general position on vital aspects of religion. Al-'Āmirī quoted a verse of the Glorious Qur-ān (Al-Imran:64) with the comment that the Muslims (as regards their sincerity in maintaining the true unity of Allah) show this absolute unity of God and call other believers in God: "Come to a word that is just (or of equality) between us and you, that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with Him, and that none of us shall take others as Lords besides Allah!....". The Muslims are sure of their position and that is why they call others to rise to their level. The practical life of the Muslims also show, how they are in constant mention of the 'sincere word' (*Kalimah al-Ikhlas*), by all and sundry and at all times, so that the quality mentioned in the previous Revealed Books will best conform to them,⁴⁸ as Allah says in the Qur-ān regarding them, that He "...made them stick to the word of piety (that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah)".⁴⁹ But the followers of other religions do not mention the name and praise of God save very rarely.⁵⁰

This is one example of al-'Āmirī's comparison between religions. It is a brief and concise comparison in general terms without the necessary exposition of the meanings of these beliefs and how they are incongruent to reason. He did not mention the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. From this comparison of al-'Āmirī, we can easily discern that it is only Islam that is truly a monotheistic religion, and by this, we will be right in dismissing the western well-known statement of the 'three fully monotheistic religions' i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Al-'Āmirī may be referring here, to such verses like Psalms 149:1-9 and Isaiah 42: 10-13 etc. of the Bible.

⁴⁹ Surah al-Fath: 26. .

⁵⁰ Ghurab, A., (ed.) *al-İlam* by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 129.

⁵¹ Ludwig, T.M., 'Monotheism' *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit. vol. 10, p. 171.

also been preserved for posterity. Some of them are reported to have stated that: 'This is Jesus the Prophet of Nazareth of Galilee'⁵⁷ Another testimony of the closest person to him, Peter, on the occasion of the greatest event after Jesus' ascension to the Heavens runs thus: "Ye men of Israel hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders, and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know;"⁵⁸ These scriptural testimonies notwithstanding, the general belief of the majority of the Christians is that Jesus Christ is "...one Lord....the son of God, begotten of the Father, only - begotten, that is Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both in the heavens and on earth."⁵⁹ It is very evident from this creed that Jesus is no more the Prophet of Nazareth, but 'very God of very God' and there can be no more exaggeration in the case of a pious Prophet of God like this one. In accordance with this fact we find Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) warning his people of falling into the same mistake of the Christians. It is reported by al-Bukhari that the noble Prophet has said "Don't extol me as the Christians have done (in the case of) the son of Mary (Jesus). I am but His (God's) servant. Say: The servant of Allah and His messenger."⁶⁰ The above prophetic statement shows what the real attitude of people should be to their prophets; an attitude of moderation not of excessive extolment that can lead a person astray and move him away from the true spirit of Allah's religion, as the Christians have been when they take a man to be God.⁶¹

The other extreme attitude towards the great messengers of Allah, as pointed out by al-'Āmirī is downgrading them from their exalted positions similar to what the

⁵⁷ See Matthew 21:11.

⁵⁸ Acts 2:22, being part of the speech of Peter, the Leader of the Christians after Jesus at the occasion of the Pentecost.

⁵⁹ Burns, A.E., (art) 'Creeds and Articles (Ecumenical)', Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol., 4, P. 239.

⁶⁰ Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of a-Anbiya (Prophets) Hadith No.3,261.

⁶¹ See the recent work of a prominent Christian theologian and philosopher of religion, John Hick and what he said on this issue The Rainbow of Faiths: (London: SCM Press, 1995) as mentioned in review article by Farid. A., Islamic Studies, vol. 36, No. 4, 1997, pp. 672-682.

Jews have done when they denied messengership to Ibrahim (Abraham) (P.B.U.H.), claiming that he was only a pious man.⁶² This Jewish erroneous assertion is no doubt a later tradition for in the book of Genesis Abraham is clearly described as a Prophet - "Now therefore restore the man his wife: for he (Abraham) is a Prophet and he shall pray for thee, and thou shall live..."⁶³ However, in the Jewish tradition, Ibrahim, (P.B.U.H.) is known as one of the patriarchs being a title assigned to leaders in the Old Testament: They were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons. The idea of Abraham being considered as a model of appropriate Jewish piety was first put forward, according to 'The Encyclopedia of Religion,' in post-biblical Judaism in the work known as 'Jubilees' or the 'Little Genesis' written in the Maccabean period.⁶⁴ We also found that a verse of the Bible gives a slight idea of what al-'Āmirī claimed and we suppose that perhaps, based on that verse, one of the early Jewish scholars interpreted it to mean that Abraham, due to his faith, is seen by God only as a righteous man. The verse is: "And he (Abraham) believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness."⁶⁵ To consider the father of the prophets, whose Prophet-hood and reception of divine message were confirmed, not only in the Old Testament itself, but also in other subsequent divine messages,⁶⁶ would be a deviation from the true spirit of religion, which in-turn speak of the inferiority of that religion in the scale of Abu al-Hassan al-'Āmirī.

The other thing, al-'Āmirī accuses the Jews of doing, in their belief concerning the prophets, is attributing to the prophets, commitment of major sins, like what they said of Prophet Lot (P.B.U.H.) having committed sexual intercourse with his two daughters while he was intoxicated.⁶⁷ This allegation or defamation of the Jews against

⁶² Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-I'lām of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 130.

⁶³ Genesis 20:7 cp. Van Seters, J. (art) "Abraham", The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 1 p. 16.

⁶⁴ ibid. pp. 15-16.

⁶⁵ Genesis 15:6.

⁶⁶ See The Gospel according to Luke 13:38 and in the Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa: 163.

⁶⁷ Al-I'lām by al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 130.

the pious servant of Allah Lot (P.B.U.H.), smacks of Jewish chauvinism and egocentrism as is very clear at the end of the narration.⁶⁸ Many examples of Jewish defamation related to other prophets of Allah abound. For example, what they said against Haroon, Dawud, Sulaiman (P.B.U.Th.) etc. was most unfortunate.⁶⁹ However, we find in the Qur'ān that prophets Dawud and Sulaiman whose image the Jews wanted to tarnish, have been described by Allah in the loftiest of terms.⁷⁰

In comparing the Christian and Jewish attitudes with that of the Muslims, al-Āmirī opined that the Muslims are free from the two extremities and believe that all prophets of Allah are chosen servants who are infallible. Furthermore, in order to avoid exaggerating the position of their Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.), the Muslims have made it a part of testimony of their faith to describe their Prophet as a servant of Allah and His messenger.⁷¹ The *Hadith* of the Prophet mentioned above in which he warned the Muslims not to extol him as the Christians have done in the case of Jesus is an enough testimony to this fact.

Al-Āmirī added that, even in their practical life, the Muslims maintain this moderation regarding their Prophet, and even their Caliphs, who were leaders of the world at the time of al-Āmirī, always started their letters with the phrase: "From the servant of Allah so and so....."⁷² Furthermore, to show their sincerity of belief in and respect for other prophets, the Muslims maintain the following Qur-ānic verse: "... We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, Jacob, and to the tribes, and that which has been given to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been given to the prophets from their

⁶⁸ See the complete fabricated lie in Genesis 19:30-38 At the end of the narration, they showed the two illegitimate sons as the fathers of Moabites and Ammonites respectively, them being their traditional enemies.

⁶⁹ See Exodus 28; 2 Samuel: 11 and 12; 1 Kings: 11 etc.

⁷⁰ Surah Sad: 25 and 30. Dawud was described as having a near access to Allah and a good place, while Sulaiman was described as an excellent servant.

⁷¹ Al-īlam of al-Āmirī, op. cit. p. 130.

⁷² ibid. p. 130.

Lord. We make no distinction between any of them and to Him we have submitted." ⁷³

It is clear from the above that apart from Christianity and Judaism al-'Āmirī did not mention the other religions he is comparing, perhaps due to lack of available information about their concepts of Prophethood or because it is only Judaism and Christianity, whose ^{prophets} were mentioned and confirmed by the Qur-ān that attracted his attention. For the others not mentioned in the Qur-ān, as far as we know, there is no clear and authentic confirmation of their being prophets of Allah. Sometimes, from the similarity of the message of a founder of a religion, with the Qur-ānic message of Allah's unity and His judgment, scholars speculate that, he might have been a prophet sent to another nation, as Allah declares in the Qur-ān: "And verily, We have sent among every community a messenger (proclaiming): Worship Allah (alone) and avoid false deity....". ⁷⁴

Al-'Āmirī in this case, was comparing the comparable i.e. attitudes towards prophets, rather than comparing the prophets themselves. His comparison is very brief, for he did not mention the rejection of the Jews the Prophet-hood of Jesus (P.B.U.H.) and the rejection of both the Jews and the Christians of the final Prophet and Messenger of Allah to the entire mankind (*Kafatan li al-nas*) Muhammad (P.B.U.H.).

In the same way, al-'Āmirī successfully explains the superiority of Islam over the other religions in the question of belief and oneness of God (Allah) as well as in the elated position of all prophets of Allah. He has also tried, with equal degree of success, regarding his analysis of belief in the Angels of Allah. He stated that all the six religions, with the exception of Islam, have become victims of believing in some wrong and erroneous doctrines concerning the Angels. This is because the idol worshippers claim that the Angels are the daughters of God while the Dualists (the Zoroastrians and perhaps the Sabians) believe that the Angels possess divine loftiness. ⁷⁵

Al-'Āmirī also mentioned that, the Jews claim that one after the others, the Angels can commit sin and disbelieve in their Creator and as a consequence, Allah will

⁷³ Surah al-Baqarah:136 cp. Surah al-Imrān:84.

⁷⁴ Surah al-Nahl : 36 .

⁷⁵ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 131.

the

punish them by disfiguring them.⁷⁶ So, to Jews, just like human beings, angels can also commit sins including the greatest of all ---- disbelief in the Creator. Al-'Āmirī also compared these beliefs regarding the angels, with those of the Muslims by simply saying that the Muslims sincerely state that angels are"honourable servants, who do not go before Him (Allah) in speech and they act upon His command."⁷⁷ In other words, the Muslims believe that the angels are not divine and do not commit minor or major sins, talkless of disbelief. They are honourable servants of Allah who do not disobey His command. Al-'Āmirī believes that this is more in line with the spirit of true religiosity and by that, he proves the superiority of Islam over the other four religions he compared. Al-'Āmirī did not discuss the Christian belief in this particular issue. The Christian traditional belief, especially after the second Nicene council (787 C.E.), in the angels, is that they are creatures with thin and ethereal bodies or fiery bodies. From that time, the Christians depicted and venerated the images of the angels.⁷⁸ Al-'Āmirī's comparison here was also in general terms, not going into details, but he showed how the concepts of the angels in the other religions, border on raising the status of the angels to share divinity with Allah, either by being His daughters or by raising them to the divine status or by invoking them. All these are seen by al-'Āmirī as deviations from the normal course of religion, in which only Allah is the Lord and the Divine.

3-Moderation: Having studied the different religions of his time, al-'Āmirī came to the conclusion that there are some internal factors in a religion that will make it not only superior to all others but will also guarantee for it everlastingness, widespread acceptance and success. The most important of these factors is the quality of

⁷⁶ Ghurab, A. (ed.) al-Islam of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 131 cp. Coudert, A., 'art' 'Angels' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 283-285.

⁷⁷ Surah al-Anbiya:26-27.

⁷⁸ See Hall, H.H., (art) 'Demons and Spirits (Christian)', Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 4, p. 581. Cp. Fisher, M.P., An Encyclopedia of the World's Faiths, op. cit. p. 320.

moderation; ⁷⁹ moderation in the religion's basic principles, in its forms of worship, both in quantity and quality; moderation also in the relation of the religion's teachings with the social life of the adherents, and with the natural composition and structure of man. ⁸⁰ Al-'Āmirī believes that structurally, the religion that is superior should have quality of moderation between gentleness and mildness on the one hand, and austerity and rigidity on the other. ⁸¹ This is necessary so that people of different natures will find in that religion, what leads to the betterment of their destiny and their livelihood, so also what will bring to them: the good of both two worlds. The examples of rigidity and austerity that lead to hardship, given here by al-'Āmirī are, like the peculiar characteristics of the Christian monks by abstaining from marriage and their solitude in the hermitage, and their abandoning the good and the lawful of livelihood. So also the self-mortification and penance of the Dualists including their castration, together with their sticking to the five principles of truthfulness, purity, rest, holiness and humility, while being oblivious of any efforts towards the construction and usufruct of the world. Al-'Āmirī saw all these as ways and means of destroying or bringing harm to the body, which is supposed to be taken care of and provided for. ⁸² This attitude is far from moderation. Al-'Āmirī made this particular assertion on the necessity of moderation in the beginning of his comparison between the forms of devotion in the different religions. It is no wonder that his starting discussions with the issue of moderation shows his acute observation of the religious experience of these traditions. As mentioned above the devotional dimension of religion is in a way, the practical face of it, what is observable to all and any specific characterisation of a religion will mostly center on the dimension of worship and devotion being existentially conspicuous.

⁷⁹ Moderation in worship especially, is the best deterrence from falling into either exaggeration and exceeding the limits or negligence, and a famous saying of the prophet (P.B.U.H.) says, "The best of affairs are the moderate ones or those characterised with moderation." (See Ajluni's Kashf al-Khafa, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Qudsi, 1351 A.H., vol. 1, p.391.) and the verses of Glorious Qur-ān confirm this meaning. See Surah al-Isra: 29 and 110, and Surah al-Furqan:67.

⁸⁰ Al-īlām op. cit. pp. 137-139.

⁸¹ ibid. p. 137.

⁸² ibid. p. 137-138, See the Qur-ānic guidance in this in Surah al-Baqarah:195 and Surah al-Nisa:29.

Al-'Āmirī started his discussions on the devotional aspect, with the statement that prayer --- involving the remembrance of God and humility before Him ---- is found in all religions. The forms of the prayer may differ, but the intention and purpose behind it will, more or less, be the same. He stated that the Islamic prayer (Salah) is the best because it conforms to the spirit of moderation in two ways, i.e. qualitatively and quantitatively.⁸³ Quantitatively, the Islamic prayer and the injunctions related to it, are characterised by moderation, because the prayer is not imposed in large numbers that can lead to intemperance and excessiveness and perhaps obsession, similar to the case of the Dualists and the Christian hermits.⁸³ Moreover, the Islamic prayer is not in very small numbers which may lead to negligence and forgetfulness, like the prayers of the Majus (*Zoroastrians*). However, what is found in modern writings is that a pious Zoroastrian for instance prays five times a day similar to the number of Muslim prayer. The names of some of the main prayers are, '*Ahuna Vairyā*', '*Airyema Isho*', '*Ashem Vohu*' and '*Yenhe Hateam*'.⁸⁴ What al-'Āmirī may be pointing to here, ~~is~~ is the in-elaborate and shallow nature of the prayer in the Zoroastrian religion. In one description of the Zoroastrian prayer, that is seen as particularly important it was described as an 'act of tying a sacred cord (*Kusti*) around one's mid-section' performed at least five times a day. The interpretation of this symbol is that, the believers are girding themselves ---- while saying some prayer to keep evil away ---- as soldiers of *Ahura Mazda* and by that they strengthen their resolve to continue treading the spiritual path.⁸⁵ Due to this fact, al-'Āmirī might have considered that the Zoroastrian prayer is less in number, and goes to the extent of negligence of the deity as they pray to keep away evil only. Another fact to strengthen this opinion is what is being said by Western students of *Zoroastrianism*, that *Zoroaster*, as far as records show, did not make a provision for ceremonial or outward

83 Al-*I'lam* of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 139.

84 See Gnoli, G., 'art' 'Zoroastrianism', The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 15, p.586. cp. Edwards, E., 'art' 'Worship (Parsi)' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 12, p. 807.

85 See Fisher, M.P., An Encyclopedia of the World's Faiths, op. cit. p. 210, cp. Gnoli, G., (art) 'Zoroastrianism' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol. 15, p. 586.

forms of worship. The Gathas, seen as the best reflection of his teachings, contain nothing regarding ways or forms of worship. ⁸⁶

Al-'Āmirī saw that the number of required prayers in Islam is more in line with the spirit of moderation as it is neither too much nor too little. Rather it allows the believer to seek his livelihood while fulfilling his duty to his Creator in a manner that is well-balanced, neither fully engrossed in the pursuit of the world, nor glued to prayer like the Christian monks. As Allah says:

“But seek, with that (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on you, the home of the Hereafter, and forget not your portion of (legal enjoyment) in this world,...” ⁸⁷

Al-'Āmirī said the quantity of Islamic prayer is well balanced because there are three prayers in the daytime, (*al-fajr, al-dhuhr and al-asr*), while there are three also in the night time, including of course *al-witr* prayer *, (*al-Maghrib, al-Isha and al-witr*). That is ten *rak'ats* (standings or units of prayer) in the daytime and ten also in the night. Al-'Āmirī saw all these facts as having been designed by the All-Wise Lord of the worlds to enable the human being to operate a balanced life and keep in touch with his Lord. Al-'Āmirī did not give us the other side of the picture (the number of prayers in the other religions and their times, *rak'ats* (standings or units of prayer) or what resembles it. We have already mentioned the prayers of the Zoroastrians. As for the Jews, especially after the destruction of the temple in the year 70 C.E., they started the synagogue institution. They pray three times daily: morning, afternoon, and evening, with recitation from the Torah, which is supposed to be continuous, i.e. from the beginning to the end and then back to the beginning, with a kind of celebration at the end of the round, and then restarting it again. ⁸⁸ As for the Christians, what we

⁸⁶ Edwards, E. (art) “Worship (Parsi)”, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 12, p. 807.

⁸⁷ Surah Al-Qasas:77.

⁸⁸ Hoffman, L. A., (art) “Jewish Worship” The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 15, p. 446 and Loewe, H. (art), ‘Worship (Jewish)’, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 12, p. 806.

* This is because *al-witr* prayer is strongly recommended in all the schools of law in Islam. It is even considered by Imam Abu Hanifah as *wajib*. Al-'Āmirī being a Hanafite would use this to support his theory.

may consider as similar to *Salah* in Islam is what they call 'Liturgy of the hours'. Scholars agree that the Christians, especially in the first two centuries, practiced the daily prayers of the first century Judaism, but later on they changed them to two prayers only, in the morning and evening.⁸⁹ These prayers are public, to be performed either in the Synagogue for the Jews or in the Church for the Christians.

While comparing the Islamic prayer with that of other religions, al-'Āmirī opined that no meditational prayer of a religion contains elements of real humility like that of the Muslims. He compared the different postures in that prayer with the different bodily postures, by which people greet their kings and people in authority. He tried to explain the issue philosophically by pointing that not only the postures but also the sequence of these acts reflect the normal way people show obeisance to their rulers - standing, bowing, prostration and then kneeling (sitting by the knees).⁹⁰

As for the quality of prayers of other religions, al-'Āmirī saw that it is not as perfect as that of Islam. This is because some of the prayers have bowing position only, with no prostration; some have only the prostration; while others do not have a specified beginning, and no specified end i.e. spontaneous.⁹¹ Al-'Āmirī mentioned another dimension of the superiority of Islamic prayer to that of other religions. It is first, the *Azan* as a proclamation of *Tawhid* and the testimony of Allah's unity, with its import. And secondly, the political aspect of the prayer of Friday, when the Imam, being both a political as well as a spiritual leader, comes out in full grandeur to address the people in their worldly and other-worldly affairs. He holds to a weapon to depict power, and so on.⁹² At the end, al-'Āmirī said, nothing of the above is in other religions in which there is a clear, dichotomy between the spiritual, headed by the 'High priests' and the mundane supervised by the political leaders.

⁸⁹ ibid.

⁹⁰ Ghurab, A., (ed.) Al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. pp. 139-140.

⁹¹ ibid. p. 140.

⁹² ibid. p. 141.

Another example given by al-'Āmirī of Islam's superiority over other religions in terms of moderation in worship is the act of fasting which he considered a physical or bodily worship.⁹³ He said that both in quantity and quality no other religious fasting is superior to the Islamic fasting. In terms of quantity, he said, Islamic fasting is not too long to make it boring like that of the Christian monks (even though they do not represent the majority of Christians), nor like that of the Dualists and the idolaters.⁹⁴ For the Dualists, perhaps, Sabians as we said earlier, or the Manichees, followers of Mani whose religion is also a clearly dualist religion, they fast every Sunday and an additional one month before the annual Bema celebration - which represents a remembrance of Mani's suffering and death.⁹⁵ As this form of fasting is made incumbent on the Dualists, it is plausible that it creates hardship on the followers and in turn, encourage them to desert their religion. Regarding the Zoroastrians, al-'Āmirī said that the Islamic fasting is not as short as that of the Zoroastrians which, in real sense, is not a fasting. We have not succeeded in our search for any mention of fasting in *Zoroastrianism*. Our futile effort is corroborated by a Western writer on Zoroastrian religion in the early part of this century, who stated that there is indeed no fasting in *Zoroastrianism* because "...*Zoroastrianism* has always condemned fasting."⁹⁶ As for quality, al-'Āmirī said that the Islamic fasting is not like that of the Christians and the Dualists, who believed in the prohibition of meat, and who by that suffer from leanness and emaciation. Again Islamic fasting is not like that of the Jews that is scattered throughout the year with no stable regulation to the extent that the knowledge of its different times is not available, save with specialists among them only.⁹⁷

As for the Islamic fasting, it has a very clear and specified time which starts by a confirmed sighting of the moon. It leads to the purification of the soul from sin and it

⁹³ ibid. p. 142.

⁹⁴ ibid. p. 142.

⁹⁵ Smart, N., *The World's Religions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1992) p. 223.

⁹⁶ Jackson, A.V.W., *Zoroastrian Studies*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), p. 184, F. No. 34.

is a complete abstention from the three carnal enjoyments of food, drink and sex, (from dawn to dusk). Other forms of worship associated with the Islamic fasting are, *Zakah al-fitr* (food alms given at the end of the fasting period), *Tarawih* prayer in which the whole Qur-ān is recited, *al-I'tikaf* - a sort of temporary withdrawal from the world during the last-days of the fasting month of *Ramadan* in order to devote oneself to prayers and worship of Allah, ,and finally, the Eid celebration with all its happiness, merry - making and joyful festivities. Al-'Āmirī said that there are no similar things in the other religions and hence, the superiority of Islam in this aspect is also emphasized.

4 - Concern with the overall uplift of and welfare of the individuals in the Society:

Another point seen by al-'Āmirī, which proves the superiority of a religion over others, is its absolute concern with each individual member of its community, in terms of his overall development, especially intellectual development, and in terms of the welfare of the different classes and strata of the society in its domain. Any religion which stresses the importance of knowledge and encourages its pursuit is seen by al-'Āmirī as a superior religion.⁹⁵ He believed that these are qualities which guarantee that the religion is not based on ignorance, irrational ideas or ineffable mysteries. To him, such religion must be based on facts attested to by all right thinking persons upon reflection on its claims, values and sources. Al-'Āmirī believes that, of all the religions he had examined for his comparative studies, it is Islam alone that shows the most concern in encouraging its adherents to seek ways of perfecting their different spheres of life - the personal (which includes personal ethics and morals and the control of desires and urges), the familial (which includes the relationship between the person and his wife, his children, his maids and servants and his other dependents), and the political (which includes the protection of the social classes and their production in ---

⁹⁷ Ghurab, A., (ed.) *Al-Islam of al-'Āmirī*, op. cit. p. 142.

⁹⁸ Ghurab, A. (ed.) *Al-Islam by al-'Āmirī*, op. cit. p. 78.

accordance to their different levels). ⁹⁹ Al-'Āmirī believes that the teachings of Islam encourage the seeking of knowledge that helps a believer in conducting himself vis-a-vis his different relations as a member of a human social set up. There is divine guidance in every aspect of man's life in this world---general guidelines have been provided in the two main sources of law in Islam, namely the Glorious Qur-ān and the authentic *Sunnah* of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.). As this divine guidance is all encompassing ¹⁰⁰, it is incumbent on a believer to ask the people of the Reminder (Revealed knowledge) if he does not know. The guidance of Islam in the above mentioned areas is more comprehensive and given in a more detailed form than in all the other religions. As this is not our area of study we will mention it generally rather than specifically. In all those areas, what the Muslims have, from their original sources (Qur-ān and *Sunnah*), is more comprehensive than what the followers of other religions have inherited from Revealed knowledge through their founding Prophets (P.B.U.Th.).

As regards the concern of Islam with the individual in the society, al-'Āmirī believes that Islam, more than any religion, shows concern and takes into cognisance the rights of the weak, as it encourages the strong and the powerful to seize all the opportunities before him and reach all heights and glories, as he has been given complete immunity from enslavement or encroachment upon his rights and belongings. ¹⁰¹

As for the weak in the society, al-'Āmirī referred his weakness to the following different factors:

- a. If the weakness is due to the bodily structure, i.e. woman, then Islam more than any religion, has given strong warnings against encroaching on her rights, or any other form of aggression against her. Islam exhorts its believers to show kind and tender attitudes towards the women. ¹⁰¹ In the Qur-ān, we see that Allah advises the believers, even on the event of divorce, to act kindly towards women.

⁹⁹ ibid. pp. 76-78.

¹⁰⁰ Surah al-An'am:38 and Surah al-Nahl:89.

¹⁰¹ ibid. pp. 163-164.

"The divorce is twice, after that, either you retain her on reasonable terms or release her with kindness...." ¹⁰²

Elsewhere Allah says:

"....And live with them honourably...." ¹⁰³

In the farewell sermon of the prophet (P.B.U.H.), in which he summarised the most important aspects of his mission to humanity, he has this to say on the issue of women:

"Treat the women kindly, since they are your helpers, and are not in a position to manage their affairs themselves. Fear Allah concerning them, for verily you have taken them on the security of Allah, and have made their persons lawful unto you by the words of Allah." ¹⁰⁴

b. If the weakness is due to age (and lack of support or protector), i.e. the orphan, the religion of Islam, unlike the others, has gone to the last extent in commanding his protection and that of his property. ¹⁰⁵ Allah Says, regarding the wealth of the orphans:

"Verily, those who unjustly eat up the property of orphans, they eat up only a fire into their bellies, and they will be burnt in the blazing fire!" ¹⁰⁶

In a Hadith of Imam al-Bukhari, the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) is reported to have said:

"I and the one who takes care of an orphan, will enter Paradise together like this", and he raised his forefinger and middle finger jointly leaving space between them (by way of illustration).

What a lofty position! - To be in the company of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.). ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Surah al-Baqarah:229.

¹⁰³ Surah al-Nisa: 19.

¹⁰⁴ Faizi, S.F.H., Sermons of the Prophet, (Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1987), p. 146.

¹⁰⁵ Al-I'l'am, p. 164.

¹⁰⁶ Surah al-Nisa: 10.

¹⁰⁷ Abbasi, S.M.M., (Trans) Riyadh-us-Saleheen by Imam al-Nawawi, (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, N.D.), p. 173.

- c. If the weakness is due to lack of means of livelihood, i.e. the poor, Islam has strongly recommended charity for the poor and the needy,¹⁰⁸ and spending on them. Allah has specified in the believer's wealth, a portion for the poor as a duty imposed by Him. Numerous Qur-ānic verses and *Hadiths* of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) abound in this regard.¹⁰⁹
- d. If the weakness is due to bondage, i.e. slaves - The Qur-ān has encouraged their being set free, and that is also one of the great means of ransoming oneself from sins.¹¹⁰ In this regard Allah says:
"But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep. And what will explain to thee the path that is steep? (It is) freeing the bondman."¹¹¹

He also says:

"....If one kills a believer it is ordained that he should free a believing slave...."¹¹²

In the prophet's farewell sermon he advised thus:

"And your slaves! See that you feed them with such food as you eat yourselves and clothe them with the clothes as you yourselves wear."¹¹³

- e. If the weakness is due to ^(being away from) one's country, i.e. wayfarer, there are in the Qur-ān repeated exhortations for helping and caring for the traveler mentioned mostly together with the other classes.¹¹⁴

These are the different classes of the weak in the society as explained by al-Āmirī and he showed that special attention has been given to them by the Islamic

religion, something which is not found in other religions, even though he did not explain what are the real teachings of these religions on these issues. These are beyond the scope of this study and as such they will not be discussed.

The foregoing long discussion and illustrations of the superiority of one religion over others is a very conspicuous phenomenon, which appears to be the bedrock of al-'Āmirī's comparative study of religions. His conception of the study of religion and perhaps, that of others (Muslims, Jews and Christians alike) at that time was never seen as useful and conclusive, nor was the study itself seen as useful, if no judgment was given on the superiority of one religion over others. The lengthy discussion to establish the superiority of Islam is therefore very pertinent and useful.

4- Other Aspects of Al-'Āmirī's Conception of the Comparative Study of Religions:

Al-'Āmirī views religion as part of human nature as mentioned earlier, so it is only natural to have religious inclination, feelings and sentiments.¹¹⁵ This idea might have been conceived by al-'Āmirī through the teachings of the Qur-ān, wherein the belief in Allah and in His being the Creator of the Heavens and Earth, has been taken for granted. *, and that in a way, alludes to the fact, that natural religiosity has been placed in everyone's heart by God. The idea of religion being part of human nature is generally believed by religious people, and many anthropologists and students of religion used to be overwhelmed with the existence of one form of religion or worship or beliefs in some supernatural beings or the others, in almost all human societies or communities explored.¹¹⁶ Al 'Āmirī also believes in this fact, moreso, that we find

¹¹⁵ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 116.

* Surah Al-Ankabut : 63 and Surah Luqman : 25

¹¹⁶ See the first footnote of the first chapter.

explicit Qur-ānic verses declaring that, to each human nation, Allah has sent a messenger with His message of Unity of God and the eventual return to Him. ¹¹⁷

Not only that religion is considered as part of human nature by al-'Āmirī, but also that the knowledge of the fundamentals of religion are inherent in man. Al-'Āmirī's concept of religion's original source, and that of its study is strictly religious. So if the knowledge of the essentials of religion is in everyone, then every man can, after little thought, easily discover what is right in religion and what is not, what is in line with the fundamentals of religion and what is not. This is in sharp contrast with the Western study of religion today, in which the question of truth and the right is completely ruled out as explained in chapter one of this study. ¹¹⁸

Another important aspect of al-'Āmirī's concept of the study of religion is that, he considers it a religious duty, which is rewardable by God. ¹¹⁹ It is not a secular exercise undertaken for some material benefit, rather, it should be seen as a kind of *Jihad* by means of the tongue, because through the study of religion, one defends the Islamic beliefs from the unjustified attacks of the obstinates. As the Islamic religion in both its belief foundations and its practical aspects, is not based on irrational ideas or myths and also is not based on unconfirmed revelation, its defence or rather its rational exposition is not theology in the derogative sense, which was rejected by the so-called scientific study of religion. Islam has a solid historical foundation and its revelation, even if rejected by skeptics is there to testify for itself. It has been preserved by God as promised in a very miraculous manner, that speaks for itself. Allah promised this in His saying (*Hijr* : 9).

Al-'Āmirī believes that the study of religion is not neutral in itself. It affects the student and helps him to grow. It makes the student one of the '*Khassah*' (elites), who are able to prove or disprove something intellectually. By that he will no more be

¹¹⁷ Surah al-Nahl : 36 and Surah Fatir : 24

¹¹⁸ See pp. 18-19 above.

¹¹⁹ *Al-Islam*, op. cit. pp. 110-112 and p. 180.

of the followers (*Muqallidin*), especially in matters of religion,¹²⁰ but is helped by his knowledge to be able to discern what is right and what is wrong.

This leads us to another important aspect of al-Āmirī's comparative study of religion - the question of truth. Many western writers today tend to completely avoid raising the question of truth and say that it is relative,¹²¹ in their study of religions. We see in all other fields, the truth is being sought, but not so in the study of religion - and partly in sociology. In the study of religion missing the truth is of more precarious consequence than in other fields because the truth in the realm of religion leads to peace, bliss and harmony in both worlds, while falsehood will bring doom on a person here and in the hereafter. It is so important that it (truth) is one of the names of Allah in Islam (*al-Haqq*).

We have already pointed to al-Āmirī's concept of 'the religion of truth' , which he takes as his criterion for evaluating other religions. He shows in several places that he is seeking for the truth in his study and wants to apply it. It is not only theoretical interest in the truth that al-Āmirī shows but it goes beyond that to its application in his comparison of religions and in other issues as well.¹²² According to al-Āmirī and many Muslim students of religion, truth is being sought in the study of religion. This may be because of the fact that religion is so important, and pervades all their life endeavours, and they do confront many issues in their daily lives, which warrant constant introspection and raising of questions of truth in religion. Not only this, they also believe that, since Allah has bestowed on them intellect and has revealed guidance to them for all their life activities, then that guidance should be comprehensive, intelligible and in line with the truth based on which the heavens and the earth were created.¹²³ Al-Āmirī believes in the search for truth of any issue and advises one not

120 ibid. p. 112.

121 See Weibe, D., Religion and Truth, (The Hague :Mouton, 1981), for a full discussion of this difficult problem in the modern scientific study of religion. Compare it with Smith, W. C., The Question of Religious Truth, (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

122 The al-İ'lam op. cit. p. 73.

123 See Surah al-Nahl : 89, Surah al-A'raf : 52 and Surah al-Hijr : 85.

to succumb to beliefs that are ambiguous and that lead to perplexity and the confusion of the mind. ¹²⁴

As an example of al-'Āmirī's position regarding the truth is his non-acceptance of the general attitudes of the different sections of scholars regarding some branches of knowledge, similar to today's scholars. He defended '*ilm al-Kalam*' or the science of Kalam (Scholastic theology - to use western terminology) against the attacks of the scholars of *Hadith* (*al-Muhadithin*), as he also defended '*ilm al-Hadith*' (the science of *Hadith*) with equal vigour, from the onslaughts of the scholars of *Kalam*. This shows that he is not taking sides in this controversy and is with the truth wherever it lies. ¹²⁵ To reach at the truth, according to al-'Āmirī is to strive for it. He believes that if one struggles in search of truth with all sincerity, one will definitely find it. To him, the truth is the goal and one should strive for it, and that the struggle should not be undertaken by one alone but rather one should seek help from God who is the Truth Himself, since Allah is the Truth, He is the Ultimate Guide to the truth. Al-'Āmirī sees that the student of religion should seek for help from Allah, the Endower of intellect, to guide him along the way of excellence so as to be able to observe the facts by the light of truth. ¹²⁶ This idea, (of observing by the light of truth) of al-'Āmirī may be seen as part of the influence of Neo-Platonism on him. A great deal of his philosophical writings, especially his *al-Sa'adat wa al-Is'ad* contains many Neo-platonic elements. Intuitive knowledge is generally taken as a source of knowledge* by Neo-Platonists, and by the scholars of the different religions. ¹²⁷ That inborn knowledge may be crystal clear within one who seeks God's help by means of some spiritual exercises; and it will be blurred or even completely lost in those who indulge in the carnal enjoyments in this world. The later are those who possess intellect, but do not understand (the truth),

¹²⁴ Al-I'lām, p. 97.

¹²⁵ ibid. pp. 107-112.

¹²⁶ ibid. p. 127.

¹²⁷ For instance St. Augustine in explaining his theory of knowledge, he squarely arrived at intuition as the main pillar of his epistemology. See Jordan, J.N. Western Philosophy, (New York : Macmillan, 1987), pp. 294-300.

who possess eyes, but do not see (the truth) and who possess ears, but do not hear (the truth) ¹²⁸ They are described in the Qur-ān as being similar to animals, and even worse than animals. ¹²⁸ The people who do not see things in their true perspectives are those upon whose hearts and hearing Allah has placed a seal and has placed on their sight a veil - so that they cannot see the truth. ¹²⁹ Allah tells us in the Qur-ān that those who are obstinate and proud before the truth will not be guided to the signs of Allah, and that even if they see all the signs (of Allah's majesty), they will not believe them, and if they see the path of guidance, they will not follow and tread it, but if they see the path of mis-guidance, they will follow and tread it. The reason for this is because they denied the signs of Allah and they were also oblivious and negligent of them. ¹³⁰

The light of truth mentioned by al-Āmirī may corresponds in Islam to that divine help and success bestowed on those who struggle sincerely to attain the truth, as seen in the above Qur-ānic verses. ¹³¹ That light of truth will remain kindled as long as selfish desires did not blemish it, for desires according to al-Āmirī blemish the 'mirror of reason'. ¹³² But this blemishing of the mirror of truth will only be in the concerned persons, not in the truth itself. This is because the truth will always remain as the truth, it will never change to falsehood, for instance, due to peoples' differences regarding it. Likewise, falsehood will never become truth because of people' consensus on it. ¹³³ It will remain as falsehood howsoever it may be decorated and adorned.

128 Surah al-A'raf : 179.

129 Surah al-Baqarah : 7.

130 Surah al-A'raf : 146, cp. Al-I'lām, op. cit. p. 210.

* Intuition here refers to an idea or belief not preceded by inference, a hunch. See Rorty, R. (ed.) 'Intuition' The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edwards, P. (ed.) New York: Macmillan, 1972) Reprint ed., vol. 4, p. 204.

131 See Surah al-Ankabut : 69.

132 Al-I'lām, op. cit. p. 188.

133 ibid. p. 192.

Before concluding our discussion on al-'Āmirī's conception of the comparative method and the study of religion as a whole, it will be pertinent to mention his theory on the distinguishing features of the different kinds of religiosity. In trying to explain the attitude of Islam towards people of other faiths, al-'Āmirī explains the nature of their religiosity and he saw that the Islamic treatment of them is the best and most suited to their religious temperament.

According to al-'Āmirī, the atheist loves gratifying his carnal desires through enjoyment. It is this attitude that blinds him from contemplating on the true nature and consequences of things. The atheist always tries to also satisfy his soul with whatever it wants.¹³⁴ As for the polytheist, al-'Āmirī opines that his bane is what he perceives by means of the two senses of hearing and sight, in the carved idols. The different wonders or mysteries of these idols-like when they pray to them, they got what they requested, or when some of these idols make some sound, or remain suspended in the air and so on, so also a great deal of myths and folktales^{all these} were invented and explained by the priests and the custodians of the sacred places.¹³⁵ That is, as they are inclined towards tangibles and things that are concrete, they never feel satisfied with an abstract or unseen God. They believe in what they can see and touch. This attitude tends to limit the power of the Almighty in their^{view}, while limitless nature of God's power is supported by reason. They cannot think of one diety, who can effectively control the whole of this universe alone, rather there should be others to help him. For one single Lord, since they conceive him within their own limited nature, which is tied to what can be seen and touched, He (Lord) cannot possess that all-pervading power over all things.¹³⁶

Al-'Āmirī sees that it is part of the mercy found in this religion (of Islam) that the above two groups, namely, the atheists and the polytheists are not tolerated in an Islamic polity unless under^{the terms of} a covenant. To al-'Āmirī, if they are left alone with an unrestricted freedom, they will mislead a large number of the common people.¹³⁷ Al-

134 ibid. p. 166.

135 ibid.

136 See Surah Sad : 5.

137 Al-İlam, op. cit. p. 168.

'Āmirī believes these two groups to be the most feeble-minded and foolish in terms of their religious beliefs and he also believes that their religions are the most faulty and imperfect. But despite that, he stated that guiding them (atheists and polytheists) to the 'religion of truth' is very difficult. This difficulty, according to al-'Āmirī is not because of their ability to argue or to engage one in a dialogue for long, but it is due to the existing compatibility of their beliefs and the existential materiality of this world.¹³⁸ It seems to us that al-'Āmirī is trying to say that according to the atheists, the apparent reality that exists in this universe is such that, there is no need for faith in any superhuman agency, that controls this universe. Some scientists today are claiming that they are proving this scientifically. This is what the atheist will say to justify his stand. On the other hand, the polytheist argues that, within human limitations, one can see in this universe a number of forces inhabiting the different aspects of the universe. And that these forces constitute in themselves deities worthy of worship and hence, a plurality of gods is a fact in this universe.

Neither the former nor the latter arguments can withstand the evidences put forward against them, and in favour of the belief in the real existence and absolute unity (*Tawhid*) of the Creator of this dispensation. As part of al-'Āmirī's keen observation of the religious history and practice, he stated that the recourse of the 'religion of truth', when weakened by the forces of innovations (*bid'ah*) will be like a form of polytheism - where due to the weakness of faith, other things or persons are given some of the attributes of God and are subsequently worshipped. That makes them, in a way, deities besides God. Al-'Āmirī also predicted that any religious person who has excessive dependence on reason in matters of religion will end up being an atheist.¹³⁹ This may be due to the fact that each religion holds to some beliefs regarding the unseen world (*al-ghaib*). That world is beyond human perception, and reason and other tools at the disposal of man cannot affirm something for certain in that world. It

¹³⁸ ibid. p. 167 - This idea of al-'Āmirī mentioned here is one the greatest insights into the philosophy of our life in this world. As a trial, Allah has hidden from our hearing and sight all things related to the next life. Man is suppose to see beyond the materiality of this universe, so as to be of those who succeed in this trial of life.

¹³⁹ ibid. p. 167.

remains then, that any knowledge about that metaphysical world has to come to man from that world, by means of what is known as revelation (*Wahy*), when the Creator of both the worlds chooses to reveal something of that world to man, and that happens mainly through the medium of an angel according to Islam.

As for the people of the earlier revealed books (*ahl-al-Kitab*), al-'Āmirī believes that their main bane is the many corrupted misinterpretations found in their books, and a great deal of misleading selfish interests that were brought to bear in their Gospels.¹⁴⁰ Al-'Āmirī is here pointing to the corruption of the previous revealed messages by its custodians - the scholars, by means of deliberate misinterpretation of the text or its corruption by addition or deletion, so as to be in line with the vain desires of the concerned persons.

According to al-'Āmirī, to guide the people of the book is less difficult than that of the atheists and polytheists. The reason for this being, that in al-'Āmirī's view, anyone who believes in a revealed Book, do testify to and accepts the resurrection and the gathering before God.¹⁴¹ In other words, since he (the follower of a previous Book) believes in God's revealed Book(s), then he has the knowledge of God and of His judgement¹⁴² which means there is a common platform between his religion and the 'religion of truth', and this will facilitate dialogue and exchange of facts between the two. The Islamic treatment of this group, whose Book the Qur-ān has testified to its truth, and supersedes, that treatment is of tolerance. Due to this fact, Islam takes only *jizya* (poll - tax) from them, which is an administrative and not religious * matter - in lieu of their being protected under Islamic rule. They are given this treatment of tolerance with the hope that, after living and interacting with the people of Islam under the canopy of the Islamic social justice, they will become aware of the uniqueness of

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 167.

* Here, al-'Āmirī is trying to show that the *jizya* imposed on the people of the Book is related to Islamic administrative system not something necessitated by the dictates of religion at all times and in all conditions

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 168.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Islam, and on their own accord, submit to its lofty teachings and enjoy its high position in place of the mean jobs they were made to perform.¹⁴³ Al-'Āmirī, having lived in the golden era of Islamic civilization and of its political predominance, had a clear view of the social status of the different religious groups, under Islamic rule.

On the nature of the religiosity of Zoroastrians and the Dualists (*Sabians*), al-'Āmirī sees that, they are of moderate nature, in terms of the relationship between their beliefs and reason and they see reason as the greatest evidence in an issue.¹⁴⁴ So, they fall between the above two groupings, and this is why Islam treats them in some issues like the people of the Book and like the polytheists in other issues. This is a philosophical insight into the nature of the religiosity of the different religious groups by al-'Āmirī, who with that explains also why Islam treated and do treat these groups the way it did and does.

5- Al-'Āmirī's Underlying Principles in his Comparative Method:

Every scholar who studies an issue, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, has his own presuppositions and underlying principles, which he tends to apply. These principles may be stated openly or applied covertly, to be recognised by the reader. This is natural with man, as he cannot deny the influence of his environment, his training, his background and his inclinations on himself and his actions. Even though a lot has been said today on the need of being objective in academic research, it seems to be a far cry from the reality. Some scholars even see it as a myth to talk of a value-free, presuppositionless study of human issues.¹⁴⁵

Abu al-Hassan al-'Āmirī also has his own principles in his study of religions. Some he categorically mentioned and others he applied covertly. Thus the general picture of his study is that of a believer in the divine revelation, which forms the basis of religiosity for man in his view. Added to that, he believes in the value of human

¹⁴³ ibid. pp. 168-169..

¹⁴⁴ ibid. p. 169.

¹⁴⁵ See Bailey, K. D., Methods of Social Research, (New York : The Free Press, 1982), p. 28.

intellect, in understanding that revelation, and in its power to affirm or reject what is claimed to be from divine revelation. The general stand of many philosophers with religious background is that, there is harmony, not conflict between religion and reason, both are believed to have come from the same source - God.¹⁴⁶ So that reason, within its own limitations can go a long way in explaining the different aspects of this universe. Al-'Āmirī believes that reason is limited and is unable to explain some aspects of the universe which involves the unseen and the metaphysical world and other issues raised only by religions.¹⁴⁷

Since the main power of man --- his intellect, cannot recognize all facts nor explains all issues in this universe, it needed some help from somewhere. Al-'Āmirī believes that, that help should come from divine revelation and so he clearly recognizes revelation as a source of knowledge. As al-'Āmirī was writing on the issues of religion, he took it as a principle that the religion that evolves from pure and authentic revelation should constitute the standard religion and his criterion for judging the other religions. In al-'Āmirī's comparison of religions, he seems to implement a rule of the science of jurisprudence (*Usul-al-Fiqh*) i.e. that of '*maslahah*' (What is good or a cause of good). According to Muslim jurisprudents, what is a public good should be preferred to what is good only for the individual or for a limited number of people. Al-'Āmirī opined that the need for a thing which benefits all, is more than the need for that which benefits only a single individual.¹⁴⁸ As an example of the application of this principle in al-'Āmirī's comparison, we mention his views about the intellectual contributions made by the adherents of the religions he compares.

Al-'Āmirī stated that helping the course of religion can be by means of the hand (power) or by means of the tongue (speech). The need of helping religion by means of speech or statement is more than the need of helping it by means of power or

¹⁴⁶ See Jordan, J. N., Western Philosophy, op. cit. pp. 291-294 and pp. 385-386.

¹⁴⁷ See al-I'lām, p. 98 and 100.

¹⁴⁸ ibid. p. 101.

authority.¹⁴⁹ In real sense, seeking help by means of force, to strengthen religion is not done until after going to all extent in warning and admonishing and only after despair and the loss of hope of the people's acceptance of guidance.¹⁴⁹ This shows the urgent need for knowledge and insight in matters of religion and in other fields of learning. It is with knowledge that one argues, explains, supports or refutes another's idea. Al-'Āmirī mentions that all sciences are classified into two, namely, the religious sciences and the rational sciences. He added that none of the adherents of different religions he compared had contributed to these sciences in a large measure, like the Muslims.¹⁵⁰ He said that, as for the Jews, their religious injunctions or matters are limited to what was written in the Torah.¹⁵⁰ However, we find today the book of Talmud or the oral law (*Mishnah* and *Gemarah*) with the Jews, comprising several volumes. These are considered more important to the Jews than the Torah, especially in the modern age.¹⁵¹ It is true that not many great scholars emerged among the Jews till the time of al-'Āmirī, and even upto the modern time, as compared to the thousands of great scholars in the Islamic world.

As for the Christian contributions to knowledge, al-'Āmirī, stated that they have a book called 'Sanhodis' which contains church traditions and other matters. Al-'Āmirī may be referring ^{here} to the Christian councils proceedings. The other name for the councils is synods which is closer to the word used by al-'Āmirī. According to the 'Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics' there are three major collections of these proceedings upto 1798. One was published in 1674 in 17 volumes, another one in 1715 in 12 volumes, while the third one was published between 1759 and 1798 in 31 volumes!¹⁵² This is a great deal of material related to Christian traditions and religion. Yet, all this cannot be compared to the numerous new sciences founded by

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 180.

¹⁵¹ Goldenberg, R., (art) 'Talmud,' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 14, p. 259. See also Al-Sharqawi, M.A., Al-Kanz al-Marsud Fi Fada'ih al-Talmud (Cairo : Maktabah al-Way 'al-Islami, 1990), pp. 13-15.

¹⁵² Schaff, D.S. (art) 'Councils and Synods (Christian)' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 4, p. 197.

the Muslims and the multiple number of books written in each field by Muslim scholars in al-'Āmirī's view.

The Zoroastrians have a book called 'Avesta', which has two (main) commentaries; the 'Zand' and the 'Pazand'. ¹⁵³ It consists of the exposition of what brings, to the adherents of Zoroastrianism, good in this life. Only that the tradition of proceeding from primary to secondary, or from the main to the sub-issues, like the Ijtihad that obtains in Islam, is not found in their religion. Their religion, according to al-'Āmirī is based on complete followership and emulation, while reflection on issues so as to come out with new issues not initially mentioned in the texts, is prohibited. Nor can the Zoroastrians employ 'qiyas' --- analogical deduction as is done in Islam. ¹⁵⁴

The Dualists (*Sabians*) also possess holy books in which they explained their religion, and the faults or problems that obtain in the religions of others. ¹⁵⁵ The Dualists were among the first comparative religionists who show interest in the study of the religions of the 'others', in order to determine the flaws in them. They study these religions seriously and ^{and} analyse ~~and~~ write on them as was stated by Abu Hamid al-Marwarudhi, (d. 362), one of the noblest scholars met by al-Tawhidi ¹⁵⁶. Al-'Āmirī, found that the arguments of the Dualists in matters of religion are not as strong and skillful as those of Muslim scholastics (*Ulama al-Kalam*) in the latter's exposition of Islamic beliefs with ^{arguments} strong in their defence. From the above, we can discern that, al-'Āmirī was not impressed as a philosopher, a thinker and an intellectual, by the contributions to knowledge of the adherents of these religions. This might have stemmed from the teachings of these religions, i.e. a lack of encouragement for intellectual pursuit in all fields of learning, contrary to what we see in Islam.

¹⁵³ Al-l'lam, op. cit. p. 181. The two words 'Zand' and 'Pazand' mean the commentary or explanation and the re-explanation of the holy text in the Pahlavi language. See Muller, F.M. (ed.) The Sacred Books of the East, Pahlavi Text, (trans) West, E.W., (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1965) Reprint. vol. 5 (Intro), p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ See al-l'lam, op. cit. p. 181.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁵⁶ See Amin, A and al-Zain, A, (ed.) Kitab al-Imta' wa al-Mu'anasah of al-Tawhidi, (Cairo : Matba'ah al-Lajnah al-Ta'lif, N.D.) vol. 1 p. 91.

When al-'Āmirī comes to explain the intellectual contributions of the scholars of Islam, he strongly commended the efforts of scholars of *Hadith*, who sought for all the sayings and actions of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), and those of his companions and their followers¹⁵⁷ from all the main cultural centers of Islamic world. They studied the lives of the numerous narrators, criticised and studied their narrations in a very scholarly and honest manner, and present the most authentic collections of the prophet's sayings and actions within human limitations, in this nascent Islamic science. They left no stone unturned in order to be certain, and by that, facilitate the way for millions of Muslims to be certain of this precious treasure. They were very scrupulous and meticulous regarding the transmitters of this mine of knowledge. They knew their names, nicknames, lineages, lifespans, times and anything of importance in their lives so as to be certain that they are reliable people of impeccable integrity. The science of *Hadith* helped in no small measure in the preservation of the *Sunnah* and it created in the Muslim scholars that critical outlook on statements attributed by others to Allah or His pious servants (the prophets), who lived centuries before the advent of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.). This, in our view might be one of the strong factors which led to the Muslim critical study of the Bible. Works like al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa wa al-Nihal' by Imam Ibn Hazm of al-Andalus has been particularly appraised as a pioneering work in Biblical criticism.¹⁵⁸

The '*Ulama al-Kalam'* (Scholastics) contributions and their struggle for the defence of Islamic *aqeedah*, was another area of Islamic contribution to human thought mentioned by al-'Āmirī. He believed that they followed the path of the scholars of *Hadith* in leaving no stone unturned and in engaging in serious research in the fundamentals of Islamic creed system like the areas of the arguments for the existence of the Creator, in His unity..... in the prophet-hood and its necessity and so on. There was no religious claim put forward or expressed by some people, which was not studied thoroughly and accepted or rejected accordingly by these scholars. Not

¹⁵⁷ ibid. p. 181.

¹⁵⁸ See Margoliouth, D.S. (ed) 'Old and New Testaments in Muhammadanism' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 9, p. 482.

only this, they also studied the complex issues of metaphysics as obtained in philosophy, issues of all sorts, that help make ^{their} minds sharper and more understanding.¹⁵⁹ The issue of Muslim study of people's claims is directly related to this humble work. It is the starting point of what we call science of religion today, especially in the Muslim world. The study of the religious claims of others led to the inception of the field of the study of religion, which ~~thrives~~ mostly in the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries of *Hijrah*. Many great scholars of Islam, from different schools of thought, like *al-Mu'tazilah*, *al-Shi'ah*, *al-Ash'ariyyah* etc. wrote on Judaism, Christianity, Indian religions, and so on, at the time.

Similarly, al-'Āmirī pointed to the contributions of '*al-Fuqaha*' - Jurists, who are experts of the law, and who employed analogy to bring out new laws from and in line with the primary sources of law in Islam, namely the Glorious Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*.¹⁶⁰ They discussed even the minutest of legal matters to its logical conclusion, and by that, they saved those after them the time and efforts of research in those issues.

Al-'Āmirī lauded the Muslim intellectual exercise, which is seen, even in modern times --- as the unique contributions of Islam and as a food for thought to the world of philosophy. Evidently, Muslims have contributed a lot in the transmission of the Greek and other philosophies to the modern age through the west. However, Islamic thought is what originated from the primary sources of Islam and what served as an explanation of any aspect of them, with the traditionally accepted interpretations.

In the field of literature also, Muslims have contributed significantly, according to al-'Āmirī, especially in the different areas of the study of Arabic language, like grammar, prosody and so on, in which they wrote a large number of books for progeny. The other aspect of the Muslims' intellectual contributions to knowledge which no other civilization has done, and from which all sections of humanity benefited later on was the great translation works,¹⁶¹ encouraged by inquisitiveness and the love for knowledge, instilled in the hearts of the Muslims by their religion.

¹⁵⁹ *Al-īlam*, pp. 181-182.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 182.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.* p. 182.

They translated, studied, commented on and contributed to the wisdom of Rome, Persia, India and Greece. They possessed the insight and the true infallible knowledge, which guides them through the labyrinth of these human intellectual ideas. One of the Qur-ānic guiding principle relevant here is the saying of the Almighty:

'Those who listen to the word and follow the best of it, those are the ones who Allah has guided, and those are the ones endued with understanding.' ¹⁶²

It is only a person with confidence in what he has that can try to enter the intellectual worlds of other. After all, we know that everyone will use all his rational powers to show that his ideas are the best and the most correct. The fact that the Muslims have done this, is enough to prove their intellectual superiority to all other civilizations before theirs.

Al-'Āmirī raised another important point in this regard, saying that if the followers of other religions possess this vast knowledge and learning, it could have been found with them and its knowledge would not be hard to find. Even if someone would say that most of the translators were Christians or Sabians, the fact remains that, it was the power of Islam and its prestige and the desire to be closer to the Caliphs which made those non-Muslims to participate in the translation process. ¹⁶³

The principle of Islamic jurisprudence applied here by al-'Āmirī, clearly shows that the benefit accrued from the intellectual contributions of Muslims, both in their original thinking and in what they inherited from others, is far more than what others had contributed when put together. The indebtedness of the modern technological advancement to the pioneering works of Muslims is a well-known fact in the intellectual circles. ¹⁶⁴ This is then a great benefit for the whole humanity.

Al-'Āmirī believes that religion is based on what brings blessings and benevolence to not only man, but also other living and non-living things on this earth. With this idea

¹⁶² Surah al-Zumar : 18.

¹⁶³ Al-īlam, op. cit. pp. 182-183.

¹⁶⁴ See for instance Wells, H. G. The Outline of History, (London: Cassell, 1920), p 336. Wells for instance stated, "...the influence of Arab philosophy (being then the mother of sciences) coming by way of Spain upon the universities of Paris, Oxford, and North Italy and upon Western European =

at the back of his mind, he stated that any religion that is founded on what brings destruction to crops and progeny cannot be called a good religion.¹⁶⁵ In al-'Āmirī's comparative study of religion, he showed pragmatic tendencies, where he questions the good and benefit of values that are not practicalised in life. In his comparative ethics, he agrees that in the *Avesta* --- the holy book of the Zoroastrians, there is a commandment to live by noble morals. In reality we see their rulers classifying people on the basis of their lineages, to the extent that their subjects were prevented and obstructed from soaring high, and this greatly retarded the progress of those with perfect bodily structures and endowed with understanding and intellect. Such people will never attain for themselves what otherwise, they can. If really their religion commands them to acquire these noble qualities, their rulers, who always show great concern for the preservation and application of these teachings, will not act contrary to those commandments.¹⁶⁶ So, since in their practical lives no emphasis is placed on nobility and the best of morals for all and sundry, then either the claim for the existence of such commandments in the *Avesta* is invalid, or that it is not so religiously blinding as to be maintained in practical life.

6- Al-'Āmirī's Methodological Principles in his Comparative Method:

Al-'Āmirī outlined his overt methodological principles at the outset of his comparative study. As if he was a modern student of religion, he pinpointed at some guiding principles that protect the investigator from missing the important issue of objectivity in his study of religions. He stated that whenever one wants to compare two or more things, in order to arrive at the superiority of one of them, there is the

thought generally, was very considerable indeed." p. 336, and Russell, B., History of Western Philosophy (London: George Allen & Unwin., 1961) second Edition, pp. 419-420.

¹⁶⁵ Al-l'lam, op. cit. p. 137.

¹⁶⁶ ibid. pp. 159-160.

likelihood of having a right or a wrong comparison.¹⁶⁷ He further went on to mention what guarantees right, and avoids wrong comparisons. He suggested two rules which can be seen to be very much related to objectivity in the study of religion and these are:-

1--- That no comparison is made of things if they are not similar and homogenous and so one should not take something noble in one religion and compare it with something worthless and mean in another religion. Objectivity imposes on one to compare things of the same kind, level, value, etc., and that proves one's honesty.¹⁶⁸ This is a great insight of al-'Āmirī, which came out of his experience of the comparative method. Similar point is made by modern scholars of religion with a caution of not going too far in searching for similars, to the extent of misjudging something from another religion as similar to what is being compared from another tradition.¹⁶⁹

2--- Not to describe an issue according to the belief of only one sect; that description, not being the wide-spread or the most widely accepted in the religion, ~~one should not attribute it~~ to all the different sects in the religion.¹⁷⁰ This guideline also is closely related to the requirement of objectivity, because description of an issue in which opinions differ in any religion, is very difficult. One has to either adopt what al-'Āmirī suggests i.e. the view of the majority or he tries to come out with a compromising description of that issue while keeping in view the different interpretations or descriptions of the same issue given by the different sects. One may end up pleasing no one, especially when one adopts the second method. Al-'Āmirī believes that whenever human reason (a person) maintains in its comparison

¹⁶⁷ ibid. p. 125.

¹⁶⁸ See for example Parrinder, G. Comparative Religion (London : George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 14 and Waardenburg J. Classical Approaches to the Study of Religions (The Hague : Mouton, 1973), pp. 52-53.

¹⁶⁹ See Kitagawa J. M. (ed.) Introduction to the History of Religion by Wach, J. (New York : Macmillan, 1988) (Intro) pp. Xx-xx1 and p. 136.

¹⁷⁰ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 125.

these two principles it becomes easy for him to give comparison its due right, and also to be right in the process.¹⁷¹ Al-'Āmirī believes in that inborn criterion of reason which he describes as a mirror through which both good and evil are glaringly clear, if selfish interest did not cause it to rust or be blemished. As a philosopher, al-'Āmirī knows the value of human intellect and its limits. That is why, he is cautioning here against the investigator's undeclared selfish interests that will thwart away hope of objectivity and honesty in academic research.

Another fact pointed by al-'Āmirī concerning factors militating against the issue of objectivity, is taking the study of religion as a combat or, as we say today, a boxing match in which each side is trying to knock out the other! Al-'Āmirī advises any person who will go into the study of *Kalam* (the study of the beliefs of others in contradistinction to his own) to stick to the facts and should not try to overcome all others with or without truth.¹⁷² He should remain always with the truth wherever it is. This kind of study should be for the search of truth only. This is similar to what some modern scholars warned against, when they say that comparative religion should not degenerate into 'competitive religion'.¹⁷³ Al-'Āmirī also advises that the investigator should accept the truth on the basis of evidence and reason,¹⁷⁴ and not on the basis of what the forefathers have said or done. This point has been stressed a lot in the Qur'ān, to dissuade the non-believers from following their fore-fathers and to encourage them to reflect on the facts and evidences presented before them in the Qur'ān or by the Noble Prophet (P.B.U.H.).¹⁷⁵ Al-'Āmirī had a deep insight in the socio-political life of religion, which shows his great concern with this kind of study. He opined that Islam is not to blame for the iniquities of those who are not true representatives of its lofty teachings. And by that, we should not always depend, in our study and judgment, on what exists before us in reality --- the status quo! According to al-'Āmirī whatever

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, P. 188.

¹⁷² Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 188.

¹⁷³ Smith, H., The Religions of Man, (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1983), p. 5.

¹⁷⁴ Al-I'lam, op. cit. pp. 121-122. See also p. 73.

¹⁷⁵ See for instance Surah al-Baqarah : 170 and Surah Luqman : 21.

fault or mistake is being committed by Muslims should not to be attributed to Islam.¹⁷⁶ One has to study the relevant sources of the religion and the first application of its message by its recipient, to see the true teaching of the religion as implemented by the Prophet (P.B.U.H.). The same rule should apply to other religions when studied and compared so as not to fall into prejudice and biasness by comparing the ideal and scriptural form of a religion with the distorted views of another religion. This will be far from doing justice to the second religion. In this particular case, al-'Āmirī was pointing to the true Islamic rulership and its majesty as an example.¹⁷⁷ He said if we find some fault in the application of those sublime teachings, by some rulers, we should immediately recognize that, that is not from Islam and is a clear violation of its teachings, and that the Rightly-guided Caliphs should also not be blamed because of what their successors did after them.¹⁷⁸

7- The Application of the Comparative Method according to Al-'Āmirī:

As explained in the beginning of this chapter, al-'Āmirī's main contribution to the Muslim study of religion is his special interest in comparative method and his practical application of it in his works. After having examined his concept of the study of religion and of the comparative method in that study, including his covert and overt principles in his comparative study of religion, it is pertinent to take a much closer look at his method in the study of religion. In his book 'al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam', Abu al- Hassan al-'Āmirī made two kinds of comparison. In the issues he outlined for comparison, there are some which he compared across the board of all or most of the religions he specified for study. For example in the concept of diety or God, he mentioned the Jewish, Christian, Dualist (**Sabians and Zoroastrians**) the Polytheists' and the Muslims' concept of the Divine. Even though it is a brief and concise mention

¹⁷⁶ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 158.

¹⁷⁷ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 158.

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

of these conceptions it can be regarded as having been treated across the board.¹⁷⁹ Other examples of this kind of study is his treatment of the belief in the Angels, the Last Day and the meditational prayer etc.¹⁸⁰ In this kind of comparative method, al-'Āmirī tried to mention what each religion has to offer independently, while being careful in identifying what corresponds to that concept or act in all the religions. There are some religions that he did not mention, may be due to lack of knowledge of those things on al-'Āmirī's part or the non-availability of that concept or act in one or more of these religions. He did not mention the Christian belief in the angels for example, as he did not also specify the religions he was referring to in the belief in the Last Day, as pointed out earlier.

The other kind of comparison made by al-'Āmirī is when he takes an issue and groups different religions according to their attitudes towards that issue as he has done in his comparison of the belief in the Prophets (P.B.U.T.H.). He did not say that one prophet is better than the others. What he did was to group these religions according to the two extreme attitudes towards their nature and the middle course that is balanced.¹⁸¹ Here, al-'Āmirī mentioned the attitude of exaltation and exaggeration in persons and natures of the prophets as the Christians have done in the case of exalting Jesus (P.B.U.H.) to the status of divinity.¹⁸¹ A similar thing happened in Buddhism, where the Lokkottaravadins, a school of ancient Buddhism holds the belief that the Buddhas are 'other worldly'. They must have also "extolled the extraordinary character of the bodhisattva", because of their supernatural conception of the Buddhas. These developments led to the belief that this school 'played an important part in the formation of the Mahayana Buddhism,¹⁸² which deified Buddha, who himself preached atheism.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 128-129.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. pp. 131-132 and p. 133 ff.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p. 129.

¹⁸² Bareau, André (art), Weeks, D. M., (trans), "Buddhism, Schools of : Hinayana Buddhism," The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 449.

¹⁸³ James, G. A., (art) 'Atheism' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 483.

The other attitude is that of belittling and downgrading the Prophets (P.B.U.T.H.) as the Jews have done, especially in attributing the commitment of major sins to them, as explained earlier. Al-'Āmirī, after all that, mentioned the balanced attitude of the Muslims towards the Prophets of Allah (P.B.U.T.H.).¹⁸⁴

Another example of this kind of comparison is done by al-'Āmirī, in his treatment of the belief in the Books. In this issue, like in the belief in the Prophets (P.B.U.T.H.), he did not state that one Revealed Book is better or superior to the others. He tackled the issue on the composition and the style of these Books. Al-'Āmirī groups the other Books on one side and the Glorious Qur-ān on the other. He shows how the composition, structure, style and meaning of the Qur-ānic message is not human, and he also showed how it cannot be composed by humans. On the other hand, he maintained that for the other Books, it is very clear that they are like our daily human speeches.¹⁸⁵

It is evident in this second kind of comparison, that al-'Āmirī was trying to compare the comparables. As Muslims, we believe Allah has exalted some Prophets above others, like Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) and the 'Ulu al-azm',¹⁸⁶ and Allah has preferred some Books over others, like the Glorious Qur-ān and those mentioned in it.¹⁸⁷ Despite this fact, it will be academically futile to try to compare, the Prophets and the Books, as no certain and detailed knowledge of them is available which is enough to enable a scholar to reach certain conclusions, in his comparison. Moreso, there are no authentic records of the lives of these Prophets today or even at the time of al-'Āmirī, and the originals of these Books are lost. With the only exception of the life of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) and the original and uncorrupted copy of the Glorious Qur-ān, both having come 'In the full light of History'.

Another important aspect of al-'Āmirī's comparative method is his concern with similarities more than the differences. He searches for similars of any one issue in Islam,

¹⁸⁴ See al-I'lam, op. cit. pp. 129-130.

¹⁸⁵ ibid. pp. 132-133 and pp. 197-200.

¹⁸⁶ See Surah al-Baqarah : 253 and Surah al-Ahqaf : 35.

¹⁸⁷ See Surah al Ma'idah : 44, 46 and 48.

from the other five religions.¹⁸⁸ To al-'Āmirī, this is how to compare things. As we mentioned earlier, one of his two main principles for a correct comparative study is to compare similar things in terms of their importance or otherwise in the sight of the adherents.¹⁸⁹ He believes it is only by that, that correct and unbiased comparison can be made. Al-'Āmirī's interest in comparison of similar things is evident to anyone who is acquainted with him or his writings on the comparative study of religions. Al-'Āmirī was once asked by Abu al-Fath Dhu al-Kifayatain -¹⁹⁰ whom al-'Āmirī accompanied for some time, why a soul (*al-Nafs*) searches for differences in two similar things? Al-'Āmirī replied that "the essence of the self and what suits it best, is such that it abhors and is averse to plurality. By his nature, man longs and craves for unity and accepts all that helps and paves the way for him towards that. The differences (in things that are similar) make the way to unity clear. The more the similarity in two things, the more subtler the differences become. The more the differences are subtler the more serious man searches for them, and the more pleased he is in his search, because of the success and happiness that are connected with its achievement."¹⁹¹ Here al-'Āmirī is explaining the complex relationship between unity and plurality, especially as they relate to man, and his craving for his return to his origin as mystics and Neoplatonists will say. It also demonstrates al-'Āmirī's unrelenting efforts in trying to unravel the inner secrets of the comparative method. He believes that man, in accordance with his nature, abhors plurality and longs for unity, perhaps so as to focus his attention and efforts towards achieving unity. Focusing attention on a plurality causes man's attention, understanding and concern to be divided and by that his energy

¹⁸⁸ See al-I'lām, op. cit. pp. 127-128

¹⁸⁹ ibid. p. 125

¹⁹⁰ Ali bin Muhammad bin al-Hussain, Abu al-Fath bin al-Amid (d.366), the vizier of Rukn al-Daulah Abu Ali al-Hussain bin Buwaih, renowned for his knowledge, bravery and generosity. See Margoliouth, D. S. (ed.). The Irshad al-Arib, by Yaqut, op. cit. vol. 5, 00. 347-375

¹⁹¹ Al-Tanji, M. T., (ed.) Akhlaq al-Wazirain by al-Tawhidi (Damascus : Majma 'al-I'lāmi al-Arabi, N.D.) pp. 446-447.

will be expended on the different members of this plurality.¹⁹² According to al-'Āmirī, anything that can lead man to that unity and integration is worth pursuing. So the study of things that seem to be similar to each other, in order to bring out the dissimilarities in them can lead to a better understanding of those apparently similar ideas or things. Al-'Āmirī believes that the more things resemble each other, the more difficult it is to identify their differences, and so the more effort is needed for the search of those differences. Another aim of the study carried out by al-'Āmirī mainly in his book al-I'lam bi manaqib al-Islam, may be his effort to recognise the underlying unity of the religions he compared despite their apparent diversity in terms of their origin, and this could be the reason why al-'Āmirī had carried a number of studies on religion using the comparative method as explained above.

Methodologically, al-'Āmirī took what is known today as 'Revealed Religions' or the Abrahamic religions as his term of reference and the framework according to which other religions should conform.¹⁹³ Moreover, al-'Āmirī believes Islam to be the 'religion of truth' as mentioned earlier, that establishes the essentials of religion, and the shapes and forms these essentials should take. In outlining the essential articles of faith in the religions, al-'Āmirī mentioned them as they are found in the Qur-ān and *Sunnah* with the exclusion of the belief in destiny as explained above. In the modern study of religion, no religion or aspect of religion is taken as the basis of the study. It is, or rather is supposed to be a purely descriptive exercise.¹⁹⁴

Wherever possible, al-'Āmirī used to support theoretical evidences with practical examples in order to buttress his point. This is what he did in describing the absolute unity of God as believed by the Muslims, which is clearly reflected in their everyday

¹⁹² See Qur-ān, Surah al-Zumar : 29. Allah compares a person with many Lords and gods as a slave owned by many quarreling masters, who is trying to please them all. He cannot be comparable to another one with only one Lord and God devoting his peaceful life to Him alone.

¹⁹³ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 127

¹⁹⁴ See for instance Platvoet, J. G., Comparing Religions, A Limitative Approach, (The Hague : Mouton, 1982), p. 3, and Schmid, G., Principles of Integral Science of Religion (The Hague : Mouton, 1979) pp. 68-69.

life,¹⁹⁵ i.e. by their frequent mention of the sincere word of 'There is no deity but Allah'. Also in the issue of the meditational form of devotion , al-'Āmirī compared the various stages of the Muslim prayer with the sequential postures of people when they greet their kings,¹⁹⁶ after having mentioned its superiority over the prayers of others.

8- Al-'Āmirī's Methodological Criteria in his Comparative Method:

Abu al-Hassan al-'Āmirī, in his comparative study of religions, had some criteria on the basis of which he accepts or rejects claims. The following is a brief discussion on such criteria:-

One - Reason:

Al-'Āmirī's entire study of religions is part of his rational contribution towards understanding the relationship between religion and philosophy or between revelation and reason. He believes that human reason is an invaluable favour upon man, from the Almighty Creator. Al-'Āmirī opines that the relationship of things to reason is of three kinds:

- a- What reason imposes; this al-'Āmirī sees as incumbent and acceptable;
- b- What reason makes permissible; here one has to find in the intelligibles what supports it, i.e. whether it should be permitted or not;
- c- What reason contradicts. This is to be discarded and is unacceptable;¹⁹⁷

To al-'Āmirī, religious norms and values help protect the use of reason and guarantee its efficacy, so as not to change to something similar to that of the beasts.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Al-I'lam op. cit. pp. 128-129.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 99

¹⁹⁸ Rowson, E., (ed.) Al-Amad ala al-Abad of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. p. 93

Hence the importance and the need of reason and its application to religion. The rational faculty in al-'Āmirī's view will not accept falsehood and because of that, he deems it right, or rather necessary, to put before it all kinds of beliefs from the imaginative faculty - the latter being itself the abode of false beliefs.¹⁹⁹ This may be the philosophy behind al-'Āmirī's examination of religious beliefs by the scale of reason, in order to know the false from the true belief. The other side of this complex relationship between faith and reason is al-'Āmirī's belief that human reason, even though it can be trusted in areas of its scope, in some other areas, it stands in need of revelation in knowing the truth.²⁰⁰

Reason is accepted by al-'Āmirī as a criterion on the basis of which one judges or criticises religious belief or practice.²⁰¹ Those beliefs or practices must fall within the scope of what reason can recognise as true or false and as right or wrong. He gave an example of the belief in the next life, that if what the Muslims believe is compared to what others believe and reason is made as the arbiter, the outcome will be in favour of the Islamic belief.²⁰² Also in the qualities required of rulers in Islamic state when compared to the requirements of other religions in their states, reason will make judgment in favour of Islam.²⁰³ Al-'Āmirī also believes that human intellect, when not affected by selfish interests, recognises good and evil,²⁰⁴ an idea similar to the *Mu'tazilites'* stand on the same issue. Despite the importance of reason in understanding matters of religion, al-'Āmirī is not in favour of its excessive use. He warned that anyone who uses reason excessively in issues of religion will end up

199 *Al-I'lam*, op. cit. p. 79

200 ibid. p. 98 and 100

201 ibid. pp. 122-123.

202 Ibid., p. 133

203 ibid. pp. 158-159

204 ibid. p. 188

behaving like an atheist.²⁰⁵ This may be due to the fact that in religion there is an area which is considered beyond the comprehension and conception of reason. So, clear reason is one of al-'Āmirī's criteria for knowing the truth of a statement and the rightness or falsehood of a religious belief or practice. According to him intellect is the most special and distinct feature of being human, and it constitutes the knowledge of the truth and conducting oneself in accordance with what conforms to that truth. If this is true, then the most perfect of men will be the one who has the widest knowledge of the truth and possesses the greatest ability to implement that truth,²⁰⁶ and the *vice versa* is true. As an example of this principle, al-'Āmirī believes that the one endowed with intellect will never be happy and joyful, on account of a favour he does not deserve nor the position he attains with the name of another, nor the success he achieves due to the injustice of the rulership.

Two - Evidence:

The second important methodological criteria according to which something is accepted or rejected by al-'Āmirī is clear evidence of fact. In order to have a smooth sailing to the banks of safety in the next life, one's faith and religion should be based on clear evidence.²⁰⁷ This leads to enlightenment and insight and to the holding faster to the rope of religion as explained above. According to al-'Āmirī, before accepting a statement, clear evidence must be presented, and in matters of religion whatever has been confirmed by a genuine evidence, will not be contrary to the religion of truth.²⁰⁸ This is yet another important criterion of al-'Āmirī's. Evidence can either be in the form of an authentic and genuine text that cannot be doubted in terms of its recording, preservation and interpretation, or in the form of a religious practice. Al-'Āmirī warns that, if practice is not in line with the original teachings of the religion, it cannot be a

²⁰⁵ ibid. p. 167

²⁰⁶ ibid. p. 73

²⁰⁷ ibid. p. 123

²⁰⁸ ibid. p. 83

genuine evidence for judging in favour of or against a religion. ²⁰⁹ Al-'Āmirī gave the example of the Prophet's conduct of Jihad. After explaining that, he compared it with what happened after the Prophet. He stated that if any deviation from the sublime teachings of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) in a period of time is witnessed, Islam will not be to blame, since its teachings have not been applied to the letter. ²¹⁰ For this reason, to support an argument with that practice will tantamount to prejudice, since that is a spurious evidence. In this kind of situation one will have to cross check that evidence, with the original teachings of the concerned religion, before reaching a conclusion or passing a judgment.

Al-'Āmirī believes that anyone who is obstinate in opinions will be blinded to clear evidences presented before him. ²¹¹ Rather, that person should be modest and sagacious before clear evidence. Added to this, al-'Āmirī opines that the common people intend to do good but miss it, because of their ignorance of its pre-conditions, while the recalcitrants intend to commit evil acts and they do them, due to the evilness that they have reared in themselves. Both the groups have missed the righteous acts. Due to this, al-'Āmirī saw that we have to ask the Endower of intellect (Allah) to guide us to the path of righteousness, so as to observe facts through the light of truth, lest we miss or reject them due to one reason or another. ²¹² As some facts or some aspects of a fact may be obscure to a person, al-'Āmirī being a Muslim thinker, saw the necessity of seeking help from Allah, to guide man to the path of goodness and to bestow on him the power to see facts and evidences in the light of the truth.

Al-'Āmirī in his comparative method wants to stand on concrete and indisputable evidences in any claims or issues he compares so as to arrive at the right conclusion. This is the basis of a correct scholarship where no inconclusive or uncertain statement is made on an issue before a thorough research and study of it. Presentation of a genuine

²⁰⁹ ibid. p. 158

²¹⁰ ibid. p. 158.

²¹¹ ibid., p. 201

²¹² ibid. p. 127

evidence is the only guaranteed way to a true study of other issues, religious or otherwise.

Three - Religion of Truth:

The third methodological criteria of al-'Āmirī in his comparative method is what he calls 'the religion of truth'. ²¹³ This religion seems to be different from religion as known in the intellectual circles of today. It is not the ^{man-made} superstitions, irrational and unscientific human assertions about God and the next life! According to al-'Āmirī, the religion of truth never contradicts reason. It is the last and perfected religion with sublime teachings that have rightly abrogated all earlier revealed and non-revealed religions. ²¹⁴ Al-'Āmirī believes Islam to be that religion because of its inherent values, practicability, utility, etc. The whole of his work *al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam* is devoted to uncovering the virtues of that religion. Islam was taken by al-'Āmirī as his guiding principle in determining what are the essential aspects of all religions and in determining even the smaller aspects of the broader categories of religion as mentioned above.

For a scholar who believes in religion and who also believes in the superiority of an aspect of a religion over a similar aspect in another religion, and who judges the former religion as superior to the latter, such a scholar must have a standard and a basis and a criterion on which he bases his arguments to be able to pass such judgments. Al-'Āmirī believes Islam has such a quality and as if its most evident quality is that of the truth, so he simply calls it, 'the religion of truth'. He believes that the truth of that religion is based on clear evidence, and that may be due to its relatively shorter life than the other religions. More importantly because of its originating from an authentic revelation from the Lord of the Worlds. There are ample evidences to show that that revelation and the Prophet's explanation on it have both been preserved intact. No religion, to the best of our knowledge, can make justifiably, a similar claim.

²¹³ ibid. pp. 83, 101 and 167. A similar term has been used in the Qur-ān, Surah al-Taubah : 29

²¹⁴ ibid. p. 71

Due to all of the above, al-'Āmirī strongly believes that Islam is the religion of truth and he made it the criterion in his study.

Al-'Āmirī, being a philosopher who reflects on universals, may be referring by the term 'religion of truth', to the universal religion of all the Prophets of Allah (P.B.U.Th.). This concept is very clear in the Qurān, and it declares that: "And We did not send any Messenger before you (O' Muhammad), but We revealed to him Saying):None has the right to be worshipped but I (Allah), so worship me (alone)." ²¹⁵

It is one of the peculiar features of Islam that it affirms all the previous messages before it, believes in them, while at the same time claiming to be the final version of them. ²¹⁶

The religion of truth, according to al-'Āmirī does not contradict and is not in conflict with what evidence has confirmed and reason has imposed. ²¹⁷ This means that the religion of truth is not irrational but in line with reason. In this point also, to the best of our knowledge it is only Islam, of the existing religions, which based its foundations on thinking and reflection and which considered the non-use of reason as a crime punishable in the next life. ²¹⁸ And as it is based on clear evidences of Allah's sovereignty and clear evidences of Muhammad's messengership, the Islamic religion is not in conflict with what clear evidence has confirmed.

As if al-'Āmirī was asked why he took the 'religion of truth' as a criterion, he mentioned that it is through it that one knows what are his true responsibilities towards the Creator . It is by this religion that one becomes aware of the true conception of God's religion or true spirit of God's religion. ²¹⁹ With the existence of the religion of

²¹⁵ Surah al-Anbiya' : 25

²¹⁶ See for instance Surah al-Ma'idah : 48

²¹⁷ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 83

²¹⁸ One of the evident characteristic of the Qurān revealed in the Makkān period, is its constant call on man to reflect on the different aspects of the universe, including himself, so that it leads him to the belief in Allah, His message and His messenger (P.B.U.H.). See Surah al-Mulk : 9-11.

²¹⁹ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 101

truth, a clear idea of the ideal religion is found and it serves as a scale by which the other religions are measured. This aspect of al-'Āmirī's comparative method in his study of religion is not found in the Western study of religion, which is claimed to be value-free and which does not need, so it seems, any standard religion by which to judge other religions, in order to see to what extent they are in line with it or not. Hence, the religion of truth is another methodological criterion of al-'Āmirī in his study of religion.

From the above three criteria of al-'Āmirī, we can see that he wants to be objective in his judgment on religions or aspects of them. The judgment he passed on a religion or an aspect of it is either because it is not in line with reason, within its own scope as indicated, or it has no clear and certain evidence to support it or it is not in accordance with the general principles of the religion of truth - the religion of all Allah's Prophets and Messengers (P.B.U.Th.)

THREE

EVALUATION AND CRITICISM OF AL-'ĀMIRĪ'S COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION:

Al-'Āmirī, from the foregoing can be considered as an original thinker in the field of comparative religion. We have already seen that his interest in this field went beyond writing a single work, but he wrote at least four works, two of which are lost. His contributions to theorisation and understanding of the religious phenomenon are outstanding and glaring. He offered a lot of insights regarding the inner workings of religious sentiments of people, their response to them in terms of beliefs and practices, and their value in their sights. We found in our study four important and relevant areas of al-'Āmirī's contribution in the field of the scientific study of religion even today.

One – As far as the importance of religion and its relevance to man's life is concerned, al-'Āmirī believes it is vital to man's sojourn on this planet, it helps him discover himself, his responsibility before "the One who creates and commands" and his need for guidance in this life.¹ Man to al-'Āmirī was created to be divine-oriented not nature-oriented.² He is to respond constantly to the spiritual impulses in him and the divine guidance, lest he became the 'odd one out,' after all, all that is in the heavens and the earth are glorifying Allah and are obeying and conforming to the divine design for this vast universe.³ Religion is a great and generous companion that 'raises' the one who takes refuge in it, as it also 'covers' the defects and shortcomings of those who have relations with it, coupled with the everlasting reward man receives in the next life.⁴ This is al-'Āmirī's view of religion and it tells of his confidence, belief and trust in it.

¹ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 137.

² Al-Amad ala al-Abad of al-'Āmirī, op. cit. P. 101.

³ See the tafsir of verse No. 4 of Surah al-Mu'min (Ghafir) in Sayyid Qutab's Fi Dhilal al-Qur'ān, (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1982) 10th ed. vol-5, p. 306 .

⁴ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 127.

Two - Methodologically, al-'Āmirī's two outlined principles in his comparative study came as a result of serious research and direct experience in the issue. To be objective and unbiased in comparing religions al-'Āmirī believes one has to search for aspects that are similar in form as well in importance, in both the religions. This is so as not to judge against a religion because one compares a less fundamental aspect of it with a fundamental aspect of another religion. Secondly, on the question of varying and conflicting interpretations of religious beliefs and practices, al-'Āmirī saw rightly, that the interpretation of the majority adherents and the mainstream of what can be called the mother sect should be preferred.⁵ It is pertinent here, to say that al-'Āmirī was not referring to the popular religion practiced by the common and ignorant people, whose religion is always frowned at by the elites of that religion. In case of Islam, it is the interpretations of the '*ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaat*' who constitute the bulk of the Muslims that should be taken. The problem al-'Āmirī wants to avoid seem to be, the rejection of an interpretation of religion by the adherents of that religion on the claim that it is a heretical interpretation not acceptable to them.

A third principle of al-'Āmirī in his comparison is his placing all issues in the comparative study before human reason, so as to see which aspect of a religion is superior to the other, and to see also which aspect is true or false, right or wrong.²²⁴ Al-'Āmirī as we have seen, believes in value judgement in comparative religion and this is because superiority and preference of one thing over another or others is part of the nature of this life.⁶ Non-judgment is unacceptable according to al-'Āmirī in other spheres and therefore is not to be accepted in the sphere of religion. Moreover, in line with the Islamic belief that the earlier revelations have been corrupted and distorted, reality rules that there must be differences in the positions of religions in relation to the sources of revelation (God). But how can we confirm this, with the numerous conflicting claims as to who possess the truth, unless by means of serious research and in-

⁵ Ibid. p. 125.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 106-107.

depth perusal of the issue at stake.⁷ Al-'Āmirī believes in and attaches great importance to research in order to reach at the truth of any issue and he advises the investigator to be with the truth always and to be sincere in his research,⁸ as this will be a guarantee of being guided to it.

Part of al-'Āmirī's methodological contribution is his outlining of the qualities required for the students of religion which includes, the loyalty of the researcher to his religion. Al-'Āmirī is here writing from the viewpoint of the 'religion of truth', being loyal to which is imperative. The student of religion should also possess the knowledge of the rules of logic and how they operate; he should know the norms of 'ijtihad' (analogical deduction); he should desist from following (blindly) his mentors in their views without substantive evidences and he should not falsify or deny any evidence that is evident to him.⁹ In his comparative method, al-'Āmirī did not limit himself to the theoretical aspects of religion, but went beyond that to see in the practical life of the adherents what supports his theories. This he has done for example in affirming the absolute unity of Allah among the Muslims, so also in their non-exaggeration regarding their prophet (P.B.U.H.), where he said that the rulers of the Muslims in writing their letters they start with the statement: "from the servant of Allah so-and-so", instead of saying: 'from the king of kings', for instance,¹⁰ which stinks of arrogance.

Three - Al-'Āmirī's comparative method gave him the rare opportunity of a deep understanding of the religious experience of mankind. In line with Max Muller's famous statement '...he who knows one knows none...' ¹¹ al-'Āmirī's comparison of different religions has enabled him to make very interesting discoveries about the world of religion.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 97.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 192.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 130.

¹¹ See Whaling. F (ed.), Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, (Berlin: Mouton, 1983) vol.-I, p. 247.

On the essential dimensions of all religions, al-'Āmirī discovers them to be four in his study of religions. He believes a religion should have: a diety (or in modern times even a concept or an ideology) revered; a system of devotion to the diety or what stands in its place; a code of conduct to guide the community in their daily interactions and a system or a set of penalties (which can be worldly or other worldly) to safeguard others from the evils of the few undesirable elements in the society.

Some other discoveries of al-'Āmirī in the understanding of the phenomenon of religion is the need he saw for a balanced form of devotion to and worship of the diety. He believes that a religion should not be too worldly or too otherworldly in the different forms of worship it demands on its adherents, whether it is meditational prayer, fasting or any other form of worship. Al-'Āmirī believes that it is moderation in this issue that can guarantee for a religion endurance, long lasting and widespread.¹² He believes that no religion can be declared as superior and perfect, if it does not comprise of the best of morals (*Makarim al-akhlaq*) and if it does not guarantee the social security of the weak members of the society.¹³ Here al-'Āmirī is linking morality to religion and this is what obtains in Islam. He discovered that discrimination against some people due to their lineages or what is called the social class, leads to retardation and retrogression of the society. This is because for some people categorised in the lower classes, howsoever gifted and talented, there is an infringement on their ability to utilise all their latent powers for the general uplift of the society.¹⁴

The environment in which al-'Āmirī studied and wrote gave him the opportunity to have a clear vision of the human factors that lead to factions and sects within one religion. He observed the perpetrators of these acts operate their evil machinations against Islam after the Muslim conquest of the Khurasan region, a region replete with

¹² ibid. pp. 137-139.

¹³ ibid. p. 159 and 163.

¹⁴ ibid. p. 160.

such realities.¹⁵ Al-'Āmirī believes that Islam has a number of enemies, being the last prophetic religion claiming the abrogation of all earlier religions, and conquering vast areas of lands, bringing a number of thrones and priest hoods down. In other words, it has stepped on a number of toes. Not only this, Islam has also its own beauty, perfection and attraction. A thing of this sort will definitely have a number of enemies.¹⁶

On the prophecies regarding a prophet, which we find in revealed scriptures, al-'Āmirī believes them to be clear evidence of the truth of that Prophet, because this foretelling is part of the unseen, which Allah keeps to Himself or confines to whom He pleases of His messengers (P. B. U. Th.).¹⁷ Al-'Āmirī opines that the words of such prophecies are never made explicit and clear, as that will render those with knowledge as the ignorant. It is also clear that if it is symbolical/allegorical, that gives room for many interpretations. Vested interest can easily play a role in this regard.¹⁸

Four - On al-'Āmirī's contribution in the study of Islam, we have seen his idea of its superiority, viewed from different angles.¹⁹ He also believes that Islamic values are permanent, as they abrogate and are inabrogatable, by virtue of its conforming to reason and nature.²⁰ Al-'Āmirī also mathematically analysed the Islamic *prayer* (*al-Salah*) in terms of its number in the day and the night, as well as in the number of *Rak'ah* (standings) in the prayers, to show that it conforms to the principle of moderation and balance.²¹ Al-'Āmirī also opined that Islam has prohibited all kinds of enmities and hostilities except one, that due to difference in religion. A Muslim should

¹⁵ See Said, H. and Zahid, A. Al-Biruni, His Times, Life and Works, (Karachi: Hamdard Foundation, 1981), pp. 6-8.

¹⁶ Al-I'lam, p. 193.

¹⁷ ibid. p. 201.

¹⁸ ibid. p. 202.

¹⁹ See pp 89-111 of this chapter.

²⁰ Al-I'lam, p. 71

²¹ ibid. p. 139.

not fight for self-honour, or purely on the basis of his people or other worldly causes. The Islamic community is a community of faith (*Iman*) and in it absolute value is given to religion only. ²²

These are some of al-'Āmirī's contribution to the study of religion comparatively and it clearly shown how concerned and interested he was in thematic comparison.

If we turn to the negative aspects of al-'Āmirī's study, we will notice that, as no human is perfect, al-'Āmirī also was not perfect in his comparative study of religions. It is evident to anyone who happens to read his *al-I'lām bi Manaqib al-Islam* – that his comparison was not rigorous but brief, mentioning the headlines (the concepts) without explaining them. It may perhaps be due to brevity, which he did not state himself or due to the fact that he was writing for the elites, to whom all those concepts were familiar. Another possibility for his not giving detailed and in-depth analysis of the concepts involved is the lack of enough data related to all the issues he took up for discussions in the different religions. For example in comparing the conceptions of God, he did not explain what he means by 'tajsim', 'tathlith', 'thunaiyyah', 'al-tauhid', etc. He did not also mention the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Jesus, ²³ which is the basis of Christianity for many centuries.

In the belief in the prophets, al-'Āmirī compared the attitudes of the people of two religions only towards them and how they relate to them. He mentioned only the attitudes of Jews, who downgrade the prophets and that of the Christians who exaggerate in them, no mention was made of the other three religions in his scheme of comparison. ²⁴ It is very clear that al-'Āmirī did not compare the position of one prophet with that of the other, and it is likely that this is because he does not have clear and authenticated records of the lives, sayings and actions of the earlier prophets as found in respect of the last prophet, Muhammad (P.B.U.H.). As for others we can not easily find an authentic records of their lives, actions qualities, etc. Similar to the non-

²² ibid. p. 166.

²³ *Al-I'lām*, p. 128-129.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 129-130.

mention of some religions in the belief in the prophets, is al-'Āmirī's mention, for instance, of the performance of Hajj (or religious festival that contains all forms of worship, as al-'Āmirī defined it). He outlined the different acts of worship and *Spiritual performances* depicting unity and also actions with added political meanings in the performance of Islamic Hajj. In the end, he said no any kind of worship can come closer to the Islamic Hajj, without his telling us what he considers to be similar to it in other religions, and how they fell short of the Islamic Hajj. ²⁵

Another glaring feature of al-'Āmirī's comparison is its Islamic character not only in the selection of themes but also in what is expected to be found in an aspect of religion being investigated. The articles of faith he compared are Islamic, so also the kinds or forms of worship found in the religions he compared. ²⁶ Al-'Āmirī could well use the Islamic framework for his comparison, but scholars today, would immediately term this as a theological study instead of comparative study of religion. These scholars would have seen al-'Āmirī's work as a great contribution to the science of religion if he had devised a means of finding the universals in religion, and then he compared religions on the basis of these universals. This would have been onerous task and enough research work for the collection of data would have to be carried out then.

The Islamic framework followed by al-'Āmirī may be the cause of his not finding similar themes and similar beliefs and acts of worship in some religions, notably the religion of the *Sabians*. For instance no mention of them was made by al-'Āmirī in the belief in the Prophets, and in the Books and in the financial worship – the giving out of alms, and in the all encompassing kind of worship (Hajj), save in the negative sense. ²⁷ Another possible explanation for his not mentioning these aspects may be because the religious belief or practices as the case may be, seen by al-'Āmirī are not similar to the issues he was tackling. ²⁸

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 148-149.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 122.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 129-120, 132, 143-145 and 148.

²⁸ For other examples see *al-l'lam*, p.131, p. 143, p.163-164.

As regards his two methodological principles, al-'Āmirī was searching for resemblances in the issues studied. While doing that an investigator is supposed to, 'not only search for similarities but must be very cautious in uncovering the differences also. Perhaps in trying to stick to this principle, al-'Āmirī have to keep silent in mentioning some religions in some issues of study as earlier stated. Al-'Āmirī's mention of the fasting of the Majus (Zoroastrians) seems to be going against his principle of comparing things that are similar, because, he himself later said it is not really a fasting.²⁹

Al-'Āmirī's second methodological principle is taking any statement in any religion as explained and interpreted by the main body of that religion (the mainstream or the majority). This principle is in line with the requirements of objective scholarly study. Al-'Āmirī as an oversight, seems to have violated this principle, while comparing meditational³⁰ prayer of the religions he compares. He opined that the Islamic prayer is not many to the extent of superfluity as is with the Dualists and the Christian monks. As for the monks they are not the majority of the Christians but constitute a very small fraction of them. Al-'Āmirī also mentioned monks and their longs fast, while comparing fasting of the specified religions under study.³¹ This shows that al-'Āmirī takes them as representing Christians, while in real sense they do not constitute the majority or mainstream Christianity, unless when viewed as trying to do the ideal in the religion, as both Jesus and St. Paul have encouraged aspects of monasticism.³²

In the belief in the Last Day, while mentioning the enjoyments and punishments of the next life, al-'Āmirī opined that the soul would receive its enjoyment spiritually, away from the heaviness and filth of matter.³³ Al-'Āmirī supported this opinion by

²⁹ Ibid. p. 142.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 139.

³¹ Ibid. p. 142.

³² See Mt. 19:21, Mt. 19:12 and 1 Cor 7, 80 also Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35.

³³ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 135.

means of two verses of the Qurān.³⁴ This seems to contradict what al-Āmirī stated earlier about the return of the souls to the body.³⁵

This opinion is similar to what some Muslim philosophers believed notably, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.³⁵ By implication, if the reward or punishment in the next life is spiritual then resurrection itself is of the spirit only without the physical body. This is the view of almost all of the Muslim Neo-Platonists.

Regarding the intellectual contributions associated with the religions al-Āmirī is comparing, he stated that the Jews have only the Torah, it is perhaps al-Āmirī was misinformed or he took the Talmud as an aspect or rather a commentary on the Torah.³⁶ Though the Jews claim that it is the oral law, it is in a way a separate and voluminous work that could easily be seen as another book.³⁷ Al-Āmirī in the Islamic contributions to this matter pointed only to the contributions of the scholars of *Hadith*, those of *Ilm al-Kalam*, those of *al-Fiqh* and those of Arabic literature and finally to the great translation work.³⁸ It shows that he was concerned with the religious sciences, as he did not mention the philosophical and similar sciences.

Al-Āmirī compared the specified religions in only two of the four dimensions he believed to exist in each religion. He mentioned at the end of that, that as for the penal and transactional dimensions, he has already treated ^{that} in another work Al-Ibanah an ilal al-Diyah. So also that he has set a way of doing this sort of comparison, based on which other areas can be explored.³⁹

³⁴ Surah al-Waqi'ah:61 and Surah al-Sajdah:17.

³⁵ See al-Farabi's *al-Madinah al-Fadilah*, p. 114f and Ibn Sina's *Ahwal al-Nafs*, p. 130f and *al-Najat*, p. 293 as quoted by Fakhry, M. A History of Islamic Philosophy, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 2nd ed. pp. 126-127 and p. 145.

³⁶ Al-I'lam, op. cit. p. 180.

³⁷ Al-Sharqawi, M.A.; Al-Kanz al-Marsud.

³⁸ Al-I'lam, pp. 181-183.

³⁹ ibid. p. 150.

Al-'Āmirī seems to have fallen into some errors perhaps due to his non-revision of his work. As pointed earlier he said that the Jews did not consider Abraham a prophet, while we have seen a clear verse of the old Testament describing him as a prophet. (Gen. 20:7). Al-'Āmirī also quoted a statement, which he first attributed to the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) (Al-I'lām, p. 119) and later on he attributed ^{the same statement} to the great companion Ali bin Abi Talib (May Allah be Pleased with him.)(P.183).

Finally, al-'Āmirī's comparative study of religion is value-laden and a bit critical of the non-Islamic religions especially. This is clear from the fact that he did not, for example point to the denial of the Jews of the prophet-hood of Jesus and Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) and the equal denial of the Christians of the prophet-hood of Muhammad (P.B.U.H.). Al-'Āmirī did not also stress the Jewish and Christian distortions of their Holy Scriptures. His study is descriptive, mostly phenomenological (not seriously critical), but for the purpose of showing the superiority of Islam as is clear from the title of the main book of this humble study.



CHAPTER THREE

**THE COMPARATIVE METHOD
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION
ACCORDING TO AL-BIRUNI**

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO AL-BĪRŪNĪ

Abu-Rayhan Muhammad bn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī
(362-440 A.H.)

- ONE** A brief sketch of al- Bīrūnī's life and times
- TWO** The comparative method in the study of religion according to al-Bayruni Conception and basic principles)
- THREE** Evaluation of al- Bīrūnī's comparative method in the study of religion.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO AL-BĪRŪNĪ):

INTRODUCTION:

After having seen the contributions of Abu al-Hassan al-Āmirī in the study of religion in the previous pages, this chapter will focus on another equally important model of the Muslim study of religion, i.e. that of Abu Rayhan Muhammad bn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī * (d440/442 A.H.). Al-Bīrūnī studied world cultures and religions, besides his scientific studies in various fields. In his anthropological studies of the societies and civilizations of his time and those prior to that, al-Bīrūnī employed the comparative method extensively. However, our interest and discussion is in his study of religion. As he was a polymath and encyclopedic in erudition, we will limit ourselves to his study of various religions of the world, with special emphasis on where he employed the comparative method. Al-Bīrūnī lived chronologically after al-Āmirī, due to that we decided to study his own contributions in the scientific study of religion in the present chapter.

Al-Bīrūnī was a great scholar, researcher, empiricist, historian, comparative religionist considered as the greatest scientist of his time, with some scholars recognising him as one of the greatest in the whole history of mankind.¹ In the world history of science, the first half of the 11th century C.E., was considered al-Bīrūnī's age, and that was the climax of the medieval thought in the whole world.² Many scholars have given

¹ Sarton, George, Introduction To The History of Science, (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins, 1927) Reprinted 1950, vol. I, P. 707.

² ibid., p. 693.

* Both al-Baihaqi (d.565 A.H.) and Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630 A.H.) mentioned that 'B' in al-Bīrūnī has Kasrah not fathah followed by sukoon on 'y' and dammah on 'R'. See Al-Alim Abu al-Rayhan, al-Bīrūnī, (Damascus; University of Damascus, 1974), p. 17 and P. 25.

a lot of eulogies of al-Bīrūnī, which in all, speak of his intellectual status and accomplishments. He was seen as:

“.....a phenomenon in the history of Eastern learning and literature.”³

“.....the undisputed master of astronomy, astrology, geography and mathematics.”⁴ (in the Muslim World).

“.....the most erudite and the most cosmopolitan or international scholar in the whole world.”⁵ (about 1040 C.E.).

“One of the greatest scholars of medieval Islam, most original and profound.....”⁶

As regards his interest in the study of religion and cultures of other nations, he has been seen as ‘.....The first Muslim to make a study of Hindu philosophy (and culture) and became the most important link between two great provinces of mankind, India and Islam.’⁷

All these statements point to the fact that we have before us a great sage who reached a very high intellectual position in the long history of scholarship. This makes our task, all the more difficult in this humble work. It is not only the efforts of a group of scholars that will do justice to the lifetime scholarly output of al-Bīrūnī, but as Sachau the first editor and translator of al-Bīrūnī’s works declared, the ‘..... work of generations will be required to do full justice to al-Bīrūnī.’⁸ Faced with this formidable task we would have to state from the outset that our study of al-Bīrūnī is limited to his study of religions and most particularly, his insights on the comparative method in that field.

3 Sachau, C., Edward (ed. and trans.), The Chronology of Ancient Nations of al-Bīrūnī, (Lahore : Hijra International , 1983) 1st published 1879., P. X (preface).

4 Nasr, Sayyid H., Introduction To Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, (Bath: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 112.

5 Chatterji, S.K. (art) ‘Al-Bīrūnī and Sanskrit’ in Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume, (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951), p. 84.

6 Boilot, D.J. (art) ‘Al-Bīrūnī’ The Encyclopedia of Islam, (eds.) Gibbs, H.A.R. et al (Leiden : E.J. Brill, 1960), vol. I p. 1236.

7 Sarton, G. op. cit. p. 694. Sharpe included him among the few people who showed interest in the religions of others before modern times. See his Comparative Religion, A History , (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1975).

8 Sachau, C.E. (eds. trans.) The Chronology of Ancient Nations of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit. p. vi (preface), p. 11, cp. Eliade M., The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt, 1959), p. 225.

It is very clear to all those who study the works of al-Bīrūnī related to religion, that his two extant works in the field of religious studies are:

Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah (Vestiges of The Past) or (The Chronology of Ancient Nations) and

Tahqīq ma li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fi al-aql aw Mardhulah
(Determination of Indian Doctrines Accepted or Rejected by Reason)

Due to this fact, our study of the comparative method in the study of religion according to al-Bīrūnī will mainly centre around these two outstanding great works.

This chapter will consist of three main parts. The first part will focus on the life and time of al-Bīrūnī, and his contributions in the field of comparative religion. The second part will, Allah willing, discuss the comparative method in the study of religion according to al-Bīrūnī, while the third part will evaluate and assess al-Bīrūnī's comparative method in his study of religion.

ONE - AL-BĪRŪNĪ, HIS LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION:

A- A Brief Sketch of al-Bīrūnī's Life and Time:

Abu Rayhan Muhammad bn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī al-Khwarizmi was born in the suburbs of Khwarizm or the city of Kath in the Chrosmia region of present Uzbekistan.⁹ The city was before recent years called Kara-Kalpakska, but named now after al-Bīrūnī.¹⁰ Different opinions have been expressed about the meaning of Bayrun (Old Persian) and Biruni (present Persian).¹¹ In fact, fourteen different suggestions were given as regards al-Bīrūnī's birthplace, especially due to his affiliation of 'al-Bīrūnī'. Al-

9 Jum'ah, B.M. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī Mu'arrikhan': Proceedings of the International Conference on Islamic Studies Among the Non-Arabs, organised by the League for Islamic Universities in collaboration with al-Azhar University held in Cairo (20-22 May 1977)p. and footnote 10 below.

10 See Great Soviet Encyclopedia (New York: Macmillan, 1973) (Trans.) 3rd Ed., vol. 3, p. 345, Sachau, E., The Chronology, op. cit. pp. vii-viii. Cp. Kennedy, E.S. (art) 'al-Bīrūnī', Dictionary of Scientific Biography (ed.) Gillispie, C.C. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), vol. 2, pp. 147-148 and Saeed, Hakim, M. and Khan, Ansar Z., Al-Bīrūnī, His Times, Life and Works, (Karachi: Hamdard Foundation, 1981), p. 53.

11 See Sachau, E., The Chronology, op. cit. p. vii (preface)

Shahrazuri in his 'Tawarikh al-Hukama' written shortly after al-Bīrūnī's death, was the first biographer to say that he was born in Bīrūn, in Sind. This opinion was followed by Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah and Haji Khalifah in their works.¹² However, al-Bīrūnī's statement himself and the fact that, even in the past, there was no town by the name of 'Bayrun/Birun' in Sind have disproved this suggestion.¹³ Al-Sam'ani in his Kitab-al-Ansab written in 563 A.H., mentioned that 'Bīrūnī' was derived from the Persian, meaning outside, and this view was accepted by many scholars since then, including Yaqut al-Rumi and Sachau.¹⁴ The 'outside' referred to here means outskirts or suburbs of the city of Khwarizm, believed now to be al-Bīrūnī's actual birthplace.¹⁵ On al-Bīrūnī's date of birth, he himself mentioned in his Risālah al-Fihrist that he was born in the year 362 A.H./973 C.E., and in another of his works discovered later by al-Tanji (Maqālah fi Hikāyah Ahl al-Hind Fi Istikhraj al-'Umr) al-Bīrūnī stated that he was born on the 3rd of Dhu al-Hijjah 362 A.H., which corresponds to 4th September 973 C.E.¹⁶

Unlike al-Āmirī, whom we have studied earlier, al-Bīrūnī was mentioned in many major and early Biographical works, although nothing is known about his family and early life. Some scholars are of the view that he was born of an Iranian family, and that he spent 25 years of early life in Kath, getting early education and receiving scientific training from his teachers, and under the canopy of the then Khawarizm-Shah, from the House of al-Iraq.¹⁷ Two of his teachers have been mentioned. The most well-

12 See Elliot, H.M. and Dowson, John (eds.) The History of India As Told By Its Own Historians, (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1976) Reprint, vol. 2, p.1 F.N. 2. See also Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah, Uyūn al-Anbā Fi Tabaqāt al-Atibbā (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1957) vol. 3, pp. 29-30.

13 M. T. al-Tanji in his works on al-Bīrūnī found al-Bīrūnī's statement in a book entitled 'Maqālah fi Hikāyah Ahl al-Hind fi Istikhraj al-'Umr' where he categorically mentioned that he was born in the city of Khwarazm, on 3rd Dhul-al-Hijjah. This ends all speculations on these issues. See Al-Tanji (ed) Tahdīd Nihayat al-Amakin li Tashih al-Masakin, by al- Bīrūnī , (Ankara: Dogus Ltd., 1962), p- 'd' (Introduction).
↓
Masāfāt

14 Yaqut, Mu'jam al-Udaba (Cairo: Dar al-Mamun N.D.) vol. 17, p. 180, cp. Sachau, The Chronology cit., p. vii (preface).

15 See F.N. 13 above.

16 See Said, H.M. (ed.) Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, op. cit. p. 263 cp., Said and Khan, Al-Bīrūnī op. Clt. P. 53.

17 See Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume, Iran Society, op. cit. p. xiv (Introduction) and Bollot, D.J., (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī', The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. 1 p. 1236.

known being the eminent 'Khwarizmian astronomer and mathematician' – Abū Nasr Mansūr bn Ali bn Irāq Jīlānī.¹⁸ The other teacher of al-Bīrūnī mentioned by Yāqūt al-Rūmī was Abdul Samad (I) bn Abdul Samad, the wise, suspected of being a Qarmatian and caught by Sultan Mahmūd of Ghazni, who later killed him. Part of his early life was spent in Jurjaniyyah, probably at the court of Qābus bn Washmgir Shams al-Ma'ali, the then ruler of the area, and to whom al-Bīrūnī dedicated his first great work Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah, (written around 390/1000).¹⁹ Al-Bīrūnī is also believed to have visited other areas especially the Khurasan region like the city of Rayy.²⁰ He was said to have left his native country in 995 C.E. due to the civil war, and that he returned to it before 399/1008. This time period (995-1008 C.E.) was the period he spent in al- Jurjaniyyah under Sultan Qābūs bn Washmgir and the surrounding areas.²¹ The Ma'muni prince Abu al-Hassan Ali bn Ma'mun, who was the brother of the ruling Khwarizmshah – Abu al-Abbas Ma'mun bn Ma'mun, received al-Bīrūnī on his return. While back at home and due to his erudition and friendship of the ruling Khwarizmshah, al-Bīrūnī was entrusted with 'delicate political missions' in the court of the ruler for seven years.²² Al-Bīrūnī witnessed the rebellion against Ma'mun bn Ma'mun, who became the last Khwarizmshah from the House of Ma'mun; his subsequent murder and the invasion and acquisition of his country by Sultan Mahmūd al-Ghaznawi from Sijistan (Afghanistan) in 407-408 A.H.²³ Al-Bīrūnī together with other scholars and perhaps the notables of Khwarazm were taken by Sultan Mahmūd to Ghazni, and this opened a new page in the life of al-Bīrūnī.²⁴ After settling in Ghazni he enlarged the scope of his researches in various fields like chronology, history, (being the time generally

18 See Kennedy, E.S. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī', Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 148, cp., Boilot, D.J. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī', The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. I, p. 1236.

19 Sachau, The Chronology, op. cit. p.viii (preface).

20 Boilot, (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī', The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 1236, see also Kennedy, E.S. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī' Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 148.

21 The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 1236 and Kennedy, E.S. (art) Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol.,. 2 p. 149.

22 The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 1236.

23 ibid., p. 1236 cp., Sachau, The Chronology, op. cit. p. viii (preface).

24 See Sachau, The Chronology, pp. viii-ix (preface).

believed when he gathered his data for his monumental work on India), mathematics, astronomy, geography and the natural sciences.²⁴ In his early age and with the discovery of his talents and his inclination towards scientific studies, his ingenuity was nurtured and tendered by the Āl Iraq, the then Khawarizmshahs, both materially, by means of patronage and morally, especially through his teacher 'Abu Nasr Mansur bn 'Ali bn Iraq 'Mawla Amir al-Muminin'.²⁵ The intellectual ability with which al-Bīrūnī was endowed made him a great genius, a person well ahead of his time, who embodies '.....much of the modern spirit and method of critical research.....'.²⁶

Al-Bīrūnī's interests range from languages like Sanskrit, Persian, Syriac, Hebrew, Arabic etc, to mathematics, astronomy, culture, and physical studies based on experimentation, observation etc. His special interest in India developed with his coming to Ghazni, the capital of Sultan Mahmūd's empire, which included part of the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent. With his desire, so it seems, to have the knowledge or the sciences of the different parts of the known world, al-Bīrūnī was able to master the sciences of the Greeks, the Muslims, the Turks, the Romans and finally the Indians.²⁷ As he desired to study India, its people, culture and religion, he saw it as a necessity to study their main *lingua franca* – Sanskrit. He taught the Indians Greek sciences in exchange of Sanskrit language and Indian sciences.²⁸ Al-Bīrūnī's thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. He was so much engrossed in the pursuit of knowledge and writing of books according to Yāqūt, that his hands are never without a pen, nor his eyes ever cease looking into books throughout the year except on two days i.e., 'Nāurōz' and Mihrajan'.²⁹ being public holidays in his country, and even this was so as to arrange his basic needs, as regards livelihood and clothing. This statement has been

25 Said, M.H., and Khan, A.Z., Al-Bīrūnī, His Times, Life and Works, op. cit. p. 64 cp., Kennedy, E.S. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī', Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol. 2 p. 148.

26 Sachau, C.E., The Chronology, op. cit. p. x (preface).

27 Chatterji, S.K., (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and Sanskrit' Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume, (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951), p. 84.

28 See Boilot, (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī' The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. I, p. 1236.

29 Nāurōz – The festival of the first day of the year in Zoroastrianism being a public holiday. =

Mihrajan – The festival is in honour of the divinity Mithra, one of the evocations of 'Ahura Mazda' celebrated as a harvest festival. See Brown, Alan, (ed.) Festivals in World Religions (London: Longman,

confirmed by the story mentioned in the same work by Yaqut. He said that it was reported that one al-Faqih (Jurist) called Abu al-Hassan 'Ali bn Isa al-Walwalījī one day went to al-Bīrūnī, and found him in great difficulty (struggling for his life). In that situation al-Bīrūnī asked the Jurist what he told him one day concerning the inheritance of the maternal grandmothers. Al-Walwalījī pitied him and did not want to talk on that seeing his conditions, but al-Bīrūnī insisted with an inquiry the import of which is, would it not be better for him to bid farewell to this world with the knowledge of that problem than to leave it while ignorant of it? The jurist conceded to his desire and left the place. He was on his way when he heard the cry of al-Bīrūnī's relatives on his death!³⁰

There were a lot of speculations made by Sachau and others on al-Bīrūnī being taken as prisoner and kept in a separate place by Sultan Mahmūd; so also the in-cordial relation of al-Bīrūnī with the ruler; about his anti-Arab feelings and his strong inclination and penchant in Indian philosophy and so on. In the two millennial commemoration of al-Bīrūnī many of these unsubstantial speculations have been disproved.³¹

With the death of Sultan Mahmūd in 1030 C.E., and after some power tussle, his son Mas'ud, who had great interest in astronomy and natural sciences, came to the throne.³² He proved to be more favourable to al-Bīrūnī as could be seen from al-Bīrūnī's dedication of his masterpiece to the Sultan, titled 'al-Qanun al-Masudi fi al-Hay'ah wa al-Nujum', and his eulogy of the new ruler in it, to a great extent.³³ As at the time of Sultan Mahmūd, al-Bīrūnī continued his researches and studies of nature in its different aspects, with better facilities and in a better financial position.

1986) pp. 252-254., cp. The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 207-208, where Mihrajan is depicted as the day of the creation of the Sun for the first time in the world. The Persians hold a fair on that day.

30 Yāqūt, Mu'jam al-Udaba (Cairo: Dar al-Mamun, N.D.) vol. 17, p. 182.

31 See Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951) and Said, H.M. (ed.) Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, (Karachi: Hamdard Foundation, 1973), cp., Said, H.M. and Khan, A.Z., Al-Bīrūnī, His Times, Life and Works, (Karachi: Hamdard Foundation, 1981).

32 See Hanameh, S.K. Al-Bīrūnī's Book on Pharmacy and Materia Medica (ed) Said, H.M. (Karachi: Hamdard National Foundation, 1973) p. 27.

33 Al-Bīrūnī, Al-Qanun al-Masudi, (Hyderabad: Dairah al-Ma'arif al-Uthmaniyyah, 1954), pp. 1-4.

It was mentioned by Yaqut that Sultan Mas'ud wanted to reward al-Bīrūnī for the above-mentioned work with an elephant load of silver coins, which al-Bīrūnī did not accept due to his not being in need of it.³⁴ Mas'ud was murdered in 1040 C.E. and his son Maudud became the ruler of the declining empire. Al-Bīrūnī found favour with the new Sultan as he did with his father. Al-Bīrūnī wrote on pharmacology, mineralogy etc. during Sultan Maudud's reign.

As was the case about his place of birth, meaning of his appellation (al-Bīrūnī) etc, such is the case regarding the time of his death. In one of his last works 'Kitab al-Saydanah fi al-Tibb', al-Bīrūnī said that he was over 80 lunar years old.³⁵ The usual date given of his death – 2nd Rajab 440 A.H./11th December 1048 C.E.³⁶ has been called into question by recent researches on al-Bīrūnī. The researchers believe that he died two or three years later than that date, so that the year of his demise should be 442/1050 or 443/1051.³⁷

Al-Bīrūnī was an orthodox Sunni Muslim but of tolerant nature, one whose strong conviction in Islam did not deter from studying other religions deeply without the fear of losing his faith or being 'comparatively religious'.

B- His Works:

Different estimations have been made of al-Bīrūnī's total number of works, and his wide range of intellectual contribution. In the Encyclopedia of Islam a total number 138 works have been attributed to al-Bīrūnī, including 12 written by his teacher Abu Nasr in his name and another 12 also written by Abu Sahl al-Masihi in the name of al-Bīrūnī.³⁸ Another source put the number at 146 works and yet another put the

34 Yaqut, Mu'jam al-Udaba, op. cit. vol. 17, p. 181.

35 The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. 1, p 1236.

36 Sachau, The Chronology, op. cit. p. vii-viii (preface) p. 973, p. 27

37 Sachau, The Chronology, op. cit. p. vii-viii (preface), See also Barani, S.H. (Intro), Al-Qanunu'l-Mas'udi by al-Bīrūnī, (Hyderabad-Dn: Da'iratu'l-Ma'ārif-il-Osmania, 1954), vol. 1, p. xi, cp. = Baloch, N.A. (ed) Ghurrah Al-Zijat or Karana Tilaka by al-Bīrūnī (trans.)(Sind: University of Sind, 1973, p. b (Intro)).

38 The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 1236.

number as 180 works.³⁹ Of these works of Islamic classical heritage only about one sixth are believed to be extant (around 27) or so.⁴⁰ This is a very small fraction of the intellectual output of this genius.

Some breakdown of his works has been given by scholars, so as to show his diverse interests, his encyclopedic knowledge and his vast erudition. See for instance the list below:

Classification of al-Bīrūnī's Works:⁴¹

| <u>FIELD:</u> | <u>NUMBER OF WORKS WRITTEN:</u> |
|---|---------------------------------|
| • Astronómny | 35 |
| • On Astrolabes | 04 |
| • Astrology | 23 |
| • Chronology | 05 |
| • Time Measurement | 02 |
| • Geography | 09 |
| • Geodesy (Earth measurement on large scale) and Mapping Theory | 10 |
| • Arithmetic | 08 |
| • Geometry | 05 |
| • Trigonometry | 02 |
| • Mechanics | 02 |
| • Medicine and Pharmacology | 02 |
| • Meteorology | 01 |
| • Mineralogy and Gems | 02 |
| • History | 04 |
| • India | 02 |

39 See Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 151 cp. The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 232 and Nasr, .H. An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine op. cit. pp. 109-110.

40 Al-Bīrūnī's Commemoration Volume, op. cit. p. xvi (Introduction).

41 Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 152.

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| • Religion and Philosophy | 03 |
| • Literary | 16 |
| • Magic | 02 |
| • Unclassified | 09 |

Some of the extant works of al-Bīrūnī in different fields are as follows:

- On Chronology, Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah an – Qurūn al-Khāliyah;
- On History, Religion and Culture, Tahqīq ma li al-Hind min maqulah maqbūlah fi al-aql aw mardhulah;
- On Geography, Tahdīd Nihāyāt al-Amakin li Tashīh Masāfāt al-Masākin;
- On Astronomy, Astrology and Mathematics: Al-Qanūn al-Mas'ūdī fi al-Hay'ah wa al-Nujūm, so also Kitab-al Tafhīm li-awa'il Sinā'ah al- Tanjīm, written both in Arabic and Persian languages by the author.⁴²
- On Geometry: Jami' al-Turuq al-Sa'irah fi ma'rīfah awtar al-Da'irah;
- On Optics: Tajrid al-Shu'at wa al-Anwar 'an al-Fada'ih al-Mudawwanah fi al-Asfār;
- On Mineralogy and Gems: Kitab al-Jamāhīr fi Ma'rīfah al-Jawāhir;
- On Shadows: Ifrād al-Maqāl fi amri al'-Dhilāl;
- On Medicine and Pharmacology: Kitab al-Saydanah fi al-Tibb.

Other works of al-Bīrūnī include translations especially from Sanskrit to Arabic and the vice-versa. Three of such works are extant viz.:

- a. Book of Samkhya;
- b. Book of Patanjali;
- c. Ghurrah al-Zijat or Zij Karana Tilaka (on mathematical astronomy). These were translated into Arabic from Sanskrit.

All this portrays only a fraction of the works in various fields of human knowledge investigated by Abu Rayhan al-Bīrūnī in the first half of the 11th century of

42 Sachan, C.E. (ed. & trans.) The Chronology of Ancient Nations (Lahore: Hijra International, 1983) p. xii (preface)

the Christian Era. Almost one thousand years ago, al-Bīrūnī in the north-eastern part of the Muslim world, after having read the sciences of the different nations of the then known world, was making a lot of pioneering researches and discoveries in almost all the known branches of human intellectual pursuit.

C- Al-Bīrūnī's Scholarship:

Abu Rayhan al-Bīrūnī as mentioned earlier was one of the greatest astronomers and mathematicians not only in the golden era of Islamic scholarship, but also in the entire medieval world of his time. Al-Bīrūnī was described as 'the most original, the deepest thinker that Islam has produced in the field of physical and mathematical research'.⁴³ Because of this, most of his intellectual contributions were either in the physical or the astronomical sciences or in other words, in the knowledge of the physical universe with its earth and heavens.

Some of al-Bīrūnī's more specific contributions in the physical realm include his provision of better information on the earth as a planet, the oceans, his theories about the changing of earth's landscape, land distances between cities, a scientific description of the Indian sub-continent, its rivers, mountainous regions etc., so also his measurement of the earth's circumference using spherical trigonometry. His extensive study of the stars, determination of longitudes and latitudes of different individual cities, his theories on mapping, the chronological computation of years were all counted as real contributions. Al-Bīrūnī is believed by Sachau to be the first Muslim, or indeed the first of all scholars who has composed a scientific system of the Jewish chronology. In his mention of the Jewish and Christian chronologies in his work Al-Āthār al Bāqiyah..., he showed that he did it purely for the service of humanity and in the most objective form possible, even when the subject is related to the Muslims' traditional enemies-Jews and Christians. He said (Sachau's translation, p. 319): "And from our side we have proved that we candidly adopt their (Jewish and Christian) tradition and lean upon their theory,.....In all of which we are guided by the wish

43 Nallino as quoted in al-Bīrūnī, Al-Qanunu'l-Mas'udi (Hyderabad-Dn: Dairatu'l-Ma'arif-il-Osmania, 1954) p. 8 (Gen. Intro).

that both parties should dismiss from their minds the suspicion that we are partial to any side or try to mystify them.....'⁴⁴

Al-Bīrūnī's al-Qanun al Mas'udi...was seen by Sarton as an encyclopedia in astronomy. He also viewed al-Bīrūnī's contributions in historiography to be of the very first order.⁴⁵ Not only in these areas were the contributions of al-Bīrūnī profound. In the humanities also al-Bīrūnī has written no less than twenty works. He was a Historian, a Comparative Religionist as well as a man of letters. On his studies of India due to which he was seen as 'its first scientific interpreter' al-Bīrūnī was deep and profound. He studied Indian chronology, religion, society, customs, sciences and whatever one can think of. The Indians themselves were grateful to him as stated earlier. As for his study of religion which is our main area of concern in this humble work, it is to the credit of al-Bīrūnī that one of the western students of religion has seen his work as truly scientific.⁴⁶

As regards his qualities which made it possible for him to 'achieve and attain his intellectual status', mention has been made of his love for truth, his insatiable thirst for knowledge, his open mind, tolerance, intellectual curiosity and courage, his critical spirit, and his passion for objective knowledge. Al-Bīrūnī was also described as a person of rare prodigious mind, creative, versatile, having a strong sense of history, with a strong penchant for first-hand investigation of natural phenomena.⁴⁷ Despite his strong conviction in Islam, he used to investigate some narrations to ascertain their scientific genuineness, as he has done regarding the narration on the institution of the fasting of Ashura, where he found, after his calculations, that the narration that the Prophet (P.B.U.H) arrived in Madinah while the Jews were observing it, is not sound scientifically, as the Jewish fasting of 'Kippur' in 3-7 years before the prophet (peace be upon him) migrated to Madinah was in Muharram, while in the year he arrived in

44 The chronology – op. cit. p. 319.

45 Sarton, G. Introduction to the History of Science, op. cit. vol. I, p. 694.

46 See the scholarly article of A. Jeffery 'Al-Bīrūnī's contribution to Comparative Religion' in Al-Bīrūnī, Commemoration Volume, (Calcutta: Iran society, 1945, pp. 125-160).

47 Sarton, Introduction....,op. cit. vol. I, p. 694 & 707 cp. Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol. 2, pp. 155-156, Said and Khan, Al-Bīrūnī, His Times...op. cit. p. 1.

Madinah the 'Jewish Ashurah' was on Tuesday, the 9th of Rabi'I⁴⁸. This strong feeling of accuracy is a clear feature with al-Bīrūnī. He was also seen as 'a friend of clear, determined and manly words. He abhors half-truths, veiled words and wavering actions'.⁴⁹ From the above, it becomes clear that Abu Rayhan, known to his contemporaries as 'Ustadh'⁵⁰ possessed the qualities that raised him to a great and lofty position even among the few men recognised as intellectual giants throughout the ages.

Some noteworthy scientific contributions of al-Bīrūnī:

Scholars of the natural sciences have brought to light some significant contributions of al-Bīrūnī in the sciences, so as to give us an approximate estimate of his greatness as a scientist. Here are some of them:-

1. Accurate determination of latitude and longitude of large number of places;
2. Trisection of an angle and the solution of some complex problems without the use of protractors and scale;
3. Pointing to the existence of the American continent;
4. Theorising that the Sind valley was once under water in the past, but later changed into dry land following some geographic changes;
5. Explaining the flow of springs on the principles that water finds its own level;
6. Determination of specific gravity of 18 precious stones and metals correctly;
7. Providing proof that light travels at a much faster speed than sound;
8. Explaining the forces of gravity and throwing light on gravitation forces;
9. Devising methods for identifying a number of precious stones;
10. Explaining the phenomenon of the fire visible at the time of sun eclipse;
11. Providing useful information and views on the heights of trees;
12. Discussing whether the earth revolves on its axis or not;

48 Sachau, E.C., (ed & trans.) The Chronology of Ancient Nations of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit. pp. 327-328.

49 Sachau, E.C., Al-Berūnī's India, op. cit. vol. I p.xix (preface).

50 See The Dictionary of Scientific Biography, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 156.

13. Explaining the universal law of nature that flowers have always 3,4,5,6,8 petals and never 7 or 9;
14. Determination of the circumference and diameter of the earth by using spherical trigonometry; and
15. Determination of the Sun's declination and Zenithal movement.⁵¹

This shows that al-Bīrūnī was well ahead of his time due to his love for research and investigation. As most of the works of al-Bīrūnī are in the astronomical, mathematical and scientific fields, we would like to state again here that, our study will focus on only al-Bīrūnī's discussions of issues directly related to the study of religion with special emphasis on where the comparative method has been employed by him.

D- Al-Bīrūnī and The Study of Religion:

Al-Bīrūnī described as a polymath and encyclopedic must not have abandoned in his intellectual endeavour, the religious realm, due to its ubiquity and conspicuity in all human societies. His later association with Sultan Mahmud al-Ghaznawi and the latter's Jihad campaigns in north-western India, as well as his intellectual milieu,⁵² all contributed to his interest in the religions of others, as is evident from his first major work – 'al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah...., where he studied the chronologies, religious festivals and institutions of the various nations of the world. He gathered all the information he could find of the ancient times in the above-mentioned issues, and using the scientific, critical and comparative methods, he tried to understand the religious thinking of these nations.

His study of India is the greatest proof of his interest in the religion of others and its study. It seems to be sheer intellectual curiosity which influenced him towards it, and also in order to know the religion of the Hindus and all other aspects of their society as they are seen, as entirely 'other', by al-Bīrūnī as well as by other Muslims.

51 See (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and his Academic Conquests', Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume (ed.), Said, H.M. (Karachi: Hamdard, 1979) pp. 158-159.

52 See al-Bīrūnī's preface in his Kitāb Tahqīq mā li al-Hind..., Sachau's Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p p. 5-7.

After studying their ways and customs, some of them being strange and abominable, al-Bīrūnī saw it as a duty on him to present his findings exactly as they are. His was a true record of the facts he found, for the *benefit* of anyone who wants to converse or to enter into a dialogue with the Hindus, to do so on the basis of their own terms. ⁵³

Abu Reyhan's main work in the study of religion is Kitab Tahqiq ma li al-Hind.... for which he prepared himself well in two ways. One is his deep study of the ancient language of the Indians – Sanskrit. The other was his sitting before their scholars – 'Pandits' so as to understand the intricacies of their religious philosophy as well as their sciences. Another thing that facilitated al-Bīrūnī's study of Indian and other religions was his procurement of their literature at any cost. He said regarding Sanskrit books: "... I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I suppose they were likely to be found...." ⁵⁴ All these measures taken by al-Bīrūnī serve a very important methodological purpose – that of getting information on the Indian religions and society from the original sources, i.e. written records and living and practising Hindus.

The study of religion carried out by al-Bīrūnī includes not only those of the Indian origin, but also Judaism especially their chronology, religious festival and fasting. The bulk of material collected and arranged in his other monumental work al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah, was enlightening and depicts al-Bīrūnī's depth in research work. Other religions which came under his study are, Christianity and its different sects, Manichaeism, in the course of the study of which he searched for Mani's Sifr al-Asrar, and found it after 40 years! ⁵⁵ We found in al-Bīrūnī's Kitab al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah..., to the best of our knowledge, the most ancient scholarly study of the Sabians. His mention of them was of an in-depth nature, and in accordance with his method, he wrote only what he found to be facts about them. Al-Bīrūnī also had a good knowledge of Zoroastrianism and Greek religion. The latter he compares a lot with the religion of the Hindus. Al-Bīrūnī may be indirectly pointing in that to the proximity and similarity between the two; which may be due to influence or the origin

53 See Al-Beruni's India, vol. I, p. 7 cp. vol. II, p. 246.

54 Al-Beruni's India, vol. I, p. 24.

55 Said, H.M. and Khan, A. Z., Al-Biruni, His Times, Life and Works, op. cit. p. 60.

of one from the other, but this has to be ascertained by means of serious research establishing the connection and the link, if there is any. All these religions came into focus in al-Bīrūnī's comparative study of religion.

As mentioned earlier, about 27 or so of al-Bīrūnī's works are extant today. We would have a closer look at his major works that have materials on different religions, which will serve as our main focus of study in this work:

- 1- al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah – This is al-Bīrūnī's first major work, written around the year 1000 C. E., edited and translated by E. C. Sachau, who stated that as a work (on chronology and religious institutions and festivals of the ancient nations) '...it will scarcely ever be superceded....representing in its peculiar line the highest development of oriental scholarship' – The book contains a 'comparative chronology of eras and festivals, of various ethnic and religious groups'. Al-Bīrūnī employed the comparative method in his study and came out with a lot of theories related to the religious practices of different nations; the importance they attach to their religious calendars and festivals; fasting and prayer being the main pillars of religious practice were also treated comparatively. Due to all these discussions, the book will be one of the important works to be focussed on in this study.
- 2- Al-Qanūn al-Mas'ūdī fī al-Hay'ah wa al-Nujūm – This work is considered al-Bīrūnī's masterpiece in the area ~~that~~^{him most} interests – astronomy. It has been described by Sarton as an 'astronomical encyclopedia'. It was finally compiled and dedicated to Sultan Mas'ūd in 1031 C. E. This work is 'the most systematic and comprehensive of al-Bīrūnī's numerous works on astronomy' – over 30 different works were written by him in this field alone. Being compiled closer to the time of his death after almost half a decade of exhaustive research in the field, he incorporated into it some of his earlier

contributions, reviewed and refined, like his earlier researches on the chronologies of ancient nations.

In the opening chapters of the book he discussed the theories of the different religious communities on the creation of the universe, the first human family and so on, hence its relevance to our discussions on al-Bīrūnī's study of religion.

3- Kitab Tahqīq mā lī al-Hind min Maqūlah Māqūlah fī al-Aql aw Mardhūlah

Also known simply as Tarikh al Hind – It seems that it took al-Bīrūnī some years to compose it and he finally compiled it in 1030 C.E., may be few months after the death of Sultan Mahmūd. He did not dedicate it to anyone. This book may be seen as his masterpiece in the study of religion and society. It is based on al-Bīrūnī's long study of India, its ancient language of Sanskrit and various works written in that language, including his earlier discussions with Hindu pandits. The work is seen by some modern scholars as '...the first objective study ever made of a foreign culture.'⁵⁶ It depicts al-Bīrūnī's breadth of learning and novel sense of cosmopolitan objectivity. Kitab Tahqīq mā lī al-Hind..' has been seen as intellectually admirable because of its '...strictly scientific style, its perfectly logical and methodical arrangements, its deep and patient investigation ... its candid criticism in the light of the sciences, philosophy and institutions of other nations, and the wealth of illustrations which it gives from Greek literature'.⁵⁷

4- Another important work of al-Bīrūnī which is very unfortunately missing, would have been the main focus of our study – Kitab al-Maqālāt wa al-Arā wa al-Diyānāt

was mentioned in a list of sixty works of al-Bīrūnī by Isma'il Pasa al-Baghdadi (d.1339-A.H.) in his Hadiyyah al-'Arifin fi Asmā al-Mu'allifin wa Āثار al-Musannifin (vol. 2, pp. 65-66).*

⁵⁶ Schimmel, Annemarie, Islam in the Indian Subcontinent, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980) p. 7.

⁵⁷ Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, (art) 'Alberuni's India' Islamic Culture, vol. 1, No. 1, Jan 1927 pp. 33-34.

* See Al-Alim Abu Al-Reyhan al-Bīrūnī, Damascus, op. cit. p. 39

his (India)

Al-Bīrūnī's scholarly objectivity in *Al-Bīrūnī's India* and other works is seriously admired and stressed by modern scholars. And this is what makes the book all the more important in the world of religious study. By his objectivity and descriptive study in *his work, al-Bīrūnī* foreshadows the modern scientific study of religion, especially as developed in the West. Even the circumstances of writing that book were such that a different approach altogether was expected from al-Bīrūnī. This work was written during the Jihad campaigns of Sultan Mahmud in India against the non-believing Hindus. Despite those circumstances, al-Bīrūnī decided to write his findings on the Indian people, religion, culture and sciences from a descriptive perspective, showing by that, that his beliefs, feelings, sympathies do not affect his objectivity when it comes to academic honesty and disinterestedness. This very fact of this work has been portrayed by Sachau in these words: "...It is like a magic island of quiet, impartial research in the midst of a world of clashing swords, burning towns and plundered temples."⁵⁸ Even though the concluding words of Sachau are debatable and are not to be taken for granted, especially his indirect assessment of the campaigns of Sultan Mahmud, the statement shows how a scholar, inspite of the environment around him, can sit and give an accurate description of a situation, unaffected by what might otherwise influence his statements.

This work clearly speaks of its relevance to our humble work, and so it constitutes one of the most important part of it, moreso that it remains to this day, the most authoritative first-hand source of information on Indian culture and religion about the time of the Ghaznawids.⁵⁹

From the above works, we can see that al-Bīrūnī has great interest in the study of religion, and that he contributed to the field in terms of theories, and especially in the methodology of its study. His study of other religions need to be understood as the descriptive and objective study of a believing Muslim who is enlightened as regards the wisdom of Allah in His creations due to his study of them. As seen earlier he conceives

58 Sachau, E.C. (ed. and trans.) *Alberuni's India*, (London: Kegan, Trench, Trubner, 1914) vol. 1, p. xxiii (preface).

59 Ali, A.Y. (art) 'Alberuni's India' op. cit. p. 33.

his study of other people's religions and chronologies as a service to humanity and religion.

1- Al-Bīrūnī's Methodological Contributions in the Study of Religion:

Al-Bīrūnī is known in the scholarly world as basically an astronomer, a mathematician and a natural scientist. These being the main areas he emphasized on, but not necessarily being his only fields of interest. We have already seen a list of his works in the different fields of intellectual endeavour. One of these other areas is the study of religion other than that of al-Bīrūnī - Islam. We have also mentioned above his interest in, and subsequent study of the Indian religion.⁶⁰ In that study, al-Bīrūnī gave one of the early medieval significant contributions to the scientific study of religion, not only in theories but also in applied forms.

As we mentioned in an earlier chapter on al-Āmirī that his greatest contribution to the field of religious studies, was in his method. Likewise is the case of al-Bīrūnī, but on a greater scale. Al-Bīrūnī in many respects resembles the modern scientists as regards, his method in the study of various fields. Due to this feature of al-Bīrūnī many scholars saw him as one who was much ahead of his time, and therein lies his greatness.⁶¹ His study of religion was no exception. There is no greater testimony to that than the statement of one Western student of religion in the following words:

"If Comparative Religion means the study of religion by the same scientific method as is used in Comparative Anatomy or Comparative Philology, viz. the assembling of facts about the beliefs and practices of various religious groups, arranging them, classifying them, comparing them with one another and with the beliefs and practices of one's own religion, in order to arrive at a better

60 Al-Bīrūnī's Tahqiq ma li al Hind..... edited and translated by E.C. Sachau, with the title Alberuni's India (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, Co, 1914), popular ed. We would be referring to this edition throughout this work unless where we find some problem with the translation whereupon we will refer to the Arabic while indicating that.

61 Barani, S.H. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and His Magnum Opus' Al-Qanunu'l Mas'udi (Hyderabad, Dairatu'l Ma'arif-il Osmania, 1954) p. ii (General Introduction).

understanding of the significance of religion, then this branch of study had already had a long history in the area of al-Bīrūnī's life work." 62

We will try here to bring out some salient methodological contributions peculiar to al-Bīrūnī, especially from his main works related to this field. It is pertinent to point out here that, some of the problems of the modern scientific study of religion outlined at the end of the first chapter of this humble work, have already been solved by al-Bīrūnī in his study.

Al-Bīrūnī has been described as a lover of truth, this love of truth he carries to every field he studies. As we have said earlier, his contribution in methodology was not only theoretical but also practical, we will try to outline those contributions, as we recognise them, from his main works.

In any serious search into one's study of the religion of the others, the question of the motive behind and aim of that study will be important. The motive behind al-Bīrūnī's study of Indian religion was vividly explained in the preface to Kitab Tahqiq ma li al Hind..... al-Bīrūnī mentioned in it that, as a result of discussions with one scholar, Abu Sahl Abd-Almun'im Ibn Ali Ibn Nuh al-Tiflisi, both of them blame some Muslims who wrote on not only rival sects, but also on other religions, for misrepresenting the beliefs of their opponents or the adherents of other religious traditions, due to either inadequate knowledge of the material, or the language, or other difficult aspects of belief, or due to simple prejudice, as they were not their co-religionists. So due to their lack of thorough comprehension of these topics they present them sometimes in distorted forms. This being in a way, similar to early orientalistic writings on Islam and the Muslims.

It is with the intention of correcting this situation that al-Bīrūnī, based on the suggestion of Abu Sahl al-Tiflisi, set out to write his book on India. Al-Bīrūnī did not mince words when he said that he was writing... "this book on the doctrines of the Hindus, never making any unfounded imputations against those, our religious antagonists (Hindus)". 63 So it is al-Bīrūnī's love of truth and justice that was the source

62 Jeffery, A (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī's Contributions to Comparative Religion' Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume, (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951) p. 125.

63 Sachau, E. C. (ed. & Trans.) Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 7.

of his idea of writing on Indian religion and society. This is a great methodological point, moreso, when we know that many people, when they write on the religion of the others, before and even today, they do it with the sole aim of championing the cause of their religion, with or without truth.

He believes as a matter of principle that, this should be the motive not the different vested interests, antipathies and animosities that characterise the reports of most people when they write about their opponents or enemies.⁶⁴ Almost similar points which al-Bīrūnī believes blind people against the truth, were mentioned in both his main works on the study of religion. These factors are: inveterate custom, party-spirit, rivalry, being addicted to one's passion, the desire to gain influence or any profit, hatred of a person or a people, due to cowardice, or due to a reporter being afraid of telling the truth, or if it is his nature to lie or, even due to ignorance.⁶⁵ In contrast to this, we see that al-Bīrūnī wants or believes that, certain qualities are suppose to be in a person when he set to study other people, their culture and religion. These 'qualities'⁶⁶ are: Firstly, seeking what satisfies God or what pleases Him and that means all the good qualities like truth, justice, etc. Secondly, possessing proper insight into the nature of what is false. With a good insight on the nature of falsehood, and what are the different forms and disguises it can take, one will not be deceived easily. He recognises what is false as soon as he sees it, and will not base his judgements and conclusions on something he knows to be baseless. Thirdly, the one who studies religion should also possess the ability to sift the grain from the chaff. If the two are already mixed, then one has to have the ability to separate what are say, the fundamentals from what can easily be done away with. From the fourth and fifth points below, it appears to us that al-Bīrūnī advocates an applied study of religion, one at the end of which the student upholds the truth and undermines falsehood. The quality of 'upholding the truth', is in line with the aim of that study, which is to gain the knowledge of truth and to state it

64 ibid., pp. 3-4 cp. Sachau, E.C. (ed. & trans.) The Chronology of Ancient Nations of al-Bīrūnī, (Lahore: Hijra International Publishers, 1983, p. 3, Arabic text was published by Deutsche Morgenl. Gaesellscliaft, Leipzig, 1923. Being al-Bīrūnī's al- Athar al-Baqiyah an al-Qurun al-Khaliyah.

65 Sachau, Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I pp. 3-4 cp. The Chronology, op. cit. p. 3.

66 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. II, p. 246, see also The Chronology, op. cit. p. 81.

clearly. The other point of 'crushing falsehood' is a necessary process that goes with that of upholding the truth. For one who wants to establish the truth will have to crush and uproot falsehood first.

All what we have mentioned above are related to the pre-requisites for a proper study of religion according to al-Bīrūnī. Added to these are other factors seen by him as equally necessary. These include, an adequate knowledge of the language in which their traditions were recorded. This requirement was met by al-Bīrūnī when he learnt the Sanskrit language so as to study the religion of the Hindus.⁶⁷ The other factors are, the procurement of the original books at any cost and so also the difficult task of getting the right teacher to teach him *the language and the sciences* *of the people studied.* He said, "...and although I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I suppose they were likely to be found, and in procuring for myself, even from very remote places, Hindu scholars who understand them and are able to teach me...".⁶⁸ It is a glaring fact that al-Bīrūnī wants to depend on the original sources as possibly as he can. He started his work on India by enumerating the different kinds of narrations, and he clearly chose the written sources despite their lapses and shortcomings, partly due to the unreliability of some reporters. Al-Bīrūnī is not a blind follower of sources uncritically. In fact, as regards written sources, he seems to be impatient with the errors committed by both the authors and the scribes, which he immediately corrects.⁶⁹

From the above, we can see what methodological ideas al-Bīrūnī was alluding to. The knowledge of the language of the tradition and the sources, *learning from* *the scholars who are* well-versed in those works, and the possession of those original works, all these help towards a truly scientific study of a religion and culture. With the right method, a scholar can "do his utmost to deduce the tenets of a sect from their legendary lore..."⁷⁰ But which is the right method for the study of religion? This has been a persistent

67 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 24

68 Ibid.

69 See Al-Bīrūnī's Al-Qanun al-Mas'udi, op. cit. vol. I (Gen. Intro.) p. 4.

70 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 228.

question in the field of Comparative study of religion. We have raised a similar question in the last chapter and have seen how al-Āmirī, in his own way, answered the question.

Al-Bīrūnī's response to this question was both theoretical and practical. Since he has studied, in a very special manner, the Indian religions, we have his own model before us to discover his method in it. We would therefore, give below the various aspects of what constitutes al-Bīrūnī's method in his study of Indian and other religions. He wants anyone who wants to study another religion to start from a similar motive as the motive behind his study of India, which was his love of truth. Al-Biruni wants a scholar of religion to have the attitude of an impartial and correct reporter who describes things as they are. No distortion, biasness or subjective treatment of religious topics should be accepted.⁷¹ Al-Bīrūnī employed the comparative method in his study of Indian religion, due to the similarity he noticed between it and especially, the Greek religion. In his preface to that study he said: "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."⁷²

The reason for this comparison according to al-Bīrūnī as noted above, is to show the relationship between the two traditions and peoples. But apart from his mention that the Greek philosophers do entertain and believe in the same customary exoteric expressions and tenets both of their religion and law as do the other common people, no further explanation was given. In our humble opinion, al-Bīrūnī wants to say that both the Greeks (known for their philosophy and abstract thoughts) and the Hindus, were not free of falling into crude ideas and beliefs bordering on anthropomorphism and materialistic and concretistic conceptions of religion in the spiritual realm as the common people.

Another important idea related to methodology in the study of religion mentioned by al-Bīrūnī, and which we think, he is the first to have mentioned, is in his own words: "If such an author is not alive to the requirements of a strictly scientific

71 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 3-7.

72 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 37.

method, he will procure some superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherents of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it".⁷³

Al-Bīrūnī is here alluding to some writers who are not well versed in a tradition, but who then, write some work on that. He believes that author due to his lack of comprehension of that foreign tradition because of any reason, will end up writing something that will not be 'approved' by the adherents of that religion or sometimes it may not even be recognised by them, like some early oriental writings on Islam. What he writes may at the same time, not be approved by the scholar well-versed in the field. This is a great insight on the part of al-Bīrūnī. It is only in this century, (nine centuries after al-Bīrūnī!) that we heard voices calling on the students of religion, to write on any tradition what the adherents of that religion will recognise as their own religion.⁷⁴ This is an aspect of objectivity and descriptive narration, where the scholar will not allow his hatred of a people and their religion, swerve him from describing exactly what he found in them. Allah (S.W.T.) tells us, in an exalted manner, the same fact:

"O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah, for Allah is well acquainted with all that you do." ⁷⁵

In another of al-Bīrūnī's work titled 'Tahdid Nihāyāt al-Amākin li Tashīh Masāfāt al-Masākin', he said on this point that the rejection of something and taking it to be spurious due only to the hatred of its owner; and the abandoning of truth due to the mis-guidance of the one who said it, is going contrary to the dictates of the Revealed Book (al-Quran), for Allah (S.W.T.) said:

"Those who listen to the word (statement) and follow the best of it..." ⁷⁶

It may be due to this point that al-Bīrūnī does not go out of his way to mention something on any issue, if he is not sure of his information on that. This he considered

73 Ibid., vol. I, p. 6.

74 Notably among these scholars is W.C. Smith. See his On Understanding Islam (Selected Studies), (Delhi: Idarah-I-Adabiyat-I-Delhi, 1985) Reprint, p. 236.

75 Surah al-Māidah : 8

76 Surah al-Zumar : 18.

to be contrary to his method, as it leads to mixing certain knowledge with doubt, or bringing together truth and falsehood. As he stated in the al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah regarding the months, of different nations, admitting his uncertainty of such months ^{due to which}

He will postpone mentioning them in that work '.....as it does not agree with the method which we have followed hitherto, to connect that which is doubtful and unknown with that which is certain and known'⁷⁷ In line with consistency of an acute scientist al-Bīrūnī mentions in his 'India' written almost 30 years after the al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah.....' while commenting on one Balabhadra an Indian astronomer, thus: "To Balabhadra it is just as easy to prefer tradition to eyesight, as it is difficult to us to prefer doubt to a clear proof."⁷⁸ Al-Bīrūnī wants to be precise and accurate in whatever he says and in all branches of knowledge.

Another important aspect of al-Bīrūnī's method is his statement in his 'Tahqīq mā li al-Hind.....' that this work, ".....is not a polemical one. I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them as I believe to be in the wrong." Before this he said, "If the contents of these quotations happen to be utterly heathenish, and the followers of the truth i.e. the Muslims, find them objectionable, we can only say that such is the belief of the Hindus, and that they themselves are best qualified to defend it."⁷⁹ This aspect of al-Bīrūnī's method seems to be lauded very much by the Westerners, as it is in line with their declared method of the study of religion, as we have seen in the first chapter of this humble work. But it seems to be frowned at in Muslim quarters. For some may say that, to mention the wrong of a person in his religious beliefs and practices and then pass over them without stating the right beliefs or practices is not enough. This can even be seen as contrary to the Qur'anic method. The Quran, as is clear, mentions the religious beliefs and practices of other people which are not in line with its spirit, and it immediately points to the faults and lapses that are in those beliefs. For instance Allah says in the Qur'an concerning the Christians and their concept of God:

77 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 81.

78 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 227.

79 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 227.

"Certainly they disbelieve who say: 'Allah is Christ the son of Mary,' But Christ said: O' children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord' Whoever joins other gods with Allah, Allah will forbid him the Paradise and Hellfire will be his abode....." (Surah al-Ma'idah : 72).

In our humble opinion, it seems al-Bīrūnī was writing for a purpose different from the purpose of those who refute or attack the religious beliefs or practices of others. As he stated in the preface of his book and in the conclusion, that he was presenting all the facts, beliefs, practices, customs, myths and sciences of the Hindus as he found them.⁸⁰ Being the first scientific writer on India, it seems as if he wants everything regarding the Hindus to be very clear and accurate in the first instance. So that anyone, who wants to write later on, to refute their ideas and practices, can do it, based on the correct, precise and objective information on their beliefs or whatever. Being a pioneer in this field, writing after a discussion that showed how these issues did not fare well in the works of other Muslims, it is naturally expected of al-Bīrūnī to take an entirely different approach. That of setting things right, for future generations and also for his contemporaries who want to interact with them on the basis of what they believe and practice.⁸¹

Another aspect of al-Bīrūnī's methodology, which seems to contribute to the field of Comparative Religion, is his penchant for giving the most comprehensive and most widely accepted views on the issues he studies. As regards the different sects of one religious tradition, he tries to get their different opinions, compare them and then come out with a system in that particular issue. Al-Bīrūnī mentioned this after having opined that anything related to the knowledge of history and traditions of former nations and generation, cannot be obtained '.....by way of ratiocination with philosophical notions, or of inductions based upon the observations of our senses....'⁸² Another aspect of this comprehensibility of al-Bīrūnī, is in his study of the prophecies about the advent of prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.), in which he shows that, we

80 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 7 and vol. II p. 246.

81 ibid., vol. II, p. 246.

82 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 3, cp. Ibid., pp. 108-109.

should use arguments that are acknowledged by all the contending parties, like the verse (Isaiah 21: 6-9) where a rider on an ass and another rider on a camel were mentioned in connection with the falling of Babylon and the breaking of its idols.⁸³ Al-Bīrūnī showed that it is known to all that the one who rode an ass was Jesus, while the rider on a camel can be no other than Muhammad (P.B.U.H.).

Even though al-Bīrūnī was not writing to show the superiority of his religion (Islam) over other religions, he could not help pointing to that reality, like when he mentioned the kinds of marriage among the Hindus and the pagan Arabs. He said at the end of it: "We have here given an account of these things in order that the reader may learn by the comparative treatment of the subject how much superior the institutions of Islam are, and how much more plainly this contrast brings out all customs and usage, differing from those of Islam, in their essential foulness."⁸⁴

It appears here as if al-Bīrūnī has somewhat deviated from his method, which we can call today as value-free. Judgement has been passed on all other 'customs and usages' other than those of Islam as essentially foul. The issue of superiority as we have seen in the last chapter is natural in the life of man and in the other aspects of this universe. Al-Bīrūnī also mentioned that in another of his works, Kitab al-Jamāhir fi Ma'rifah al-Jawāhir where he says: "The superiority of good things is but obvious."⁸⁵

Al-Bīrūnī being a scientist did not just reject strange things without reason. He however, does not accept them without question either, but was of the opinion that if two conditions are fulfilled in such narrations, they must be accepted. The two being that:

1. There is in such a report all the conditions of authenticity;
2. Whether a similar thing have already occurred before that time (a precedent).⁸⁶

83 Ibid., p. 22.

84 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 109-110

85 Said, H.M. (trans. To English) al-Bīrūnī's Kitab al-Jamāhir fi Ma'rifah al-Jawāhir, (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1980), p. 16.

86 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 92

Due to his scientific bent al-Bīrūnī investigated some traditions to verify their soundness by means of observation and calculation, like what we have mentioned earlier on the fasting of Ashura; similarly the story of Mary Magdalene and the shadow of Christ falling to the east.⁸⁷ Al-Bīrūnī's scientific mind does not accept superstitions, charms, witchcraft, alchemy, 'Rasayana'*⁸⁸, but is very skeptical about them, and believes that they are all tricks.⁸⁹

It is evident from the numerous works of al-Bīrūnī that he demands strict adherence to, and acceptance of the truth, from whomever it comes. The hatred of a person or his mis-guidance do not disqualify him from al-Bīrūnī's acceptance of truth from him. In fact he declared that it is not unbefitting of him to accept the truth from any source. He declares: 'I definitely do not scorn to accept the truth from whatever source I can find it.'⁹⁰ He believes it is only the truthful who enjoys respect and credit even from liars. Truth like justice, has its own intrinsic beauty and was enjoined by all Revealed Scriptures.⁹¹

Al-Bīrūnī employed various methods used today for the study of religion, chief among them being the 'historical-scientific' method, where he depends a lot on historical data, investigating the narrations, criticising them, accepting some and rejecting others, like the story he mentioned as to why prophet Ibrahim (P.B.U.H.) broke the idols,⁹² and so on.

The phenomenological method also was applied especially when he mentions the different religious beliefs and practices as they are. His work on India is a very good example of his application of this method. Even in the al-Āthār al Baqiyah, similar

87 Al-Bīrūnī, Ifrad al-Maqāl fi amr al-dhilāl in Rasa'il al-Bīrūnī (Hyderabad-Dn: Da'iratu'l Ma'ārif, 1948), pp. 7-8. No such story is there in the canonical Gospels of today. Something somewhat close to this is in Mark 16:2.

88 Alberuni's India, vol. I, pp. 194-195.

89 Al-Bīrūnī's Kitab Tahdīd Nihayat al-Amākin..., op. cit. p. 82 and p. 9.

90 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 4.

91 See The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 186-187.

* 'Rasayana' : 'Rasa' (mercury) played an important part in Indian alchemy and was used in concocting the elixir of life. See Stutley, M. and J. A Dictionary of Hinduism, London, 1977, p. 247.

method was employed, for instance in his study of the Sabians.⁹² He also used to analyse factors that caused some phenomena. For example, the loss of Jewish historical records which includes also part of the message sent to them, was attributed to various factors like the several hard times they suffered, when they were so much displaced and distracted by other matters, from preserving their historical traditions; their leadership was not always held by the same tribe; their rule was not organised so well; nor their empire and government handed over from one to the other in such good manner...' ⁹³ The other chief method employed purposely and in many places, is the comparative method, the main focus in our work. We will discuss it in details, Allah willing in the later part of this chapter.

It is very clear from the previous pages that al-Bīrūnī did not only contributed in transmitting Indian religion and culture to the Islamic world objectively, but he also contributed immensely in bequeathing one of the best methods for any similar study, to later generations. His methodological contributions have been beautifully summarised by Barani in these words:

"His (al-Bīrūnī's) firm belief in the laws of nature, his insistence on continuous observations and collection of reliable data and the successful application of all these principles, mark him out as one of the greatest exponents of the true scientific method." ⁹⁴

2- Al-Bīrūnī and Theorisation on Religion:

Al-Bīrūnī, in the course of his study of religion, especially the Indian religion, has discovered a lot of facts which in one way or another, explain some phenomena of the religious world. He believes religion forms a very important bedrock in human society. This may perhaps be the reason why he started his 'masterpiece' in the study of religion – Kitab Tahqiq ma li al Hind...., which is a study of almost all aspects of Indian society, with the exposition of their religion, the theoretical aspect of it, i.e. the beliefs.

92 ibid.

93 ibid., p. 90.

94 Barani (ed) 'Al-Bīrūnī and his Magnum Opus....' in Al-Qanunu'l – Mas'udi of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit. vol. I, p. Lxxi (Gen. Intro.)

Religion in a human society, even in modern societies, serves many purposes as the functional approaches to the study of religion reveal. Man is 'Homo Religiosus', he lives in this world and interacts with fellow humans and other things in the Universe to a greater or smaller extent, on the basis of his religious background. This shows that the influence of religion on human societies is not waning, but it only appears in different garbs.

Al-Biruni studied idol-worship as a religious phenomenon in his 'India'. The worship of many images of gods and goddesses is very conspicuous in Indian temples and homes. In the opening statements of that study, he mentioned one of his outstanding discovery about the religious practice by classifying the homo religiosus into two main categories as regards their response to religious doctrines and teachings.⁹⁵ We have the elites (al-Khassāh) who represent the clergy and the scholars in any religious tradition, and they are the only ones who understand abstract thought regarding the supernatural and the spiritual worlds.⁹⁶ We notice in the history of religions, a sort of gradual abstraction, when it comes to the conception of God. For instance in the Semitic revealed religions – we have the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims. The Jews, the inheritors of the earliest revelation fell into gross anthropomorphism, when they conceive God close to being a 'man', ".....walking in the garden in the cool of the day....."⁹⁷, looking for Adam and his wife who have hidden themselves from Him. And then, as if in total ignorance of the whereabouts of His creatures, He asked.... 'where are you?'⁹⁷ A lot of similar statements are found in the Old Testament, stressing the human and material aspects for God!

As for the Christians, they received God's revelation through Jesus who declared, according to them, 'And this is life eternal, that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'⁹⁸ Every aspect of that life

95 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 111-117.

96 Al-Bīrūnī stated that this group is always a very small group, while the overwhelming majority forms the second group – the popular mind.

97 Genesis 3:8 and 9.

98 John 17:3.

eternal as mentioned above was changed by subsequent Christian religious authorities. They do not know only 'the only true God' but Holy Trinity or is it Tri-theism? Jesus Christ also was not seen any more as being sent by God, but is God, 'very God of very God, of the same substance with the Father'! This shows that abstract notions have no place in their minds, as God according to them has become flesh and has dwelled with them.⁹⁹ They even allowed later, the worship of not only the cross, but also images of Saints, etc.

It is only with the Muslims, that we find that wholehearted acceptance of abstract thought and the rejection of any forms of representation or images when it comes to the practice of religion.

The other part of 'homo religiosus' according to al-Bīrūnī, comprises of the common people. The 'popular mind', he declares, 'leans towards the sensible world, and has an aversion to the world of abstract thought.....'¹⁰⁰ Then he said ^{that it is} /due to this inclination of the second group towards the concrete and the tangible that, the 'Khassah' deviated and exploited them so as to continue enjoying the loyalty of their followers by giving imagery and allowing images and representations of gods in houses of worship and in books. Al-Bīrūnī did not exempt the Muslims from the possibility of acting in a similar way. He opined that if there were to be images or pictures of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) or the Ka'bah in Makkah, and that will be placed before the uneducated Muslims of al-Biruni's time, their reaction to that will be very similar to when they see the real thing.¹⁰¹ So with the representations taking the place of idols, due to the passage of time, and the ignorance of the later generations of the origin of that veneration, the matter deteriorates to real worship of these images. Moreover, the religious legal experts make it obligatory on them to venerate them.¹⁰²

It is interesting to note that al-Bīrūnī was aware of the controversy on what was the origin of religion, and of the two main opinions in the issue. The first being that of

99 John 1: 14.

100 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, P. 111.

101 ibid.

102 ibid., p. 112.

the overwhelming followers of revealed religions, that religion started with worship of the only True God (al-Tauhid). It was later as we have just seen above that images were made of the abstract form of religion, that later became full-fledged worship of several 'gods'. The second opinion puts the matter the other way round. Al-Bīrūnī says regarding this: "Some people even pretend to know that all mankind, before God sent them His prophets, were one large idolatrous body." ¹⁰³

In the Quran, Allah says:

"Mankind was one single nation. And Allah sent messengers with glad tidings and warning, and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed....." ¹⁰⁴.

Majority of scholars of Tafsir say that, it means, mankind were initially one nation on the same religion of truth, which came to the first man, Adam (P.B.U.H.), but then they differed among themselves, some believed and others disbelieved, so Allah sent Messengers giving glad tidings of Allah's paradise and warning of His punishment. ¹⁰⁵ Although a second opinion was attributed to Ibn Abbas, that mankind were first on disbelief, it has been described by Ibn Kathir as unsound, ¹⁰⁶ and it has not been mentioned by al-Tabari, he even strongly rejected anything like it. What is more acceptable is that, religion originates from God, the sole object of worship and veneration. God did guide mankind from the first day, and man was not left to grope in the dark, without any Divine light. Allah told us in the Quran of His promised guidance, from the very moment He was sending mankind to live on this planet. ¹⁰⁷ Another thing that supports this view, is the conversation of the members of the first human family mentioned in the Quran, which shows clearly, that they have clear concepts of the overall Lordship of Allah over the entire universe; of the fear of Allah;

103 ibid., p. 112

104 Surah al-Baqarah: 213

105 Tafsir al-Tabari (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif N.D.), vol. 4, pp. 275-280.

106 Tafsir Ibn Kathir, (Lahore: Amjad Academy, 1982) vol. I, p. 250.

107 See for instance Surah al-Baqarah: 38.

of reward and punishment in the next life. And these are the main components of religion of al-Tauhid.¹⁰⁸

Al-Bīrūnī, in his study of idolatry mentioned the names of those believed to have initiated it, in various traditions. These are Serugh, the great-grand father of Ibrahim (P.B.U.H.) according to the present Torah; Romulus, according to the Romans; as for the Hindus, they claim it is the command of their Lord – Vishnu to King Ambarisha.¹⁰⁹

Al-Bīrūnī also discovered a general tendency of the priesthood to maintain their positions in the eyes of their followers by enthralling them in perpetual servitude and dependence on them, for their religious salvation. This leads these priests into 'preconcerted tricks' to reach their ends.¹¹⁰ They also exploit the weak-minded nature of the common people, in imposing on them certain things, like the veneration of the idols, etc.¹¹¹ It is a well-known fact today, that the exploitation of the priesthood towards their followers, exists in many religions, to the extent of the sale of indulgences in the medieval Christendom.

Another important theory of al-Bīrūnī in his study of religion, is what he saw as a universal worship and veneration of fire from time immemorial. He stated that fire has been worshipped since the sojourn of man on earth, when it used to consume sacrifices (accepted by God). Possibly referring to the story of Qabil and Habil mentioned in Surah al-Ma'idah: 27-31. It was since then, that fire was venerated; not only by the Hindus, but also by all nations – with the exception of Islam. Their worship of other things did not distract them from it.¹¹² The universal religious use of fire in cult, myth etc. has been confirmed by modern scholarship.¹¹³ The Indian god – Agni, is a god of fire, who is second only to Indra in terms of the number of hymns praising him, in the Rig-Veda.¹¹⁴

108 Surah al-Ma'idah: 27-31.

109 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 112-115.

110 ibid., vol. I, p. 123.

111 ibid., vol. I, p. 112.

112 ibid., vol. II, p. 131.

113 Eliade, M., (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 5, pp. 340-341.

On the sociology of religion, al-Bīrūnī discovered that a country or a society will be difficult to administer, if the members of that society profess different religions. This according to him, constitutes the greatest hurdle, due to the antagonistic and inimical relationship that will exist in that society, which is evident from observation. He said it is known of the Jews that they eliminate their opponents, while believing that, that act brings 'them closer to God.' The Romans enslave anyone who is not their co-religionist; or that person will be rejected and denied his rights, due to his being a foreigner and a stranger, in that religious community. He may be leveled with all kinds of accusations, that may incur on him the worst kind of suffering just because of his faith.¹¹⁴ On the contrary, if the whole nation is united under the umbrella of one religion, i.e. Islam, which spread and took control of almost the whole of the then known world, that will bring a feeling of universal bond of unity and love created only by Allah,¹¹⁵ in the society. When that happened, only few criminals will remain as a problem, and they can easily be controlled and contained. The followers of other religions, who remained in their religions, will fear the power of the Islamic rulership and will live in peace, and in good terms with the all the rest. This is the only way to real and universal peace mankind have been seeking for, throughout the ages.

Al-Bīrūnī also employed the philological method, by means of which he made startling revelations as regards the meaning of words and some conceptions in different religions. He found that the Greeks, so also the people of other nations use the word 'god' for a number of things like, the First Cause (God), angels, souls – as the word stands for anything that is 'glorious and noble'.¹¹⁶ We find similar usage in the Old Testament, especially. This can explain to us why al-Bīrūnī declared that the 'devas' in Hinduism are the angels. He called Indra, the prince of the angels.¹¹⁷ Is he the equivalent of Archangel Jibril (P.B.U.H.)? Al-Bīrūnī equally found that some religious notions found in some religions, are believed to be offensive in others. He gave the

114 Al-Bīrūnī's Kitab Tahdīd Nihāyat al-Amākin...op. cit. p. 214.

115 Surah al-Anfal : 63.

116 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 35-37.

117 ibid., vol. I, pp. 111-113.

example of apotheosis * which is repugnant to the Muslims.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the concepts of Father and Son as regards Divine – Human relations, is equally rejected in Islam, because of what follows that, in terms of parentage and birth, and so on, bordering on anthropomorphism.¹¹⁸

Another subtle discovery of al-Bīrūnī, in the religious significance of words, is that 'Allah' is used in Arabic as the exclusive name of God, it cannot be used for any other thing. But the corresponding word to it in Hebrew and Syriac, the two languages in which earlier revelations before the Quran, were revealed, is 'Rabb'. It is such that... 'it cannot in a genitive construction be applied to anybody besides God...', which is not the case in Arabic, as we have 'rabb' of the house, or of the property, etc. On the other hand, the word that seems similar to 'Ilah' in construction is 'Eloah' in Hebrew, which in its usage, is similar to the word 'Rabb' in Arabic. It can be applied to other than God.¹¹⁹ This point of language, may explain a lot of misunderstandings, between the followers of the 'Abrahamic religions' (in the sense that they affiliate themselves to him), on the significance of words like God, Lord, Father, Son of God, children of God etc. as used in scriptures. But this will require a place other than this. Some other discoveries of al-Bīrūnī in the realm of religion include: his discovery of the existence of numerous and conflicting Torahs and likewise for the Gospels, despite conflicting claims as to the correct Torah and correct Gospel. Because of this, he said, all must be doubted. He said after explaining the existence of different Torahs and some of the contradictions in them: "Now, if such is the diversity of opinions, as we have described, and if there is no possibility of distinguishing by means of analogy – between truth and fiction, where is the student to search for exact information?"¹²⁰

He continued "Not only does the Torah exist in several and different copies, but something similar is the case with the Gospel too."¹²⁰

118 ibid., vol. 1, pp. 36-38.

119 ibid., vol. 1, pp. 36-37.

120 The Chronology..., op. cit. p. 25.

* It means making a human being god, or to become a god.

He also added, "The reports, contained in these four copies (four Gospels)... differ very widely the one from the other."¹²⁰

He mentioned apart from these four Gospels, the Gospel of Marcion, Bardesanes and that of the Manichaeans, and then he concluded: "...that among the Gospels there are no books of the prophets to be found, on which you may with good faith rely."¹²¹

From all of the above, we can see al-Bīrūnī's position in the field of Biblical Criticism. Although he did not devote a particular work to that, his contributions in it are significant. Another aspect of his criticism of these earlier revelations as they are found in his days, was in their denial of and dubious interpretations of the texts referring to the advent of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.). At one time he said, after interpreting a text (Deut 33:2): "He who refuses to accept this interpretation, for which all evidence has born testimony – is required to prove what kinds of mistakes there are in it."¹²² At the end of that study, al-Bīrūnī was, without any doubt ^{convinced of} the corruption of their Books, he concluded: "All they have brought forward (in interpreting the prophecies), and all we are going to propound, is a decisive proof, and a clear argument, showing that the words in the Holy Books have been altered from their proper meanings, and that the text has undergone modifications contrary to its original condition."¹²² The bulk of the material found in al-Bīrūnī's works on theories and discoveries in the study of religion is overwhelming. Therefore, we will mention some other aspects of it, briefly as follows:

- a. Al-Bīrūnī have mentioned in his Kitab Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., what seems to be the main constituents of the evolutionary theory, expounded much later by Charles Darwin. Al-Bīrūnī's idea was based on the nature's selection of species where some members are eliminated and others were left for the survival of that species, for instance, in wars in the case of man, when many people perish in order to give room to others to live. He started his discussions on that

121 ibid., p. 27.

122 ibid., p. 23.

by indicating

that the life of the world depends on the growing of food and procreation and

b. both increase unlimitedly while the world is limited! ¹²³ *It was mentioned by al-Biruni that certain week-days are venerated in all religions either because it is the day when the religion's founder, for instance, made a triumphant entry to the main city of his mission, or due to its being the day of his resurrection; or it may be venerated, because it is believed to be, the day God finished His creation, like Saturday (Sabbath) of the Jews or Friday according to some narrations of the Muslims like the one narrated by Muslim in his collection; ¹²⁴ or that day(s) may be celebrated because the horoscopes of their prophets and the constellations indicative of their coming stood under the influence of the planets that reign over these respective days. ¹²⁵*

c. Al-Biruni due to his study of the 'homo religiosus', and his awareness of the possibility of mis-contruing any statement of religion, containing the least of ambiguity, categorically advise religious scholars, that every "religious sentence destined for the people at large must be carefully worded...." ¹²⁶, otherwise a lot of misunderstandings and misrepresentations may result, due to the unscrupulous use of words, and the tendency to give them different interpretations.

d. He also discovered that, of all religions, three of them stress the use of the word, 'mystery'. They are the Hindus, the Sabians of Harran and the dualistic Manichaeans. Al-Biruni mentioned that the word, as mentioned in a passage quoted from Plato's 'Book of Laws' meant a special kind of devotion. ¹²⁷ This may be a kind of occult practices which are peculiar to these traditions. As far as the Hindus are concerned, al-Biruni made a lot of revelations on their religious life. Some of the important findings are:

123 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 400-401.

124 Tafsir Ibn Kathir (Cairo: Maktabah al-Istiqlamah, 1956), vol. 4, p. 93-94. See Sahih Muslim, Kitab Sifat al-Munafiqin, Hadith No.27 and also Musnad al-Imam Ahmad, vol. II, P.327.

125 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 308.

126 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 31-32.

127 ibid., vol. I, p. 123.

- 1- That as the 'Good Word' (al-Kalimah al-Tayyibah)– 'There is no deity except Allah' is the hallmark of Islam, transmigration of soul is the hallmark of Hinduism and '...he who does not believe in it, does not belong to them, and is not reckoned as one of them.'¹²⁸ This may be particularly in al-Bīrūnī's time, because some different situation obtains today. Most scholars in modern times found it difficult to point to one specific belief or practice of the Hindus as the hallmark of that religion.¹²⁸
2. The Hindus, like the pagan Arabs and the Greeks take idols as mediators between them and God. Even though it is mostly the ignorant who fall into it, but it is maintained by means of the pre-concerted tricks of the priests.¹²⁹ But those "who study philosophy and theology are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent him".¹³⁰ They abhor anthropomorphism and other crude conceptions of God.
3. Al-Bīrūnī pointed to the opinion that, the Hindus believe matter to be eternal. 'Therefore, they do not, by the word 'creation' understand a formation of something out of nothing'¹³¹. If this is their belief, it takes them a bit far away from the revealed religions and this seems contrary to their claim of possession revelation. In revealed religions, it is generally believed that matter has a beginning, and was created by God. As it is also believed in these religions that, God created the universe out of nothing. The view of the Hindus above is the view of the Greek philosophers in this matter.
4. The Hindus, according to al-Bīrūnī, believe that, in the two places of reward and punishment, man exists 'as an incorporeal being' and that 'the soul exists in

¹²⁸ ibid., p. 50. cp. Bleeker, C. J. and Widengren, G. (eds.) Historia Religionum, Handbook for The History of Religions, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) vol. II, pp. 238-239.

¹²⁹ Ibid., vol. I, pp. 122-123.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 113, cp. p. 39.

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 321-322.

these two places without a body'.¹³² Again their belief in resurrection and the reward or punishment, in the next life is spiritual only i.e. they do not believe in bodily resurrection, like the philosophers of Greece.

5. Sociologically, al-Bīrūnī found that the Hindus have two kinds of customs: those originating from the society, they are explored and investigated and then adopted or abandoned accordingly. The other customs and usages have a backing of some religious command. These are more powerful, and are left as they are, not inquired into, or investigated and they are adhered to by the majority simply on trust. The Hindus do not argue over these issues.

A very good example of the latter is the caste system. This order has a strong backing in the religion of the Hindus as this text from Saunaka clearly reveals:

"I do that to him only for this purpose that the equality between men, which he desires to realise, shall be done away with, that men shall be different in their conditions of life, and that on this difference the order of the world is to be based..."¹³³ This explains to us why that order, with all that it entails, in preventing some people from soaring high, and reaching zenith of human achievements, despite their being endowed by God, with perfect human faculties, is still persisting and is being preserved by the Hindu society. One wonders at the magnitude of loss, a society suffers, when a large part of it, is not given the chance to exercise all their latent powers, talents and capabilities on the simple pretext of the 'crime of their births!'

This issue of inequality of men in Hinduism is the direct opposite of the teachings of Islam. Al-Bīrūnī saw it as 'the widest gulf between us and them'.¹³⁴

Al-Bīrūnī in his study of religion made some discoveries concerning Christianity also like, his rejection, as an astronomer and a chronologist, of the Christian claim that, Jesus was born on the 25th of December. They claim that it was a Thursday. On this al-Bīrūnī said, "Most people believe that, this Thursday was the 25th, but that is a mistake, it was the 26th. If any body wants to make the calculation for this year... he

132 ibid., pp. 62-63.

133 ibid., vol. II, p. 145.

134 ibid., vol. I, pp. 19-20.

may do so.”¹³⁵ Al-Bīrūnī also reveals that there is no original legislation in Christianity. It was the Fathers, a well venerated title, he stated, who derived the laws and then developed them, from the sayings of Messiah and their apostles.¹³⁶ Al-Bīrūnī believes that the Christians are too prone “ to accept and to give credit to such things (miraculous tales, like the ones, they narrated of Antonius Martyr, – (believed to be Abu-Ruh, the cousin of Harun al-Rashid), which are unheard and unread by Muslims), more particularly if they relate to their creeds, not at all endeavouring by the means at their disposal to criticise historical traditions, and to find out the truth of bygone times.”¹³⁷

Al-Bīrūnī started his chapter on ‘Punishments and Expiation’ in Kitab al-Hind, by extolling Christian ethics of virtue and abstinence from wickedness, only to turn round and criticise it, in its demanding of everyone to be a philosopher, who is being the only likely person to apply it. After mentioning the Christian command of turning the other cheek to the one who has slapped a person on the one cheek, and to give the shirt to the one who has taken the coat, he said, ‘Upon my life, this is a noble philosophy; but the people of the world are not all philosophers. Most of them are ignorant and erring, who cannot be kept on the straight path save by the sword and the whip.’¹³⁸

From the preceding pages, we can see what quantity of material al-Bīrūnī has gathered in his study of religion, despite the fact that, we gave only some examples. His vast erudition, and interaction and exposure to the followers of other religions gave him the rare opportunity to obtain first hand knowledge on their religions, their interpretation, application and so on, especially in those times, when that is not as easy as it is in our days. It is also evident from al-Bīrūnī’s theories and discoveries that, as he studies anything, he tries to compare it with similar things he has seen or read, and this is what makes him give some general statements sometimes. Over and above all, al-Bīrūnī used his scientific mind to analyse issues related to religion and the ‘homo religiosus’.

135 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 287.

136 ibid.

137 ibid., pp. 287-288.

138 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. II, p. 161.

E- Al-Bīrūnī and the Comparative Method in the study of Religion:

Unlike what we saw in the previous chapter, of al-Āmirī's open and declared comparison of the major religions of the then world, and in particular and specified themes, the case of al-Bīrūnī slightly differs. Al-Bīrūnī did not compare religions in selected themes with the purpose of say, proving the superiority of Islam over other religions, except spontaneously and in unlimited cases, as al-Āmirī did. Yet we find some kind of comparison or the other, when we go through this works. What he did was that, in the course of his study of some religious phenomenon, if he finds any similarity in any aspect of it, in another phenomena found in another religion, he immediately points to it. This he believes, will facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon in question, and may lead to some idea of how the religious realm operates. Al-Bīrūnī was quite aware of the possibility of the human mind operating independently, but in a similar way, in the different parts of the world, and possibly arriving at the same conclusion. This may be seen as expressed implicitly, in al-Bīrūnī's comparison of the Hindu philosophical exposition of their religion with the Greeks'. The only reason for the comparison, stated by al-Bīrūnī was the similarity he finds in the two. He did not try to show that one religion has taken from the other, or that one originated from the other, even if that has happened very long ago, except in very general and indefinite sense. But if we are to search seriously for the *raison d'être* for this specified and limited comparison, and with these particular groups, we will have some understanding of al-Bīrūnī's comparative method and its purpose.

First we cite the statement of al-Bīrūnī in his Kitab al-Hind, where comparison has been mention. In Sachau's translation quoted earlier, al-Bīrūnī's words have been rendered thus: "My book is nothing but simple historic 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"¹³⁹ This is the method of al-Bīrūnī as explained in his 'India'. But is it only mere similarity, or is there anything that calls for al-Bīrūnī's comparison of Hindu ideas with those of the Greeks? Why not his religion but the Greeks? Al-Biruni continued, as if expecting above inquiries: "For the Greek philosophers, although

139 Alberuni's India, op. India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 7

aiming at truth in the abstract, never in all questions of popular bearing rise much above the customary symbolical expressions and tenets of their religious law. Besides Greek ideas we shall only now and then mention those of the Sufis or of some one or other Christian sect, because in their notions regarding the transmigration of souls and the pantheistic doctrine of the unity of God with creation there is much in common between these systems."¹⁴⁰ The picture is clearer now. Al-Bīrūnī compares the Hindu doctrines and ideas, being the main focus of his study, with not only those of Greeks, but also the ideas of the Sufis and some of sects of the Christians. It seems al-Bīrūnī sees that to be due to an unexplained phenomenon observed, in the similarity of their doctrines of the transmigration of the soul, and the doctrine of 'wahdat al-wujud' or the pantheistic unity of God with creation. As if he intends, with his study in his India, to find out the explanation and the reason for that resemblance.

As is well-known in the modern study of religion, especially in the first fifty years of this science, the focus of investigation has primarily been on the similarities and differences to be found while comparing religions. The similarities/resemblances, as Radhakrishnan explains in his Hibbert lectures of 1929, are investigated so as to see whether they "are superficial or deep rooted. Are the agreements due to suggestions arising from historical contact, or are they derived from certain common types of experience....?"¹⁴¹ He believes, and it seems al-Bīrūnī also did, that this kind of study of parallels and analogies, broadens one's vision and provides him wider understanding of the religious phenomena.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that in al-Bīrūnī's India, his main focus of study is the Indian religions which he compares with similar doctrines from the Greeks and the Sufis' ideas, and on some occasions, of one or the other sect of the Christians. So we can safely say that, we expect to see in 'India' a mention, however little, of the above mentioned religious systems. It is pertinent to point here that, al-Bīrūnī in his discourse, has mentioned also the Jews, the Zoroastrians, the Manichaeans, the Buddhists, and the Jahili Arabs and their religious traditions, here and there. These

140 ibid., vol. I, pp. 7-8 (with some alteration).

141 Radhakrishnan, S., East and West in Religion, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958) 4th imp, pp. 36-37

other religions were amply studied by al-Bīrūnī in his other works especially, in his al-Athar al-Baqiyah.... and possibly in his Kitab al-Maqālāt... We would like here to give some brief remarks on the religions compared by al-Bīrūnī, and at the same time, speculate on the reason why they were chosen by him.

I- The Religions Compared:

As we have explained in the previous chapter the religions compared by al-Āmirī, we will give here, a brief note on the religions compared by al-Bīrūnī other than the ones introduced in the last chapter. As al-Bīrūnī's is not an all-out thematic comparison, we will mention only the major systems outlined by him. These religious traditions will then turn out to be, the Greek, the Hindu and the Sufi. But it must also be stated here, that as al-Bīrūnī was not ready to compare Islam, being the Truth, with other religions, he chose to compare the ideas of Sufis being Muslims, but with some remote interpretations and innovations, with the other systems being compared.

1- Hindu Religion: The major tradition in al-Bīrūnī's study of other religions is Hinduism or the religion of the Hindus. To discover the essence of that religion and know its adherents, so as to present that to his own people, was the reason why he wrote his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind... The Hindu religion or Hinduism, as is generally known today, to the students of religion, is not one limited religious tradition like say, Islam, with its specific revelation, prophet, doctrines and specified religious observance. In fact, it tends to be identified with the religious experience of the people of the Indian sub-continent, from pre-historic times to the present day. Even though presented or projected as one religion, it is in fact a number of religions put together in all this long period.¹⁴² It is being professed today, or so it seems, by nearly 600 million people or over 80% of the total population of India alone.¹⁴³ The Indian people, especially, at the time of al-Bīrūnī constitute an entirely different people from the Muslim. In fact the difference was considered by him to be very profound and deep. He said in his

142 Hiltebeitel, A (art) 'Hinduism' The Encyclopedia of Religion (ed.) Eliade, M., op. cit. vol. 6, pp. 336-342.

143 Robinson Francis, et. al. (ed.) The Cambridge Encyclopedia of India (Cambridge: University press, 1989), p.45.

'India', ".... they totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa all their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them, against all foreigners. They call them Mleccha, i.e. impure, and forbid having any connection with them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship, because thereby, they think they would be polluted." ¹⁴⁴ Despite this attitude towards a non-Hindu, al-Bīrūnī as is clear in his lamentations, tolerated and learnt from them, what we have today in his works. One very clear feature of that religion is the conspicuous idolatry of its people. With their myriad of deities and their intense devotion to them, this depicts the Indian people to be 'rather excessively obsessed with religion'.¹⁴⁵

Being al-Bīrūnī's main area of research, he studied all aspects of that religious tradition, indicating the variations that exist therein. He studied their doctrines about God, the universe, eschatology, law, literature, science, geography, mathematics, astronomy and customs. It is in the course of this study that al-Bīrūnī compared this with other traditions in his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind....

2- The Greek Religion: - The Greek religion according to Adkins in Historia Religionum * 'was a phenomenon far different from the religions (generally known). It has no founder, no limited corpus of sacred books, no creed (and hence no orthodoxy and heresies), and no means of assuring that its adherents observe its tenets.'¹⁴⁶ Hinduism was presented with a very similar feature in the same work. It has no founder, no particular book is considered 'as its absolutely authoritative scripture. It does not also insist on any religious observance as essential, no any specific moral code, etc.'¹⁴⁷ The similarities are striking. The Greek religion constitutes, therefore, the Greek peoples' different beliefs about gods, how man is related to them, their relation

144 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol., I, pp. 19-20.

145 Bleeker, C.J. and Widengren, G. (eds.), Historia Religionum, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) vol. II, p. 237.

146 Historia Religionum, op. cit. vol., I, p. 377

* This work represents the result of the scientific and historical study of various religions, presented objectively by experts in the field of History of Religions or Comparative Religion.

to the universe, and the various ways men thought they should be worshipped, including the different conceptions of the afterlife and rewards and punishment, etc. Al-Bīrūnī, in his study of Greek philosophy had a good conception of their ideas in these areas. He noticed the resemblance between their religion and what he found in India. This is what led him to compare the two traditions.¹⁴⁸

On the similarities between the two traditions, even modern scholars have confirmed that. Radhakrishnan, quoted before, has this to say: "The Olympian religion of the Greeks and Vedic beliefs had a common background. There is also striking similarity between the social life described in Homeric poems and that of the Veda. Both are patriarchal and tribal. These agreements indicate that the two people must have been in close contact at some early period, but neither possessed any recollection of those times...."¹⁴⁹

From the similarity, the writer has gone to speculate that there was some sort of 'close contact' which however, both the people cannot recall, and he went on to prove his case by means of various evidences and arguments.¹⁵⁰

On the similarity on the doctrinal plane pointed to by al-Bīrūnī, in anthropomorphic conceptions of God, one modern authority on Greek religion says:

"Of the Hellenic religion, no feature is so salient as its anthropomorphism, and throughout its whole development and career, the anthropomorphic principle has been dominating and imperious than it has ever been found to be in other religions."¹⁵¹

147 ibid., vol., II, p.237

148 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 7 and p. 24. See Magasthenes and his India on the same similarity, as indicated by Sharpe, E. J. Comparative Religion, A History, (New York: Charles Scribne's, 1975), p. 4

149 Radhakrishnam, S., Eastern Religions and Western Thought, (London: Oxford University, 1959), pp. 118-119

150 ibid., pp. 119-152! cp. with our unpublished M. A. Thesis on The Doctrine of God: A Comparative Study of Hinduism and Christianity, (I.I.U, 1993), pp. 7-17

151 Farnell, Greece and Babylon, 1911, p. 11, as quoted by Radhakrishnan, East and West in Religion, op. cit. p. 50

We find in the works of experts on Greek religion today, the same themes mentioned and compared with the Hindu religion by al-Bīrūnī, like transmigration of souls, the different periods of the universe, eschatology, anthropomorphism etc.¹⁵²

This similarity is one aspect of the reason why al-Bīrūnī decided to compare Hindu ideas with those of the Greeks. Other factors that might have warranted that comparison in our view, are as follows:

- a. Al-Bīrūnī implicitly pointed to another reason for the comparison, and that is, both are deviations from the Truth, and so will essentially be comparable and same.
- b. He also saw another kind of resemblance between the two traditions. Both are the results of the human efforts to understand the universe, which is different from the path of Truth, based on revelation. Here also there is but little difference when the two are taken into view.. For the Greeks have been able to arrive at some truth, because they aimed at it, and did not depend on popular superstitions as the Indians did.¹⁵³
- c. Another reason why al-Bīrūnī might have compared the two religions may be due to the similarity between the two systems, of being more philosophical than religious, in the sense he knew it. These two philosophical systems have been speculating on the metaphysics, and one of them (the Greek) was able to arrive at some part of the truth, which has to, still be supplemented or complimented by the real truth through revelation,¹⁵⁴ while the other was filled with superstitious and popular tales.

3- The Sufis (Muslim Mystics): The third tradition compared by al-Bīrūnī in his 'India' is that of the Sufis. Although it is not a completely different and independent religion apart from its mother tradition, Islam, in some of their ideas the

152 See Historia Religionum, op. cit. vol. I, p. 426, pp. 432ff and pp. 436-438.

153 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

154 Cp. Peters, F. E. (ed) 'Science, History and religion: Some Reflections on the India of Abu Reyhan al-Bīrūnī' Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume (Karachi: Hamdard National Foundation, 1973), p. 239.

Sufis resemble some non-Islamic traditions. In fact, scholars have identified two kinds of 'Tasawwuf' or Sufism,¹⁵⁵ viz., the 'Sunni Sufi' tradition which stresses on the ethical and moral teachings of the Quran and Sunnah and their spirituality, while avoiding any doctrine that is incompatible with them. It is characterised by intense devotion to Allah, through purification of the soul and constant remembrance of Allah and His worship. This is not the Sufism compared by al-Bīrūnī, with the Hindu thought.

The other kind of 'Tasawwuf' is called 'al-Tasawwuf al-falsafi' or philosophical Sufism. It is clear from the name, that it has relation with philosophy, and in fact with many other traditions in one way or the other, and in large or small measure.¹⁵⁶ Prominent among these other traditions are the Greek philosophy and Indian religious philosophy. As regards al-Biruni's comparison of Hindu ideas with those of the Sufis, he undoubtedly have this kind in his mind.

The orientalists have penchant for inventing theories to the effect that, not only its institutions, but Islam itself evolved from earlier religious or philosophical systems. Regarding Sufism, Zaehner opined that, Indian mysticism did influence Muslim mystics especially, through Abu Yazid al-Bistami, who had a teacher called Abu 'Ali al-Sindhi, who might have taught him Indian theories on mysticism.¹⁵⁷ Another famous orientalist who studied and wrote on Sufism a lot – Nicholson showed that there is a relation between Sufi ideas of 'fana' and 'baqa' with the Buddhist doctrine of 'Nirvana'.¹⁵⁸ It seems that this is only a figment of imagination unsubstantiated by enough evidence, and has therefore been rejected by scholars.¹⁵⁹ The apparent contradiction that appears above can easily be explained in the following words. The issue of similarity is clear

155 Al-Nashshar, A.S., Nash'ah al-fikr al-falsafi fi al-Islam (Dar al-Ma'arif, 1965) 3rd ed. P. 30.

156 ibid., pp. 28-30, cp., Omar, F., Tarikh al-fikr al-Arabi, (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijari, 1962), pp. 380-383.

157 Zaehner, R. C., Mysticism Sacred and Profane, (Oxford: Oxford University, 1957) pp. 161-164.

158 Nicholson, R. A., The Mystics of Islam, (London: Routledge and Kegal Paul, 1963), p. 16ff.

159 See Schimmel, A., Mystical Dimensions of Islam, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1957), pp. 47-48 and p. 345, cp. Rizvi, S. A. A., A History of Sufism In India, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986) vol. I, pp. 322-323, and Lawrence, B. B., (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism' Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, op. cit. p. 372.

and observable, while the idea of one system influencing the other, has to be proved beyond doubt, because the former may be there but not as a result of the latter.

As for the reason why al-Bīrūnī compared the Sufi ideas with the other systems, it seems, that was because he considered them also as having strayed from the path of truth, at least in those ideas mentioned. The existence in all the three systems, of the Hindus, the Greeks and the Sufis, of ideas of transmigration of soul and pantheism brings them into a closer relationship. It appears also that, al-Biruni considers the philosophical Sufis to form a philosophical movement, which has a lot to share with the Hindu and the Greek philosophies. This suspicion comes from al-Bīrūnī's explanation of the origin of the word 'Sufi' which he believes comes from 'Sophia' (wisdom). He said ".... the Sūfis, i.e. sages, for Sūf means in Greek wisdom (Sophia). Therefore a philosopher is called 'pailasopa' i.e. loving wisdom. When in Islam persons adopted something like the doctrines of these philosophers, they also adopted their name; but some people did not understand the meaning of the word, and erroneously combined it with the Arabic word 'Suffa'...."¹⁶⁰ Due to this connection he saw, al-Bīrūnī compared their ideas with those of the Hindus. The religion of Māni was also mentioned in many places, especially quotations from his Sifr al-Asrar (Book of Mysteries). Al-Bīrūnī offers a lot of information about that sect, as pertaining to their anthropomorphism, belief in transmigration of soul taken from India and their intrigues and machinations against Islam, being the zindiqs mentioned by scholars.¹⁶¹ The Sabians were also studied and

identified strictly on the basis of the evidences presented. This being one of the few studies identifying them.¹⁶² Judaism and Christianity were also studied and compared here and there. The only surprising fact is that Buddhism which is a great Indian religion, was mentioned but only briefly and perhaps the information was through a secondary source. Zoroastrianism also received a fair and critical mention. This may point to al-Bīrūnī's aversion to the religion of his fore fathers.

160 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 33-34

161 ibid., p. 48, 54-55, 264 etc. cp. The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 189-192.

162 The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 186-189.

In his comparative method, al-Bīrūnī was more concerned with parallels, which he gives more weight, than the differences. As a result of this we found that sometimes, the ideas compared have some problems in their resemblance to each other. For instance, when he compared the position of the earth and what holds it, from the statement of Aristotle and what comes from Vāyu-Purāna. According to the former, the earth is bounded by the water, the water by the air, the air by the fire, the fire by the ether¹⁶³. But in the Vāyu-Purāna, it runs, the earth is held by the water, the water by the pure fire, the fire by the wind, the wind by heaven.¹⁶³

Al-Bīrūnī and Comparison:

While going through al-Bīrūnī's writings, most especially his al-Athar al Baqiyah and Tahqiq ma li al-Hind, one has to appreciate his vast knowledge of the ideas of different nations, their cultures, religions and sciences. His great erudition has helped him in, and has formed part of his comparative method. It is evident that one who lacks a thing cannot offer it. If one wants to compare something or some idea in a particular tradition with similar ideas of other traditions, the knowledge of all the traditions or, at least, some of them became imperative. It is al-Bīrūnī's undisputed gift from Allah that, as alluded earlier, he knew the sciences of almost all the civilised nations of his world. That made him a great comparativist. Coupled with his interest in the religions of the world of his time, their scriptures, religious life and so on, his comprehensive knowledge of the issues he tackled complimented his method in comparing religious issues.

If we want to know the idea of al-Bīrūnī in his employing the comparative method, we have to see first, how he defined it and its significance in the scheme of things. At the beginning of his chapter on Hindu metrology in his India, he stated:

“Counting is innate to man. The measure of a thing becomes known by its being compared with another thing which belongs to the same species and is assumed as a unit by general consent. Thereby the difference between the object and this standard becomes known.”¹⁶⁴ If we are to substitute, the word ‘value’ for measure, in

163 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 232.

164 ibid., vol. . I , p. 160

the second sentence, then we have a clear-cut definition of comparison and its value in al-Bīrūnī's works. By implication, we can say that, we can know the value of a thing when we compare it with another that has been agreed upon as a standard. Although this is more in line with counting and numerology, comparison always brings out the hidden value or lack of it, of a thing, when it is held. The similarities become exposed, so also the differences. Comparison also reveals the relationship between something and another, which may not be apparent before the comparison.

In his study of religions, al-Bīrūnī did employ the comparative method and he shows the close relationship that exists especially between the Greek, the Hindu and Sufi thoughts, and particularly in the transmigration of soul and the unification of God with creation (pantheism),¹⁶⁵ through comparison.

He sometimes compares one religion with another single tradition, while at other times, he compares it with two or three or more traditions, depending on the issue at hand, as we will Insha Allah see in the second part of this chapter. It is also noteworthy to see that, al-Bīrūnī while comparing religions, goes out of his way to explain some points, analyse an issue or criticise the source of his information or the issue in question, and so on.

Themes Compared:

It is very difficult to pin point some particular themes as being the basis on which, al-Bīrūnī compared the religions he studied. The case of al-Āmirī was different, for he outlined the areas, and he tried to limit himself to them. In the case of al-Bīrūnī, it is one of the two cases. Either that in the course of his study of the Hindu religion, whether in their belief system or in their religious practices, he cites similar ideas from any of the religious traditions we have numbered above. It seems to be an impromptu comparison. And for a great sage like al-Bīrūnī, that is quite possible and easy. The themes in which al-Bīrūnī compares religions in this way, are the general themes found in any religious tradition, like the belief in God/god, eschatology, the spiritual beings, marriage laws, expiation, punishments, peculiar beliefs like the endless circles of births

165 ibid., p. 8

in one place, while in the other place, he mentioned only the Greek in the following words:

"The heathen Greeks, before the rise of Christianity, held much the same opinions as 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."³

So, that close relationship may be the reason why both the communities hold 'much the same opinions', according to al-Bīrūnī. The other aspect of the use of the comparative method known today, that of suggestion of some useful idea coming as a result of comparison, also has a place in al-Bīrūnī's application of it. In his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., apart from showing the relationship between the ideas of the two or more communities he is comparing, mostly implicitly, he added another reason or some useful feature to his comparison. That useful feature being, to dispel the strangeness of the Hindu traditions in the eyes of his readers, being mostly Muslims. He said: "If you compare these traditions (of the Hindus) with those of the Greeks regarding their own religion, you will cease to find the Hindu system strange."⁴ Al-Bīrūnī is here suggesting that, perhaps, as the Muslims of his time are well aware of the Greek people, whose philosophy many of them admire and extol, their other side – the religious, may be obscure to them. So in depicting them as having similar ideas and traditions as the 'strange' Hindu, he is subtly disproving the high praise of this people from some Muslims. Although, al-Bīrūnī has been pointing out that the said similarity and close relationship between the Hindu and the Greek systems, existed before the rise of the so-called 'seven pillars of wisdom' among the Greek,⁵ there is a reason to think that he does not rate them, as high as other Muslim philosophers do. His frequent criticism of

3 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 24.

4 ibid., vol. I, p. 95.

5 ibid., vol. I, p. 33.

Aristotle in some issues, coupled with his correspondence with Ibn Sina regarding other issues, all do suggest the likelihood of what we opined.⁶

Another important aspect of al-Bīrūnī's concept of the comparative method is the issue of objectivity, with all the difficulty it entails, even in today's scholarship.⁷ He set out to study other cultures, religions, calendars of religious festivals, etc. as in al-Athar al-Baqiyah...., but "making their opinions a basis", not as he says, by "way of ratiocination with philosophical notions, or of inductions based upon the observations of our senses..."⁸ For according to him that will not give the desired result, ^{as} we frequently find in Western study, especially, of Islam. About thirty years later, when he compiled his work on India, he declared that he is sticking to the same method, as he is confronted here with an 'other' culture and religion, and as he knows that that is the only right way to do it. He wrote: "My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are...."⁹

As Smart has pointed out in his article on this method, the comparative study of religion which aims at being 'as objective as possible about the nature and power of religion' and which relates 'religion's actual influence and effects within the world of human history', has a forceful rationale.¹⁰ This is the way al-Bīrūnī chose to study religions. The comments of the editor and translator of his works (Sachau) on the point of al-Bīrūnī's objectivity is biased, to say the least.¹¹ There is nothing like the establishment of Muhammadan orthodoxy by anyone other than the prophet himself, and to say that this kind of study of other religions can be done in Islam, only in some periods, and by people with 'liberality of mind', is to deny all what historical

6 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 247, cp. Nasr, S. H. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī As Philosopher' Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, op. cit. pp. 401-402.

7 See Smart, N., (art) 'Comparative – Historical Method', The Encyclopedia of Religion, Eliade, M. (ed), op. cit. vol. 3, p. 572.

8 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 3.

9 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 7, cp. P. 24.

10 Smart, N. (art) 'Comparative Historical Method', op. cit. vol. 3, p. 572.

11 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. II, p. 250.

documents have confirmed on the freedom enjoyed by non-Muslim subjects of Islamic state, from the first day of its establishment. Al-Bīrūnī himself has quoted al-Transhahri and his work on religions, while praising his objectivity.¹² This issue should be viewed within the general attitude of Islam towards other religions, especially those not fighting or undermining the Islamic state, and also within the framework of Muslim scholarship when it treats other cultures and nations.

The objectivity of al-Bīrūnī in his study of religion in our view is part of his love for the truth, which he eulogises in the preface to his India, at length.¹³

Another important aspect of al-Bīrūnī's concept of the comparative method, which we see as a deviation from his earlier statements, outlining the method which he wanted to impose on himself, is his judgements against some Hindu beliefs and practices, and his seeing in that the superiority of Islam over all other systems. When he mentioned the different kinds of marriage found in the Hindu, Arab, and Iranian societies, as if fearing censure, from some Muslims, that he is promoting promiscuity, he concluded that, he mentioned these unnatural kinds of marriage, so that the reader (as we said earlier, being mostly, the muslims).. "may learn by the comparative treatment of the subject how much superior the institutions of Islam are, and how much more plainly this contrast brings out all customs and usages differing from those of Islam, in their essential foulness."¹⁴ This is a clear judgement against these practices, which he said in the beginning, he is not going to give. The proponents of the modern agnostic method of the study of religion, will easily say in defence of those practices that they appear unnatural and foul to al-Bīrūnī, but not so to the people who practice them. More examples of this kind of comparison will be mentioned when we come to show al-Bīrūnī's application of the comparative method, Allah willing.

According to al-Bīrūnī's practice in his works, three kinds of comparison can be seen:

12 ibid., vol. I, pp. 6-7.

13 ibid., vol. I, pp.3-5.

14 ibid., vol. I, pp. 108-110. cp. pp. 185-186.

One is when he compare two traditions, mostly the Hindu and the Greek, as they share more common grounds than others. There are numerous examples of this, like the description of God in negative attributes only, as He is too high to be approached.¹⁵ Another example is that of the Brahmanda (egg of Brahma) compared to a Greek parallel.¹⁶ Another form of this kind of comparison is when he saw that, what one religion says in an aspect of religion consisting of many parts, is similar to what the other one religion says on that aspect, and all that relate to it. An example of this is when he compared Sabians with the Muslims on all issues related to women and the penal law. He also compared the Sabians with the Jews on the rules pertaining to 'pollution caused by touching dead bodies etc.'¹⁷

Two - The other kind of comparison carried out by al-Bīrūnī is that of more than two traditions, of either three or four or more. The more frequent examples here are where he compares the Hindu doctrines or practices with those of the Greeks and the Sufis. This, as suggested earlier may be due to some underlying unity he discovered among them, at least in metempsychosis and union with God or the First Cause.¹⁸

Three – The third kind of comparison is when al-Bīrūnī recognises the existence of an issue in all or most of the religions known to him. This may be a discovery as a result of study of many religions. He stated for example, the veneration of fire by different nations so also setting aside some days for religious festivals etc.¹⁹ The statements of al-Bīrūnī on the worship of fire seem to be very authoritative, and he quoted one Bashshar Ibn Burd (a poet considered a heretic during the time of caliph al-Mahdi), who said that "Since there is fire, it is worshipped"²⁰ Al-Bīrūnī's startling discovery is presented thus: ".....the Hindus highly venerate the fire, and offer flowers to it. It is the same case with all other nations. They always thought that the sacrifice

15 Ibid., vol. I, p. 123.

16 ibid., vol. I, pp. 222-223.

17 See The Chronology, p. 188.

18 See ibid. vol. I, pp. 33-34 and p. 40, see also pp. 70-71 etc.

19 ibid., vol. II, p. 185 and p. 131.

was accepted by the deity if the fire came down upon it, and no other worship has been able to draw them away from it.....”¹⁹

Some Special Features of al-Bīrūnī's Comparative Method

It is very clear from even a cursory look of al-Bīrūnī's works, that he seems to be more interested in the similarities that he observed in the religious phenomena he studies. This is not to do full justice to the phenomena being compared, because of what we know today, that even if a religious theme occurs in two different religions, there is 'a different contextual meaning in each'. For instance the prayer al-Bīrūnī took as a theme across the board of religion means different things to different religious groups.²¹ The prayer in Islam, for example, refers particularly to 'Salah' and its well-known form and stages. When we compare this with the prayer in the Christian context, we find that the resemblance may be only in name, and partly in objective. Prayer in its simplest and most primitive form has been defined by Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics as: "the expression of a desire, cast in the form of a request, to influence same force or power conceived as super-natural."²² This resembles 'du'ah' or supplication in Islam. Prayer is more than 'du'ah', but it contains it. It is an intercourse with God, by means of His praise, showing humility, supplication, recitation, conforming to particular postures, etc. In the context of Christianity, although prayer has been defined 'as any intercourse of a human soul with God', and 'the communion of the human soul with God,'²³ it is clear that it mostly involves what resembles Islamic du'ah – an entreaty or petition, but not really resembling the numerous parts of Islamic Salah.²³

20 ibid., vol. II, p. 131.

21 See al-Bīrūnī, Ifrad al-Maqāl fi Amr al-Dhilāl, in Rasā'il al-Bīrūnī, (Hyderabad: Dairah al-Ma'arif al-Uthmaniyyah, 1948) p. 160 and pp. 174-175, where even the number of the units (rak'ah) of each prayer were mentioned by al-Bīrūnī.

22 D' Arcy, C. F. (art) 'Prayer (Christian, Theological)', Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (ed.) Hastings, J., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1956) 4th imp. vol. 10, p. 171.

23 Woolley, R. M. (art) 'Prayer (Christian, Liturgical)', Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 10, p. 177, cp. Gill, S.D. (art) 'Prayer' The Encyclopedia of Religion (ed.) Eliade M., op. cit. vol. II, pp. 490-491.

From the above discussions, it becomes obvious, that mere search for similarities and resemblances, may not be enough evidence that such act or belief is the same in two or more religions. It happens that atimes, the similarity between two acts from different religions may be at the expense of the difference, which may in reality be almost completely different from each other. For example when al-Bīrūnī depicted the élites among the Hindus as 'pure monotheists or acceptors of 'Tauhid', he did not point to the difference that may be in their Tauhid and that of the Muslims. We, in our humble opinion, think that, this is similar to the Western writers' claim that Judaism and Christianity are also monotheistic as Islam. Another example of this kind of comparison is where al-Bīrūnī compares the duties of the Hindu heirs towards the soul of the deceased, with what he perceives to be similar to it in the Phaedo of Plato. He says: "..... the heirs must make, above the door of the house, something like a shelf projecting from the wall in the open air, on which they have everyday to place a dish of something cooked and a vessel of water, till the end of ten days after the death."²⁴ The reason for this daily act, they thought is because it is possible that '...the spirit of the deceased has not yet found its rest, but moves still to and fro around the house, hungry and thirsty!'¹⁹¹ So, the reason why the Hindus place food and water, from the above, is because it is possible that the soul is within the vicinity of the house, not having found rest and so, may be in need of food and water. Al-Bīrūnī compares this belief with what Plato says in the Phaedo regarding 'the soul circling round the graves, because possibly it still retains some vestiges of the love for the body.'²⁵ The only similarity between these two narrations is on the periphery – only in the soul of the deceased moving around. The place of the movement, its purpose, the act performed and even the real essence of the two beliefs are different in the two cases, as we can easily recognise.

Another special feature of al-Bīrūnī's comparative method is that, in the course of comparing an element of one religion with that of another religion, he sometimes

24 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. II, pp. 165-166.

25 ibid., p. 166, cp. Lawrence, B. B. (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism', Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, op. cit. pp. 367-368, where he accuses al-Bīrūnī of accusing the Sufis of belief in metempsychosis misleadingly.

goes into detailed analysis of the issue, or he criticises it., or its narration, or he mentions all other things related to the same element. At other times, he explains the historical development of that element upto the time of his writing. It seems to us here that, al-Bīrūnī was benefiting from other methods employed in the study of religion, like the comparative analytical, historical-critical and sociological methods. In al-Bīrūnī's comparison of the era of creation in different religious traditions in al-Athar al-Baqiyah, he critically analysed both the claims of ^{the} Jews and the Christians on the number of years between Adam and Alexander. This led him also to the critical study of the claims of prophecies, and then finally to biblical criticism, i.e. the existence of conflicting and numerous Torahs and Gospels.²⁶ In his outlining of the Hindu funeral rites, al-Bīrūnī indicates that in ancient times, the bodies of the dead (among the Hindus, by implication, as he did not specify) were first exposed to the air, being thrown on the open fields, and then by the order of a legislator, after a long time, they exposed them to the wind on constructed roofed buildings, as the Zoroastrians do even today.²⁷ After this stage "Nārāyana" prescribed to them, to hand the dead over to the fire, and ever since, they are in the habit of burning them."²⁸ It was after this that al-Bīrūnī continues with his comparison.

One aspect of al-Bīrūnī comparative method we notice, was his oversight as regards some narration or beliefs or acts of worship mentioned by him, but he did not compare them with similar ideas from other religions. Two examples will be mentioned here. Firstly, on the origin or inception of the construction of idols and their worship by the Hindus, al-Bīrūnī narrated a story of Nārada, son of Brahman, who wanted to see the Lord, he had a stick by which if he throws it down, will turn into a serpent, and he also performs other miracles by means of it. One day, he saw a fire, and when he went towards it, he heard a voice telling him that he cannot see him, save in the form of fiery appearance in something like a human shape. From then, people 'used to erect

26 The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 16-27.

27 Boyce, M., A History of Zoroastrianism, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975) vol. I, p. 113 and 325.

28 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. II, P. 167.

idols of certain shapes'.²⁹ Anyone who reads the Quran or the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, will not fail to recognise this personality as 'a Moses in India' as Sachau described him.³⁰ But al-Bīrūnī, due to one reason or another did not at all comment on it, at the end of the narration or before it.

The second example is when al-Bīrūnī narrated the story of king Ambarīsha, immediately before that of Nārada seen above. He reported that, the Lord spoke to that king in these words: "And if you are overpowered by human forgetfulness make to yourself an image like that in which you see me,.....make it a memorial of me, so that you may not forget me."³¹ This statement resembles the proceedings of the second Nicean Council held in the summer of 787, counted by the Catholics and the Orthodox as the seventh General Council, to the effect of the veneration of the holy icons (images), the honour done to them being relative.³² In this case also, al-Bīrūnī did not compare what he recorded of the Lord's' statement to king Ambarīsha with the Christian worship of the icons, nor did he comment on it either.

Some Findings of Al-Bīrūnī In the Field of Comparative Religion While Using the Comparative Method:

The comparative method in the study of religion seems to be the one general method employed in all branch-areas of this discipline, as it was also employed in all other specialisations and disciplines in the human intellectual pursuit. The one undisputed advantage of this method is that, it reveals relationships between ideas, sets of beliefs, practices, etc. from varying traditions, as it also leads to the uncovering of or recognising some implicit ideas and facts, which may not be easily observed when each tradition is treated separately and independently. As is clear from what we said from the beginning of our discussions on this method, similarity does not necessarily points

29 ibid., vol. I, p. 116.

30 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. II, p. 296.

31 ibid., vol. I, p. 115.

32 Fortescue, A. (art) 'Iconoclasm' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op. cit. vol. 7, p. 79.

to identity. This is because two ideas or beliefs may be similar in many of their features, but they remain completely different and independent of each other.

Al-Bīrūnī in his study of other religions applying the comparative method has shown us glaringly some other advantage of the comparison, i.e. the discovery of some enlightening facts in the realm of religion hitherto unknown before the comparison. We will give below a brief discussions on some of the important findings we have been able to recognise in his works.

1- From al-Bīrūnī's preface in his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., it is explicitly clear that, it may surprise many, especially in the times of al-Bīrūnī, including al-Bīrūnī himself to see a lot of similarities between the thought and practices of the Hindus and those of the Greeks. In the modern times, with a lot of advancement in anthropological, archeological, philological and ethnological studies, a lot have been discovered on the relation between the different races of the world. It is our humble opinion that, even if such knowledge was available at the time of al-Bīrūnī, it might be very scanty. So to see the close relationship and similarity that was found by al-Bīrūnī, will be a very interesting finding. This might be one reason, why he decided to make his study of India, not exclusively Indian, but a sort of comparative study of Indian beliefs, religious practices, culture and sciences with other cultures and religions. Al-Bīrūnī's addition of the Sufis as explained earlier, was also an intellectual surprise, which made the study all the more interesting.

The Hindu religion's famous features recognised even today, are the belief in the transmigration of soul and pantheistic unity with the ultimate. On transmigration Werblowsky said, 'The notion of transmigration and reincarnation is a pivotal aspect of the general socio-religious belief system of India.' And that it has 'to be an accepted-pre-supposition of life.' ³³ On the belief in pantheism, it is associated with Advaita Vedanta of Sankara, where other things apart from Brahman must be seen as mere appearances.³⁴

33 Zwi Werblowsky, R.J. (art) 'Transmigration', The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 15, p. 24.

34 Hartshorne, C. (art) 'Pantheism and Panentheism' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. II, p. 170.

For the Sufis also, and here we mean the philosophical Sufism of mystics like Abu Mansur al-Hallāj and Abu Yazid al-Bistami and many other Sufis, they accept the latter idea of pantheism.³⁵ We agree with Lawrence who pointed to the fact that the belief in transmigration of soul is not well-known among the Sufis and that the citations of al-Bīrūnī in this regard are not very precise, and that they 'bear only a distant relationship either to actual Sufi teaching or to the concept of metempsychosis'.³⁶ We did not know who were those Sufis who hold this belief. Lawrence in his article³⁶ saw the reason of al-Bīrūnī's claim of the belief of the Sufis in the doctrine of transmigration of soul not in al-Bīrūnī's statements from the Sufis, but in the statement of Proclus just before that. That the cleavage of the soul from the body which was seen by Proclus as 'forgetting' and its restoration as 'remembering' reminds al-Bīrūnī of the Sufi ascetic utterances which tend to see the world as a sleeping soul, while the reality i.e. the next life as a soul awake.³⁶ The whole quotations of al-Bīrūnī on Sufi parallels to Hindu and Greek ideas, according to Lawrence have one general import that unification (with God) "is the answer to the body/soul, matter/spirit, dilemma for the Sufis as well as for their philosophical counterparts in Athens and Benares".³⁷ So, it appears that unification is the point of comparison of Hindu ideas to those of the Sufis.³⁷

2- ^{SAW} Al-Bīrūnī /some kind of close relationship between the Manichaeans and the Christians especially in their using terms like Brothers, Sisters, Fathers, Virgins etc. for the spiritual beings. As for the Christians, they mainly maintain the Father-Son/Children usage. They call God as Father, while the Son, or Son of man is most especially used for Jesus. This kind of usage is abhorred in Islam because, as al-Bīrūnī stated –"the word 'Son' means nearly always as much as a 'child' in the natural order of things, and from the ideas involved in parentage

35 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I pp. 57-58.

36 Lawrence, B. B., (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism'. Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, op. cit. pp. 367-368, cp. Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 57-58.

37 Lawrence, B. B., (art) 'Al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism'. op. cit. p. 373.

and birth, can never be derived (from the Arabic word 'Son') any expression meaning the Eternal Lord of creation." ³⁸ To come back to our point, the Manichaeans conceive the resplendent beings, as being males and females, as the beings of the low dark realm are also of males and females, this is so as to place them in their perpetual fight 'one kind of beings oppose the same kind of the other world.'³⁸

This close relationship seems not to have been clear to al-Bīrūnī when he wrote al-Athar al-Baqiyah, for he stated clearly while mentioning the different and conflicting Gospels that existed, that the Manichaeans also "have a Gospel of their own, the contents of which from the first to the last are opposed to the doctrines of the Christians....' and believed that it is the correct Gospel, that its contents are really that which the Messiah thought and taught, that every other Gospel is false, and that its followers are liars against Messiah,"³⁹

- 3- As regards Mani, the founder of Manichaenism, al-Bīrūnī found that his doctrine of metempsychosis or transmigration was much similar to that of the Hindus. The connection and the link here is proved historically and was affirmed by al-Bīrūnī clearly in his India. He said: "When Mani was banished from Iranshahr, he went to India, learned metempsychosis from the Hindus, and transferred it into his own system..."⁴⁰
- 4- On the Islamic cosmogony, al-Biruni believes that the Jews and the Manichaeans did incorporate into the Islamic traditions wrong notions and ideas with the intention of deceiving the simple and the weak-minded Muslims, due to their hatred of the Islamic message from the first day. As for the Jews, al-Bīrūnī said they falsely claim, while spreading Islam, that they accept it, and then go on to narrate to the people of good hearts, from their compiled works, things not created by Allah, neither in small, nor in large measure.⁴¹

38 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 38-39.

39 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 27.

40 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 54

41 Al-Bīrūnī, Tahqiq ma li al-Hind.... (Da'irah al-Ma'arif al-Uthmaniyyah, 1958), p. 219, cp. Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I p. 263, where there are serious problems in the translation of Sachau. He wanted to show al-Bīrūnī as a Mutazilite and that the Quran has numerous copies like the Christian Gospels.

This Dualistic Manichaens being fathers of criticism raised doubts concerning Allah, the One, the First, and the Unique, while presenting the biography of Mani to the people in such a beautiful garb, that they were gained over to his side.'⁴²

In explaining the nature of creation of the universe as discussed by al-Bīrūnī in three of his works, he reveals the Qur'anic method in such an issue. It is a well-thought idea of al-Bīrūnī to compare the Holy scriptures in this issue, which is so important in the religious realm, as God is believed, in most religions to be the Creator of the universe. Al-Bīrūnī believes that the earlier Revealed Books portray serious contradictions in this matter, (as in many others) and this confirms what the Glorious Quran has said about them, as regards interpolation and distortion, to the extent that reliance upon them is not possible. It became due to that on equal footing with what Zoroaster has believed in the same affair.⁴³ Therefore in the end, all hope of realising and ascertaining the truth in that is lost as there is no reliable source to turn to.

But as for the Qur'an, it did not say anything in this issue except what reason also arrives at, i.e. the necessity of a beginning (for the creation) only, while believing that, there is no way of knowing it in all details for certain, as its real nature falls now under the category of the hidden and the unseen.⁴³ Explaining further this finding in his India, al-Bīrūnī opined that the Qur'anic verses on this and other "subjects necessary for man to know are not such as to require a strained interpretation in order to become positive certainties in the minds of the hearers. Besides, the Qur'an does not contain questions which have for ever been subjects of controversy nor such questions the solution of which has always been despained of..."⁴⁴

These, we believe are statements of an expert in astronomy who read the Qur'an while comparing it with his knowledge of astronomy and other fields. He found at the end of his comparison of that with similar statements in the other religious scriptures, that the Qur'an, not because he believes in its Divine origin, is the only

42 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 264.

43 Al-Bīrūnī, Al-Qanunu'l Mas'udi..., (Hyderabad: Da'irah al-Ma'arif al-Othmaniyyah,), vol. 3, p.1,472, cp. The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 16-17 and Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 263.

scripture that treated such and like issues, while respecting reason and human observation in its assertions. These are some of al-Bīrūnī's findings as a result of his employing the comparative method in his study of religion.

Al-Bīrūnī's Application of the Comparative Method:

Abu Rayhan al-Bīrūnī did employ the comparative method, the main features of which, we have seen in the previous pages. We saw that he compares, in his works either, two religions only, or at other times, he compares in one issue or another, three or more religious traditions in accordance with the data at his disposal. He was able also, through his study of the religions of man, to find some universal features in the religious realm, which are found in all religions, with the only possible exception of Islam, the final and perfected divine message to man. This feature of Islam speaks of its uniqueness, and in our humble opinion, it is what made al-Amiri to elucidate that superiority of Islam throughout his work – al-I'lam bi Manaqib al-Islam earlier, and what made al-Bīrūnī to go against his stated principle of a value-free study of India, and to give judgements to the effect of confirming that uniqueness and superiority of Islam.

In applying the comparative method al-Bīrūnī stated clearly his purpose, of showing the similarity, and close relationship between some religious traditions, using the principle of disinterestedness, in comparing the various aspects of the different religions he treats. His sole interest is the truth, and nothing but the truth. We believe that, in some of the judgements given by al-Bīrūnī against some sets of beliefs or practices of the Hindus, or of others, he did it not out of malice or prejudice or even biasness, but probably due to his inability to reconcile those beliefs or practices with the Truth as he conceives it. That truth is essentially one. Historical facts, universal truths, natural laws placed in the universe, reason and what it establishes or rejects, the dictates of unadulterated revelation from God, all constitute that incorruptible truth, al-Bīrūnī was seeking for. We will give below examples of al-Bīrūnī's two kinds of comparison, i.e. the non-normative and the normative comparisons to demonstrate further his application of the comparative method.

The Non-Normative Application of the Comparative Method in the Works of al-Bīrūnī:

As al-Bīrūnī openly declared in the preface of his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind, that he is not going to make any 'unfounded imputations' against the Hindus,⁴⁵ he has to a great extent stucked to that promise except in very few cases. Nor did he try to refute such of their beliefs or practices not in line with the truth as he perceived it, but recorded them as they believe in them.⁴⁶ What follows are examples of al-Bīrūnī's application of the comparative method non-normatively:

a- The first comparison in al-Bīrūnī's India we would like to mention, is on the first essences and the origin of all things. *He believes that the Greeks, before their seven philosophers held the same views as the Hindus,* before the so-called seven pillars of wisdom, believe that all things are one, which can be latent according to some, and potential according to others.⁴⁷ These ancient Greeks are known today as pre-Socratic philosophers, who attempted to 'find universal principles which would explain the whole nature, from the origin and ultimate constituents of the universe to the place of man within it.'⁴⁸ Thales, for example chose water or moisture as constituting that one principle, while Pythagoras believed that there is 'one glorious harmonia' - a harmony engulfing the whole of the universe.⁴⁹ Al-Bīrūnī did not give examples of these one -principles as believed by these Greeks. But after identifying this one principle as the First Cause, he immediately says

45 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 7.

46 ibid.

47 ibid., vol., I, p. 33.

48 See Guthrie, W.K.C. (art) 'Pre-Socratic Philosophy' The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edwards, Paul (ed.), (New York: Macmillan, 1967) vol. 6, P. 441.

49 ibid., pp. 442-443.

that this 'is also the theory of the Sufis,.....', giving the etymology of the name as from sophia – wisdom.⁵⁰ He then further explains the Greek concept of the First Cause, when he says that, they think the existing world ^{is only} one thing, and that the First Cause appears in it in various shapes. Not only this, other Greeks also believe that, anyone who turns his whole being towards the First Cause, striving to become as much as possible similar to it, will become united with it..."⁵⁰ These ideas put together, pointing to pantheism and followed by pantheistic union with the First Cause according to the different pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, al-Bīrūnī compared with what the philosophical Sufis also believe. After explaining other 'related' points, al-Bīrūnī mention the Hindus (the educated Brahmans) whom he believes, think that the whole creation is a unity, by quoting the Bhagavad-Gita, in which, their Lord Vishnu made himself the earth, water, fire, wind and the heart of every single being etc. ⁵¹ It is clear from the above that al-Bīrūnī seems to be indirectly pointing to the one essential source as the origin of these ideas *in* the three traditions, which he didn't specify.

b- Somewhat related to the point above, but mentioned by al-Bīrūnī much later in his India, is the concept of the five eternals which he introduced through Muhammad Ibn Zakariyya al-Razi, who in turn, attributed them to 'the most ancient philosophers of the Greek thought'. These five eternals are the Creator, The Universal Soul, the first ether, space in the abstract, and time in the abstract.⁵² Al-Bīrūnī seems reluctant to compare this with what the Hindus hold. He started by saying that their view in this matter 'is rather poor in thought and very little developed.' They say the first primeval thing was darkness – a kind of non-existance, then God created this world for Brahman, etc. Kapila wrote, "God has always existed, and with him the world..." and so

50 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 33-34.

51 *ibid.*, p. 40.

52 *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 319.

on.⁵³ Yet some of their philosophers saw that the primeval one is the compound of the five elements of : heaven, wind, fire, water, and earth – ‘Mahabhuta’, while others saw it as time, or nature, or Karman (*action*) etc. We can see the difference in both the traditions in this matter as al-Bīrūnī himself has mentioned indirectly. Showing the resemblance of something to another, is never enough when the differences are not highlighted.

c- As regards the different conceptions of God in triads, al-Bīrūnī explains the Hindu Triad as the life that circulates in the ether – which has been explained to be ‘the middle between matter and the spiritual divine ideas above matter.’⁵⁴ So, he further explains, any ‘.....life which circulates in the ether under the exclusive influence of the First Cause (Sattva) is called ‘Brahman’, ‘Prajapati’, and by many other names’ in their tradition. This is identical to nature, in so far as it is active. This is why all bringing into existance and creation is attributed to Brahman, by the Hindus.⁵⁵ This is the first aspect or person? of the Triad. The second being Nārāyana, who represent, life that circulates in the ether under the influence of the ‘Second Force’ (Rajas) – it “means nature in so far as it has reached the end of its action”, and is now preserving and protecting it. So Nārāyana is believed to be preserving the universe.⁵⁵ The third ‘person’ of the Indian Trinity comes from their belief that, any “life which circulates in the ether under the influence of the third force (tamas), is called Mahadeva and Samkara or Rudra. He is responsible for destruction and annihilation, like nature in the last stages of activity, when its power slackens”.⁵⁵ This is the philosophical explanation of the Hindu ‘Trimurti’, indicating the three forms of God.⁵⁶ Al-Bīrūnī explains that, they believe that, prior to all beings, there was one source for all things, in this unity, ‘they comprehend all three things

53 ibid., vol. I, pp. 320-321.

54 ibid., vol., I, p. 93.

55 ibid., vol. I, p.94.

56 Parrinder, G., (art) ‘Triads’, The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 15, p. 40. cp. with our unpublished M. A. Thesis, op. cit. p. 81-90

(beings), not separating one from the other. This unity they call 'Vishnu'.⁵⁷ After this detailed explanation, of the Hindu Triad called 'Trimurti' al-Bīrūnī was quick to remember and compare it with Christian Trinity. His words, according to Sachau' translation are: "Here there is an analogy between Hindus and Christians, as the latter distinguish between the Three persons and give them separate names, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but unite them into one substance."⁵⁷ It is evident here that al-Bīrūnī found the similarity between the two Triads in two things) namely: That they have separate and distinguished Persons, as Brahman is not Rūdra, just as the Father is not the Son. Secondly they are united into one substance – God in Christianity and Vishnu according the Vaishnavite Hindus. The two similarities as indicated by al-Bīrūnī here, are clear.

Al-Bīrūnī sometimes compares only part of the details in any particular aspect at hand. After what we have just seen of the two Triads, he mentioned that there is another nature for Zeus, the God of the Greeks, whom he says, have similar things as the Hindus believe in anthropomorphism. That other nature of Zeus has no connection with humanity. They (Greeks) believe that " he is Jupiter, the son of Saturn; for Saturn alone is eternal....."⁵⁸ He then added that Brahman is described in the same way, as Zeus by Aratos. "Aratos calls the ether and the air, Zeus etc.⁵⁹ This reveals how keen al-Bīrūnī is to mention any new fact he observes, as regards any similarity of an aspect of what he discusses, wherever he finds it.

- d- Another important application of the comparative method by al-Bīrūnī, is in his discussions on what he considers the main distinctive feature of the Hindu religion – metempsychosis or transmigration of soul. To him it is the hallmark of Hinduism. After explaining the philosophy behind that belief – that of the soul's need to the knowledge of all things in the universe; One life-span of an

57 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 94.

58 ibid., vol. I, p. 97.

59 ibid., vol. I, pp. 97-98.

individual will never be enough for that, hence the necessity of numerous rebirths. After this explanation, he mentioned Mani, the founder of Manichaeanism, and how he went to India, after having been expelled from Iranshahr, where he learnt their theory on metempsychosis, which he transferred to his own religion.⁶⁰ This means there is even no need for any comparison, as he has taken it directly from the Hindus. After this, al-Bīrūnī mentioned the Greek parallel from the statement of Plato, on the tongue of Socrates in Phaedo expressing transmigration of souls from the world to Hades, and from Hades back to the world and that "the living originates from the dead, and that altogether things originate from their contraries. Therefore those who have died are among the living."⁶¹ The main idea is the same as that of the Hindus. But the *raison d'être* of transmigration according to the Greeks is, the entanglement of the soul to the body, it is nailed to it, and then gives it a bodily figure. It is particularly the impure soul, which cannot go to Hades, but quits the body filled with its nature, and "then migrates hastily into another body..."⁶²

Finally Al-Bīrūnī mentions the Sufis, but prior to them, he quoted Proclus who was of the opinion that, remembering and forgetting are "always with the soul, which has always existed, and so has always been both knowing, and that is when it is separated from the body, and forgetting when connected with it."⁶³ It is this idea of the soul knowing when separated from the body and so on, which Al-Bīrūnī compares with some Sufis 'who teach that this world is a sleeping soul and the next world a soul awake, and who at the same time admit that God is immanent in certain places e.g in heavens etc.' Still others admit that He is immanent in the whole world, in animals, trees, etc. which they call His 'universal appearance'. This very idea expressed here is pantheism, not metempsychosis. As al-Bīrūnī is comparing traditions here in the belief in

60 ibid., vol. I, pp. 54-55.

61 ibid., vol. I, p. 56.

62 ibid., vol. I, p. 57.

63 ibid.

souls. In both al-Tihanawi's Kashshaf Iṣtilāhāt al-funūn⁶⁷ and The Encyclopedia of Islam,⁶⁸ we could not see any mention of 'al-hulul' meaning transmigration of souls, especially when it is mentioned with 'al-ittihad', as al-Bīrūnī has done. In the place, quoted in these pages al-Bīrūnī mentioned the views of the Sufis and then added that, (according to Sachau's translation: "To those who hold this view, the entering of the souls into various beings in the course of metempsychosis is of no consequence", Here al-Bīrūnī used the word 'hulul' with other words, i.e. 'hulul al-arwah bi al-taraddud'⁶⁹ which gives the meaning of metempsychosis. This is different from al-hulul wa al-ittihad as is very vivid. From this long discussion, we want to show that, as we have alluded to earlier, al-Bīrūnī was not saying in the preface of his India that the Greeks, the Hindus and also the Sufis have similar 'notions regarding the transmigrations of souls and the pantheistic doctrine....' as Sachau has erroneously translated. The 'hulul' and 'ittihad' mentioned here by al-Bīrūnī simply means the indwelling of God in the creature. The two words used often synonymously.⁷⁰

- e- Another example of al-Bīrūnī application of the comparative method in his India, is the general belief of the soul being defiled and imprisoned by the body, and how one should try to liberate that soul by means of doing away, ^{with} or at least scorning the body. The comparison is of the Hindu, Greek and Sufi ideas, which more or less, resemble each other.⁷¹ A lot of illustrations and quotations from Patanjali, Gita, and other sources were given.
- f- Al-Bīrūnī also compared the Hindu idea of the primeval water, which existed before all creation, considered by them as "an instrument in the hand of the Creator when he wants to create something out of matter....", he compared it with the Qur'anic verses in Surah Hud, where Allah says:

67 Al-Tihanawa, M. A., Kashshaf Iṣtilāhāt al-Funūn, (Tehran: Maktabah Khayyan, 1947), vol. I, pp. 349-32.

68 Massignon and Anawati (art) 'Hulul' The Encyclopedia of Islam, op. cit. vol. III, pp. 570-571.

69 Al-Bīrūnī, Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., op. cit. p. 44.

70 See 'The Encyclopedia of Islam', op. cit. vol. III, p. 571.

71 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 68-88.

"He it is who created the heavens and the earth in six days – and His Throne was over the Waters....."72

Al-Bīrūnī, not going into the intricacies of the 'Mufassirin' simply concluded ".... in any case the meaning is this, that at that time beside God there was nothing but the water and the Throne."73

g- Another revealing comparison made by al-Bīrūnī is that of the city of Benares, and that of Makkah in the eyes of Hindus and Muslims respectively. He said the Hindus venerate, for reasons connected with their law and religion, the city of Benares. Their hermits stay in it forever, "as the dwellers of the Haram in Makkah, They want to live there to the end of their lives...." That even if a murderer who is due for punishment, enters it (Benares) he obtains pardon.⁷⁴ Other comparisons included the belief of the Hindus, Magians, Buddhists, and some Muslims of a mountain surrounding the earth.⁷⁵ And the practice of self-mortification among the Greeks and the Hindus.⁷⁶

h- In the book of al-Athar al-Baqiyah also al-Bīrūnī made a lot of comparisons like that of the 'Qiblahs' – the directions faced by adherents of the different religions when they pray to their Lord. He stated that the Ka'bah is the Qiblah of the Muslims instead of Jerusalem. The Harranians (sometime taken as Sabians) turn to the South pole. The Sabians proper* as explained by al-Bīrūnī turn to the North pole. The Manichaens, he believes also turn to the North pole, this is to them because it is the middle of the dome of heaven and its highest place.⁷⁷ In another of his works – Tahdīd Nihāyat al-Amākin...., al-Bīrūnī mentioned that, the Jews face the Sacred Temple of Jerusalem, while the

72 Surrah Hud: 7.

73 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 222.

74 Ibid., vol. I, pp. 146-147.

75 Ibid., vol. I, pp. 243-250.

76 Ibid., vol. I, pp. 171.

77 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 329.

* Al-Bīrūnī made a thorough study of who are the real and proper Sabians as mentioned in the Quran. He differentiated them from the Harranians, who took the name later. See The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 186-189 and pp. 314-315.

Christians face the equator in their prayers, because they face the East. The Harranians called the Sabi'ah face the Meridian.⁷⁸ Al-Bīrūnī has a penchant for comparison. He loves to compare in any issue he discuss. After he has mentioned these 'qiblahs' in The Chronology, he mentioned the reproach of the Manichaens for the adherents of the three revealed religions? for their maintaining that, a worshipper must turn to one direction in prayer to the exclusion of another, adding that one "who prays to God does not need any qiblah at all."⁷⁸ This attack on religion by the Manichaens, al-Bīrūnī and other historians and Mutakallimin have well documented in their works. They want to undermine all religions while trying to establish their own, as al-Bīrūnī has said of Abdullah Ibn Muqaffa' and his translation of Kalilah and Dimnah into Arabic. He added into it the chapter about 'Barzoya' "with the intention of raising doubts in the minds of people of feeble religious belief, and to gain and prepare them for the propagation of the doctrines of the Manichaens."⁷⁹ What they say in this regard is not in line with some verses of the Quran closer in meaning to it, but far apart as regards the purpose and the import of the statement.

Allah says:

"To Allah belong the East and the West, wheresoever you turn, there is Allah's Face, for Allah is All-embracing, All-knowing."⁸⁰

He also says in the same Surah:

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West, but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day and...."⁸¹

It is blind and barren formalism without spirit, that is being condemned here not the direction faced. But if the direction is faced based on clear and elaborate

78 Al-Bīrūnī, Tahdīd Nihāyat al-Amākin li Tashīh Masāfāt al-Masākin, (Ankara: Dogus, 1962), pp. 269-270. cp. with what he said on the origin of Christian 'qiblah' in Ifrād al-Maqāl fi amr al-dhīlā (Hyderabad: Dairah al-Ma'rif, 1948), pp. 7-8. The Chronology, op. cit. p. 329.

79 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 159, cp. p. 264.

80 Surah al-Baqrah : 115

81 Surah al-Baqarah: 177

Magians or Zoroastrians, they have three main prayers, one in receiving the sun (sunrise), the other one at midday, while the third one is at sunset. Al-Bīrūnī added that the Magians pray once a month in veneration of the moon also.⁸⁵ As regards non-normative comparison of al-Bīrūnī, the illustrations are just too many, what have been mentioned above, we believe, will suffice.

The Normative Application of the Comparative Method in the Works of al-Bīrūnī:

It is evident in al-Bīrūnī's prefaces in both his major extant works on the study of religions and cultures viz.: al-Athar al-Baqiyah... and Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., that he intends an objective and value-free study of the religions and cultures of others. In some instances, al-Bīrūnī became impatient with some beliefs or practices which he immediately describes as abominable or silly. At some other times, as we opined earlier, it might be the sublime teachings of Islam which he lives by, that will prove to him the abominable or crude nature of what he found in other religions. As he said in his India, he is not going to refute the ideas of the Indians, but will only record them as they are, that is what he did, if not because of these few qualifications here and there.

The superiority of Islamic teachings when compared to others, as al-Āmirī did, is what came up for few times in al-Bīrūnī's scientific study of Indian and other cultures. Let us see some demonstrations of his normative comparison, from his two main works mentioned above:

- a- Creation of the world and other matters related to the unseen – In this issue al-Bīrūnī compares the Qur'anic statements in these issues with the other revealed books and clearly sided with what the Quran offers, showing implicitly its having an edge upon them. This matter was mentioned by al-Bīrūnī in four of his best works.⁸⁶ The import of his statements after comparing these scriptures in the

84 Al-Biruni, Ifrad al-Maqāṣī, op. cit. pp. 174-175.

85 ibid., p. 175.

86 See Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, P. 263, cp. Al-Qanun al-Mas'udi of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit. vol. 3, p. 1472, cp. Al-Bīrūnī's Tahdid Nihāyat al-Amākin, op. cit. p. 18 and The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 16-17.

matter of creation and the shape of the heavens and the earth is that: there are a lot of contradictions in the earlier revealed books, confirming what the Quran has said of their fate due to distortion, to the extent that reliance upon them is lost. Many statements are found in them incompatible to science. The Quran however, did not say anything on these issues except what reason arrives at, in terms of the necessity of a beginning. Its verses in these issues are such that it will not require strained interpretations, they are perfectly clear and without any ambiguity.⁸⁷

Even though, this is a value judgement, but it is based on facts that can be observed and tested. So to rule out value judgement completely in the field of the study of religion is to do injustice to Islam. What is wrong in calling a spade, a spade?

b- In mentioning the Hindu traditions on marriage, al-Bīrūnī compared that with that of the Tibetans, Jahili Arabs, ancient Iranians, and then concluded with a general statement comparing them with the Islamic teachings on the subject. As far as the Hindus are concerned, there are three ways, according to al-Bīrūnī of determining descent or relationship:

- 1- Through a legitimate marriage where a child is for his father;
- 2- If through a legitimate marriage a child is born, but in the marriage contract it is stipulated that the child born will belong to the father of the woman who delivered him, then that child will not belong to his father, but to his maternal grandfather!
- 3- If a stranger has a child by a married woman, because she is the property of her husband, if the cohabitation took place with his consent, the child is for her original husband.⁸⁸

Another kind of marriage according to Hindu tradition is, where four or more people will have a common wife – polyandry, like the Tibetans and Jahili

87 See Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 263, cp. Al-Qanun al-Mas'udi of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit. vol. 3, p. 1472, cp. Al-Bīrūnī's Tahdid Nihāyat al-Amakin, op. cit. p. 18 and The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 16-17.

88 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 107

Arabs before Islam.⁸⁹ Al-Bīrūnī then mentioned the different kinds of marriage amount the Jahili Arabs, including 'Nikah al-Maqt' (Odious kind of marriage) "when a man married the widow of his father, or of his son, the child of such a marriage will be attributed to the deceased. The child born is called 'daizan'"⁹⁰ Al-Bīrūnī then said, this kind of marriage is nearly the same as a certain Jewish marriage, when a man must marry the widow of his brother, if he has not left an issue, so as to create a line ~~of~~ descent for his dead brother.⁹¹ After this, he goes to mention the existance of a somewhat similar kind of marriage among the Magians – 'the institution of a man's being married as the substitute for another man.' According to their tradition if a man dies without an issue, but left behind a wife, they marry her to his nearest relative.⁹¹ If the deceased did not leave a wife, they marry his daughter or the nearest related woman to the nearest related male of the family. If this also is not found, they got another woman by means of the deceased's money and then marry her to some male relative. But despite the non-availability of any woman having any relation with the deceased, the child in all these cases, is considered the offspring of the deceased.⁹²

After this long comparison al-Bīrūnī with his critical mind showed the unnaturalness of these kinds of marriages, where a child does not belong to his natural parents, who directly suffered because of him, but is attributed by customs, to someone not alive. He saw this and all other ^{similar} marriage traditions as foul and inferior to those of Islam. He believes the comparison and contrast he did here, show 'how much superior the institutions of Islam are' and how much it brings out all customs and usages, differing from those of Islam, in their

89 ibid., vol. I, p. 108.

90 ibid., vol. I, p. 109.

91 See Deut. 25: 5-6.

92 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p p. 109-100.

essential foulness.”⁹³ This is another clear value judgement given by al-Bīrūnī. It seems he gave it out of his awareness that, a genuine marriage – contract, is where a man singly sticks to his wife, not sharing her with another man. Otherwise, there is every likelihood that the child will be wrongly attributed to someone other than his biological father. Something which supports this our view is, al-Bīrūnī’s belief in another chapter of his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., that “No nation can exist without a regular married life, for it prevents the uproar of passions abhorred by the cultivated mind,...”⁹⁴ He believes is one having a decent married life, which is organised, and which he observes even among animals. He opines that, prostitution and wanton licentious and promiscuous life is not befitting of man, and this fact man can observe, even from animals. Al-Bīrūnī states:

“Considering the life of the animals by pairs, how the one member of the pair helps the other, and how the lust of other animals of the same species is kept aloof from them, you cannot help declaring matrimony to be a necessary institution; while disorderly cohabitation or prostitution on the part of man, is a shameful proceeding, that does not even attain to the standing of the development of animals,* which in every other aspect stand far below him.”⁹⁵

So, to al-Bīrūnī his judgement against other marriage customs which are related, in one way or the other, to the unnatural and irregular married life, is justified and is not unscientific or subjective. The order that we see in the animal life in this regard, is supposed to be reflected in human societies, even in a greater scale, as he is much superior to all other animal species, being the only one exclusively endowed with reason.

93 ibid., vol. I, p.110.

94 ibid., vol. I, p. 154.

95 ibid., vol. I, p154.

* Emphasis ours.

c- On the doctrinal plane, al-Bīrūnī compared the Hindu concept of God with that of the Greeks, and he showed how the adherents of both religions comprise of two main groups. The first one is that of the elites, the learned scholars in the religious sciences and the philosophers. This group's conception of God is nearer to the truth. They believe God to be one, possessing all qualities of perfection. For the Hindu elites "who march on the path to liberation, or those who study philosophy and theology....are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent him." The Greek elites and philosophers also rise "above the class of fools and uneducated people..."⁹⁶ in this regard. The second group in both religions are the ignorant masses described as the popular mind which 'leans towards the sensible world of abstract thought.'⁹⁷ They are engrossed in crude anthropomorphism, by means of 'priestly tricks and deceits'. Al-Bīrūnī stated in another chapter: "If we now pass from the ideas of the educated people among the Hindus to those of the common people Some of them are simply abominable...." Al-Bīrūnī as a true comparativist added, ".....but similar errors also occur in other religions. Nay, even in Islam we must decidedly disapprove e.g. of the anthropomorphic doctrines....."⁹⁸ The Hindu anthropomorphic doctrines include, speaking "of wife, son, daughter, of the rendering pregnant and other physical processes, all in connection with God..... they do not even abstain from silly and unbecoming language." The many images they make in human shapes with many eyes, hands etc. all speak of that anthropomorphic conception of God. Al-Bīrūnī described these notions in the above mentioned words, because he believes that, apart from revelation, which is our main reliable and incorruptible source of knowing God, reason also is able to establish or reject many attributes, when God or the First Cause is the subject of description. Anthropomorphism,

96 ibid., vol. I, p113 and 124, cp. pp. 27-31.

97 ibid., vol. I, p. 111.

98 ibid., vol. I, p. 31, cp. p. 39.

as we stated earlier, is described as crude even in the most authoritative book in the scientific study of religion today.⁹⁹ So al-Bīrūnī's judgement here is not the kind that is totally rejected in the field.

b- Al-Bīrūnī in another of his works – The Chronology, applied his comparative method also normatively. It is a sort of scientific criticism, which may fall under the area of Biblical Criticism as we know it today. In that work, he criticised both the Old and the New Testament collections. First he pointed out the wide difference that exists in the books of Jews and Christians in, for instance, the time period between Adam (P.B.U.H.) generally believed to be the first human being and the father of all, between him and Alexander. According to the Jews, the period is only 3,448 years, while the Christians believe the same period to be 5,180 years, a difference of 1,732 years! The irony here is, both claim to be following the same ancient scripture, especially the Old Testament books which are considered as holy, sacred and inspired, by both Jews and Christians. The difference then raises questions, as to what really happened?¹⁰⁰ After a long discussion on chronology and the appearance of the Messiah etc., al-Bīrūnī concluded: "All they have brought forward (in terms of explanations), and all we are going to propound (in stating the real facts), is a decisive proof, and a clear argument, showing that the words in the holy books have been altered from their proper meanings, and that the text has undergone modifications contrary to its original condition.... that their authors purposely deviate from the path of truth and righteousness.... The fact is that they are blind to the truth."¹⁰¹ All these strong words were used by al-Bīrūnī, due to a lot of problems he found in these so-called revealed books. He explains himself further, when he opened the Pandora's box as pertains to these books. He continued: "...both Jews and Christians have a copy of the Torah, the contents of which agree with the doctrines of either sect. Of the Jewish copy people

99 Eliade, M. (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. I, pp. 317-318.

100 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 18.

101 ibid., p. 23.

think that it is comparatively free from confusion."¹⁰² Al-Bīrūnī's interest in the study of religion knew no bound, for he stated after a little while that besides the copies of the Torah he has alluded to, 'there is a third one that exists among the Samaritans, also known as 'al-Lāmasāsiyyah'. After this, he also examined the account of the lives of the descendants of Adam, in these Torahs to the time of the Flood (Noah's time), and on finding a lot of discrepancies lamented regretfully, "... if such is the diversity of opinions, as we have described, and if there is no possibility of distinguishing – by means of analogy – between truth and fiction, where is the student to search for exact information?"¹⁰³ Just as the Torah has several and different copies, the same is in the case of the Gospels.¹⁰³

From the above discussion we can see how al-Bīrūnī foreshadowed the modern biblical criticism, with his judgements on the unreliability of the Bible as a true records of revelation and history. Al-Bīrūnī's application of the comparative method, as we have just seen, was scholarly and scientific. He was not a polemist, but a critical mind that abhors dishonesty in preserving revelation of God or historical records of facts. His comparison reveals a lot of other facts, and enrich us further in these areas.

102 ibid., p. 24.

103 ibid., p. 25.

THREE

EVALUATION AND CRITICISM OF AL-BĪRŪNĪ'S CONCEPT AND APPLICATION OF THE COMPARATIVE METHOD:

The evaluation and assessment of such an intellectual giant as al-Bīrūnī is such an onerous task, beyond the ability of the present writer. We have already seen some of the statements of great scholars and men of letters giving us an idea of his standing in the intellectual world. His great erudition and the diversity of his interests have also been expounded by scholars from both the fields of the sciences, and the humanities. We need not to mention that again. It is an enough testimony to that fact that, some of al-Bīrūnī's teachers themselves wrote books in his name.¹

We have also mentioned some of al-Bīrūnī's qualities, which in one way or another help him achieve his scientific accomplishments and also endowed him with the success with which, he studied other religions and cultures, in a unique manner. His tolerant attitude towards the beliefs and practices of other religions, gave him the opportunity of studying them, while comparing them with each other, instead of a general condemnation of them as crude ideas of infidels. Al-Bīrūnī's study of religion really opened for him many vistas of knowledge, which would have been otherwise closed to him. He comes to know the people of the Book and what they did with their revelations through direct study of such books. He discovered many prophecies in their books, which he believes beyond doubt to be compatible only to one person, Muhammad (P.B.U.H.), the last of Allah's prophets and messengers.² The contributions made by al-Bīrūnī in the field of Comparative Religion are numerous, many aspects of which we have seen in the preceeding pages.

His insistence on written texts, which he believes are more reliable, despite their shortcoming, than oral traditions, was a new dimension as regards the study of religion

1 Nasr, S.H., Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, op. cit. p.110.

2 See The Chronology, op. cit. pp. 22-27.

in his times. The texts however, are not to be accepted without criticisms. The insistence of al-Bīrūnī on the necessity of getting information not only from the right sources, but also from the adherents of that religion, which will mean, their own interpretation of their beliefs, practices and texts, is a real methodological breakthrough in the scientific study of religion and culture of the other. The constant mention of the truth² and al-Bīrūnī's strict adherence to it, serves the purpose of objectivity and honest presentation of facts as they are. This is in fact what motivated him to write his work on India, after a discussion on the distortions of some Muslims of the beliefs of their opponents, or of the adherents of other religions. It is his adherence to the truth, and his love for accuracy which led him to check scientifically even some narrations, like the tradition on the start of the Ashura fasting upon ~~the~~ arrival ^{of the Prophet} in Madinah, so also the Christian narration of Mary Magdalene's episode and the shadow of Christ mentioned above. Al-Bīrūnī also questioned the Bible creation story and the details mentioned like ".... God said, 'let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good and God divided the light from the darkness. The light God called Day and the darkness He called Night. There was evening and there was morning, the first day."³

The narration continued in the same way till the sixth day with the sun and the moon created on the fourth day. Al-Bīrūnī noticed the discrepancy here, and said that this period cannot be measured by day and night or morning and evening, as their effective cause (sun) was not yet created till the fourth day.⁴ It is al-Bīrūnī's credit that he uses his knowledge of other disciplines in understanding the religious realm. For instance, he uses his knowledge of geography to determine correct 'qiblah' for the muslims of different parts of the Islamic World. He also uses his knowledge of physics (optics) to determine the correct timing for Salah.⁵

The scientific acumen of al-Bīrūnī is evident in his contributions to the physical sciences. His faculty of observation is very sharp, and that was what made his study of religion more scientific. His observation of striking similarity between Hindu, Greek

3 Gen. 1: 3-5

4 Al-Bīrūnī, Tahdīd Nihāyāt al-Amākin, op. cit. pp. 18-19.

and Sufi ideas made him compare them in his India. In the same way he observes Hindus' obsession with personifying anything, marrying it to something or someone, and then make it bear offsprings. He observes in his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind... , "The Hindus can never speak of anything, be it an object of the intellect or of imagination, without representing it as a personification, an individual. They at once marry him, make him celebrate marriage, make his wife pregnant and give birth to something."⁶

Al-Bīrūnī's credentials as an unbiased an objective scholar cannot be questioned because of both his works, Tahqiq ma li al-Hind... and al-Athar al-Baqiyah, as well as others. His method in the study of religion, being an offshoot of his method of the study of nature and the universe, is one of the reasons why he is seen as, well ahead of his time. It is only in the last couple of centuries, that religion was studied scientifically, especially in the Western world, where its study predominates today. As a scholar, al-Bīrūnī was not affected by the circumstances, around him, as we have seen earlier. His collecting data and compiling a monumental work on India, during the Jihad campaigns of Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah can be likened to a quiet Island in the midst of a turbulent and stormy sea. It appears to us that, when al-Bīrūnī stated that he is not going to compare the systems he studies, with the truth, (Islam)⁷ he might have done that, as part of his efforts towards achieving truly objective exposition of the ideas, religion and culture of the Hindus. As he knows that, if Islam is to be a part of the comparison, he can easily be swayed by his belief in it, into judging in its favour. Islam, which he equates with the sublime and incorruptible truth, has achieved that position in the eyes of al-Bīrūnī, after his critical study of it (so we suppose), and after it proves itself as the final and perfected divine guidance to man from the Creator, and Lord of all the Universe. This may be the reason why his conviction in it and its teachings is very strong.⁸ His study of other religions, in depth did not make him an eclectic but

5 See his Ifrad al-Maqāl..., op. cit. p. 160ff.

6 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 291.

7 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 24.

8 See for example Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p. 110.

strengthens his belief in the teachings of Islam.⁹ Even modern scholarship has to give al-Bīrūnī a credit due to his disinterestedness in his study of India. Lawrence in The Encyclopedia of Religion, said: " Al-Bīrūnī's work as a comparative religionist is rated high on the scale of his total scholarly output primarily because of the India."¹⁰

As no one can claim infallibility for al-Bīrūnī, and himself being a human, who is some times liable to err, and ^{who also} did not claim perfection for himself, we will in the next few pages see some of the criticisms directed against him.

The first of that criticism is that made by Lawrence in The Encyclopedia of Religion, after his praise of al-Bīrūnī's Tahqiq ma li al-Hind..., as a scholarly work on the comparative study of Indian religion with others. Lawrence found the only possible weakness in that work is, not in the employment of the data in a way that is not right, but the 'constant preference of al-Bīrūnī for literacy evidence over ethnographic observation.'¹¹ In our humble opinion, al-Bīrūnī did what he did on the basis of his judgement of the sources before him. He showed the difficulty in all the sources from which he has to get his information. Moreover, as he has stated more than once, that the elites and the scholars in each religious traditions, best represent the true teachings of that religion. Their exposition of their religious notions can be found only in their records of them. And as we pointed earlier, al-Bīrūnī is never a blind acceptor of written traditions without criticism. The ethnographic observation also is not lacking, as we see him constantly, confronting the ideas of the elites, taken mostly from their sources with the ideas of the ignorant masses, taken mostly from what he observes or hears from them. Lawrence has also found fault in al-Bīrūnī's 'predilection to posit the underlying metaphysical unity of Hindu, Greek and Muslim elites, with disregard bordering on disdain for the views of non-elites.'¹¹ This criticism also is unwarranted, as Lawrence can never defend the statement that the views of non-elites in any religion represent the true teachings of that religion. Popular religion seems always to be a deviation from the true path of a religion, and never represent it. It seems to us that Western scholars take popular religion as an integral part of any religion, not

9 Nasr, Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine, op. cit. p. 113.

10 Lawrence, B. B., (art) 'Bīrūnī, Al-' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 232.

recognising the fact that, there is what is termed as a deviation from the right track of religion. Take Islam for instance, how can any objective scholar equates the beliefs and practices of some extremist Shi'ah sects, with the clear teachings of the Quran and Sunnah? Lawrence in another article titled 'Al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism,' blames al-Bīrūnī of accusing the Sufis of believing in metempsychosis wrongly.¹² This seems to be justified when reading only the English translation of al-Bīrūnī's Tahqiq ma li al-Hind... as we have explained at length in the previous pages. Lawrence said that, in this regard al-Biruni gave some summary images which bear only a distant relationship either to actual Sufi teachings, or the concept of transmigration of soul.¹²

Another orientalist also accuses al-Bīrūnī of not showing the discrepancies that exist between Hindu monotheism which he found, and the Islamic concept of the oneness of God.¹³ Al-Bīrūnī was not directly comparing and contrasting the two 'tauhids', but he should have indicated the main differences involved, after the similarities. Another modern scholar has pointed to the non-availability of about 35 quotations of the Gita made by al-Bīrūnī, in the present Bhagavad-Gita. What really happen is known only by Allah, but the possibilities are numerous. It may be that, al-Bīrūnī was paraphrasing the statements. Or that the copy he depended on, was not accurate, or even that the book itself has not remained throughout the centuries, as it was at the time of al-Bīrūnī.

Al-Bīrūnī, while using his scientific mind in the study of religion questioned some Islamic traditions. We have seen how he raised doubts against the narration attributed to Abdullah Ibn Abbas and reported by both al-Bukhari and Muslim,¹⁴ on the arrival of the prophet in Madinah, while the Jews were fasting 'Ashura'. Al-Sheikh Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalāni also conceded to his fact, and quoted al-Bīrūnī in his interpretation of the narration, the import of which was, since the prophet arrived in Madinah in Rabī'

11 The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 2, p. 232.

12 Al-Bīrūnī's Commemorative Volume, op. cit. pp. 367-368.

13 Aro, J. (art) 'Encounter of Cultures in the work of Al-Bīrūnī,' Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume, op. cit. p. 324.

14 Sahih al-Bukhari, Chapter 68 on 'The Fast of the day of Ashura', H. No. 1900. cp. Sahih Muslim, chapter 19 on the Fast of the day of Ashura, Hadith No. 127 and 128. This narration was not mentioned by Imam Malik in his Muwatta.

Awwal, he must have stayed in it for some time, after which he saw the Jews fasting the day of Ashura and then only he enquired about it.¹⁵ Another tradition whose ^{validity} al-Bīrūnī questioned is that which mentions the different revealed scriptures and the nights in which they were revealed, all in the month of Ramadan. The narration mentioned by al-Bīrūnī was started thus: "People say that on the following days the holy books were communicated....."¹⁶ Our particular concern here is in the Gospel, which is said to have been revealed on the 18th night of Ramadan to Jesus (P.B.U.H.). The narration that conforms to what he said, we found only in *Tafsir of al-Qurtubi*.¹⁷ Of the other authentic books of Hadith, a somewhat similar, but not exactly the same, narration is found only in Musnad Imam Ahmad,¹⁸ from the Hadith of Wathilah bn al-Asqa'. After mentioning the full narration, al-Bīrūnī commented on the Quran's and Torah's revelation. As regards the Gospel, he said: "The report regarding the Gospel is the saying of a man who does not know its character, nor style and nor composition...."¹⁹ The problem with this statement is: Is al-Bīrūnī believing the Gospel, as mentioned by the Christians, in its composition, canonisation etc. to be the real al-Injil, as can somewhat be implied from his statement? The Christians at the time of al-Bīrūnī, as well as our times, have four canonised Gospels. We believe that any scholar of Islam, when he speaks of al-Injil, will not mean the four compiled biographies of Jesus and his mission, composed by four different persons claimed to be Jesus' disciples. We cannot doubt the tradition merely due to the present condition of the Gospels. Moreso that the modern critical research has confirmed what the Quran said on all the earlier revelations.²⁰

Does al-Bīrūnī support a class-society where people are divided into classes or castes? His introductory statement on the issue, in his India seems to answer in the

15 Al-Asqalānī, Fath al-Bari, (Lahore: Dar Nasr al-Kutub, 1981), vol. 4, pp. 247-248.

16 The Chronology, op. cit. p.331.

17 Tafsir al-Qurtubi, (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, 1946), vol. 16, p. 126.

18 Musnad Imam Ahmad bn Hanbal, (Beirut: Dar Sādir, N.D.)vol. 4, p. 107.

19 The Chronology, op. cit. p. 331, cp. al- Athar al-Baqiyah (Arabic version) of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit. p. 333.

affirmative. This is Sachau's translation of his words: "The kings of antiquity, who were industriously devoted to the duties of their office, spent most of their care on the division of their subjects into different classes and orders, which they tried to preserve²¹ from intermixture and disorder."

This al-Bīrūnī said while comparing the Hindu caste-system, with what the Chosroes of Iran were doing. The qualities al-Bīrūnī gave such rulers: Industry, devotion to duty, do not seem to augur well with the works he attributed to them at the end of the sentence. Is this sign of devotion to duty or tyrannical exploitation? After all, al-Bīrūnī himself, immediately after mentioning the caste system in Persia, stated the stand of Islam, which is closer to the natural creation of all as equals. He said: "We Muslims, of course, stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal, except in piety....."²² Those who devote time in dividing and classifying their subjects, will be doing injustice to at least some of subjects that have been prohibited, by virtue of that system, the opportunity of utilising all their talents, and reaching to all heights in terms of human achievements.

Other points of criticism directed against al-Bīrūnī included, his presenting to us only Vishnavic Hinduism where Vishnu is the Supreme Lord, abandoning Saivism, Saktism etc. His information on the Buddhists also is very small. Even though he confessed that he couldn't find a Buddhistic book, or a Buddhist scholar from whom he could learn their theories,²³ the Hindu Pandits from whom al-Bīrūnī studied could explain to him many of their ideas. This only shows that, the enmity between the two Indian religions is great was still great in the days of al-Bīrūnī.

We have already indicated some likely comparisons which al-Bīrūnī could have made, but he did not, like the case of the worshipping of icons and Narada son of Brahman who somewhat resembles Musa (P.B.U.H.).

20 See Johnson, P., A History of Christianity, (New York, 1980), p. 25

21 Alberuni's India, op. cit. vol. I, p.99.

22 ibid., vol. I, p.100.

23 ibid., vol. I, p. 249.

To a very great extent al-Bīrūnī stucked to his method and will not allow anything to distract him from it, except as we said in one or two places where the truth of Islam asserted itself and prevailed upon him.

Al-Bīrūnī was a great scholar, scientist, historian, a serious student of religion, whose comparative method we have seen very clearly, in this chapter. Other methods employed in the study of religion today were also utilised by al-Bīrūnī, as we have pointed above. It remains that another researcher will take it up as a subject of investigation, with the hope that at the end of it much more will be discovered of al-Bīrūnī's scholarly and scientific study of religion.



CHAPTER FOUR

**THE COMPARATIVE METHOD
IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN
MODERN WESTERN
SCHOLARSHIP**

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THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN MODERN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

ONE A brief outline of the comparative method in the study of religion in the modern West.

TWO Two comparative models in the study of religion in modern Western scholarship:

1. Joachim Wach (1898-1955)

2. Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

THREE Evaluation and criticism of the Western models of the comparative method.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN MODERN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP:

INTRODUCTION:

The field of the scientific study of religion in the Western Scholarship of today is believed to have 'started' in the second half of the 19th century.¹ It had a lot of names ranging from 'Religionswissenschaft', to 'Comparative religion', to 'The Science of Religion' – these being the major ones, and a host of other nomenclatures, as we have seen in the first chapter of this work. Its inception as an academic discipline coincided with the time when one of the main methodological approaches to the study of nature, man, and society was the comparative method — the main focus of our dissertation. Even before the modern times, the method seems to have been employed at different epochs and in different ways, as it mostly involves revealing the value of something, when brought in juxtaposition with one, or more things. This undoubtedly, man has been doing from the time of the first human family on this earth. The decision of Qabil to kill Habil, may be as a direct result of the process of comparison, when he saw the fate of his sacrifice offered to Allah as compared to the fate of his brother's.² The Western academic study of religion started as explained earlier in the socio-intellectual situation of the 19th century Europe. And as the scale of intellectualism and earnest pursuit of knowledge of all fields has already tilted towards the West, even earlier than that

¹ See Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p. 14, cp. Sharpe, E. J., Comparative Religion, A History, (New York; Charles Scribner's, 1975), p. 27 ff and Wach, J. The Comparative Study of Religion, (New York: Columbia University, 1958), p. 3.

² See Tafsir al-Tabari, op. cit., on verse 27 of Surah al-Maidah.

period, the Westerners with their ethnocentrism, interpreted human history to reflect their favoured situation. This led to the famous, but unscientific theory of evolution, underlying their interpretation of not only human anatomy or physiology, but also human history, culture, and religion.

In the religious realm, it is mostly the comparative method which was employed in trying to establish that evolutionism from the lower to the higher, or from the most primitive, to the most developed forms of religion. The West, having believed and encountered the Christian religion in its different phases, especially in the unfortunate conflict between science and religion, started a very serious critical study of religion and its various manifestations. Despite the shortcomings discovered in the written sources of Christianity which underwent very serious, and scrupulous investigation, some of 19th and early 20th century evolutionists, writing on the religions of the world, had no other choice than to declare their inherited but beleaguered religion, as man's highest spiritual attainment, and the final form of man's religious quest. This was shown to have been as a result of employing the comparative method in the study of all the discovered and vast religious data from all the different continents. This valuation or rather theological categorisation of religions was justified, or so they want to show, due to the Christian belief of the Divine having taken the form of man, so there is to be no further and better development in religion ahead of this.

We intend to study in this chapter the different aspects of this method, how it started, what forms it took and whether it has been completely abandoned now, or not. This will form the first part of the chapter. After having seen the outline of the method, we will Allah-willing give two models of the application of the comparative method in the modern Western scholarship. The two models are those of Joachim Wach (1898-1955) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), both of the Chicago tradition of the history of religions. In the last part, we will try to evaluate and criticise these two models, in their applications of the comparative method in the study of religion.

ONE - A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN THE MODERN WEST:

The comparative method due to which the modern Western scientific study of religion took its name, was seen at the beginning of this kind of studies, as the one adequate, and at the same time appropriate method, by means of which to study the diverse religions of mankind, in order to discover the possible origin of religion, and also 'the purpose that runs through the religions of mankind'.³ What are the different definitions of that method in the different phases of this nascent field? Before giving the subsequent conceptions of this method, and what it has acquired in the course of the Western study of religion for more than a century and a quarter now, let us see first what made the pioneers in this discipline choose, and rely upon it. F. Max Muller seen generally as the founder, or one of the founders of this field of study in the West, in pleading for the establishment of this kind of study as an academic discipline, has opined that, '... all higher knowledge is acquired by comparison and rests on comparison. If it is said that the character of scientific research in our age is pre-eminently comparative this really means that our researches are now based on the widest evidence that can be obtained...'⁴ C. P. Tiele seen as the only possible contender of Muller in being the founder of this discipline,⁵ 'was ever-persuaded that it is only as one compares adequately the materials which history affords, that any permanent progress can be made in the Science of Religion Hence, he esteemed and employed the apparatus of Comparative Religion in all his higher and more

³ Muller, F. Max, Chips from a German Workshop, in Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 31.

⁴ ibid., p. 43.

⁵ ibid., p. 35, cp. Jordan, L. H., Comparative Religion, its Genesis and Growth, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1905), p. 523.

complex investigations.⁶ So, these two co-founders of this discipline attest to the necessity of employing the comparative method for any scientific and progressive study of man's religions, at the inception of this discipline. Due to this, those who came after them followed their footsteps in establishing and expounding it further.

A- Definitions of the Comparative Method:

When we turn to the vast literature written on the modern study of religion, to see the various ways by which the comparative method has been defined, it becomes clear to us, the different shades of meaning and conception of that one method. Again starting with Max Muller's statement introducing or establishing this new discipline, he said: "A Science of Religion, based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important, religions of mankind, is now only a question of time....."⁷

That 'truly scientific comparison' has remained, for most part of the discipline's history, undefined precisely. It even became a target of attack after few decades of its use. It is pertinent to point here that, Max Muller was advocating the establishment of the discipline of Comparative Religion on foundations similar to those of comparative philology, to which he initially belongs. In showing how we can reach at the origin of religion, he had recourse to the issue of language. He says, "..... Yet, as it is essential that we should know the most ancient forms of every language before we proceed to any comparisons, it is indispensable also, that we should have a clear conception of the most primitive form of every religion before we proceed to determine its value, and to compare it with other forms of religious faith."⁸

From the above statements, it becomes evident that the Western desire in the study of the religions of the world, at least in the views of the pioneers cited above,

⁶ ibid., p. 183.

⁷ Muller, Introduction to the Science of Religion (1873), in Sharpe, op., cit., p. xi (preface).

⁸ Muller, Introduction to the Science of Religion (1873) in Waardenburg, Classical Approaches, op., cit., p. 94.

arose out of scientific curiosity, and the desire to know the heterogeneous nature of religions, and perhaps, to be able to discover some meaning in the unique phenomenon of religion. This is clear from Muller's famous words, 'He who knows one, knows none', contrary to what the Christian clergy were saying that he who knows Christianity, knows all religions.⁹

If the desire is to compare all religions, then the method to be employed must have the characteristic of comprehensiveness and adequacy. The comparative method is then seen to have those qualities, as explained above. The method has been defined by Louis H. Jordan, in 1905 as 'placing numerous religions of the world side by side, in order that deliberately comparing and contrasting them, it may frame a reliable estimate of their respective claims and values'¹⁰ It is almost in the same words he defined Comparative Religion.¹¹ So, it involves the comparison and contrast of various religions of the world, aiming at estimating 'their respective claims and values', i.e. it involves evaluation of the various (truth) claims and values of religions. This seems to differ very clearly from what subsequent comparative religionists said, as we will see.

Another definition of the comparative method, especially as employed by one of the great contributors to the field of comparative religion who 'ranges far and wide over the world of religion' and one of the Western scholars, to be studied in this humble work – Mircea Eliade especially in his book – 'Patterns in Comparative Religion' of 1958, is "to draw together all the examples he can find of the sacred manifesting itself in different types of hierophanies and symbols, and to lay bare their archetypal structure."¹²

⁹ Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 127, cp., pp. 7-13 on the general attitude of Christian theologians to this issue throughout the Middle ages.

¹⁰ Jordan, Comparative Religion..., op., cit., p. xi (Author's Introduction).

¹¹ ibid., p. 63.

¹² See Whaling, F, Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, (Berlin: Mouton, 1983) Vol. I, p. 215.

Here, Eliade is interested more in the different manifestations of the sacred, taken from their historical contexts and religions, and then compared and grouped later into types, in order to discover their structures and significance. This comparison has also been seen as 'phenomenological typology'.¹³

Yet another definition given as recent as 1985, is that of Ugo Bianchi when he said, comparative or comparative – historical study – (is) a synoptic consideration of two or more distinguishable facts or sets of facts in the world of religion(s); in the widest sense, (it means) a synoptic consideration of all analogous distinguishable facts and sets of facts.... (it) also includes, a synoptic consideration of the contexts and the processes of becoming in which religious facts and sets of facts exist."¹⁴ The emphasis here seems to be contrary to the idea of the last definition above. Bianchi believes comparison has to be holistic and also within historical context and process, this is why he used to call it comparative – historical study or method.

The last definition we will mention is the one given in The Encyclopedia of Religion in an article, entitled 'Comparative – Historical Method', where the writer stated that this method draws on historical data in comparing religions. It 'aims to show not only the interplay of the general and the particular elements of religion, but also the interplay of influences between religious phenomena and the secular factors in human culture'.¹⁵ It at the same time wants to 'demonstrate historical connections, and to point out independent occurrences of similar phenomena'. An added feature which distinguish the present concept of comparison from that of the beginning of this century is the writer's statement: "The comparative – historical method aims to be as objective as possible about the nature and power of religion; it is not concerned with

¹³ ibid., pp. 215-216.

¹⁴ Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.) The History of Religious Retrospect and Prospect, (New York: MacMillan, 1985), p.64.

¹⁵ Smart, N. (art) 'Comparative – Historical Method' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 3, p. 571.

whether a particular faith is true".¹⁶ So at last the Western scholars have outgrown their Euro-christian- centrism.

From the above definitions, what seems to be apparent is that, the comparative method is chiefly concerned with the placing of different religions, or aspects of those religions, side by side, so as to see and discover any meaning or insight as regards religion, which may not be apparent if one religion only is treated singly. Another belief of the scholars who initiated comparative study of religions was as Kitagawa pointed out, that the original natural religion of reason, and "..... 'truth' was to be found in the most universal essence of religion and not in its particular manifestations. The process of differentiation of the original truth into diverse religions was seen in much the same way as the Old Testament described the origin of different languages in the legend of the Tower of Babel"¹⁷ This makes the search for that truth in all the religions of man imperative, and that will be pursued, by means of comparative approach. Max Muller demands the authentic knowledge of the various religions to be taken, from the original sources available, after due textual criticism, and those 'that are still wanting, will be collected and published and translated'.¹⁸ The other side of this discipline from its inception is history, for a good deal of the material used, will have to come from historical researches, employing the historical method scientifically. Tiele, despite stressing the inevitable need for the historical method, believes however, that it is not enough. He said in his 'Elements of the Science of Religion': "..... nor do I think that the historical method will suffice. I agree with Professor Flint that by the historical method we obtain only history. But we want more than that; we wish to

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 572.

¹⁷ Kitagawa, J. M., (art) 'The History of Religions in America' in Eliade, M. and Kitagawa, J. M. (eds.), The History of Religions, Essays in methodology, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959), p. 17.

¹⁸ Muller, Chips from a German Workshop (1876) in Sharpe, Comparative Religions, op., cit., p. 31.

understand and to explain....."¹⁹ The historical aspect of the study of religion from the beginning, coupled with the fact that, of all the methods employed in the study of religion, it is only the historical that emerged from the methodological turmoil the discipline has gone through relatively unshaken;²⁰ this led to the acceptance of and the emphasis on the historical or diachronical study, side by side with comparative study and also the acceptance, especially in North America, of the title 'History of Religions' for the field,²¹ and the subsequent founding of the 'International Association for the History of Religions' in 1950.²²

B- Inception of the Comparative Method:

As regards the inception of the comparative method, different persons were given the honour of founding it. As usual with the Western scholarship, in tracing the beginning of every intellectual method or field to their Greek ancestors, S. Cain in The Encyclopedia of Religion, attributed it to Aristotle in his statement: " Moreover, Aristotle was the founder of the Comparative method, applied by him primarily to biological studies, but later extended to many other areas."²³

Another scholar of religion saw Auguste Comte (1798-1857), as having ".....laid the foundations of the Comparative Method in the Study of social and

¹⁹ Tiele, C. P., Elements of the Science of Religion, in Waardenburg, Classical Approaches, op., cit., p. 100.

²⁰ Sharpe, E.J., (art) 'Some Problems of method in the Study of Religion' in Religion (A journal of Religion and Religions), Vol. 1, Part One, Spring 1971, p. 7.

²¹ Sharpe, Comparative Religions, op., cit., p. 136 cp. Wach, J., Introduction to the History of Religions, Kitagawa et. al. (eds.) (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 19.

²² ibid., pp. 268.

²³ Cain, S. (art) 'Study of Religion, History of Study' , The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 14.

religious institutions,....."²⁴ Anyway, upto the mid – 19th century, the West has no other method by which to study other religions, than the yardstick of Christian revelation.²⁴ The different elements of what later became the comparative method were being composed and arranged at the same time, by scholars like Comte, Darwin, Muller, Spencer, Tylor and others,²⁵ in a situation described by Sharpe, as a sort of paradigm shift of the above-mentioned scholars, who were detaching themselves from religion, in line with a premise of "..... the transcendental categories of revelation being replaced by immanent categories within the temporal process". This he saw, as nowhere striking as in the development they discovered from lower to higher, and from the simple to the complex, – or evolution in all spheres of man's existance.²⁶ The theory of evolution as applied in the study of the social sciences including the history of religions gave the comparative method of that period the pigment of the thought then.

So it appears that, with a lot of material being accumulated due to explorations, colonisation and academic inquiries, in the realm of religion, one thing seem to be lacking – an effective and adequate method with which to go deep into the data to discover the 'mysteries' and wonders buried in the religious world. As Sharpe opined, Darwin suggested evolution as a theory pointing to the possibility of that progressive development, and it was Herbert Spencer, T.H. Huxley and Benjamin Kidd and others who showed that it had happened even in the religious sphere.²⁷ And Jordan has pointed out clearly in his definition of the field of comparative religion, the purely evolutionary terms upon which the discipline was initially based.²⁸ Carpenter also in his

²⁴ James, E. O., Comparative Religion (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 20.

²⁵ Sharpe, (art) 'Some Problems of Method....' op., cit., p. 4, cp. Wach, J. The Comparative Study of Religion (ed.) Kitagawa, J. M., (New York: Columbia University, 1958)

²⁶ ibid., p. 4.

²⁷ ibid., p. 4.

²⁸ Jordan, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 63.

book 'Comparative Religion', cannot be more categorical when he declared, "It is on this great idea (evolution) that the whole study of the history of religion is now firmly established."²⁹ Another eminent scholar of religion W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953) in his lectures from 1925 published post humorously in 1960 titled The Meaning of Religion, explains that comparative religion has since 1880 compares religions for the purpose of determining their value. This came as a result of the discovery of various ancient religions, the so-called primitive religions. The Westerners at that time thought that by means of comparison, they may know which religion is lower or higher, i.e. to have a general view of the different degrees of religious development.³⁰ The presuppositions of the western theory of evolution as applied to history, which we still witness in works like The End of History, has been succinctly and candidly outlined by Kristensen in the following words:

"The basis (sic) conviction (in the evolutionary – historical theory) is this, that history of mankind has had just ourselves (Westerners) as its goal, and after frightfully great pains it has generated our civilization, as a result of all that which had preceded it. History has a meaning: it follows a continuous line from the primitive through the developed up to the highest. In religion as well as in the rest of our culture, we stand on the apex of the historical pyramid."³¹

This particular application of the comparative method by mostly anthropologists, dominated the field of religious study from 1870s to 1920s or at least upto the beginning of this century.³² Even in that period of the establishment, and consolidation or emancipation of the Science of religion, from the philosophy of

²⁹ Carpenter, Comparative Religion, (1913) in Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 95.

³⁰ Kristensen, W. B., The Meaning of Religion (trans.) Carman, J. B., (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p. 2.

³¹ ibid., p. 11. (Emphasis ours).

³² Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 94, cp. Bianchi, U. (art) 'History of Religions' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 6, p.404.

religion and theology, which came slowly, the field was considered as an adjunct of theology or theology with some qualifications. Muller himself had the two terms of 'comparative theology' and 'theoretic theology' for the two kinds of religious study.³³ Due to this added feature of theology, which was to be abandoned later, the issue of value judgement became more pronounced, with many writers on world religions showing the uniqueness of Christianity and its being the highest level of spirituality man can reach. Thus reaching a rapprochement with Christian theologians who vehemently opposed this kind of liberal study.³⁴

After these decades of establishment, the two kinds of valuation, i.e. evolutionary and theological started to be attacked, and with the increase in knowledge of more religious communities, and the writing of some important works, like 'The Idea of the Holy' by R. Otto and 'Adventures of Ideas' by Whitehead, scholars were able to penetrate some of the subjective and inaccurate assumptions of early comparative religionists. This being the shaking of the comparative – evolutionary method because of being '*a priori*' and of having outlived its uses.³⁵ Even the word 'comparative' despite being extolled at the inception of this discipline as 'the method', was viewed later with great suspicion. It came to be regarded as unscientific, 'unless, that is, a very clear historical connection between the areas to be compared can in fact be demonstrated'. This may be the reason why in the latest encyclopedia of this field (published 1987), an entry was given under the title of 'Comparative – Historical Method', which rules out all speculations as regards the abandonment of the

³³ Jordan, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 27 cp. Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 43.

³⁴ Sharpe, E. J., (art) 'Comparative Religion' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 578 cp. Jordan, op., cit., pp. 129, 142, 356-359, he even had an entry in the Index I, under Christianity titled 'Superiority to all its' rivals', p. 613. See for example Carpenter's and Bouquet's works both entitled 'Comparative Religion'.

³⁵ Sharpe, (art) 'Some Problems of Method...op., cit., p. 6.

comparative method completely.³⁶ We also see modern authorities in the history of religions, upto the mid 1980s affirming the application of the comparative method or to be precise the comparative – historical method, even in the future.³⁷ It is also pertinent here to mention that, F. Whaling being the editor of 'Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion' (2 Vols.) has assigned 130 pages for treating 'Comparative Approaches' in that work, to show its relevance and significance in the contemporary study of religion.³⁸

The writer of the article on the 'Comparative – Historical Method' mentioned above, who is a well-known authority in the scientific study of religion today also wrote in the 'The New Encyclopedia Britannica' the following:

" Most students of religion agree, however, that valid comparisons are possible, though they are difficult to make. Indeed, one can see the very uniqueness of a religion through comparison, which includes a contrast....."³⁹

'Valid comparisons' are indeed what everyone will claim to be making, but in real sense very few are able to make them.

C- Two Main Kinds of Comparison:

As regards the attacks directed to the comparative method earlier in this century, and the statements of Sharpe in the preface to his work, 'Comparative

³⁶ ibid., p. 8, cp., Smart, N. 'art' 'Comparative – Historical Method' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit., Vol. 3, pp. 571-574.

³⁷ See Bianchi, U. (art) ' Current Methodological Issues in the History of Religions' and Rudolph, K. (art) 'The Foundations of History of Religions and its Future Task', both in Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.), The History of Religions, Retrospect and Prospect, (New York: Macmillan 1985) pp. 53-72 and pp. 105-120 respectively.

³⁸ Whaling, F., (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, (Berlin: Mouton, 1983-84) 2 Vols., pp. 165-295 of Vol. 1 (The Humanities).

Religion, A History', where after giving the definition of the Science of Religion (Comparative Religion) given in 1905 by L. H. Jordan, in which that science is conceived as comparing the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various religions to determine their relative superiority or inferiority; after giving this definition, Sharpe commented:

"..... Today there would appear to be no such 'science'. Not that we have ceased altogether to compare the origin....., but we do so with great caution,

and we have ceased almost entirely to concern ourselves with 'relative superiority or inferiority' of religions in the criteria provided by the Darwinian – Spencerian theory of evolution."⁴⁰

To make himself clear, Sharpe pointed to the fact that the comparative method, which the seventy years or so, that separated him and Jordan has seen its virtual abandonment, was the evolutionary-comparative method, by saying 'comparative', and then putting between brackets i.e. 'evolutionary'.⁴⁰

It is evident from the above statements, that the comparative method attacked and almost abandoned, is the comparative method that treats the data of religion in line with the 'Darwinian- Spencerian' evolutionary theory especially as employed by the anthropologists.⁴¹ This view is further augmented by Kristensen in his 'The Meaning of Religion', when he says:

"This comparison (of religions) is worked out systematically in an evolutionary interpretation of religion. This interpretation was held in high regard about the

³⁹ Smart, N., (art) 'The Study and Classification of Religions', The New Encyclopedia Britannica, (ed.) Goetz, P. W., (Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1985) Macropedia, Vol. 26, p. 548.

⁴⁰ Sharpe, Comparative religion, A History, op., cit., p. xii (preface)

⁴¹ ibid., p. 94.

end of the last century, both in scholarly circles and elsewhere. At present, however, it has practically disappeared among scholars....."⁴²

So it becomes apparent that there are two main kinds of comparative method. The comparative – evolutionary one, which has almost been completely abandoned now, due to its value judgements and positivistic temper inherited from Comte, who believes, according to his 'Law of three stages', 'that evolution must mean an evolution out of religion into science'.⁴³ The other kind of comparative method even though it took another name, evolved gradually and as a reaction to the misgivings of the first method enumerated as:

- a- the evolutionism of the early anthropologists, as we have just seen above;
- b- the implied reductionism of sociologists and psychologists, like Durkheim and Freud respectively;
- c- the value judgements of theologians, who were deprecatory of the positive in other religions;
- d- the contextual historicism of historians;
- e- the isolationism of orientalists who were concerned only about the religion of their own particular region.⁴⁴

This method of the study of religion even though it is basically comparative, it came to be known with the name 'Phenomenology of Religion', i.e. especially as conceived by the earlier phenomenologists. On explaining this kind of comparison which is 'completely different from the first and better characterised by the name 'Phenomenology'. Kristensen⁴⁵ says:

⁴² Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op. cit., p. 11.

⁴³ Konig, R. (art) 'Comte, Auguste' International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, op., cit., Vol. 3 p. 202, cp. Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 143.

⁴⁴ Whaling, F., (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 1, p. 212.

⁴⁵ Kristensen's The Meaning of Religion's appearance and another work by van der Leeuw, were seen by Whaling as heralding the first appearance of phenomenology of religion in continental Europe, which means he is among the chief exponents of that method.

"Phenomenology..... takes out of their historical setting the similar facts and phenomena which it encounters in different religions, brings them together, and studies them in groups. The corresponding data, which are nearly identical bring us almost automatically to comparative study. The purpose of such study is to become acquainted with the religions, idea or need which underlies the group of corresponding data. The comparative consideration of corresponding data often gives a deeper and more accurate insight than the consideration of each datum by itself...."⁴⁶

This same idea of a second kind of 'Comparative' method known as phenomenology of religion, was explained by Sharpe in his history of the discipline, even though he qualified it with the phrase, 'in its earliest form'. He says:

"..... 'the phenomenology of religion' was meant to be no more than a systematic counterpart to the history of religion, an elementary method of cross-cultural comparison of the constituent elements of religious belief and practice as opposed to their treatment in cultural isolation and chronological sequence."⁴⁷

The same division of the two main methods by which religious phenomena are studied was given by Wach, when he saw that these phenomena will be studied lengthwise in time (diachronically) and in cross-sections – or comparatively (synchronously).⁴⁸

It is pertinent in our view to mention here, that the comparative - evolutionary method seen earlier, despite its being attacked and challenged, continued to be

⁴⁶ Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op., cit., pp. 2-6, where a lot of emphasis has been laid on the necessity of comparison in this kind of study, cp. Allen, D. (art) 'Phenomenology of Religion' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. II, p. 280.

⁴⁷ Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op., cit., p. 223.

⁴⁸ Wach, J. Introduction to the History of Religions, (ed.) Kitagawa, et. al., op., cit., p. 19. cp. Rudolph, K. 'The Foundations of the History of Religions....' The History of Religions, Retrospect and Prospect, op., cit., p. 105 and 113, where he saw the interdependence of the two methods as recent as 1985. =

employed till as recent as 1940s. But it was from the years between the two world wars that new need was seriously felt for another approach to the study of religion. Sharpe saw the turn of the tide as coming due to a number of factors, including, the general feeling of living in an insecure world, especially after the 1st World War; the challenge from the New World with its peculiar experience; the ideas of the Psychologists of religion, like William James and others; and the new wave of writings on the spiritual life by Wundt, Otto and others.⁴⁹ Of great importance in this regard is Otto's work 'The idea of the Holy' (1917), showing the complexity of the religious realm and the irrational side of religion, thus calling for a deeper understanding of religion. Whitehead's Adventures Of Ideas (1955) tried to show that, religion 'cuts into every aspect of human existence. So far as concerns religious problems, simple solutions are bogus solutions'.⁵⁰

The phenomenology of religion has been seen by many as occupying a similar position as the expression 'Comparative Religion', and as Sharpe believes this similarity is both 'in potential scope and undeniable ambiguity'.⁵¹ 'Comparative Religion' as a term is not used much in America, as mentioned before, preferring instead 'history of religions', and so we see Wach, explaining that 'Religionswissenschaft' is the same as the phenomenology of religion or the systematic study of religion as explained by Max Scheler, in his notion of 'concrete phenomenology of religious objects and acts', as

cp. also Smart, N., (art) 'Scientific Phenomenology and Wilfred Cantwell Smith's misgiving, in Whaling, F. (ed.) The World's Religious Traditions, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), p. 257.

⁴⁹ Sharpe, (art) 'Some Problems of Method.....' op., cit., pp. 6-11, cp. his Comparative Religion, op., cit., pp. 97-188 and pp. 195-219.

⁵⁰ Whitehead, Adventures of ideas, (1955), p. 165 as in Sharpe, (art) Some Problems of Method.....' op., cit., pp. 7-8.

⁵¹ ibid., p. 11, cp. Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op., cit., p. 1, Allen, D., 'Phenomenology of Religion' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 11, p. 276, Smart even said that the difference between the two methods 'cannot be put always so clearly'. See Smart, N. (art) 'Comparative – Historical Method'. The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 3, p. 571.

distinguished to 'Religionsgeschichte' i.e. the historical study of religion.⁵² The two form the general history of religion or the science of religion in the broader sense..

The phenomenological method which some scholars saw as essentially historical, and comparative, intends a sympathetic study of the religion of the other. In fact it means many things to many people. Douglas Allen in his article on this method in The Encyclopedia of Religion has given four different uses of the term by scholars.⁵³ We have mentioned in the first chapter of this work that, in the Dutch tradition of the study of religion alone, five different definitions can be discerned for the phenomenological method.⁵⁴ The major aspects of that method have been expounded by scholars. They include:

- a. Empathy – or the power of entering into another's personality and imaginatively experiencing his experiences. On this Kristensen says:

"By means of empathy he tries to relive in his own experience that which is 'alien' and that, too, he can only approximate. This imaginative re-experiencing of a situation strange to us, is a form of representation....."⁵⁵

- b. The belief in the absolute character of all faiths and the limited validity of historical research, and due to that, the believer should be allowed to speak for himself, so that the researcher's ideas and values are not imposed on the data studied. Kristensen says on this issue:

"If the historian tries to understand the religious data from a different viewpoint than that of the believers, he negates the religious reality. For there is no religious reality other than the faith of the believers."⁵⁶

⁵² Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op., cit., pp. 92-96 and pp. 128-132.

⁵³ Allen, D. (art) 'Phenomenology of Religion' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 11, p.73.

⁵⁴ See p.

⁵⁵ Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵⁶ ibid., p. 13.

Other aspects of this approach include:

- c. Descriptive nature – This approach to the study of religion aims at a rigorous description of the phenomena as they appear. Hence the word 'phenomenon' thus it is a total description of the phenomena in its diversity, complexity and richness.⁵⁷
- d. This approach is also opposed to all kinds of reduction – which means 'freeing us from uncritical preconceptions that prevent us from becoming aware of the specificity and diversity of phenomena'⁵⁸ This reduction of religious phenomena can be in ^{the} form of psychologism or the 'oversimplifications of traditional empiricism' etc.⁵⁹
- e. Intentionality – as all acts of conscious beings are aim at, and directed toward something, trying to know this will help in the description, as Intentionality is part of the phenomena described.⁶⁰
- f. 'Epoché' – also derives from Greek, it means 'stoppage' and suspension of judgement, the exclusion from one's mind of every possible presupposition⁶¹ This is also known as bracketing, in explaining this term Wach says:
"Historians of religions have studied and described very different religions,... and they have still avoided discussing the claims to truth that

⁵⁷ Allen, D. (art) 'Phenomenology of Religion' op., cit., Vol. 11, p. 274.

⁵⁸ ibid.

⁵⁹ ibid., pp. 274-275.

⁶⁰ ibid., p. 275.

⁶¹ ibid., p. 224.

these religions naturally make. This does not mean, of course, that they deny the truth of a given religion.⁶²

Another aspect has also been mentioned by Sharpe, which is the task of clarifying and comprehending or understanding the religious phenomena, which will take us to the areas of 'hermeneutics' - 'the intellectual discipline concerned with the nature and presuppositions of the interpretation of human expressions.'⁶³ In this connection, Wach explains that, as '..... there is always a possibility of a misunderstanding , there has arisen a concern, to guarantee that understanding is adequate.'⁶⁴ He later added 'The history of religions, for example, seeks to understand foreign religions..... Its ultimate goal is to comprehend the spirit that is active in the totality of religions' manifestations..... The hermeneutics of religious documents, should make such understanding possible.'⁶⁵

D- Comparative Aspect of the Phenomenology of Religion:

As mentioned above, many scholars have pointed to the importance of the comparative approach under the phenomenology of religion, while others have seen the comparative aspect as essential in that approach to the religious data.

Starting with Kristensen, whom we have quoted above, in his only book published in English – 'The Meaning of Religion', with a sub-title : 'Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion', he tried to explain the essential need for comparison, if

⁶² Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op., cit., pp. 22-23.

⁶³ Harvey, V.A., (art) 'Hermeneutics' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 6, p. 279.

⁶⁴ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op., cit., pp. 156-157.

⁶⁵ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religion, op., cit., pp. 54. cp. Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op., cit., p. 6.

one wants to employ the phenomenological method with illustrations. For instance, on discussing the religious significance of 'ritual purification', which he says occurs in most religions, he opined that, it is 'only on the basis of comparative study of corresponding data is it possible to ascertain whether the purification has the positive effect of strengthening the one purified, or whether it has the negative aim of washing off spiritual stains.'⁶⁶

Any similar inquiry, taking religion as a whole or an aspect of it, will undoubtedly necessitate comparison. It is clear that this kind of comparison does not involve value judgements. Through such comparative analysis, we are able, according to Kristensen, 'to penetrate to the thoughts which lie deeper, and more or less, be able exactly, to determine the religious (not that of a particular religion) significance or value of each separate form of worship.'⁶⁷ He further explains the helpful relationship between phenomenology and comparison in another chapter, saying:

"Phenomenology does not aim to give a comparative evaluation; it uses comparative observation or study only as means towards better understanding of the distinctive nature and value of the various religions."⁶⁸

This means that, comparative study of religious data under phenomenology is so as to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon in question, as it is taken from different religions and then compared, to discover any hidden facts.

Kristensen, like many scholars, has his own reservations and words of caution, as regards the use of the comparative method. He said in the 'General Introduction' to his work:

"Comparative Study is in numerous instance a quite necessary aid to the understanding of alien religious ideas, but it is certainly not an ideal means. Every religion ought to be understood from its own standpoint..... The result of

⁶⁶ Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op., cit., p. 4.

⁶⁷ ibid., p. 6.

⁶⁸ ibid., p. 268.

comparative research, and every kind of historical research is likewise less than ideal; only approximate knowledge is possible.”⁶⁹

He also maintained that, as every believer looks upon his religion as unique and incomparable, so also individual beliefs or rites are also claimed to be so. It is very evident then, from points raised above, that anyone who wants to employ the phenomenological method in studying particular phenomena from the different religions, will have to use the comparative approach so as to arrive at general insights as regards prayer, for example, in the religions of the world.

The second scholar whose views as regards the position of comparison in systematic (as he prefers to call it) study of religion is Joachim Wach (1898-1955). In his work, which was edited by Kitagawa and others – ‘Introduction to the History of Religions’ – being Wach’s habilitation thesis in 1924, he pointed to the kind of comparison that is accepted in the systematic (phenomenological) study of religious phenomena, after having delineated some of the dangers associate with comparison in his views. He seems to start from where Kristensen has stopped. He says:

“To be useful, a comparison must work within its own limits. One must remember that for a comparison to be successful, certain points must be established as the “bearers of the comparison....What is peripheral in one instance may be of decisive significance in another.”⁷⁰

As if mentioning the same fact mentioned by Kristensen, he continues: ‘The integrity of an individual phenomenon unique in itself, whose elements cannot be eliminated or regrouped arbitrarily, is of utmost importance’⁷⁰ Wach believes in the use of comparison as a tool in the discipline, but that has to be guided by an important principle of ‘careful criticism’: as similarity of form does not always imply similarity of meaning. It should be of help to see not only what is common but also what is distinct,

⁶⁹ ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁰ Wach, J., Introduction to the History of Religions, op., cit., p. 136.

and that no evaluation should follow, otherwise one may fall into apologetics.⁷¹ As for his criticisms, we will mention them together with other criticisms against the method at the end of this part.

It has been stated in the only article we found speaking specifically on the comparative method and that also in French, by Geo Widengren, that the phenomenology of religion has its basis in philology and the comparative method.⁷² Thus buttressing what we have been trying to establish on the comparative nature of the phenomenological method. We see another indication of the use of comparative approach in the phenomenology of religion in The Encyclopedia of Religion. In the second usage of the term phenomenology of religion, Allen says that it 'indicates the comparative study and the classification of different types of religious phenomena'. This is the concept of P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, and to some extent Kristensen, whose many statements in this connection we have seen, so also that of contemporary Scandinavian scholars of religion like Geo Widengren and Ake Hultkrantz.⁷³ This very idea of the comparative nature of phenomenology of religion was further elucidated by Allen, when he declares that there is 'a widespread agreement that his discipline (phenomenology of religion) uses a comparative approach'.⁷⁴ Not only this, but various phenomenologists have defined their phenomenology of religion as equivalent to comparative religion, as we have shown above. Allen believes that even those who rejected such simple equation, have admitted the fact that they can 'gain insight into essential structures and meaning only after comparing a large number of (religious) documents'.⁷⁴ Another modern scholar of religion, M. Pye opines that the

⁷¹ *ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

⁷² See Pummer, R. (art) 'Recent Publications on the Methodology of the Science of Religion' in Numen, Vol. 22, Fasc. 3, p. 171.

⁷³ Allen, D. (art) 'Phenomenology of Religion' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 11, p. 273.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 280.

comparative method phenomenologically conceived is 'the' method of studying religions.⁷⁵

So, from all that has preceded, we will not be exaggerating when we say that the present 'phenomenology of religion' may be a refined form of the earlier comparative method conceived at the inception of the discipline as the main, or almost the main method by which to study religious data scientifically. It is only that it is no more being labelled 'Comparative' but phenomenological.

Another modern scholar of religion, in trying to explain the dialectic between phenomenological, historical and comparative aspects of the science of religion and in trying also to find an adequate, and comprehensive method – a sort of an integral approach to the study which scholars have been searching for, for some time and by which to study religion in all its complexity – in trying to do this, he mentions an approach called 'historical phenomenology' used earlier by Bianchi, Smart and others, and shows his satisfaction with it, and its meaning, as the most appropriate method by which to study religion. This is because it 'is perhaps the most appropriate to describe a strong historically grounded, but systematically and comparatively oriented study of religious phenomena'.⁷⁶ The reason of its appropriateness is due to its combining the historical and the phenomenological approaches together with a comparative study of the religious material. It emphasizes on empirical and non-normative research, which makes it come closer to the earlier positivistic meaning of the comparative study of religions.⁷⁶ This will also appear as a combination of the two kinds of study in this discipline – the historical and the systematic or the diachronic and the synchronic.⁷⁷ The systematic or the synchronic always involves comparison, grouping and typologies,

⁷⁵ See Whaling (art) 'Comparative Approaches', op., cit., vol., 1, p.269.

⁷⁶ King, U. (art) Historical and Phenomenological Approaches to the Study of Religion in Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 1, p. 88.

⁷⁷ ibid., p. 39, cp. Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op., cit., pp. 161-162.

so as to reach the essence and structure of religious phenomena, out of the vast data in the religious world.

In concluding his article, King says:

"To some extent there will always exist a dialectical tension between historical and systematic approaches to the study of religions.... The study of religion will of necessity be comparative, for it is not only concerned with research into one religious tradition but examines phenomena across traditions and cultures, using cross-cultural data."⁷⁸

N. Smart, in his survey of the methods of the scientific study of religion in its plurality summarised those methods in the following words:

"Thus the study of religion contains among other things the histories of various traditions..... but it also contains attempts at comparative treatment, which is necessarily cross – cultural....."

Earlier he has said that the comparative study comes in and out of vogue, adding that "..... yet in vogue in so far as we wish the study of religions to make use of the opportunities for comparison and contrast, opportunities which are useful in testing various hypothesis about religion....."⁷⁹

This further strengthens our thesis in these pages that the comparative method has not been completely abandoned, but continued to be employed in the study of religion and in other fields, differently. What distinguishes one kind of comparison from another, or makes it being declared as unscientific or abandoned, are the presuppositions and values that are associated with the application of that kind of comparison.

⁷⁸ King, (art) 'Historical and Phenomenological Approaches...', op., cit., p. 149.

⁷⁹ Smart, N. (art) 'The Scientific Study of Religion in its Plurality' in Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches...., op., cit., Vol. I, p. 371.

E- Other Types of Comparative Approaches Employed Today in the Study of Religion:

As mentioned above, Whaling in his (being the editor and the writer of the article on 'comparative approaches') Contemporary Approaches to the study of religions, has devoted 130 pages of his valuable work on the comparative approaches to the study of religion. As he has limited his investigation to the post – 1945 era, upto his day, he analysed in his article the various comparative approaches he can discern in the works of comparative religionists, so as to lay bare their worth in the discipline. He pointed to the term 'comparative religion' , giving its meaning in both a wide and a narrow sense, alluding to the fact that Max Muller, himself conceived this discipline as 'comparative'.⁸⁰ He also pointed to the uneasy relationship between comparative religion as a scientific field and theology, most particularly, Christian theology. He showed that the reason why the science of religion has been 'so anxious to distance itself from theological comparison', was due to its exclusivistic nature.⁸¹

On outlining the other comparative approaches to the study of religion he expressed at the outset, his concern of investigating the different ways in which 'religious traditions, phenomena, themes and patterns have been impartially compared and contrasted.' As regards phenomenology of religion as an approach to the study of religion influenced by Husserl, Whaling opined that the criteria of Husserl(1859-1938) in his phenomenology has been incorporated into the study of religion in two stages, thus characterising the two main periods of the application of this method.⁸² In the first stage (temporary suspension of all 'inquiry into the problem of truth), due to the tendencies that led to its inception and subsequent application mentioned above, époche

⁸⁰ Whaling, F. (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 1, pp. 165-166.

⁸¹ ibid., p. 191.

⁸² ibid., p. 212.

was applied in the general comparative study of religious data, by avoiding all value judgements of the theologians or the implied reductions of other disciplines in the realm of religion. 'Together with 'epoché', Whaling explains 'they applied 'Einfühlung' to attempt to interpret religions empathetically by taking seriously the believer's standpoint', as we have seen with Kristensen for example. In this way this method seem to be a fresh general approach to the study of religion, this is why many scholars equated phenomenology of religion with comparative religion in the beginning.⁸² At the second stage, eidetic vision was applied in that approach that led to the realm of phenomenological typology, which is a way of comparing religions, phenomenologically and grouping the phenomena into types.⁸³

ONE - One of the leading contemporary scholars who compared religions in the above mentioned way was Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the editor-in-chief of The Encyclopedia of Religion. Eliade 's main focus of comparing religions despite his wide interests not only in religion, but also in literature, alchemy, hermeneutics, etc. is well known among the students of religion. As he will be one of the two Western models we will by the will of Allah, present in this work, it will suffice to give here a brief idea of his own approach in comparing religions. Eliade uses the typological phenomenology because of his belief that 'there are certain basic comparative structures and patterns built into religion.'⁸⁴ And in his 'Patterns in Comparative Religion' (1958), he tried to present those patterns through which man perceives the sacred. In his study he has first to identify the different manifestations, of the sacred which he calls 'hierophanies', like the cosmic ones, the sky, the sun, the moon, the water, etc. so also the earth, sacred places, sacred time, and so on.⁸⁵ He gathered a lot of data from

⁸³ ibid., pp. 212-213.

⁸⁴ ibid., p. 214.

⁸⁵ Eliade, M., Patterns in Comparative Religion, (trans.) Shead, R., (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958). pp. 7-12.

ancient and living religions which he studied comparatively, so as to discover those structures and patterns in which man apprehends the sacred. The way, he compares as Whaling explains, is to draw together all the examples he can find of the sacred manifesting itself in different types of hierophanies and symbols, and 'to lay bare their archetypal structure.'⁸⁶ Throughout the book, Eliade was comparing the so-called lower and higher religions in their common elements, and he was not using evolutionary categories and presuppositions.⁸⁷ His main focus of comparison is the sacred as a phenomenon in the life of the 'homo religiosus'. To him every hierophany presupposes a system of meanings and a structure of the sacred, and it is the duty of the student of religion to discover such meanings and structures.⁸⁸ Whaling saw that Eliade's kind of comparison is analogous to that of the other members of the Eranos circle, to which he also belonged. This circle was dominated by the ideas of the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), they met annually since 1933 and one of their dominant motifs in their discussions has been that of the archetype.⁸⁹

TWO- The other kind of comparative approach mentioned by Whaling is the anthropological approaches to comparative religion. In order not to dwell long on it, we will quote O. Lewis in 1955 who summarised the anthropological comparison by classifying them into two. One is to compare societies or religious groups 'that share a common history, culture, or national identity.' This method offers, according to him greater controls and deeper research possibilities at the grassroots level.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' op., cit., p. 215.

⁸⁷ Kitagawa, J. M., (art), 'Eliade, Mircea', The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 5, p.87.

⁸⁸ See Whaling (art) 'Comparative Approaches', op., cit., p. 214.

⁸⁹ Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches', op., cit., p. 220.

⁹⁰ ibid., p. 224.

The second kind of comparison is when anthropologists compare societies or religious groups that are unrelated historically and otherwise, 'in order to seek similarities in form and structure that can point to wider typologies.'⁹⁰ This is another kind of comparative approach from the anthropology of religion, which compares societies or religious groups so as to find similarities that can lead to typology.

THREE- The third kind of comparative approach is associated with history. We have alluded earlier to the comparative-historical method, and how it takes interest in both comparison and history. There are different ways in which such comparisons were held. One of them is the comparative views of history, as practiced for example, by W. C. Smith in his 'Islam in Modern History' (1957). He compares in it the views of history in the Hindu, Christian, Islamic, and Marxist traditions, In a statement quoted by Whaling, Smith says:

"By ignoring complexities (and details), one might arrange representatives of these faiths in a graded series (as regards their concern with history and what it does) as follows: the Hindu, for whom ultimately history is not significant, ^{the Christian} for whom it is significant but not decisive; the Muslim, for whom it is decisive but not final; the Marxist, for whom it is all in all."

Smith added that it is this Islam's concern, with history and the significance it affords it, that became the symbol of its success, and kept reverberating in the minds of Muslims, and it also became 'a partial factor in the contemporary (global) Muslim resurgence.'⁹¹

Here is a comparison of religions and a pseudo-religion in the issue of their general attitudes and views of history. The scholar in this case will have to study the history of these traditions and how they have reacted to its various events, and what value they accord to them and to history itself. All this will then be compared, and

⁹¹ See Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches', op., cit., p. 238. cp. Smith, W. C., Islam in Modern History, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 21.

then only a grading will be possible, which shows clearly the necessity of comparison in this case.

Another example of comparisons based on historical studies of religion viewed as part of global history is, Trevor Ling's A History of Religion East and West, 1968). In it Ling surveys the entire history of religion, focussing on Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the major living religions in the world. He comparatively divided this whole history into stages, like firstly, the early city civilisations of Asia, Judaism and Hinduism, this he saw as the period of 'nomads, peasants and kings'.⁹² The second stage of the world history of religion corresponding with the sixth century BCE, is what he calls the era of 'prophets and philosophers' focussing on Hebrew prophets, Zarathustra, the Buddha, the Mahavira and Confucius. The third stage he tries to explain what historical development was taking place in the religions concerned. For instance, he emphasises in this stage, on the diffusion of religious ideas across cultural boundaries. The fourth stage which he calls age of 'creeds and conformity' stresses especially on the rise and spread of Christianity, Hinduism, and Mahayana Buddhism, as religions supported by and supporting great cultures. The ^{fifth} stage of the sacred history he calls the era of 'religion and civilisation', which he devoted to the rise of Islam and its expansion side-by-side with the expansion of Buddhism, as 'genuinely popular and religiously inspired' developments. The sixth stage upto 1500 CE, he calls the era of 'theologians, poets and mystics.' Here he focussed on medieval Hinduism, Christendom and the coming of age of Islam including the Buddhist civilisation in wider Asia. After this Ling wrote on contrasts and conflicts between religions from 1500-1800 CE. The final stage is that of religion and industrial society and how these religions fared generally in a changed atmosphere.

FOUR- Comparison has been made by many writers based on topics or themes selected from different religions of the world. This is called 'thematic comparison'. Here the scholar selects a theme which he compares 'across the

⁹² ibid., p. 246 ff.

religious board'. As Whaling opines, in this kind of comparison open value judgements are rarely built into it. The aim, as most writers used to say, is to compare religions with particular reference to the theme(s) selected, objectively but at the same time sympathetically. The data in this kind of comparison is taken from the histories of the concerned religions, which is then grouped together for comparison.⁹³ The object of this thematic comparison, which shows clearly its scientific nature – "is to place side by side empirical data, taken from different religions that illustrate the theme in question and to observe them and compare them." A well-known student of religion who practices this kind of comparison is Geoffrey Parrinder. In a recent article titled 'Thematic comparison' , he started with the analysis of the Gifford lectures in Scotland citing, Nasr's 'Knowledge and the sacred', Coplestone's Religion and The One and Smart's Beyond Ideology, as themes that were treated by these scholars comparatively. He pointed that the 'most useful thematic comparisons are probably in limited fields and between related subjects, rather than taking the whole gamut of religion for comparative study, except where they are largely descriptive as in comparisons of worship.....'⁹⁴ He gave example of this 'useful' and partially successful comparison which he carried out in comparing beliefs in Jesus in the Quran and the New Testament and also the Indian ideas of Avatars with Christian faith in the Incarnation. In the end he confirms – contrary to the views of some scholars⁹⁵ - that comparisons 'can be made that are neither 'odious' nor 'odorous'"⁹⁶

⁹³ ibid., p. 257ff, cp. Parrinder, G. (art) 'Thematic Comparison' in Whaling, F. (ed.) The World's Religious Traditions, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1984), pp. 240-256.

⁹⁴ ibid., p. 255.

⁹⁵ See for instance Smith, H, The Religions of Man, (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1983) 1st ed. 1958, p.5.

⁹⁶ Parrinder, (art) 'Thematic Comparison', op., cit., p. 255.

F- The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion in the 1980's and Beyond:

As some people may surmise that the comparative method or approach is no more used in the modern scientific study of religion in the West, and that it has been completely abandoned, we would like to mention some few Western scholars of religion, known for their standing in the field, and their views on the issue in the previous decade of this century. In a conference on the history of religions, with the theme: "The History of Religions, past, present and future" held in the University of Chicago – known for its old and sustained interest and tradition in the study of religion – in May 1983, Ugo Bianchi presented a paper titled 'Current Methodological Issues in the History of Religions', ⁹⁷ in which he clearly emphasises on the issue of comparison but within historical contexts. In that paper he saw two issues 'as standing out, the problem of definition and the problem of historical comparison'⁹⁸ Bianchi true to his Italian tradition of the study of religion leans strongly towards the historical comparative-method, and even agreed with some scholars who expressed the commitment of the history of religions to its being comparative using terms like 'systematic' or 'nomothetic', but he added that, that should not be thought to be non-historical. He expressed his belief in the discipline's essential requirement to be comparative and historical.⁹⁹ Having started as a historical study of religion, which appropriated historical methods of research, the discipline will always have a historical aspect, side by side with the comparative. This being the contention of Bianchi, we see that perhaps as a result of that, many scholars today accept the dual aspects of the

⁹⁷ Bianchi, U. (art) 'Current methodological Issues in the History of Religions' in Kitagawa, J. M., (ed.) The History of Religions, Retrospect and Prospect, (New York: Macmillan, 1985) pp. 53-72.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 156.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 56.

history of religions or comparative religion. These being the historical and the systematic or comparative studies of religious data.¹⁰⁰ The article in The Encyclopedia of Religion, on one of the main method in the field of science of religion proper, took the title 'Comparative – Historical Method' as mentioned above. This method presupposes 'pure history' which 'supplies the facts upon which comparisons depend.'¹⁰¹ As for the rationale for this method and its application by students of religion, Smart believes that to be partly, due to religion being considered (especially in the West) as an aspect of human culture, which need to be interpreted and explained. He saw the importance of this method in its giving eminence to the exploration of the 'recurrent patterns of religious thought, symbolism, ritual, and experience'.¹⁰² Rudolph, quoted above was cited by Bianchi in connection with, the former's belief that the proper method for 'the comparative science of religion is the comparative historical method.'¹⁰³ Bianchi stated his position clearly, as regards what he believes is the right or most appropriate method by means of which to study religious data. He states:

"Only historical comparison, a comparison 'not limited to 'facts' arbitrarily isolated from the historical contexts and processes that give them meaning and life, will avoid killing those 'facts', that is, will avoid transforming them into 'phenomena', fascinating and repelling phantasms in a lodge of disincarnate ghosts only a comparison that is historical and holistic, will be creative and scientifically sound."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ See above, cp. Rudolph, K., (art), "The Foundations of the History of Religions and Its Future Task", in Kitagawa, The History of Religions, op., cit., p. 105.

¹⁰¹ Smart, N. (art) 'Comparative – Historical Method' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 3, p. 571.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 572.

¹⁰³ Bianchi, (art) 'Current Methodological Issues, op., cit., pp. 60-61.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 62

This shows clearly that comparison is taken an undisputed method in this discipline. The bone of contention is which comparison. It is worth mentioning here, that Bianchi believes, comparison can be creative and scientific, but if it is also historical.

In his own paper at the same conference in Chicago (1983), titled 'The Foundations of the History of Religions and its Future Task', even though he couldn't attend, Rudolph articulates his view on the nature of this discipline and what he anticipates in its future. In summarising his view of the method(s) of this academic field he says:

"The special character of the history of religions, however, lies in its combination of philology, history and comparison. Being synchronic, the comparative or systematic method supplements the diachronic (historical)method."¹⁰⁵

He believes it is their interdependence that determine the relative autonomy and integrity of this field. Both methods also make their specific contributions to the discipline's hermeneutics.¹⁰⁵ Rudolph also considered 'comparison' as one of the unique contributions of the history of religions as a field.¹⁰⁶ Even in the future, he saw a special role for comparison or the comparative method in this discipline. He foresees the continuation of the use of religio – historical methods which bracket the religious claim to truth, by 'recourse to both philological – historical and comparative procedures.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ ibid., p. 105.

¹⁰⁶ ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰⁷ ibid., p. 113.

G- Merits of the Comparative Method as Employed in the West:

After what we have seen above, on the importance given to comparison most especially the historical comparison, we will now see some of the general benefits discovered by Western scholars in their application of this chapter. After that, we will also mention the general criticisms of these scholars on the comparative method.

One of the modern scholars of religion has expressed the position of the act of comparison viz-a-viz, man and his sciences in these words:

“Man cannot desist from making comparisons. To compare is one of the elementary processes of the human mind, and it is an essential procedure of all sciences.”¹⁰⁸

Since this seems to be one of the many processes of the human mind, it must have some benefit and use for man. And as knowledge is gained partly by means of the various processes of the mind, - comparison being one of them – we will definitely gain some knowledge by means of this process. But what are the different merits and benefits of this method?

The pioneers of this discipline established it on the basis of the usefulness of the comparative method as discovered in science with its different branches. From Max Muller's stress on its fruitfulness in the comparative philology and in other sciences, in fact in his times and in all ages, we can see why they decided to depend on comparative method. He said “..... The comparative spirit is the truly scientific spirit of our age, nay of all ages. An empirical acquaintance with single fact does not constitute knowledge in the true sense of the word.....”¹⁰⁹ Jordan explains extensively the usefulness of this method in almost all the branches of human intellectual

¹⁰⁸ Platvoet, J. G., Comparing Religions: A Limitative Approach, (The Hague: Mouton, 1982), p. 19.

¹⁰⁹ See Arapura, J. G., Religion as Anxiety and Tranquillity (The Hague: Mouton, 1972) p. 29, cp. Muller's statements in Introduction to the Science of Religion in Waardenburg, Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, op., cit., p. 94.

endeavour.¹¹⁰ He mentions that some scholars do believe that the real significance of any religion is never firmly grasped unless it is compared with others!¹¹¹ Kristensen in his phenomenological lectures also alluded to the benefits of comparison when he opined that the comparative consideration of corresponding data (say, in an act of worship from different religions) often gives a deeper and more accurate insight than the consideration of each datum by itself.¹¹² The writer of the article on 'Religion' in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, writing in the 1920s, has seen the comparative method as the brain behind the present globalisation we are witnessing now in all fields, like political, economic, cultural, communicational, religious and ideological.¹¹³ He also shows that comparison does not only reveals similarities, but also subtle differences. The comparative method also emphasised the necessity of constructing conceptions of religion upon a wide basis of data.¹¹³ The use of this method can lead to typology, which as a classification, gives more concern to the differences than to similarities. The methodological functions of and significance of typology are, especially in the social sciences, codification and prediction.¹¹⁴ It 'creates order out of the potential chaos of discreet, discontinuous, or heterogeneous observations'¹¹⁴. In phenomenology of religion also, typology is used after the necessary comparison, with the intention of better understanding of the vast material in the religious realm.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ See Jordan, L. H., Comparative Religion, op., cit., pp. 30-51.

¹¹¹ ibid., p. 59.

¹¹² Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op., cit., p. 2.

¹¹³ Cook, S. A. (art) 'Religion' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (ed.) Hastings, J. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956) 4th Impr., Vol. 10, p. 664.

¹¹⁴ Tiryakian, E. A., (art) 'Typologies' International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (ed.) Sills, D. L., (New York: Macmillan, 1972) Reprint Ed. Vol. 16, p. 178.

¹¹⁵ Wach, J. The Comparative Study of Religion, (ed.) Kitagawa (ed.), (New York: Columbia University, 1958), p. 25.

Comparative study can be helpful also in the study of a literary or historical problem, when it is compared with analogous data or situations. It can also be employed to prove or disprove 'absolutist pretensions' of one religion, when compared with others.¹¹⁶ On another plane, the impartial and sympathetic comparative study of world religions had led to the general appreciation of the religion of the 'other', thus facilitating interreligious dialogue, or at least minimizing acrimony between different religions.

These are some of the general benefits found in employing the comparative method, which seem to speak against its total abandonment.

H- Criticisms of the Comparative Method:

The comparative method in the study of religion has got its own share of criticisms from many quarters, with some people disliking even the word – 'comparative'. Is it due to increase in knowledge or change in presuppositions or something else that led to this complete turn as regards the usefulness of this method in Western scholarship, after having been seen as the main scientific method in almost all fields, including religious studies.¹¹⁷ It may not be unlikely that the misuse of this method by some scholars, theologians and so on, coupled with the abandonment of the evolutionary categories, and also the ardent calls by some historians of religion, reminding others that their discipline has to stick to the historical approach to research, it may not be unlikely that all these led to that change of attitude in connection with the comparative method. We have seen Sharpe's and Kristensen's statements showing that the method was considered as unscientific, and this, we suppose was due to some sort of self-criticisms on the part of students of religions, most particularly on the issue of objectivity and value judgements. When some of them thought it right to come out

¹¹⁶ See Waardenburg, Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, op., cit., p. 52.

¹¹⁷ See Pummer, R. (art) 'Recent Publications on the Methodology of the Science of Religion' in Numen, Vol. xxii, Fasc. 3 (Dec. 1975), p. 170, stating that, it is almost generally assumed that the Science of Religion is essentially a comparative discipline, citing many recent works on that.

of the slough of Eurocentrism, especially after the second world war, they questioned their numerous explicit and implicit presuppositions when it comes to the study of other people's religion or culture. We find sometime very clear statements on this issue like the statement of Widengren in a foreword to Bianchi's work of 1966:

"As a feeling and reflecting individual, I may approve of some religious phenomena and disapprove most strongly of others, but as a historian of religion it is impossible for me to provide an objective motivation for my sympathies and antipathies, and therefore, I have no right as a scholar to make my private opinions public."¹¹⁸

These rules of objectivity will automatically disqualify many derogatory descriptions or valuations of some religions as we see in many Western writings.

Some of the earlier criticisms of this method came as early as the beginning of 1920s. We saw Wach, for instance, objecting to the field being called 'comparative religion', as by that, scholars are unjustifiably emphasising a single method which is also shared with other disciplines, as if the very aim of the field is only to compare, adding that 'methods can only be means never end in themselves'.¹¹⁹ He also pointed to the dangers that threaten any comparison like errors, premature conclusions and mistaken theories, so also exaggeration, and lack of caution on the part of some scholars.¹²⁰

The evolutionary – comparative method, as we have shown was proved to be unscientific, due to its value judgement and other flaws as a result of its application by different sets of scholars in the general study of religion, from reductionism to evolutionism, to theological value judgements etc.

One general objection being raised by many scholars in this regard, is the fact that religion resembles an organism, with different parts, and that 'the meaning of each

¹¹⁸ Sharpe, (art) 'Some Problems of Method.....' op., cit., p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Wach, J. Introduction to the History of Religions, op., cit., p. 134.

¹²⁰ ibid., pp. 134-135.

of the particular elements woven together into a whole, is affected by the meanings of all the other elements in the whole. This tends to give each religion or an aspect of religion uniqueness of its own. To compare that element with other 'similar' elements will be to neglect the uniqueness of each element. Likewise, the different historical contexts and backgrounds.¹²¹ In our view, this is not to invalidate all comparisons in religion, as we still can see similar elements or phenomena from different religions e.g. prayer, the difference is only in some details which will not make it a completely different phenomenon like, say, sacrifice. The comparison here is always associated with contrast, which must be explained. Comparisons are also considered to be odious especially in matters of religion. Those carried out by Western scholars could be 'redolent of whiffs of Western imperialism' and Christian superiority.¹²² We also see that in many cases of comparison, evaluative principles are built into the very act of description.¹²³

There has to be caution in the comparative process, lest one jumps to 'concocting facile similarities and analogies' or completely neglect the differences.¹²⁴ Another problem with some comparisons is that they are done on a large scale, which tends to result 'in catalogues and collections of mere heuristic interests'.¹²⁵ The other points raised include the claim that, even if the method supports or suggests some theories, it does not prove that others are excluded. So also the suggestion that

¹²¹ See Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, op., cit., p. 6 cp. Smart, N. (art) 'Comparative-Historical Method', The Encyclopedia of Religion, op., cit., Vol. 3, p. 573. cp. Sharpe, (art) 'The Comparative Study of Religion in Historical Perspective' in Foy, W. (ed.) Man's Religious Quest, A Reader (London: Croom Helm,), p. 14.

¹²² Whaling, F. (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches....', op., cit., Vol. 1, p. 166.

¹²³ Allen, D., Structure and Creativity in Religion (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), p. 27.

¹²⁴ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religion, op., cit., p. xx-xxi (Introduction).

¹²⁵ Bianchi, U., The History of Religions, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 10.

confusion can result due 'to naïve comparison and rash inferences', which will have to be tested by means of other methods.¹²⁶

Another subtle criticism of the application of the comparative method made by Wiebe, is his accusing scholars of usually or (all too often) (making) 'evaluative comparisons between the ideal conception of one religion and the (distorted or corrupted) empirical embodiment of another.'¹²⁷

As for the criticisms of some kind, of comparative approaches, like phenomenological typology of Eliade for instance, it has been seen as being concerned with typology and not with historical contexts. This kind of approach also tends to select material from say, primal religions, with minimal reference to contemporary living religions. This approach also minimises the importance of the religious apprehensions of particular persons or specific traditions, as the emphasis is only on phenomenon and structure. So also the point that, this kind of comparison depends not so much on objective empirical criteria, but rather upon the researcher's own underlying presuppositions', as has the phenomenological method been generally criticised of subjectivism.¹²⁸

The other kind of comparison seen above – the thematic comparison has been seen to have presuppositions that are not necessarily self-evident, like the selection of themes, the de-contextualisation of material etc. It is also being argued that no one can master in a specialist sense all religions, so it seems to be a second order activity that depends on primary researches. There is also the problem of language particularities.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ See Cook, (art) 'Religion' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, op., cit., Vol. 10, p. 664.

¹²⁷ Wiebe, D., Religion and Truth (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), p. 26. cp. Brockington, J., Hinduism and Christianity, (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992), p. 1.

¹²⁸ See Whaling, 'Comparative Approaches', op., cit., Vol. 1, pp. 217-219.

¹²⁹ ibid., pp. 260-261.

In the above pages, we have seen the inception and different phases of the comparative method, its kinds and application. The benefits and objections raised against it has also been elucidated. In all, it seems that the comparative method as employed in the study of religion has had many supporters and admirers especially at the inception of this academic discipline. The method is still valid and is employed in different ways, moreso, it is perhaps the only method that is appropriate for the study of religion in plurality. With the present globalisation and the reality of religious resurgence in all its kinds, comparative study of religion can help in bringing the world community closer and also minimise tension between different contending religious groups. In the next part of this chapter we intend to focus particularly on two modern Western models of the application of the comparative method.



TWO

TWO MODERN WESTERN MODELS OF THE APPLICATION OF THE COMPARATIVE METHOD:

INTRODUCTION:

The modern scientific study of religion has employed and is employing numerous methods in trying to discover the hidden mysteries of the religious world, albeit in a secular manner. One of the chief methods employed in this endeavour was and is the comparative method, being widely employed especially at the inception of the field. The numerous scholars that have contributed to the establishment, consolidation and emancipation of this new discipline came from the different continents of the globe and also at different times of the beginning of the field. As the Western tradition of the study of religion started in Europe, particularly Britain and Germany, with the call for establishing this new science and the instituting of new chairs for the scientific study of religion or 'Religionswissenschaft' in various European universities, we saw it in the fitness of things to choose two scholars that had acquired the European experience of the study of religion, and who later migrated to the New World, with its own peculiar situation of a grand religious pluralism and a new way of looking at, and studying global human religious experience. Both the scholars we intend to study – not in all aspects of their thoughts, but only in extracting from their writings, their own way of comparing religions – were Europeans who later due to the Nazis, or due to the post-second World War situation, migrated to America. Both also happened to have poured their most ripe thoughts and ideas in the study of religion, in the University of Chicago, thus founding ^{the} /so-called 'Chicago Tradition of the History of Religions'. The two scholars are Joachim Wach (1898-1955) a German-American, and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), a Romanian-American. Both being well known figures in the history of religions, as the field is called in America, with very significant contributions both in articulating the right and adequate methods with which to study religious experience of

mankind scientifically and at the same time sympathetically, a way from biasness and prejudices and also works in which they employed their methodological insights in studying religions. Having seen two Muslim scholars of the 4th and 5th centuries of Hijrah, being one of the main periods of the flourishing of the Islamic civilisation, especially as regards the study of the different religions of the then world, we endeavour to compare those preliminary and pioneering efforts in the study of religion, with the modern progress in that study.

We would like to start with Joachim Wach being chronologically earlier, and also considered as one who introduced into the United States scholarship the phenomenological method of analyzing religious beliefs and practices. Not only this, Wach also established 'Religionswissenschaft' at the University of Chicago.¹ Wach is seen as one of most universal minds in the field (of the science of religion),² and a foremost scholar in the discipline.

The other personality whose comparative model will also be modestly presented in this humble work, considered as another pillar in this discipline, who ranged far and wide in the world of religion, is Mircea Eliade, who died of recent in 1986. Eliade was the editor-in-chief of the famous 15-volume – The Encyclopedia of Religion, which clearly shows his standing in the modern scientific study of religion.

1- JOACHIM WACH (1898-1955)

A- Brief Sketch of the Life of Wach:

Joachim Wach's biographer, and his former student who carried on and advanced further the Chicago tradition of the History of Religions, especially after the death of Mircea Eliade, Joseph M. Kitagawa has written on the life and thought of Wach, in his

¹ The New Encyclopedia Britannica (Micropedia) (art) 'Wach, Joachim', op. cit. 12-p.444

² Waardenburg, J., Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion, op. cit. p. 63.

editions of three works of Wach,³ so also in The Encyclopedia of Religion.⁴ From all these articles one can easily see the main essential features of Wach's life and thought, which we will give below briefly.

Joachim Wach was born on 25th January 1898 and was a descendant of Moses Mendelssohn, (1729-86), a great Jewish philosopher of the 18th century, seen as having symbolised the movement of the Jews out of the ghetto and into the world of European cultures.⁵ This connection of Wach with the Mendelssohns affected his later career, and became the cause of his leaving Germany for the United States of America in 1935. Wach's family have been Protestant Christians for four generations, but any link with the Jews was not forgivable by the Nazis. While young Wach was exposed to music, literature, poetry, and both classical and modern languages,⁶ as he also seemed to be very hard working with great intellectual curiosity and capacity to learn, which developed in him by and by.⁷ While at the age of 18, Wach joined the German army, and after two years, i.e. after the World War I, he joined the University of Leipzig, and obtained his Ph. D. in 1922. His doctoral thesis was entitled 'The Foundations of a Phenomenology of the Concept of Salvation'.⁸ He majored in his studies in the history of religions and

³ Three works are:

- 1- The Comparative Study of Religions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958)
- 2- Introduction to the History of Religions, edited by Kitagawa and Alles, G. D., and Luckert, K. W. (New York: Macmillan, 1988)
- 3- Essay in the History of Religions, edited by Kitagawa and Alles, G. D., (New York: Macmillan, 1988)

⁴ The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. (art) 'Wach, Joachim' Vol. 15, pp. 311-313.

⁵ Wigoder, G. (art) 'Mendelssolin, Moses' in Hinnells, J. R. (ed.) Who's Who of World Religions (London: Macmillan, 1993) Reprint, p. 266.

⁶ Kitagawa, J. M. (art) 'Wach, Joachim' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol. 15, p. 311.

⁷ Kitagawa, J. M., (art), 'The Life and Thought of Joachim Wach' in The Comparative Study of Religions by Wach, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. xviii.

⁸ Kitagawa (art) 'Wach, Joachim' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. p. 311.

minored in the philosophy of religion and oriental studies. This placed him from the beginning in a favourable position in the modern scientific study of religion. In his student years, Wach studied with Friedrich Heiler in Munich, and with Ernst Troeltsch at Berlin, from 1919 to early 1920.

Wach was given a teaching appointment in 1924, in the University of Leipzig, but in the Faculty of philosophy, and he presented his habilitation thesis (that qualifies him to teach in a German university) in the same year. In that thesis he gave his view of the field of Religionswissenschaft, that was later published as Introduction to the History of Religions.⁹ Wach continued teaching in the University of Leipzig till April 1935, when his appointment was terminated by the government of Saxony under pressure from the Nazis. That was due to Wach's lineage, even though they have been Christians for four generations as stated before. He was then invited by a friend to Brown University, at Providence Rhode Island in America. Wach continued teaching there as a professor of the History of religions till 1945, when he was again invited to the University of Chicago, as a professor and chairman of the History of Religions field at the then Federated Theological Faculty. He stayed there establishing a tradition of the History of Religions, in the University which later became known as the Chicago school of the History of Religions,¹⁰ till his death in 1955.

Some of the scholars who influenced Wach in his works as a scholar include, apart from those mentioned earlier, Adolf von Harnack, Edward Spranger, Max Scheler, Hans Haas, Nathan Soderblom, Max Weber. The last influenced Wach especially in his work Sociology of Religion. One of the most influential scholars on Wach, whose idea he regarded as one of the most important achievements of modern scholarship,¹¹ was Rudolf

⁹ The work was edited by J. M. Kitagawa and G. D. Alles with K. W. Luckert, (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

¹⁰ The New Encyclopedia Britannica, (art) 'Wach, Joachim', op. cit. Vol. 12, p. 444.

¹¹ See Wach, J., Types of Religious Experience Christian and Non-Christian, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 15.

Otto. Otto's The Idea of the Holy (1917), seems to Wach to solve a lot of problems as regards definition of religion, criterion by which to determine what is a genuine religion etc.¹² He relied on it in many of his theories.

As regards Wach's qualities, Kitagawa who was his student and 'disciple' and one of the members of the so-called 'Sangha',* said that Wach had encyclopedic learning and inquisitive mind, and became a natural link between the theological faculty to which he belongs and the humanistic and social scientific disciplines.¹³ He also saw in Wach a scholar of competence, modesty and personal charm which made him a unique teacher and counsellor.¹² Wach was a writer and a teacher who taught the history of religions discipline for 30 years and in two different continents of Europe and North America. He has written many works most of which were in German, only two were in English, Sociology of Religion (1944)** which we have not been able to find, and Types of Religious Experiences Christian and Non-Christian (1951). Presently almost all Wach's works have been translated mostly due to the efforts of his former student J. M. Kitagawa. His other works now available in English include:

- 1- Understanding and Believing, Essays by Joachim Wach, ed. with intro by J. Kitagawa (New York: Harper Torch books, 1968)
- 2- The Comparative Study of Religion, ed. with intro by J. M. Kitagawa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958)

¹² ibid., p. 15 and p. 36 etc.

¹³ Wach, J., The Comparative Study of Religion (ed.) Kitagawa, J. M., op. cit. p. xxi.

* Sangha means an assemblage in the Buddhist context. Buddhism is one area in which Wach contributed a lot.

** Frank Whaling in his article on 'Comparative Approaches' quoted above has particularly focussed on this work, thus giving us a useful insight on it. The ideas of this work were written in an essay published under the same title in Essays in the History of Religions, op. cit. pp. 81-113.

- 3- Introduction to the History of Religions, ed., by J. M. Kitagawa and G. D. Alles with K. W. Luckert (New York: Macmillan, 1988) Intro. by Kitagawa.
- 4- Essays in the History of Religions ed. by J. M. Kitagawa and G. D. Alles (New York: Macmillan, 1988) Intro. by Kitagawa.

From Wach's writings sometimes contradicting statements may be found, but this does not mean that it was intentional or otherwise, it only shows the human aspect of the intellectual journey of a seeker after enlightenment. Kitagawa in the numerous introductions to Wach's works he wrote, has explained this fact by clearly discerning three distinct stages in Wach's academic career and his intellectual progression. These phases can be summarised in the following three paragraphs:

In the first phase of his academic output, Wach stressed the importance of hermeneutics – the science of interpretation, as the basis for the descriptive- historical task of the science of religion. He regarded understanding of the religions of others or their 'religious experience' as he prefers, as one of the main task of the History of Religions.¹⁴ In this phase Wach felt 'most congenial with August Boeckh' a philologist, and considered philology a viable model for the History of Religions.¹⁵

The second phase of Wach intellectual journey was characterised by his concern, in the words of Kitagawa 'with articulating the systematic aspects of religio-historical study, especially its relation to sociological and anthropological studies'. The systematic aspect of the History of Religions Wach conceived is the sociology of religion. He wrote his work 'Sociology of Religion' (1944) during this phase. The scholars that seem to influence him more in this stage were, Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Scheler, Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber.¹⁶

¹⁴ See for example Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. pp. 153 ff.

¹⁵ ibid., pp. xi-xiii (Introduction).

¹⁶ ibid., p. xiii(Intro.).

The third and last phase of Wach's study and contributions to the field of 'Religionswissenschaft' depicts a different Wach, Wach a theologian or a scholar of scientific study of religion with strong leanings to theology and value judgement. Kitagawa saw him as advocating in this phase, the importance of the mutual influence and cooperation between the History of Religions as a discipline and the normative disciplines of philosophy of religion and theology.¹⁷ In his works of this phase, most especially 'Types of Religious Experience Christian and Non-Christian' (1951), so also 'Understanding and Believing' (1968) and 'The Comparative Study of Religion' (1958), Wach seems to clearly show his true face of a Christian theologian whose loyalty is clearly to Christ and who believes all non-Christian religions to be '*Praeparatio Evangelica*'.¹⁸ Wach believes in this new stand in accordance with his matured thoughts, that saw the task of the History of Religions as a field, in the interpretation and evaluation of all expressions of religious experience. This task is two fold: "First, to discover the facts, a procedure exclusively committed to the idea of objectivity", (as in the first two phases of Wach's academic work). The second aspect of this task involves the need to 'formulate and define our reaction to these facts, that is, the question of their evaluation.'¹⁹ These and similar views are found in Wach's later writings and portray both the positive and negative influences of theology on him.

Wach's standing as a scholar in modern scientific study of religion can be seen in his works and articles and as mentioned earlier in his establishing Religionswissenschaft at the University of Chicago and also his introducing into the U.S. scholarship 'the phenomenological method of analysing,²⁰ religious beliefs and practices. Wach was

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. xiii (Intro.).

¹⁸ See Wach, J., Understanding and Believing, (ed.) by Kitagawa, J. M., (New York: Harper Torch books, 1968), pp. 80-81.

¹⁹ Wach, J., Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. p. 7.

²⁰ The New Encyclopedia Britannica, op. cit. Vol. 12, p. 444.

invited to India in 1952 to deliver the Barrows Lectures, upon his return from India (a visit he considered as one of the significant events in his life)²¹, "He busied himself with a reexamination and reevaluation of his own methodology, incorporating more adequately the insight of Eastern religions.²² His renown as a scholar of religion was further affirmed when he was invited by the Committee on the History of Religions under the American Council of Learned Societies to deliver a series of lectures in 1954.²³ Wach also received a Th. D. degree from Heidelberg University in 1930 and turned down an invitation to occupy a chair of systematic theology at Marburg, occupied before by Rudolf Otto.²⁴

B- Wach's Concept of and Methodological Ideas in the Science of Religion:

Wach's love for the discipline of comparative study of religion is great and can be discerned in his lifetime efforts to see to the strong establishment and consolidation of the field independently of theology and philosophy of religion. His interest in the autonomous nature and the integrity of the science of religion struggling to take its right place in the academic circles and institutions is lucid in the beginning of his academic career in the University of Leipzig. His habilitation thesis expounding the most important issues facing the nascent discipline in the mid 1920s was a fine work of a promising young scholar. The main problems or dangers being faced by the discipline at that time as explained in The Encyclopedia of Religion are:

- 1- Danger from the theologians who question the right of this field to exist independent of their own discipline, while also stressing that he who knows

²¹ Wach, J., The Comparative Study of Religions, ed., Kitagawa, op. cit. p.xiii(Intro.)

²² Ibid., p.xv (Intro.).

²³ Ibid., p. xvi (Intro.).

Christianity, the dominant religion in the West, knows all religions. Adolph von Harnack in Germany was one of those scholars representing this trend.

2- The second danger was coming from the social scientists who were employing reductionist psychological and social scientific approaches in studying religion, and challenge by that its religio-scientific approach.²⁵

Wach responded squarely to the need of his time in his 'Religionswissenschaft' , translated as Introduction to the History of Religions. Because of the theories and strong views expressed by Wach in it even though he has abandoned many of them before his death – it is still considered as a small classic in the field.²⁶ In it Wach believes that the subject matter of the discipline is 'the multiplicity of empirically given religion'. Here Wach believes that the data to be used in this discipline has to come from empirical and descriptive study of the religions of mankind.²⁷

The aims of ^{this} field according to Wach is to study religions understand them as accurate as is humanly possible, and then to portray and present them.²⁷ What is the way to go about this task of studying and understanding the religion of others? To Wach there is a clear vision of what form this study should take. It is to be undertaken in two ways viz:

- a. Lengthwise study of the religions (diachronically), and
- b. Cross-sectional study of religions and their comparison (synchronously).

This means that the task of this field is twofold. It is a historical study of the different religions, as well as a systematic investigation of them.²⁷ Wach's approach to the study of religion is integral, he believes that our study of religion should not be exclusively

²⁴ Whaling, F., (art) 'Comparative Approaches' op. cit. p. 231.

²⁵ See Kitagawa, J. M., (art) 'Wach, Joachim' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol. 15, p. 31.

²⁶ ibid., p. 311.

²⁷ Wach, J., Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 19.

based on a single area of the religious life, like the psychological or historical, etc.²⁸ He conceives this discipline as a non-normative field which need to secure its complete emancipation from theology and philosophy of religion. He did not rule out any cooperation or even inter-dependence between it and its 'parental disciplines', but he viewed this as a matter to be decided by time. He says:

"No discipline can and should work in isolation. Each will be more or less dependent upon the help and cooperation of others. It is good for 'parental disciplines' to oversee and protect a discipline in its youth. But some day the moment must come when a discipline declares itself free and of age."²⁹

As for the real place of this new field, Wach believes it lies precisely between empirical science and philosophy. He followed here M. Scheler who posited it 'between a historical study of religions (a positive *Religionswissenschaft*) and the essential phenomenology of religion'.³⁰ This intermediate discipline aims at 'the fullest understanding of the intellectual contents of one or more religious forms and the consummate acts in which these intellectual contents have been given'.³¹

On the structure of this discipline according to Wach, it has as mentioned above, twin tasks of historical and theoretical or systematical study of religious phenomena. We have to also view seriously the centrality of religious experience and its threefold expressions (theoretical or doctrinal; practical or ritualistic, and sociological or religious fellowships) in our study of religion. These three aspects, Wach has discovered to be universal in all religions as we shall see insha Allah when we discuss Wach's 'universals in religions'. His early conceptions of the method of the study of religion in addition to

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 22, and pp. 127-128 cp. Kitagawa (art) 'Wach, Joachim', The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol. 15, p. 311.

³¹ See Kitagawa (art) 'Wach, Joachim', op. cit. Vol. 15, p. 312.

what have been mentioned above, is that it is to be an objective study of the facts of religion by means of empathy, interest, congeniality, and sympathy, as well as other factors. We hope to expantiate more on this issue when we take up the issue of Wach's comparative method, being the main method employed by him but in different ways, in the course of his study of the religious experience of mankind.

Wach's articulation of the method or methods of the study of religion was first explained and outlined in his Religionswissenschaft (Chapter Four). Later on in his Barrows lectures in India in 1952, while giving a brief outline of the inception of this field and its progress, he mentioned the different approaches at that time³² to the study of religious phenomena. In the Introduction to the History of Religions, Wach believes that inquiries 'into truth content certainly do not lie within the competence of the history of religions. The question of truth is a problem for theology and philosophy of religion',³³ from the hold of which he advocated the emancipation of the science of religion. As regards Troeltsch's claim that the history of religions does make and discover the 'true religion', Wach in his 1924 thesis was impatient with these remarks from his teacher. He vehemently rejected and calls for the rejection of such extension of the tasks of the discipline. Believing then, in its true scientific character, he declares that such demands would surely endanger its existance as a separate discipline.³⁴

Wach also believes that this discipline has no speculative tasks and it is at the same time not only a purely descriptive field. However, its finest task is interpretation. But this is a very difficult task indeed, as the objectification of the expressions of religious life, will require transgressing the bounds of strictly his torical, empirical research. He added that the history of religions can only lead to this kind of philosophical and metaphysical

³² See Wach, J. The Comparative Study of Religions, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 21-26.

³³ Wach, J., Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 89.

³⁴ ibid., p. 90.

questions. But is not permitted to address them.³⁵ Becoming more explicit, he asserts that the methodological task of this discipline is "to observe, treat, and interpret the 'historical' data. All the methods and procedures that the discipline has developed contribute to this enterprise."³⁶ He also adds, "Historical and systematic endeavours unite in approaching the discipline's goal: the understanding of religions."³⁶ As we intend to discuss this further in Wach's concept and application of the comparative method, we will point below to the other approaches which he believes the discipline has also developed. In his Barrows Lectures alluded to before, he admits the polymethodic nature of the comparative study of religions. These methods include the historical, which involves "the attempt to trace the origin and growth of religious ideas and institutions through definite periods of historical development...." There is also the anthropological approach which tries 'to construct man's history.' Another approach is that which tries to inquire about the 'interior aspects of religious experience' called the psychological approach. Sociological approach to religious phenomena involves the application of the methods of general sociology to religious phenomena and was employed in France and Germany and elsewhere. The last major approach is the phenomenological approach. Its aim is 'to view religious ideas, acts, and institutions with due consideration to their 'intention'.³⁷ All these methods have been treated in the first chapter of this humble work.

The various theories and methodological insights we find especially in Wach's earlier writings portray his great interest in seeing that this discipline did not deviate from its desired course or be engulfed either by theology or philosophy of religion. He envisaged a bright future for the field when it will take its most suitable place in the academic circles. He struggled for that through three main ways of advancing a cause, an

³⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

ideology or a philosophy. Firstly, Wach wrote a number of books and articles mostly in the theoretical formulations of the most appropriate, unified and adequate method of studying religious beliefs and practices.³⁸ We have tried to give some ideas on his conception of this issue but we cannot claim to be exhaustive. Moreover, as we are concerned in this work with one particular method – the comparative, we will turn our attention to it after this point. Wach's works on the application of his methodological insights are fewer than expected. His study of Mahāyāna Buddhism is a very good example in this regard.³⁹

The second way of propagating a cause, in the case of Wach, the cause of an independent science of religion is by delivering lectures and symposia. There has been no dearth of that in the academic life of Wach. Many of his lectures because of their substance were translated and subsequently edited and published.

The third way employed by Wach to further this discipline was to develop a school, a group of students, trained in the field, so as to work diligently for its progress even after his death. This resulted in the establishment of the so-called Chicago tradition in the History of Religions. We will now focus on Wach's comparative method, his conception and application of it on the three main expressions of mankind's religious experience, being the theoretical, the practical and the sociological.

C - Joachim Wach and the Comparative Method in the Study of Religion (Conception and Application):

Joachim Wach, as is clear from his life, did grow and develop in the tradition of a disinterested study of world religions. At the beginning of his career, we could not rule out the influence of theology on him which might have been one of the issues he has been

³⁷ Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions, op. cit. pp.21-24.

³⁸ ibid., pp. 14-15.

³⁹ Whaling, (art) "Comparative Approaches" in Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. p. 231.

struggling with all his life. His teachers, like Adolph von Harnack, Ernst Troelscht, Rudolf Otto and Nathan Soderblom were the well-known theologians of the time. The fact that Wach in his graduate years majored in the history of religions or *Religionswissenschaft* is a one singular fact to show how devoted he was to this new discipline, for which he spent all his time and efforts, probably not to the liking of his mentors.

The time he started his academic career was very favourable for him as a young energetic student who may harbour an ambition of being seen later as one of the main contributors who outlined in a very articulate manner the methodological principles of this academic field. The vast material that had already accumulated from all parts of the world through the combined efforts of historians, philologists, archeologists, ethnologists, anthropologists etc. need to be studied scientifically, hence the need for theorisation on method. As the valuable data on each religion of the world exist almost independently, it need to be studied in cross-sections and by means of comparison, so as to discover any meaning in the term 'religion' in the singular. Wach saw his whole vocation of teaching and writing for three decades and in two different continents, as aiming at understanding people and their religions. It did not end there. He also felt the need for helping to foster understanding among different peoples, by interpreting the results of their spiritual quests at different times and in different cultural and sociological contexts.⁴⁰ In outlining the history of the study of religion, he opines that the trend in his times tends to view data structurally and functionally, and it also tries to understand their religious meaning. There was at that time the increasing challenge of 'the pluralism of religious loyalties and its relation to the problem of truth', especially in the New World.⁴¹ Due to this, Wach took the advantage of the comparative method, as well as the various comparative studies available, especially those of Rudolf Otto, whom he saw as characterising the third period of the development of the discipline, in which focus was particularly on comparative

⁴⁰ Wach, J., Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. p. xiii (Intro.)

⁴¹ Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions, op. cit. pp. 8-9.

studies.⁴² What is Wach's concept of comparative method and its significance in his study of the different religions of the world?

1- Wach's Concept of the Comparative Method:

The Western study of religion having started in the era of Enlightenment, did a lot to provide vast material on religion, studied from different fields, as we have shown, but the main obstacle that delayed the take up of the new field of academic research was the lack of appropriate method for the scientific study of that data. It was in fact from the second half of the 19th century, that the comparative method, as a result of remarkable results achieved by its employment in various fields, was adopted in the view science of religion, entitled with the name of the method itself. The method of comparing religious data for various reasons became 'extremely popular' from that time. By the days of Wach it has been taken for granted that 'analogies can be very useful for the interpretation for not only religious concepts and rites, but also of forms of religious organisations.'⁴³

Wach has as mentioned above, even in the first phase of his academic life, conceived the new science of religion as comprising of two main kinds of study, i.e. that historical and the systematic. The latter he believes should be carried out in cross-sections (synchronously). This shows the importance he attaches to comparison, even though he has his own reservations and words of caution in making it. Another important concept in Wach's life long study of religions is 'understanding'. He explained the systematic study of religion, which we say elsewhere almost corresponds to comparative study or even phenomenological study, that it attempts to understand in cross-sections what has become of religion, e.g. doctrines, rituals etc.⁴⁴ He believes that by means of comparison, understanding of the compared phenomena is achieved in the humanistic studies

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴³ Wach, J., Essays in the History of Religions, (ed.) Kitagawa, J. M. and Alles, G. D., (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 92.

⁴⁴ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 121ff.

generally.⁴⁵ Kitagawa in analysing Wach's concept of integral understanding and objectivity at the same time, opined that an inquirer in this kind of situation is even compelled to 'compare' these data if he tries to make any sense at all.⁴⁶ Definitely, if the data of each religion is studied separately insights can be gained but on the working of that religion alone, which cannot be generalised. Despite this importance of comparison in the study of religion which can ascertain analogies and differences, to Wach, it is not an end in itself. Referring to himself in the third person, he said, " Comparison is for him (the writer) no end in itself but rather a means used in the service of a greater purpose: to help him and others to a more intimate acquaintance with the witness and the witnesses of genuine religious experience...."⁴⁷ As regards some of Wach's remarks on the comparative method, he believes 'it will always be an important and instructive research tool'. But comparison requires caution, and due to that he asserts that it 'must always be guided by an important principle of careful criticism.'⁴⁸ He also explains that we should not be interested in similarities only, which may even be determined superficially, but the differences are equally important, if we are to be objective in our investigation. This is due to the fact that may be seen in many religions, for instance, that similarity in form, 'does not always imply similarity in meaning.' This very fact itself we cannot easily grasp unless we compare. In his comparison between Christianity and Mahāyāna Buddhism, Wach presented a long list of analogous points between them.. However, he showed also some decisive differences even in aspects that were supposed to be similar, due to superficiality.⁴⁹ He says, "As against all superficial comparisons, the contrasts have to be

⁴⁵ Wach, Essays, op. cit. p. 92.

⁴⁶ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. xxviii (Intro.)

⁴⁷ Wach, J., Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. xi (Intro.)

⁴⁸ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. pp. 162-163

⁴⁹ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. pp. 125-127.

brought out by a thorough examination of the characteristic teachings and practices on both sides.”⁵⁰ Another important methodological point raised by Wach in making comparison is in his words: “We must always note carefully the weight and significance of the individual features that we are comparing in the entire phenomenon in which they occur.”⁵¹ This reminds us of one of the main methodological principles of al-Āmirī in his comparison to compare two or more things but of the same significance and importance in their respective systems. We have to avoid comparing a fundamental in one tradition with something of secondary importance from another tradition, to borrow al-Āmirī’s idea. Sometimes, Wach explains the existence of parallels as due to the influence of one tradition on the other. But influence of this sort has to be confirmed with very strong circumstantial evidences and proofs of contact in that particular area. He says as regards the similarities he discovered between Islamic mysticism and Christian spiritual teachings that the Christian, on seeing that, should not be surprised ‘if he is aware of the profound influence which early Christian thought and practice actually exerted upon early Islam’.⁵²

As long as loyalty to religion remains, we will find people comparing religions only to show the superiority of their religions, justifiably or unjustifiably. A formulator of principles many a times, formulates them with his interest at the back of his mind. Wach, being quite aware of the controversy between religions, especially the so-called monotheistic or semitic religions, makes some observations, which seem to us to be a sort of ‘defence mechanism’ through which he is only trying to safeguard his religion without saying that explicitly. In his essays collected under the title, Understanding and Believing (published post-humously in 1968), in the introduction of which Kitagawa says, “In most of these pages, Wach speaks both as a scholar of history of religions and as a committed

50. ibid., pp. 127-128.

51. Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 163.,

52. Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 102

Christian with profound interest in Christian theology'.⁵³ Wach also discusses the problem of truth in religion in his later works. On his comments on comparison he has this to say:

"There is no need for us to focus our attention upon features of other religions which may be regarded as weaknesses or falsification of an initial vision."

It seems to us that the phrase 'or falsifications of an initial vision', even if it may refer to other religions, it is more likely that it refers to the charge Muslims direct towards the followers of Wach's religion. And if Wach can outline some criteria by which genuineness or otherwise of a religion can be judged,⁵⁴ then why should not the mention of observed weaknesses or falsifications of some religion be allowed? Or is it just because perhaps Christianity can be a victim?

Another point raised by Wach, which is justifiable is his statement that, "It seems neither commendable nor helpful to compare one's best qualities with the worst qualities of others, or to make generalisations based on artificial categories...."⁵⁵ At least if one is sure of what he has, the best way to show that, is to compare it with the best of others, otherwise he should not have even dared to compare, as he can find his way then only through dubious means!

In the course of our study of Wach's application of the comparative method, some facts became apparent to us. One of the most important of which is the benefits he discovered or hope to discover when he compared al Hujwiri's spiritual teachings 'Kashf al-Mahjub' with similar teachings from other religious traditions. He saw the purpose of that comparative study in:

- (1) bringing forth the spiritual contributions of Islam;

⁵³ Wach, J., Understanding and Believing, op., cit. p. xiii (Intro.)

⁵⁴ ibid., p. 151.

⁵⁵ ibid., p. 153.

- (2) examining those teachings so as to help 'correct the one-sided picture of Islam as a legalistic religion';
- (3) doing justice to the spiritual riches to be found in a non-Christian tradition; and
- (4) rejoicing in the nearness of Islam's spirit to that of Christianity.⁵⁶

Wach also used his findings in comparative studies to explain other perplexing phenomena in the world of religion. For instance, he explained the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism with the notion of the 'cult of the founder' which used to develop around spiritual or rather religious leaders, and which tends to give another shape to the teachings of the founder after him.⁵⁷ In Wach's comparative studies of some themes in world religions or in a selected group of them, he discovers some amazing facts that might not even be expected. For example in his examination of the idea of man in Near Eastern religions, he discovered that only in Greece was man taken as the centre of the cosmos or in other words, it is only in the Greeks that anthropocentrism became a *weltanschauung*,*⁵⁸ but that has been practically unknown in the East. This being one of the basic and distinguishing features that separates the West from the East.

As mentioned above, Wach in his comparative studies tries to understand the phenomena under study, and then he tries to uncover some sort of structures in them. In the same study of the idea of man in Near Eastern religions he depicted the structure of the idea of man in the three revealed religions as: 'the creatureliness of man and his dependence upon God, his sinful nature (with a lot of differences in the details) and his responsibility...'⁵⁹ So a lot of insights can be discovered in the understanding of the religious life of man by means of employing the comparative method.

⁵⁶ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 28.

⁵⁷ See Wach, Essays in the History of Religions, op. cit. pp. 44-45.

⁵⁸ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 65.

⁵⁹ ibid., p. 78.

2- Principles and Values in Wach's Comparative Method:

We have stated earlier that there seems to be some contradicting statements in Wach's numerous works, most especially in his formulation of the methodological aspect of the science of religion. This being an area open to speculation and presentation of opinions to be backed by arguments and citations to support them, perhaps due to the relatively short period since the inception of the field and the need for richness of ideas on methods. Relative lack of rigidity and strict adherence to a single or a couple of methods or so, is encouraged in the field. Sharpe in 1971 stated that what 'the comparative study of religion needs in these days is not a rigid methodological 'either – or', though there will certainly be those who will continue to cultivate one method rather than another...'⁶⁰ Earlier he had confirmed that spirit of encouragement towards constructive participation in enriching the nascent field with ideas that can help it stand on its feet methodologically, by saying:

"I would perhaps go further, and say that the scholar may express any opinion, provided that he always nails his colours to the mast and makes it quite clear on what criteria he is passing judgement."⁶⁰

This flexibility had encouraged many a scholar to contribute his lot in the methodological discussions in the discipline. Wach had been contributing in this from 1924 till his death in 1955, due to which some of his earlier statements and stands used to be contradicted by his later 'mature' opinions. We would mention his stand on the principles of truth in religion, objectivity and the criteria for judging religious claims, the position of reason in the study of religion and the issues related to the sources of our information on different religions. As these points are interrelated they will be discussed under only two headings.

* A German word meaning an outlook on things in general or a philosophy of life

⁶⁰ Sharpe, J. (ed) 'Some Problems of Method in the Study of Religion' in Religion, op. cit. p. 12.

a- Truth in Religion:

The question of truth in the study of various religions of the world is one of the most complex aspect of the modern study of religion. It involves judgement for or against a particular, or a group of, or all other religions apart from the religion from the position of which the judgement is being passed. The issue also involves the question of how can we determine the truth or genuineness of a religion and whether the scientific study of religion as a discipline has the right to go into that discussion or it lies beyond its scope. There are no agreed opinions in this issue as in many issues in the science of religion.

While quite aware of this controversy, which is as old as the field itself, due to the fact that those who study religion and claim to do it scientifically were and are people of all persuasions, theologians, philosophers of religion, anthropologists, philologists, historians etc. etc., while aware of this fact, Wach in the beginning of his career, or the first phase of his thought as outlined by Kitagawa, seems to lean towards the view that truth should be suspended and bracketed, as a methodological presupposition but not completely. As our attitude towards the study of religion should not be as that of the positivists which Wach considered as one of the mistake of the Enlightenment in its study of religion.⁶¹ In the foreword to his Introduction to the History of Religions, Wach alluded to this controversy of affirming or bracketing the truth in religion by saying that: "Others will reject, either in whole or in part, my contention that bracketing is an important methodological presupposition for work in the history of religions."⁶² What a subtle way of showing the range of difference that exists among scholars in this issue. This being the case, we will show the earlier views of Wach in Germany of 1920s and then compare them with his mature views of the 1950s, to see the different stands of Wach in his vital issue. In his habilitation thesis, Wach addressed the issue of truth squarely and in the beginning of the work.

⁶¹

See Wach, Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. p. 7, where he states: "It was the mistake of the school of 'Comparative Religion' at the turn of the century to advocate the elimination of value judgement in favour of a completely objective approach."

Wach wanted to take the middle course as regards this issue so as to safeguard religion from the 'onslaught of English and French positivism and above all against the many shades of materialism' that tend to foretell the near end of religion which to them, have to yield to science.⁶³ As for the objective study of religion Wach believes that is the only way to guarantee its autonomy. This autonomy Wach maintains 'implies no prejudice'. This means according to him that the students of religion will simply take the religious truth-claims without debate and 'explicitly suspend, or bracket the question of truth.' He was advocating here a middle-course between dogmatism on the one hand, and illusionism of some psychologists on the other.⁶⁴ He showed the difference between the theologians and historians of religion in this issue in his words: "But the history of religions proceeds specifically by bracketing, and dogmatics can never bracket."⁶⁵ Despite this difference, Wach seems to be dissatisfied with this differentiation as religion has its intentional aspect which he believes to be what gives an act its character. Wach declares:

"However, in order to determine if an act is genuinely religious or not, we have to examine the intention with which it is performed."⁶⁶

Wach as alluded earlier, wanted to avoid positivism and dogmatism at the same time, so he followed the arguments of M. Scheler who showed that 'it is possible to suspend the question of validity and still recognize the intentional character of religious acts'.⁶⁷ This possibility Wach further explains in the historians of religions and their study

⁶² Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 5, (Foreword).

⁶³ ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁶⁴ ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁶⁵ ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁶ Wach, Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. p. 41

⁶⁷ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 22.

and description of different religions, disclosing their meaning while avoiding discussions on the claims of truth they make. His stand here is clear, i.e. even if he knows a religion and sees some truth in it, that is not supposed to affect his cognitive task.⁶⁸ Wach was more categorical elsewhere in the work where he declares: "The history of religions can neither ask nor answer the question of truth".⁶⁹ These uncompromising positions of Wach seem to have undergone modification, especially as he grew in knowledge.

In another work of early 1950s, Wach started tackling this problem of truth with a caution that we should avoid two extremes in our dealing with the religions of the world including our own. He says that we should avoid:

- 1) taking over notions and practices uncritically for no reason than that we have inherited them;
- 2) rejecting equally uncritically tradition because it is tradition.⁷⁰

The statement we quoted above explains everything, for in it Wach considered it a mistake of the early scholars of religion to opt for a total elimination of value judgement in this discipline, as he believes this has led to an unsatisfactory relativism incapable of contributing to the eternal quest for 'truth'. That quest "is actually the prime motive in all our desire for knowledge."⁷¹ This change of gear by Wach was explained more when he adds:

"We have now learned that the task of interpretation of all expressions of religious experience is two fold: first, to discover the facts, a procedure exclusively committed to the idea of objectivity, and, second, to formulate and define our reaction to these facts, that is, the question of evaluation."⁷¹

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 163.

⁷⁰ Wach, Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. p. xii (Intro.)

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

Here, Wach has another conception, and as he said he has 'now learned', which means before he was not able to recognise that evaluation should form part of his study of religion. It may be basically due to this new opinion of Wach and his subsequent implementation of it especially in that he was seen more as a theologian of religion than a historian of religions.⁷²

b- The Criterion of Reason:

As regards the other side of the issue of truth and how we can determine it, we see Wach categorically rejecting reason as a criterion by which to judge the truth in religions. He buttressed his opinion first by resorting to history of the study of religion. Starting with the Enlightenment as a philosophical movement, which due to the recoiling 'of outstanding European thinkers from dogmatic controversies and also due to their better acquaintance with the religions of world outside Europe, developed a natural religion or theology.⁷³ Wach, even though commending this effort showed that it failed for two reasons:

1. Being their implicit trust in human reason, which according to Wach prevented them from doing justice to the true nature of religious experience, and 'rendered their attainment of an understanding of its (historical) forms of expression impossible.'
2. Their 'insight into the nature of Christian experience, according to him, was insufficient, partly because of their form of intellectualism and moralism.'⁷⁴

Wach also showed that three different attitudes towards religious quest can be observed in the Anglo-Saxon world that has accepted rationalism. In all the three, 'reason

⁷² See Sharpe, J., Comparative Religion, A History, op. cit. pp. 275-276.

⁷³ Wach, Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. p. 12.

⁷⁴ ibid., p. 12.

precedes or supercedes revelation'. The three being, the critical, the idealistic and the naturalistic.⁷⁵

Wach's other arguments in this regard come from a well-known theologian Nathan Soderblom, whom Wach mentioned that he 'discards rightly the idea of universal religion to be abstracted from the positive faiths, usually with 'reason' as a criterion'.⁷⁶ It is only natural that a Christian theologian rejected reason as a criterion for judging religions, because he is thinking within the frame work of the materials he deals with. But to generalise judgement is not always safe, especially if one has no real and accurate knowledge of all the different parts that will fall under that generalisation. For Wach to agree with Soderblom in the following opinion is to fall into the error mentioned above. Wach writes:

"All religion, according to Soderblom, is positive, that is 'a concrete whole of rites, customs and traditions' not a 'conclusion of reason'.⁷⁷

Wach seems to be more explicit when he declares in his 'Universals in Religion' as regards the encounter with a power which constitutes religion: "This encounter is not a question of intellectual inference or speculative reasoning....."⁷⁸

So if reason can not be taken as a criterion, which we think is debatable, what criterion can be used to judge religious truth? Wach's answer to this is more theological than scientific, for it rests partly on what Rudolf Otto 'discovered' as regards the holy. Wach considers the view of Soderblom who anticipates Otto's idea, when he found that there is a 'new inner unity of all genuine religion' based on the characters of holiness and obligation. These two, Wach believes, are 'the surest criteria of genuine religion'.⁷⁹ As truth is one it can not be many, Wach goes on to identify how that truth can be found.

⁷⁵ ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁶ ibid., p. 15.

⁷⁷ ibid., p. 15

⁷⁸ See Types of Religious Experience....., op. cit. p. 35.

⁷⁹ ibid., p. 15,

He agrees with Hocking, who in his book 'Living religions and a World of Faith' (1940) feels that the genuineness of a religion can be proved by its fruits. This criterion seems to have been taken directly from Matthew 7:15-18, where a mention was first made of false prophets, and then as may be implied, genuine prophets who shall be known by their fruits. To conclude this discussion, we will refer to what Wach considers (agreeing with Hocking) these fruits to be. They are:

- 1- the ability to redeem contemporary man from his deep sense of frustration (Wach was writing few years after the World War II);
- 2- the ability of saving man from the vices that plague him;
- 3- the faith that is 'most fertile in stimulating his creative capacities'
- 4- the faith that is capable of legitimately asserting its authority.⁸⁰

As a final note on Wach's principles and values in the comparative method, he concluded his discussion on criterion as a committed theologian in these words:

"It is precisely the concept of the Holy Spirit of God.... which should be the guide in all attempts at the determination of the 'germs of truth,' in as much as it represents the only legitimate criterion by which to judge where God speaks and is present...."⁸¹

So if Wach can say this and still claim that he is a historian of religions, why should anyone call corresponding attitudes of Muslim scholars as mere theology?

3- Wach's Application of the Comparative Method in the Study of Religion:

Wach did not only contribute in the articulation of the appropriate method(s) with which to investigate the religious realm, but he also has his applications of his insights in the different religions. At the time of Wach as indicated earlier, vast material on religion

⁸⁰ ibid., p. 21.

⁸¹ ibid. p. 29.

has already been collected, edited, translated and published. The work was enormous and speaks of dedication to knowledge and its love. A considerable part of this data was collected through field work, when scholars go to the different communities, sometimes they have to learn their language first, observe their customs and rituals and then try to understand their religious beliefs and practices. Through these painstaking studies, virtually all human societies were explored and their religious beliefs and practices documented. We mentioned earlier that if every religion is to be studied independently of all others, very little can be discovered as common features in all religions. This calls for the need for comparison of these diverse traditions with the hope that, some kind of unity at least, in some areas can be found in that diversity. Wach is credited in our view, of taking great interest in this venture and was able after serious studies to come out with his 'Universals in Religion' for instance.⁸² In that particular study Wach desired to investigate the variety of what goes under the names of religion, (a) in order to determine by comparison and phenomenological analysis if anything like a structure can be discovered in all these forms of expression; (b) to determine to what kind of experiences this variegated expressions can be traced' and (c) to determine what kind of reality or realities may correspond to the experience in question."⁸³ This will be explained further after a little while.

Wach's comparative studies do show different ways of comparing religious data. A scholar, his studies show, can either study all the material on religion as one whole, in the course of which some similarities and of course differences, will be apparent in the data from various religions. It is in this use of the comparative method that features are discovered, which seem to appear in each individual religion. These features explain and depict, as it were, the structures of religion in the singular. The differences are not forgotten in this kind of study, they are only not stressed upon, in order that features of

⁸² Chapter Two of his work, Types of Religious Experience..., op. cit. pp. 30-47.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 30.

some sort of a 'genus' of religion be determined and presented, under which all religions would be individual 'species', with each religion having its own unique or distinguishing features that make it distinct from all others. This kind of comparison was made by Wach in an excellent article title 'Universals in the Religion' as pointed out and as will be shown below. He discovered in it many features which he found in all or almost all known religions of which data was available.

This way of comparison we consider to be 'general comparison' of religious data. As its benefits are shown above, it is not free of criticism. It tends to be superficial and general, and differences that can be decisive or otherwise are almost completely left out.

The second kind of comparison discovered in Wach's writings is what has been called 'phenomenological typology', which is also interested in the search for structure(s) of religious phenomena. In this kind of comparison employed by Wach in his 'Sociology of Religion' and in other works, he compares similar phenomena from different religious traditions in order to find the structure underlying each phenomenon, and he tries to group structures into types. By typology, differences can be seen despite the similarities. Wach's idea of human religious experience, its ways of expressions and types is an example of the use of this kind of comparison.

Another way of making comparison seen in Wach's work is where only two religious traditions are compared in order to discover the similarities as well as the differences after thorough study of the two. In his way we saw him comparing his religion (Christianity) and Mahāyāna Buddhism, one of his main areas of study.

The last way of employing the comparative method in Wach's writings is what is called 'thematic comparison'. In this kind of comparison, a theme is selected and then studied either across the board of religions, or in one class of the many classifications of religion that we have in the discipline. Wach's study of the idea of man in Near Eastern religions, of al-Hujwiri's spiritual teachings, of the problem of truth in religion etc. to us fall within this category.

We will now show how Wach applied these different approaches to the comparative method in his works.

(a) General Comparison:

Wach started his discussions on the 'universals in religion', an example of general comparison as indicated above, with a working definition of religion, which is one of the most intricate problems of the scientific study of religion. Wach suggested four essential features that make an experience religious. These features indicate that an experience can be considered religious if :

1. it is a response to what is experienced as ultimate reality;
2. it is a total response of the total being to what is apprehended as ultimate reality;
3. it is the most intense experience of which man is capable; and
4. it is practical and involves an imperative, a commitment which impels man to act.⁸⁴

After the definition Wach started outlining his universals, starting with the assertions that religious experience as defined by the above four points is universal. In other words religion is a universal phenomenon confirmed by anthropologists, like Malinowski's statement: 'There are no peoples, however primitive, without religion and magic.'⁸⁵ Wach also believes that religious experience is expressed for it is only through that, that our experiences exist for others. Depicting part of his comparative enterprise he opines: 'A comparative study of the forms of the expressions of religious experience, the world over, shows an amazing similarity in structure'.⁸⁶ The result of such comparative studies can be summarised in the following words: 'all expression of religious experience falls under the three headings of theoretical expression, practical expression and sociological expression.' To Wach, these are the three dimensions of religion what pertains to beliefs, doctrines and myths as the first expression. The second involves rituals

⁸⁴ ibid., p. 32.

⁸⁵ ibid., p. 33.

⁸⁶ ibid., p. 34.

and cultural acts, while the third constitutes religious fellowship. Due to the certainty he has from his comparative studies of all known religions of mankind, he declares, "Everywhere and at all times man has felt the need to articulate his religious experience in three ways: conceptually; by action or practically; and in covenanting, or sociologically."⁸⁶

In enumerating his universals, we will have to limit ourselves to examples Wach believes to be found in all religions. These include the following notions:

- 1- Holy times and holy places are universally found in all religions;
- 2- A cosmic (natural, ritual and social) order upon which life, collective and individual depends, seen also as foundation of all ethics;
- 3- That transcendental power is experientiable in this world;
- 4- So also the notions of Divine wrath and Divine love or grace are universals;
- 5- The use of symbolic expression is universal;
- 6- The intellectual or theoretical expressions of religious experience has a cognitive element by which the ultimate is apprehended;
- 7- Development of doctrinal aspect of religion is order to unify and systematise variants concepts.⁸⁷ He says here: "In all the major world religions a doctrinal development which includes reactions and protests can be traced;"⁸⁸
- 8- Even the themes being treated in myths and doctrines of all religions like the nature and character of supreme reality of God, evil, the origin, nature and destiny of the world, of man, etc. are universal;⁸⁸
- 9- Rites through which the presence of the ultimate is acknowledged. In this point Wach seems to have generalised wrongly when he opined that: "It (rituals) is not prescribed for a practical purpose, even not social

⁸⁷ ibid., pp. 35-39.

solidarity.”⁸⁹ In Islam the situation is not exactly as Wach has claimed. We see prayer and other acts of worship being prescribed for both spiritual purification and remembrance of Allah on one hand, and for some practical purposes like eschewing vices, curbing and controlling man's crave for wealth, etc. on the other;⁹⁰

- 10- Prayer also is universal in all its forms, silent, vocal, private, collective, spontaneous and standardised;
- 11- ‘Rites of passage’ are also universally practiced due to the belief that life “in the universe, in the social unit and in the individual, cannot go on,... if it is not nourished, encouraged, and stimulated by rites which keep it attuned to cosmic and divine powers.” These rites include prenatal preparation, birth ceremonies, those of name-giving, initiation at puberty, marriage, sickness and burial rites.⁹¹ The philosophy behind these acts which include warding off of “the dangers lurking in the passage from one stage of life to another’ we believe is not universal, even though these rites seem to be found in all traditions;
- 12- The idea that all life is an expression of worship, and that every act and deed witnesses to the continuous communion of man with God or the ultimate, is believed by Wach to be the great vision of all ‘homines religiosi’ and so is universal;⁹¹

⁸⁸ ibid., p. 40.

⁸⁹ ibid., P.41.

⁹⁰ See for example Surah al-Baqrah: 183, Surah al-Taubah: 103, Surah al-Ankabut: 45 etc.

⁹¹ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 42.

- 13- Acts of devotion and services to one's fellow-men are also universally valid practical expressions of religious experience;⁹²
- 14- All human religious acts are believed to be conditioned by the physical material in which and with which alone it can work, so certain vestments, emblems, instruments are used universally for the purpose of creating a numinous atmosphere;⁹³ and
- 15- Universally valid also are the means by which the religious community is integrated: a common faith, acts of worship, order, symbols etc. all constitute and preserve the identity and integrity of the fellowship. Just as religious leadership also is universal.⁹⁴

All the above indicate that there are universal themes in religious thought and Wach believed that 'the universal is always embedded in the particular'.⁹⁵ This is one example of Wach's use of the comparative method, the benefit of which is very evident. It shows the universal quest or rather, response to the 'religious instinct' in man and the universality of religion and its practice, so also the fact that these amazing similarities tend to give religions some kind of unity as one essential aspect of man's life. This should not be confused with a somewhat similar notion of the Perennial philosophy.

(b) Comparison between Two Religions:

The second application of the comparative method by Wach, which we want to demonstrate is the comparative study of two religions only (not sticking to the order in which these approaches have been introduced). As mentioned above Wach compared Christianity with *Mahāyāna* Buddhism showing a lot of analogies in both the religions and

⁹² ibid., p. 43.

⁹³ ibid., p. 44.

⁹⁴ ibid., p. 46-47.

in various aspects of them, while at the same time elaborating at the end, 'decisive differences', with a lot of revelations.⁹⁶

Firstly, Wach discovered in the two religions of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Christianity three-fold striking parallels as regard the three ways of expression of the religious experience. In the theoretical aspect, he found in both, 'belief in the Ultimate Reality of numinous character, in the hope of redemption and in the concepts of virtues, especially compassion and knowledge'. In the practical aspect of religious experience, Wach found both the religions similar in the stress on devotion, prayer, oblations, charity, personal sacrifice and the imitation of a perfect example.⁹⁷ There are similarities also in their concepts of 'brotherhood in the transcendence of 'natural' ties', in notions of authority and differentiation on the basis of denominations. Monasticism and celibacy are found in both. Both have their sacred writings.⁹⁷ Apart from similarities in the structure of these religions, there are what he terms 'similarities in the dynamics of their historical developments.' Here Wach is pointing to what resembles an earlier study by R. Pettazonni on 'East and West'.⁹⁸ Of these similarities Wach points to the lives of both the founders of these religions, and their teachings began 'a process of 'crystallization' in both the traditions. In both, a cult of the founder (mentioned above) originates. Both expanded beyond ethnic, national and cultural frontiers and so became missionary religions. Both experience influences from the cultural environment into which they enter.⁹⁹ This influence tends to give a new dimension, even a new shape to the respective religions. In both, Wach found theological articulation being supported by philosophical

⁹⁵ ibid., p. 47.

⁹⁶ ibid., pp. 125-131.

⁹⁷ ibid., p. 126.

⁹⁸ First published in Italian as 'Oriente e Occidente' (1945). See Pettazonni, R. Essays on the History of Religions, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), pp. 193-201.

⁹⁹ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 126.

argument. Wach even said, "Both can boast of outstanding individuals, among the early disciples of the founders as well as later in a series of prominent saints, teachers, thinkers, reformers, and ascetics."¹⁰⁰

In both religions there was break in the unity of the religious fellowship. There were in both instance of reformations, challenge from science was also faced by both etc.

Wach as we have shown before used sometimes to explain similarities as due to borrowing.¹⁰¹ He cited the example of the Mendicant Orders of Christianity in the Middle Ages and their missions which he believes had made an impact on the countries of Mahāyānā Buddhism (especially Tibet).¹⁰²

Wach, in order not to be accused of mere search for parallels and of superficiality, discussed the differences also. The differences he believes were 'due to the complexity and variety of emphases' in the two religions. He also expounded a theory explained above, that comparison should not be superficial or for the search for parallels only. Contrasts have to be shown after a thorough and rigorous study of both religions. He pointed also to the lack of competence of most liberal Protestant theologians and the 'neo-orthodox' theologians to carry out this task.¹⁰³ The matter is not only limited to study, but a very crucial factor has to be there that is understanding full meaning of the 'What' of both religions and their 'How'.¹⁰² After explaining how to go about the act of contrasting, he showed that

the first major difference is in the sources which is very evident. He added that it is only in a very formal way that the notion of redeemer in both correspond. One of his insight

¹⁰⁰ ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰¹ ibid., p. 127, cp. p. 125, here he believes there have been contacts between the two religions which explain the similarities.

¹⁰² ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰³ ibid., p. 128.

is his showing that the similarities demonstrated by some scholars between "the figure of Jesus as interpreted in modern liberalistic Protestantism and the Buddhism of the Hināyānā as interpreted by Western scholars (also) from the background of liberalistic Protestantism....vanishes if Hināyāna Buddhism is seen integrally."¹⁰⁴ Wach's concept of integral understanding especially as explained in his 'The Comparative Study of Religions' (1958) has drawn much criticism from other students of religion like Zwi Werblowsky.¹⁰⁵ Their concepts of Ultimate Reality is fundamentally different. No concept of 'Canonical' is there in the scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In Christianity the cosmic and moral law is interpreted as an expression of God's divine will and power, while in Mahāyāna theology it tends to regard it as an aspect of the Ultimate Reality without reference to a revealed God.¹⁰⁶

The Christian order is 'God – World – Man', this is not paralleled to the Mahāyāna 's of 'Cosmos – Man'. So also the theological and devotional pluralism found in Mahāyāna Buddhism is alien to Christianity. Lastly there is no analogy, Wach thinks to the concept of the Christian personality (character) as there is none to the Buddhist notion of 'Karma'.¹⁰⁶ So even in notions that seem to be found in both the religions, like that of grace Wach found that the means of which it is conferred in the two religions differ. From many similar examples, historians of religions came to the conclusion that though "a certain recurrent theme occurs into traditions, (as seen above) it nevertheless has a different contextual meaning in each."¹⁰⁷

(c) Phenomenological Typology:

The third way Wach employed the comparative method is, as mentioned above (second number) the phenomenological typology which he makes use of in his work

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁰⁵ See Sharpe, Comparative Religion, op. cit. pp. 275-276 also pp. 238-240.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁰⁷ Smart, N. (art) 'Comparative-Historical method' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol. 3, p. 573.

'Sociology of Religion' especially. In it Wach compared religious groups, the nature and organisation of religious secret societies, master-disciple relations, religious brotherhood and other different facets of the various religious institutions and their relations in the society.¹⁰⁸ In some of Wach's writing he conceives sociology of religion as a branch of the science of religion or *Religionswissenschaft*, being the systematic aspect of the History of Religions as one discipline. That aspect, as Wach explains, is interested in what has become of religion. The scholar here turns to cross-sections, hoping to present 'a religious system independent of temporal differences'.¹⁰⁹ He will study the practice of a religion in a certain place and at a certain place or the practice of a community in a given period, and so on. This shows clearly the two essential aspect of this task, i.e., religion and society and hence, sociology of religion.

In some other writings Wach shows that sociology of religion is an independent discipline with parentage from both the science of religion and sociology.¹¹⁰ Anyway, the approach adopted by Wach in his study of the relation of religion to society was presented by him, when he opines that the best method to be used by the sociologists of religion is not the empirical nor the *apriori* method, but the typological. That method is comparative ~~through~~ and ~~through~~ as pointed out by Whaling.¹¹¹ The reason why it is comparative is because it "will have to include the whole width and breath of mankind's religious experience."¹¹² Wach shows that in the study of the religious group, the systematic approach will aim "at construction of types of sacred communion", while the historical will attempt to embrace all the variegated forms religious fellowships have

¹⁰⁸ See Wach, J. Essays in the History of Religions, op. cit. pp. 781-113 cp. Whaling, F., (art) Comparative Approaches...., op. cit. Vol. I, pp. 232-236.

¹⁰⁹ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions' op. cit. pp. 131-132.

¹¹⁰ See Wach, Essays in the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 81.

¹¹¹ Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches...., op. cit. vol. I, p. 232.

¹¹² Wach, Essays in the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 98.

shown under different historical and other conditions.¹¹³ The phenomenological typology which Wach employed proceeds from the phenomenological study of say natural religious groups like, family or national cult, or of non-natural religious groups, i.e., founded groups, and then he tries to construct types in each specific phenomenon studied in all religions. In all these studies, Wach was interested to erect a typology of the main religious groupings he explored. Other areas studied by Wach in his works using the same approach include the relation of religious attitudes and practice to the social differentiation, so also the relations of various religions to the state and the different types of religious authority. As Whaling pointed out, Wach took his basic point of departure from religious experience under either thought, or action or human fellowship.¹¹⁴ All what has been discussed here is the sociological aspect of religion which he considers the systematic aspect of the history of religions.¹¹⁵ This similar approach is used by Wach in determining types of religious experience and their expressions in his The Comparative Study of Religions (1958).

(d) Thematic Comparison:

The fourth and final way employed by Wach in his comparative studies is what is known as 'thematic comparison'. In this kind of comparative approach the student of religion chooses a theme which is found in all, or a group of religions but only in the light of that theme, or what they have to say on it. Wach, as many phenomenologists carried out a number of these studies on salvation, idea of man in Near Eastern religions, problem of truth, master and disciple and al-Hujwiri's spiritual teachings, or rather comparative mysticism.

¹¹³ ibid., p. 99.

¹¹⁴ Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' op. cit. pp. 232-234.

¹¹⁵ Kitagawa (art) 'Introduction: Verstehen and Erlosung' in Wach Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. xix (Intro.)

We will start with Wach's study of al-Hujwiri's book 'Kashf al-Mahjub' (Unveiling of the Veiled), where he showed in the beginning that his purpose is to bring forth the spiritual contributions of Islam and so on, as indicated above. He then pointed to the use of comparison by which he intends 'to learn to know better and love more deeply the treasures hidden in the teachings of the great Christian counterparts'.¹¹⁶ In examining al-Hujwiri's understanding and practice of Sufism, Wach found that it is similar to all the other spiritual teachings found in other religions. Some of these agreed points in the different religions, include al-Hujwiri's belief that purification is the first step and an indispensable one in their way. The Sufi will have to leave impurities behind him so as to tread their path.¹¹⁷ Al-Hujwiri like the Christian and Hindu (Bhakti) teachings regarded love as a cardinal tenet of Sufism. Poverty and the belief that worldly possessions hold back the friend of God from contentment is believed by al-Hujwiri as well as all ascetics of all ages.¹¹⁸ He, like Christian and Hindu ascetics view hunger as illuminating the heart and purifying the soul. But Wach contrasted al-Hujwiri's concern with companionship and avoidance of solitariness due to the Hadith in this regard, with Hindu and Buddhist's notion that encouraged the solitary search for truth.¹¹⁹ As physicians of souls they (the mystics) know the treatment and the needs of the disciples, with their intuitive insight (*firāsa*).

At the end of his discussions, Wach explains the parallels as due to the profound Christian influence on early Islam.¹²⁰ It is evident that Sunni Sufism (not as against Shi'ite, but as against Philosophical Sufism) takes its roots and principles from the sublime

¹¹⁶ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. pp. 82-83.

¹¹⁷ ibid., p. 91.

¹¹⁸ ibid., p. 95.

¹¹⁹ ibid., p. 97.

¹²⁰ ibid., p. 102.

teachings of the Qur'an, and the Sunnah, as well as those of early muslims, before the contact of the Islamic Ummah with other nations.

In Wach's study of 'The problem of truth in religion',¹²¹ he entered the discussions on the basis of his main theory in the world of religion, on the nature of religious experience with its three ways of expressions, believing that all religions apprehend the Ultimate Reality expressed in theology, cosmology and anthropology, and that all religions have developed forms of worship as well as religious fellowships. Christianity is no exception here.¹²² From the similarities in the religious consciousness, types of doctrines, forms of worship and in the mythical elements there seems to be not only universal religious consciousness, but also a sort of 'convergence' of the above mentioned elements.¹²³ He then goes to opine out of his Euro-Christian ethnocentrism and the arrogance of Western 'scientific' research that ".....every religion suffers to a greater or lesser degree from distortions misapprehensions and misdirections". In order to show that he was not being biased he added 'In this respect too, Christianity and other religions must come under the same indictment.'¹²³ What concrete evidences has Wach to prove this sweeping statement that in a way creates doubt in all religions? If all religions have been distorted and we accept the fact that religion come from God not from man or society (as we believe Wach also did), then man will have strong reasons not to accept all and to wait till God reveals the perfected and preserved message to all mankind. Scores of evidences based on any criterion of truth we adopt abound, and history very evidently testifies that that religion is Islam.

After Wach's last statement which uprooted all religions, because we believe if religion has been distorted and misdirected, it loses its integrity and infallibility, he immediately after that affirms the statement of another scholar on the truth in all of these

¹²¹ Wach, J. Understanding and Believing, (ed.) Kitagawa, J.M., op. cit. pp. 146-154.

¹²² ibid., p. 150.

distorted religions in these words: 'The growing science of religion has made it quite clear that there is much truth in all the religions of the world.'¹²³ It is surprising that it is in this article more than anywhere else, where Wach confirms the truth of Christianity over and against all other religions.¹²⁴ He viewed the issue of truth in all religions as a matter of 'contest of spiritual power'. This being the criterion, he analysed it, on the basis of what a religion can do and what/^{it} can be expected to do for one and all men?¹²⁵ As far as the criteria based on which we can know the genuineness of religion are concerned, Wach gave three¹²⁶, namely:

- 1- First, we must 'separate the genuine religion from its historical, cultural, economic, political and other contexts and distinguish its various factors'.
But we fear that this will lead to reductionism and decontextualisation.
- 2- We must assess "the adequacy of any theological, practical and sociological expressions with regard to the experience to which it is meant to witness."
On what basis or principle can we make this assessment?
- 3- Asking 'to what degree there is a consciousness of the provisional character of all expressions of religious experience.' So this means there is nothing like permanence in the expressions of religious experience?

As another way of determining the truth of a religion Wach adds, only if the religious meanings which were once adequate can be retranslated into contemporary language or spiritual power can a religion claim to be regarded as

¹²³ ibid., p. 151.

¹²⁴ ibid., p. 153.

¹²⁵ ibid., p. 152.

¹²⁶ ibid., p. 151.

genuinely religious.¹²⁷ Due to the inadequacy of truth in all religions, according to Wach, religions are supposed to learn from each other, their recognised features, e.g. Islamic devotion to one God and its brotherhood.¹²⁸

In the end Wach shows his 'missionary' face when he declared that in the Gospel it is the Cosmic Christ that is speaking. He quoted John 14:6 where Jesus is reported to have said 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life'. He concluded the chapter in the following words:

"To conceive of Christ worthily all races and all nations have to do their share. The symbol of the Magi bringing their gifts and worshipping the holy child in their own ways seems very apt, for Christian faith affirms that all men are called into that universal fellowship known as his Body, the Church".¹²⁹

Without any ambiguity or difficulty, we can recognise these to be words of a committed and missionary theologian. Despite his claims of objectivity, when it comes to the problem of 'truth in religion', Wach will forget all his methodological theories and tall claims of disinterestedness.

These are the various ways Wach employed the comparative method and both the positive and negative aspects of theology become evident in him, as we will further discuss when we assess and evaluate his method in the third part of this chapter.

¹²⁷ ibid., pp. 151-152.

¹²⁸ ibid., p. 153.

¹²⁹ ibid., p. 154.

2 – MIRCEA ELIADE (1907-1986)

The second Western model of doing comparative religion or comparing religious data from different religions to be treated in this work, is Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). Eliade as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter was a Romanian historian of religions and man of letters, who spent the last part of his life in the premises of the University of Chicago where he has been teaching since 1956. He was a well-known authority in the Western comparative study of religions, who contributed immensely to the field as we will endeavour to show. Eliade was encyclopedic in erudition and the editor-in-chief of the most recent encyclopedia in the field of scientific study of religion – The Encyclopedia of Religion (1987), who died just six months before its final completion. The scientific study of religion in the West is somewhat well established as an autonomous discipline now, with many approaches to the religious phenomena. Eliade being at the centre of that Western tradition of Religionswissenschaft and also coming from the so-called Chicago school of the history of religions, will very much be another suitable model representing to some extent the second half of the twentieth century. Joachim Wach whose contributions we have seen rightly represents the second quarter of this century (he died in 1955).

As Eliade is a prolific and untiring writer, with a lot of energy and forceful arguments to support his views, we have to state from the onset, that we are not going to analyse and evaluate all his thought or even all his academic output in the field of comparative religion, that will require a separate and lengthy treatment. Our interest in this work is *prima facie* the comparative approach to the study of religious data, which we have seen with the preceding three scholars.

Eliade's comparative model will be analysed as another model of comparing different religions of the world from the modern perspective. It is worth noting that in Eliade we hope to see an advanced stage of the comparison of religious data and what future hopes are there in its further progress.

We would first give a brief sketch of Eliade's life and works and then present his comparative method and its main features. This will also be brief due to space constraint.

A- A Brief Sketch of the Life and Works of Mircea Eliade:

We could not find much on the life of Mircea Eliade, having died of recent (1986) except in The Encyclopedia of Religion, (Vol. 5, pp. 85-90) and brief introductions in other writings presenting and evaluating his ideas.¹

Mircea Eliade was born on March 09, 1907 in Bucharest, Romania, and was a son of an army officer. He witnessed the German occupation of his country while he was 9 years old. This was to have an impression on his later ideas and thought. He developed interest in different fields of learning while still in the Lycee, like literature, philosophy, oriental studies, alchemy and history of religions. To show his wide reading and devotion to learning, it is credited to Eliade that at the time he joined the University of Bucharest in 1925, at the age of 18 years, he has already published his 100th article!² This shows clearly the prospects such a young man holds in the intellectual sphere.

At the university, Eliade became a disciple of Nae Ionescu, who groomed him in life experience, commitment, intuition, the spiritual and psychological reality of the mental worlds.³ He had an early concern with renaissance humanism and the Italian philosophy from Ficino to Bruno which formed the basis of his M. A. thesis in 1928. His interest in the Renaissance was confessed to by Eliade and he showed that for him it is was a search for a wider humanism bolder than the Renaissance. Eliade was dreaming of a 'universal man'.⁴

¹ See for example Whaling, F. (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, op. cit. Vol. 1, p. 214, cp. Allen, D., Structure and Creativity in Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1978 which is a study of Eliade hermeneutics. Cp. The New Encyclopedia Britannica, (art) 'Eliade, Mircea', vol. 4, p 447, op. cit.

² Kitagawa, J. M., (art) 'Eliade, Mircea' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol.5, p.85.

³ ibid. p. 85.

⁴ ibid., p. 85.

After his M. A. and probably due to his underlying interest of trying 'to decipher the message of the Cosmos', destiny took him to study in India under Surendranath Dasgupta at the University of Calcutta from 1928-1932. Not only this, Eliade lived for six months after his study in the ashram (hermitage) of Rishikesh, Himalayas,⁵ trying to discover the mystery of his existence. India to Eliade was more than a place to study, for he felt that some kind of mystery was hidden somewhere in India.⁶ He made a lot of discoveries in that brief stay in India. Upon his return to Romania in 1932, he was appointed to assist his teacher Nae Ionescu at the University of Bucharest, in the following year. In the same year, 1933 he earned his Ph. D. from the same university with the dissertation : "Yoga - Essay on the Origins of Indian Mysticism".⁷

This intellectual make up and different circumstances of the early life of Eliade were to have their visible influence on his ideas on religion, the universe and man. The idea of freedom, of the different manifestations of the sacred, of the importance he gave to archaic and 'primitive' religions were taking shape in the mind of Eliade from his university days.

In 1936, he published his work on Yoga, in which according to Kitagawa, he attempted a new interpretation of the myths and symbolism of archaic and oriental religions, and that, this attempt attracted the attention of many eminent European scholars then, like Heinrich Zimmer, Giuseppe Tucci, etc.⁸ Eliade was a prolific writer and novelist, and he wrote many fictions works inspired by his Indian experience between 1930-1935.¹³⁷

In the field of the history of religions, Eliade started his significant contribution from as early as late 1930s, which means that for nearly 50 years of his productive life,

⁵ The New Encyclopedia Britannica, (art) ;'Eliade, Mircea' op. cit. vol. 4, p. 447.

⁶ Kitagawa, (art) 'Eliade, Mircea' The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. p. 85.

⁷ The New Encyclopedia Britannica, op. cit. vol. 4, p. 447.

Eliade was known in the scholarly circles of Comparative Religion. So it comes as no surprise that he was appointed as the editor-in-chief of The Encyclopedia of Religion. He founded a journal 'Zalmoxis: Review of the Study of Religions' in 1938 but ceased circulation by 1942.⁹

Eliade has also acted as a diplomat representing the Royal Romanian government. In 1940 he was appointed as cultural attaché in the war-torn London, and after that he moved to Lisbon between 1941-1945.¹⁰ After the World War-II, Eliade went to Paris in a life of self-imposed exile. He started lecturing, as a visiting professor at the Ecole 'des Hautes Etudes of the Sorbonne in 1946.¹¹ Many of Eliade's early works in the study of religion were written while he was in Paris (1945-1955), having taught earlier the history of religions and Indian Philosophy at the University of Bucharest (1933-1939). It should be recalled that Eliade studied in India its philosophy and the Sanskrit language. In 1956, Eliade was invited by the university of Chicago, to deliver 'Haskell Lectures' titled 'Birth and rebirth'.¹² Later in 1957 he joined the university faculty and continued to live there after retirement and till his death on April 22, 1986.

Eliade was described as having an 'unusually keen mind and a strong intuition', as well as a fertile imagination, so also a strong determination to work hard. Even while at the Sorbonne, Eliade was invited by leading universities in Europe to deliver lectures. He attended many seminars, conferences and annual meetings at Ascona in Switzerland.¹³ The numerous works written by Eliade in which he continued to expound his theory on

⁸ Kitagawa, (art), op. cit. p. 86.

⁹ ibid., p. 86

¹⁰ See Whaling, F. (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, op. cit. Vol., p. 214.

¹¹ Kitagawa, (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. Vol., 5, p.86.

¹² ibid., p. 88.

¹³ ibid., p. 87.

the study of religion, were composed during the Paris phase of his life and that was the time when he was solidifying his most important concepts and categories like, *homo religiosus*, *homo symbolicus*, archetypes, *coincidentia oppositorum*, hierophany, *axis mundi*, the cosmic rope, the nostalgia for paradise, androgyny, the initiatory scenario and the rest.¹³ These novel ideas and concepts were elaborated in his works written during that period like Techniques du Yoga (1948), Traites d' histoire (1949) which later was translated as Patterns in Comparative Religion (1958), Mythe de l'éternel Retour (1949) also translates as The Myth of the Eternal Return (1958), Le Chamanisme... (1951), translated and enlarged as Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (1964).¹³

From his works of this phase of his life and even of later phases, Eliade was aiming at a 'total hermeneutics' and deciphering the various religious symbolisms in the world. His ideas form a sort of a coherent whole, and a framework with all the different aspects interconnected, to such an extent that if one criticises one aspect of his thought, the whole framework will be affected.¹³

When Eliade came to Chicago, the University of Chicago was already an important centre for the study of religions, thanks to the efforts of the first Western scholar we studied in this work – Joachim Wach, who established a strong base for the discipline there. He wrote on, and trained young students in the field. Many of those graduates of Wach were scattered in North America and other continents, at the time of the arrival of Eliade in the United States. At that time many of his earlier works written, mostly in French were translated to English and 'were devoured by the reading public'. Eliade wrote other series of works for his new environment and as Kitagawa has observed, his willingness to use non-philosophical and non-theological terms in an elegant literary style while discussing religious subjects, attracted many secularised youths to his works.¹⁴ Some of these later works include:

¹⁴ ibid., p. 88.

- (i) Cosmos and History, (1959)
- (ii) The Sacred and the Profane (1959)
- (iii) Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries (1960)
- (iv) Images and Symbols (1969)
- (v) Myths and Reality (1963)
- (vi) The Forge and the Crucible (1962)

For advanced intellectual discourse he wrote Yoga (1958), Shamanism (1964) and Australian Religions (1973). Among his later works are included, Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashion, Essays in Comparative Religion (1976). Eliade also gave attention to the collection of original historical sources for the study of religion in a single work. He wrote in 1969 From Primitive to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions, to cover the need of students studying different religions, but who find the data they will have to defend on in different sources.¹⁵ Eliade was so energetic in writing that apart from the encyclopedia for which he was the editor-in-chief, he wrote his own encyclopedic work that shows his real interest in history, A History of Religious Ideas in three volumes (1978-1986), he intended to write four volumes. In this work among the last ones written by Eliade, one can see his matured thoughts about the 'homo religiosus' and the 'homo symbolicus' and also 'his lifelong conviction about the fundamental unity of all religious phenomena'.¹⁵

B- Mircea Eliade And the Study of Religion:

Mircea Eliade's vast erudition, his unrelenting efforts to put forward his ideas, and his participation in the general uplift of the discipline of comparative study of religion and its further consolidation in the academic circles, have secured for him a very respectful and high position in the Western general science of religion. Having written several works on the areas he showed greater interest, Eliade seemed to possess the quality he envisaged for

¹⁵ ibid., p. 89

the historians of religions – being 'learned generalists'.¹⁶ He was a generalist and a serious student of the study of religious symbolism, where he distinguished himself as a great authority. Eliade also attempted to present the meanings of religious traditions in line with the underlying primordial myths that provide the basis for mystical phenomena.¹⁷ Eliade's intellectual interest goes beyond the history of religions, due to his early concern with the Renaissance, the universal man, humanism etc. Kitagawa saw his ultimate concern in the 'revitalization of all branches of learning and the arts.' He was in the hope of deciphering the message of the cosmos which he believes to be a 'great repository of hidden meanings.'¹⁸

It is his interest in the universal man and his ways of thinking and doing things that probably took Eliade to India. He studied there under the guidance of Hindu philosophers and 'theologians', Indian philosophy and religions, and he also learnt the Sanskrit language. As if this is not enough for Eliade, since all that he did is limited to the theoretical aspects only, he decided to experience Hindu religion by staying in one of the hermitages at Rishikesh, so as to have a deep and long lasting spiritual experience, which he believes the modern Western man lacks.

To Eliade then, studying a religious tradition gives one an insight into that religion, but it seems he can understand it only partly and also not deeply. Even though Eliade did not, as far as we know, explicitly declare that, that can be easily discerned from his constant comparison between the archaic or religious man of old and the modern non-religious man of today.¹⁹ Eliade discovered in India, according to Kitagawa, the common elements in all peasant cultures of China, Southeast Asia, Pre-Aryan aborigines, the

¹⁶ ibid., p. 88.

¹⁷ The New Encyclopedia Britannica (Micropedia), op. cit. Vol. 4, p. 447.

¹⁸ Kitagawa, (art) The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. p. 85.

¹⁹ For instance, Eliade, M. The Sacred and the Profane, (trans.), Trask, W. R. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), p. 13.

Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsular – this comparative study of these religions led him later to the derivation of his notion of the ‘cosmic religion’.²⁰

Eliade’s intelligence was noticed by eminent European scholars, like Heinrich Zimmer, Jean Przylusk, Guinseppe Tucci, etc., in his new interpretation of myths and symbols in 1936. This shows his early interest in finding meanings and understanding the religious world of the archaic and the primitive man. From that time, and due to his early interest in Yoga and Shamanism, Eliade’s interpretations of religion took that line. If his interest would have been in a different religion like say, one of the revealed iconoclastic religions, his line of thinking would have been different from his lifelong interest in symbols, myths and hierophanies.

His interest in the general progress, autonomy and advancement of the discipline of Religionswissenschaft can be seen not only in his works and his teaching of the history of religions in two continents for 50 years or so, but also in his establishing two journals for the young discipline, one in 1938 – ‘Zalmoxis: Review of the Study of Religions’ which ceased circulation after 1942, and later also in the United States, he founded an international journal – History of Religions in 1961,²¹ still circulating. A journal being one of the main organs through which a discipline is refined in terms of methodological ideas, by means of scholarly exchange, and also a means by which new discoveries and breakthroughs are elucidated.

Eliade is credited with being one of the few modern scholars who presented a new way of comparing religions that leads to “a comprehensive theory on man’s religiousness set within a framework provided by the notion of universal history on the one hand, and the consciousness of the unity of the spiritual history of humankind on the other.”²² This

²⁰ Kitagawa, (art) op. cit. p. 85.

²¹ ibid., p. 86 and p. 88.

²² See King, U. (art) ‘Historical and Phenomenological Approaches’ in Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. Vol. I, pp. 111-112.

comprehensive theory which we will, Allah willing, explain after this has been lauded as well as criticised by various scholars of religion.

Guilford Dudley being one of those who focussed their attention specifically on Eliade's new theory in his work Religion on Trial : Mircea Eliade and His Critics (1977), after showing that positivist empiricism which many scholars of religion are sticking to today, has been seriously criticised even in the natural sciences, he said history of religions as a discipline should free itself from it, and instead look for a methodology around a core theory by which to study religious phenomena. Dudley thinks that Eliade's work can provide that core theory for the whole discipline of the science of religion.²³ Though this seems to be debatable as the theory has been criticised on some grounds, it at least shows to what extent Eliade's works and theories are valued in this academic field. To Eliade belongs the credit of coming out with a theory in religion which influenced not only the field of the study of religion, but also other disciplines like, philosophy of religion, phenomenology of religion and theology.²⁴ It is admitted by Bianchi that despite criticisms, the Eliadean theory remains a most important term of reference in the discipline.²⁴ Bianchi also opines that, in that interpretation of religious data by Eliade, there is "much that is valid for the historical comprehension of religion and of the religious phenomena, and that it will gain much from being freed from all the philosophical and postulatory (or revelatory) elements which characterize it...."²⁵ Whaling also after disclosing his reservations as regards the 'metaphysical underpinnings' in Eliade's theory, admitted that it is valuable and that his structural groupings of religious phenomena and data can be a helpful mode of comparison and of understanding religious data.²⁶

²³ ibid., p. 135

²⁴ Bianchi, U., The History of Religions, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), P. 185.

²⁵ ibid., p. 190.

²⁶ Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. vol. I, P. 220.

Not only Eliade's ideas in religious studies acquired global importance, he himself also got renown and fame, as well as honour coming his way from various parts of the world.²⁷ Kitagawa believed three factors helped the cause of Eliade, especially in the last phase of his life. They are:

- 1- His founding of a new international journal 'History of Religions' in 1961, and in an article written by Eliade in its first issue 'History of Religions and a New Humanism', he expressed his sympathy with the young scholars of religion in a world that stresses specialisation. He exhorted the students of religion to engage in the twin (systematic and historical) tasks of the discipline, which he saw as more than an academic pursuit.
- 2- Eliade's taking active part as a member and for one term, a president of the American Society for the Study of Religion (A.S.S.R.) established in Chicago, in 1958. He made a lot of contacts through it.
- 3- His long career of the study of religions in which he previously worked either on 'systematic' endeavours or on particular forms of religion like Shamanism, Yoga etc., but during the Chicago days, he embarked on a 'historical' study of the history of religions. He wrote two important works: From Primitive to Zen (1968), and an intended 4-volume work – A History of Religious Ideas (1978-1986) of which 3 volumes were written before his death.²⁸

From the foregoing we can vividly see Eliade's early efforts towards getting a place in this discipline, starting from India, passing through Australia to the Shamans and at the end with the various archaic and primitive religious data, out of which he came out with a comprehensive theory, after comparing the materials from these diverse religious worlds. He is acclaimed for his daring efforts to advance a theory in interpreting religion despite

²⁷ Kitagawa, (art)'Eliade, Mircea 'The Encyclopedia of Religion', op. cit. p. 89.

²⁸ ibid., pp. 88-89

the criticisms, as timidity ²⁹ according to him has prevented others from taking such a bold step. We will now turn to the explanation of this theory of Eliade which constitute at the same time his comparative method and its application.

B- Eliade and the Comparative Study of Religion (Conception and Basic Principles):

As mentioned above, Eliade has a conception of religious data and a way of studying it, which form his own theory presented to the scholars in the field for examination and subsequent acceptance or rejection. Eliade's basic conception of religion is based on the idea of the 'sacred', which constitutes his definition of religion. Allen quoted him as saying that religion 'does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred.'³⁰ Eliade states in another work seen by him as an introduction to the History of religions, that he will present the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity, and not only in so far as it is irrational but the sacred in its entirety.³¹ This introductory work to the field – The Sacred and the profane (1957) seems to be so, according to Eliade as it describes the modalities of the sacred and the situation of man in a world charged with religious values.³²

The discipline of the science of religion as a whole is conceived by Eliade in a similar way conceived earlier by such scholars like R. Pettazonni, J. Wach and others. The general science of religion to them including Eliade, consists of two main dimensions, the systematic and the historical. He says that the historian of religions uses an empirical

²⁹ Eliade, M. (art) 'Methodological (Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism' in Eliade M. and Kitagawa, J. M. (eds.), The History of Religions, Essays, in Methodology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 90-92.

³⁰ Allen, D. Structure and Creativity in Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1978) p. 120.

³¹ Eliade, M. The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion, (trans.) Trask, W. R. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959) p. 10.

³² ibid. p. 18.

method and is concerned with 'relgio-historical facts'. Not only this for, "the historian of religions also is led to systematize the results of his findings and to reflect on the structure of the religious phenomena".³³

The main areas of research focussed on by Eliade, and this gives us an idea of his general concept of what should constitute the history of religions are: 'the meaning and function of myths; the structure of religious symbols, the general dialectic of the sacred and the profane and the various manifestations of the sacred in 'hierophanies'. Based on his conviction that every rite, every myth, every belief or divine figure reflects the expression of the sacred and hence implies the notions of being, of meaning and of truth,³⁴ so the efforts of the student of religion should be for the understanding of these different aspects of the sacred and making them intelligible to others.³⁵ This basic idea of the sacred and how man is related to it and to the universe around him which is saturated with it, is the ultimate aim of the historian of religions. He says, "The ultimate aim of the historian of religions is to understand, and to make understandable to others the religious man's behaviour and mental universe"³⁶ This study of the behaviour and the mental universe of the religious man involves myths, symbols, doctrines, rituals and the various 'hierophanies'. The word 'hierophany' coined by Eliade etymologically means 'that something sacred shows itself to us'. Eliade wants to uncover the various manifestations of the sacred and its mysteries as it is something of wholly different order, but yet an 'integral part of our natural 'profane' world.³⁷

On the symbols and their place in Eliade's study of religion, he says:

33. Eliade, M. (art) Methodological Remarks op. cit. p. 88.

34. ibid. p. 89.

35. ibid. p. 88.

36. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. p.162.

37. ibid. p.11.

"The historian of religions is preoccupied uniquely with religious symbols, that is, with those that are bound up with a religious experience or a religious conception of the world."³⁸

Eliade's idea of the study of the different manifestations of the sacred, myths and symbols centres around what is considered the '*homo religiosus*' – the religious man. He saw this to be truly represented by the archaic and the primitive man, being close to the simple and pure state of religiosity.³⁹ Eliade is reluctant to depend more on the so-called higher religions and the religions of great ancient civilizations like those of Greece, India and China, for the scriptures, mythologies and theologies of these religions have been clearly influenced, and are 'marked by the long labour of scholars, even if they were not 'people of the Book''.⁴⁰

In his Patterns in Comparative Religion where Eliade systematically studied religious data, it confirms what Whaling summarised as Eliade's overall concept and method in the comparative study of religion in the following words: ".... central to his thought is the notion that there are certain basic comparative structures and patterns built into religion whereby man perceives the sacred. These take the form of hierophanies, symbols, and archetypes, and identifying these comparatively lies at the heart of the student of religion's task."⁴¹

In that work, Eliade pointed out that any hierophany or a manifestation of the sacred is important in the study of religion for two things, firstly, it reveals some modality of the sacred. Secondly, it is a historical incident, it reveals some attitude man has had.⁴² In giving us an idea about the variety of hierophanies, Eliade opines that it is 'quite certain

³⁸ Eliade, (art) 'Methodological Remarks', op. cit. p. 88.

³⁹ Eliade, M. Patterns in Comparative Religion, (trans.) Sheed, R., (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 1.

⁴⁰ Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. pp. 162-163.

⁴¹ Whaling (art), 'Comparative Approaches' in Contemporary Approaches,' op. cit. vol. I, p. 214.

⁴² Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. p. 2.

that anything man has ever handled, felt, come into contact with or loved can become a hierophany'. Likewise all gestures, dances, children's games and toys all have religious origin."⁴³ He also adds, 'it is unlikely that there is any animal or any important species of plant in the world that has never had a place in religion."⁴⁴ In this sense the material in the study of religions is extremely vast that Eliade believes that "even if one is satisfied with studying only one religion a lifetime would scarcely be long enough to complete the research, while, if one proposed to compare religions, several lifetimes would not suffice to attain the end in view."⁴⁵ In his Patterns, Eliade was comparing the lower and the higher religions side by side, despite the reservations. He did not accept evolutionism in the religions realm so his comparison is not evolutionary, for to him evolutionism "presupposes an evolution in the religious phenomenon..... (and) is a mere hypothesis and cannot be proved."⁴⁶ Eliade explains the way he chose in that systematic work, which reveals his perception of comparative religion, showing that he was not going to give any *apriori* definition of religion due to the difficulty in that, and so as the reader can make his reflections on that; he also chose to analyse each group of hierophanies through a natural division of the varying modalities of the sacred while at the same time showing how they fit together in a coherent system; he also examined the so-called 'lower' and 'higher' religions together, to see the common elements in them but not on the basis of evolutionist or occidental (Western) perspective; each class of hierophanies to him forms a whole both morphologically (all sorts of myths, gods etc. are dealt with) and also historically (across cultures and ages); and finally, Eliade wanted to discuss in each chapter, one particular modality of the sacred, 'a series of relationships between man and the sacred'.⁴⁷

⁴³ ibid. p. 11.

⁴⁴ ibid. p. 12.

⁴⁵ ibid. p. 1

⁴⁶ ibid. p. xii (Author's Foreword).

⁴⁷ ibid. p. xiv.

Eliade's treatment of religious data like that of many comparative religionists has been criticised mostly by those scholars who want the history of religions to remain a strictly empirical science by insisting on which, as Eliade observed, they are reducing their data to something other than the religious. He was not ready to compromise on this, and attacks the various approaches of the social sciences to the religious data as reductionistic. By implications, he compares them to a naturalist who examines an elephant under the microscope and then claims that he knew enough about it. At the microscopic level all organisms show the same structure and mechanism of the cells, but at the level of human sight the differences are very vivid.⁴⁸

What Eliade did in his works was to study religious material as religious (sacred?) data. He declares that, "..... a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is, if it is studied as something religious." Then to all others who are not and will not do this, Eliade asserts. "To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred."⁴⁹ Due to this, Eliade believes only the historian of religions who studies religious data in this manner, 'can formulate general considerations on the religious behaviour of man'.⁵⁰

This long discussion is to show how Eliade conceives this discipline, the nature of its subject matter, the way to treat it and what we can see or discover from our study of it. Another important aspect of Eliade's concept of the scientific study of religion is his concern: what can it do for the modern man? Is his idea of the science of religion similar to that of the empiricists who believe only in a descriptive study of data for study sake and stopping there? Eliade seems to be different in this regard.

⁴⁸ ibid. p. xi (Author's Foreword).

⁴⁹ ibid. p. xi.

⁵⁰ Eliade, (art), 'Methodological Remarks' op. cit. p. 89.

On the issue of sympathetic understanding which tend to be seen as subjectivism, Eliade says:

"..... there is no other way of understanding a foreign mental universe than to place oneself inside it, at its very center, in order to progress from there to all the values that it possesses."⁵¹

It is Eliade's conviction that you have to go to the centre of that religious experience so as to understand it, and at the end we see him affirming the values that it can possess.

On the expected benefits to be drawn from the modern study of religion, Eliade shows a lot of concern for the modern Western man and his irreligiousness and his 'desacralization of the cosmos'. His comparison is mostly between him and the primitive man, the *homo religious*, and with his lamentation on the spiritual bankruptcy of the modern urban populations of the West, calling on them indirectly to learn from the archaic and primitive man how to harmonize themselves with the cosmos.⁵²

In his work considered an introduction to this discipline he said that he is comparing in it the experience of a religious man who wants to stay in a sacred universe and one who lives without religious feeling or one who wants a desacralised world.⁵³ He considers the modern non-religious man as assuming a tragic existance.⁵⁴ He also opines that the nonreligious man (of modern age) who desacralises the vital experiences of life like eating, sex, etc. and so these physiological acts are deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimensions!⁵⁵ To Eliade the modern man's

⁵¹ Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. p. 165.

⁵² See Eliade, M. (art) 'Homo Faber and Homo Religiosus' in Kitagawa, J. M. (ed.) The History of Religions Retrospect and Prospect, (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 1-12 and Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. pp. 201-213.

⁵³ Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. p. 13.

⁵⁴ ibid. p. 203.

⁵⁵ ibid. p. 168.

habitation (because of desacralizing it) has lost its cosmological values, so too his body is without religious or spiritual significance. Not only this, even the religious sense of the whole urban populations (of the West especially) is gravely impoverished.⁵⁶

These are clear value judgements among which one of the clearest was given by Eliade in his words:

"For religion is the paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis. It is the paradigmatic solution not only because it can be indefinitely repeated, but also because it is believed to have a transcendental origin and hence is valorized as a revelation received from an 'other' transhuman world."⁵⁷

All these kinds of judgements which Eliade passes have been accordingly criticised by many scholars as we shall see in the last part of this chapter.

C- Eliade and the Comparative Method:

Comparative study is one of the vital methods employed by Eliade in his various works. The vast material he uses in his works is studied comparatively so as to bring out the comparative structures he believes to be in religion, and so also make the data understandable to other after the scholar has understood its import. We have already seen what Eliade believed to be the necessity of comparing data from the greatest possible number of religions and his statement that if one were to compare different religions several lifetimes will be required. This gives us an idea of the importance of the comparative method in Eliade's works. In one of the definitions of the discipline of the history of religions, the idea of comparison is very evident. He saw the science of religion 'as an autonomous discipline devoted to analyzing the common elements of the different religions, and seeking to deduce the laws of their evolution, and especially to discover and define the origin and first form of religion...'⁵⁸ The analysis of common elements from

⁵⁶ ibid. pp. 178-179.

⁵⁷ ibid. p. 210.

⁵⁸ Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. p. 216.

different religions is in other words, the employment of the comparative method by bringing the material from different religions and comparing them, so as to see which elements are common in them, or in other words, the similarities in them, and then only analysis will follow, to be followed by understanding and theorisation. This is the logical sequence of this endeavour.

Eliade believes that comparison or employing the comparative method is necessitated by the nature of this field. The historian of religions must familiarize himself, according to Eliade, with the greatest possible number of religions, especially those of the archaic and primitive people and this is so as to compare and study religion on a wide variety of data.⁵⁹ If religion is believed to be a universal phenomenon by both anthropologists and historians of religions, then to be able to give any statement on religion as such, one has to refer to the greatest possible number of religions, otherwise his statement will have to be qualified and limited. This idea of the necessity of perusing a large number of religions and of being a generalist in some sense has been extraordinarily stressed in the only article of Eliade specifically discussing methodological issues in the science of religion we have been able to lay our hands on.⁶⁰ Eliade considered timidity as the main cause militating against and stopping historians of religions from doing what they are supposed to do as regards comparing religious data and the integration of various materials coming from different disciplines into the study of religion. Comparison and integration he believes are inhibitions of the historians of religions.⁶¹ This is the place of comparison in Eliadean conception of the scientific study of religion.

The vastness of data in this field also necessitates employing the comparative method in Eliade's view. Eliade having worked in this field for nearly fifty years (almost a lifetime in countries of low mortality rate) will be in a very good position to tell us that a

⁵⁹ Eliade, (art) 'Methodological Remarks...' op. cit. p. 88.

⁶⁰ The full title of the article is 'Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism' in Eliade and Kitagawa (ed.) The History of Religions, Essays in Methodology (1959) op. cit. see p. 89, p. 90, p. 94 and p. 107.

whole lifetime is scarcely enough for a scholar to study the whole material of only one religion. For comparison of religions seen as a necessity in this field several lifetimes will be required.⁶² This vastness of material can be seen in what Eliade in his work on 'Shamanism' says regarding religious phenomena and their comprehension. He believes that "the historian of religions does not reach a comprehension of a phenomenon until after he has compared it with thousands of similar or dissimilar phenomena until he has situated it among them."⁶³ If there can be not only a thousand but thousands similar or dissimilar cases in one phenomenon of religion, this is enough to show the enormity of religious data in the world.

As we can see from the above quotation, which we will use in a different way in the following point, comprehension is another factor that necessitates comparison. The ultimate aim of the history of religions, according to Eliade is to understand, and to make understandable to other, religious man's behaviour and mental universe, as mentioned before, this makes the application of the comparative method all the more important, as it very much facilitates understanding. One discovers through it (comparative method when employed) the different religious universes, institutions, behaviour, myths, prayers, magics, and so on.⁶⁴ Earlier we mentioned F. Max Muller's famous saying that 'he who knows one knows none'. It is by comparison that the material becomes understandable and is then subsequently made so to others. Affirming the earlier distinction made by al-Bīrūnī between the religious elite and the masses, Eliade opines that different modalities of the sacred exist and to prove that and the diversity and tenuousness of the evidence, he

⁶¹ ibid. p. 90.

⁶² Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. p. 1

⁶³ Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, p. xv, as quoted by Allen, D., Structure and Creativity in Religion, (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), p. 110.

⁶⁴ Eliade, (art) 'The History of Religions From 1912 to the present Day' in his La Nostalgie d' Origine, (trans.) Qubaisy, H. Al-Fikr al Arabi, vol. p. 345, cp. Eliade (art) 'Methodological Remarks...' op. cit. ≡

reminded us of "the fact that a given hierophany may be lived and interpreted quite differently by the religious elite and by the rest of the community."⁶⁵

In trying to understand this hierophany and making it understandable to others, even though the interpretation of the elites is the true meaning Eliade preferred to treat both as valuable, as both stand for an authentic modality of the sacred and that both are complementary.

It is pertinent to point here that Eliade's comparison is not completely a historical as some people claim. He, as seen in many of his works, stresses a lot on the importance of history in the study of religion. His works on the history of religious ideas and his documentation of them have been alluded to above. He explains that the historian of religions uses empirical method of approach and is concerned with religio-historical facts.⁶⁶ That he is also attracted to 'both meaning (attained by comparison) and history of a religious phenomenon(trying) not to sacrifice either one of them.'⁶⁷

Eliade believes that religious symbols have autonomous 'systems' with great coherence within them.⁶⁸ That structure or system cannot be discovered and the symbol itself cannot be deciphered unless all of its contexts have been considered,⁶⁹ and unless a considerable number of examples are compared and analysed. Eliade also asserts that in the field of history of religions and in other fields, comparisons are made in order to find both parallels and distinctions.⁷⁰ So that in the comparison and context of two expressions of a symbol for example, the historian of religions is not trying to reduce them

p. 98, where he mentions that religious symbols can reveal a modality of the real or a structure of the world that is not evident on the level of immediate experience.

⁶⁵ Eliade, Patterns, op. cit. p. 7.

⁶⁶ See Eliade (art) 'Methodological Remarks....' op. cit. p. 88.

⁶⁷ ibid. p. 88.

⁶⁸ See Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. p. 49.

⁶⁹ Eliade, (art) 'Methodological Remarks....' op. cit. p. 107.,

⁷⁰ ibid. p. 94.

to a single pre-existent expression, but in order to discover the process whereby a structure is likely to assume enriched meanings.⁷¹ The search for 'enriched meanings' being an aspect of Eliadean hermeneutics have been criticised by some quarters, who saw any tilting towards strict hermeneutics tend to go beyond the strict parameters of the history of religions proper.

The understanding of religious phenomena which the historians of religions want to achieve so that they make them understandable to others, is one of the most difficult tasks of all, due to the nature of that phenomena. It is so complex and has had a long historical development. Eliade's idea of the study of this complex mass of 'doctrines, rituals and fellowships' to use Wach's three expressions of religious experience, involves comparative study of that data and assembling it in order to discover both the changing morphology of the sacred, and its historical development.⁷² All the different aspects of this data like, rites, myths, divine forms, sacred and venerated objects, symbols, cosmologies, consecrated animals, sacred places etc. each one of the, according to Eliade must be considered as a 'hierophany' – or a manifestation of the sacred in the form of that particular aspect in question. So since Eliade wants to assemble this (labyrinth of complex and at the same time complicated material), he has to come out with a theory of comparing this data and arranging it in accordance with that theory. It is an accepted fact that Eliade has been consistent in sticking to his theory of the study of religious phenomena.⁷³ He believes that the study of any hierophany, like say the sky hierophanies, will provide data enabling us to understand both exactly what the manifestation of the sacred means at those particular cosmic levels, and how far those hierophanies constitute autonomous forms.⁷⁴

⁷¹ ibid. p. 94.

⁷² Eliade, Patterns, op. cit. p. 1.

⁷³ See Kitagawa, (art) 'Eliade, Mircea', The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit. vol. 5, p. 89.

⁷⁴ Eliade, Patterns, op. cit. p. xiii.

In expounding his theory further, Eliade opines, in justifying idolatry which according to him is 'supported by the very dialectic of the sacred, for the sacred is always manifested through some thing.' He further says, 'From this point of view, therefore, a sacred stone, an avatar of Vishnu, a statue of Jupiter, or an appearance of Yahweh will all be held by the believer(?) as at once real and inadequate simply because in every case the sacred manifests itself limited and incarnate.'⁷⁵

It seems to be clear to anyone who studies Eliade's works that his early study of Hinduism and his practising it together with his Christian background has clearly influenced his theorisation on religion. Manifestation of the sacred in different objects, animals and so on is reminiscent of the avatars doctrine in Hinduism. The idea of the sacred only manifesting itself partly and limited and 'incarnate' shows implicitly the origin of the idea (the unique Incarnation in Christianity)!

From the idea of morphology and structures which the diverse hierophanies take, Eliade starts his comparative method. In his work Patterns in Comparative Religion, after studying the structure and morphology of the sacred (Chapter One), he states that he has arrived at the end of it at four guiding principles in the face of the complexity and flux of the modalities of the sacred:

- 1- That the sacred is distinct from the profane qualitatively, but can manifest itself in the profane;
- 2- The dialectic of the sacred belongs to all religions, not only the 'primitive' ones, expressed in worship, trees etc;
- 3- Elementary (not complex) hierophanies are found nowhere;
- 4- We find everywhere, a system into which the elementary hierophanies fit. The system, he believes, is always greater than the elementary hierophanies.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ ibid. p. 26.

⁷⁶ ibid. p. 30.

As for the religious rite, its repetition by the primitive man always consists an archetypal action performed in '*illo tempor*', (before 'history' began) by the ancestors or by the gods.⁷⁷

The religious theories (like symbols, myths, ideogram) of the man of the ethnological stage, according to Eliade, are held to be hierophanies by primitive people as 'truths' 'not only because they reveal modalities of the sacred, but because these 'truths' help man to protect himself against meaningless, nothingness, to escape, infact, from the profane sphere.'⁷⁸

From this theory Eliade looks at religious materials in terms of structures, systems and hierophanies and his study of these which he called morphology or the morphological approach tend to group hierophanies and symbols based on their common elements, while 'ignoring the differences between them', in order to discover and ascertain their 'fundamental structures and their archetypal significance'.⁷⁹ Whaling in his article in the work he edited – Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion (2 vols.) saw Eliade's way of doing comparative religion as more subtle and complex than the others he explained. He categorised his method as 'phenomenological typology' because he puts side by side types of religious phenomena drawn from all parts of the world in order to find out their structures and archetypes.⁷⁹ Elsewhere he saw his comparative method as aiming at the classification of "the various hierophanies, symbols, myths and rituals by their common characteristics and to lay bare their phenomenological structures and typologies."⁸⁰ So comparative religion to him means the grouping and classification and comparison of the basic types and structures of religious phenomena. As Eliade concluded his brief discussion on the history of religions as a branch of knowledge thus:

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 32.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* pp. 32-33.

⁷⁹ See Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' *op. cit.* p. 215.

"At present, historians of religions are divided between two divergent but complementary methodological orientations – One group concentrate primarily on the characteristic structures of religious phenomena, the other choose to investigate their historical context. The former seek to understand the essence of religion, the latter to discover and communicate its history."⁸¹

It is very evident from our discussions above that Eliade pre-eminently belongs to the first group.

This is yet another conception of the comparative method appropriate as Eliade may say, to his time when religious data that accumulated by various ways was more than what al-Āmirī, al-Bīrūnī and even Wach can find. The discipline of the study of religion at the time of Eliade has come of age and seems to be more organised, more articulate, and so, likely to be a bit different. It will remain now for us to see how Eliade has applied this concept of the comparative method to the concrete and superabundant data before him.

⁸⁰ ibid. p. 218.

⁸¹ Eliade, The sacred and the Profane, op. cit. p. 232.

D- **Eliade and the Application of the Comparative Method in the Study of Religion:**

Mircea Eliade as we have seen above has his own way of conceiving religion, the religious man, the study of religion and his own application of the comparative method. From his concept of the '*homo religiosus*', best represented by the archaic and primitive man who lived in a sacred world and whose life as a whole was sacralised, and both his home and space were also conceived as sacred. From the dialectic of the hierophanies in the different spheres of the religious man's world as part of the overall dialectic of the sacred and the profane in the cosmos, Eliade has been able through his understanding of the mental universe of the primitive man to compare the numerous religious phenomena in line with the above mentioned concepts in the different and diverse religions. The idea of comparison which we have seen with Eliade is seen elsewhere by him to be valid when it is between religious facts pertaining to different cultures, this is because according to Eliade, all these facts arise from a single type of behaviour that of '*homo religiosus*'.⁸² Eliade is always interested, as we have seen, in the arrangement of facts into types and modes.

His application of the comparative method seems to be a general comparison, in which he searches for similarities and differences in similar themes or aspects of religion. Based on the similarities mostly, as he tends to ignore the differences between them as he admitted, he groups the religious phenomena into types and then tries to find meaning in that by some kind of interpretation. Eliade, it appears, does not believe only in a descriptive comparison and which ends there. His lamentations on the reluctance of historians of religions to compare religious data and to integrate the results of other related discipline into the overall corpus of the history of religions, those lamentations, in a way also point to the clear lack of theorisation in this field. This comes from the very fact that any attempt at understanding the religious data and making it understandable to others by means of some theories will involve some explanations, which the scholar offers

⁸² Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. pp. 17-18.

either from his background experience or from other disciplines, and which he will then integrate into his data, so that some meanings be found in what was initially un-intelligible.

In Eliade's study of comparative data in the realm of religion he came out with concepts like hierophanies as mentioned before. On applying the comparative method he found that the manifestations of the sacred had taken many different forms in almost all aspects of the entire religious life of man. He declares:

".... it is quite certain that anything man has ever handled, felt, came in contact with or loved can become a hierophany. We know, for instance, that all the gestures, dances and games children have, and many of their toys, have a religious origin..."⁸³

He says further 'It is unlikely that there is any animal or any important species of plant in the world that has never had a place in religion'.⁸⁴ Eliade's comparative study takes care or mostly depend on historical data, at least in the initial stage. In further stressing the ubiquity of hierophanies, he asserts '.... while it is true that anything at all can become a hierophany, and that in all probability there is nothing that has not, somewhere some time, been invested with a sacred value, it still remains that no one religion or race has ever been found to contain all these hierophanies in its history.'⁸⁴

All these statements can not come but from someone who has compared the whole material of the different religions and communities, especially as discovered by anthropologists, and who tries to search for common elements in that diverse data, so that he was able as at the end to make some general statements. It is only a generalist with much great research ability – as can be seen in Eliade and his several works – that can do give such general statements without the fear of censure.

In his comparative study of the various manifestations of the sacred he discovered a dialectic, in the fact that despite what has been declared above, that anything can be or

⁸³ Eliade, Patterns ..., op. cit. p. 11.

⁸⁴ ibid. p. 12.

has actually been a hierophany, there is in every religious framework profane beings and things beside the sacred.⁸⁵ Eliade gave the example of the worship of stone found in some religious communities, that not all stones are held to be sacred. Those who worship them may be due to some shape or bound up with some ritual. He also explains that it is not a question of actually worshipping the stones, 'the stones are venerated precisely because they are not simply stones but hierophanies, something outside their normal status as things.'⁸⁶ He opined that the dialectic of hierophanies, of the manifestation of the sacred in material things, remains the cardinal problem of any religion.⁸⁷

Eliade also shows from the results of his comparative study of the types of behaviour of the homo religiosus and his attitude to life, cosmos, and all things around him on the one hand, and the behaviour and attitude of the modern nonreligious man of today a lot of differences can be seen as if they both are not of the same human nature. Their response to the sacred and its manifestations are sharply different. He saw that according to those with religious experience 'all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmos sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany'. Such people tend to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects.⁸⁸ In some of his ideas about the 'sacred' – which Eliade takes to be the minimum definition of religion – he shows that it is always manifested through some thing, either because it is saturated with being or possesses some spiritual power like mana, or because it commemorates a mythical act and so on.⁸⁹ The belief that the sacred can manifest itself at anytime in something is both a justification of idolatry, as well as, an affirmation of the

⁸⁵ ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁸⁶ ibid. p. 13, cp. Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Eliade, Patterns, op. cit. p. 29.

⁸⁸ Eliade, The Sacred and the profane, p. 12.

Christian theological statement in justifying the doctrine of incarnation. The manifestation of the sacred can be in a sacred stone, an avatar of Vishnu, a statue of Jupiter etc. All these in real sense are idols being worshipped, and to say that it is the sacred or that the divine manifests itself in all these is to say the least, misapprehension of facts. Apart from justifying the incarnation, it seems to us that Eliade does not want to differentiate between what is claimed to be a manifestation of the sacred and what is the sacred himself, and even what comes from him, but has no divinity in itself or it does not require any veneration, like the differentiation we see in Jews and Muslims between God and His angels. The other source of Eliade's idea of the sacred manifesting itself in anything is the Hindu avatara doctrine, in which the god Vishnu takes various shapes in order to restore order in the universe when it is being threatened.⁹⁰ To show his Christian stand, even though he claims that religion is human,⁹¹ he declares that the different manifestations of the sacred in fetishes, idols and so on may be seen as 'desperate attempts to prefigure the mystery of the Incarnation.' He even adds "The whole religious life of mankind – expressed in the dialectic of hierophanies – would, from this standpoint, be simply a waiting for Christ."⁹² These are the two origins of Eliade's theory of the sacred and its various manifestations. As Eliade has made many of comparative studies, especially in his Patterns in Comparative Religion, and he used to mention them in many other works of his we would select only two of this groupings of hierophanies – that of the sky and sky gods and that of the sacred space and after that we will mention other typical comparisons made by Eliade.

⁸⁹ See Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. p. 26, cp. Eliade, M. The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History, (trans.), Trask, W. R. (New York: Princeton University press, 1954), pp. 3-4.

⁹⁰ See Bhagavad Gita IV: 7-8.

⁹¹ Eliade, Patterns, op. cit. p. xi (Author's Foreword).

⁹² ibid. p. 30, F. No. 1.

a- The Sky Hierophanies:

Under this heading, Eliade wants to study whatever religious material he can obtain concerning the sky as a religious symbol, as a hierophany and the various sky gods and their qualities and also the religious man's belief in them. Eliade starts with this hierophany in his 'Patterns' because of its being most popular concept of God in both primitive and higher religions. The different celestial beings considered to be gods are so numerous that that belief is almost universal. Eliade for instance says that 'there is an almost universal belief in a celestial divine being, who created the universe and guarantees the fecundity of the earth (by pouring rain down upon it)'.⁹³ Elsewhere Eliade owing to this quality believes that the history of Supreme Being of 'celestial origin' is very important for understanding the religious history of man.⁹⁴ One of the great anthropologist W. Schmidt 'even claims to have established the existance of a primitive monotheism, basing the proof chiefly on the belief in sky gods among the most primitive human societies.'⁹⁵

Eliade through employing the comparative approach has discovered that the sky god has been popular especially among the primitive men due to the qualities of the sky itself which include transcendence, power, and holiness. The contemplation of the primitives on it is always considered as revelation of its qualities that entails the symbolism of transcendence, is the primitive man's realisation of its infinite height; and also it appears to be inaccessible to man *quo man*, but belongs to superhuman powers and beings; so also that the sky reveals changelessness and being infinite, immovable, ...etc.⁹⁶ In some religions the name of God means simply on high or above, or one in the heavens like, Oki, Oke, Wakan, Iho, Uwolawn etc. The sky gods have always been supreme.⁹⁷ Eliade also mentions specific examples in primitive and archaic religions where many of the

⁹³ ibid. p. 38.

⁹⁴ Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. p. 121.

⁹⁵ Eliade, Patterns, op. cit. p. 38

⁹⁶ ibid. p. 39.

⁹⁷ ibid. pp. 39-40.

qualities given to the supreme god of the sky are those found in the 'higher' religions. Baiame, the sky god of the Australians dwells in the sky, on a crystal throne, the sun and the moon are his sons; thunder is his voice and he causes rain to fall. Baiame is self-created and he created every thing from nothing, he sees and hears everything, etc.⁹⁸ Almost exactly similar qualities are believed to be in Bunjil, the supreme being of the Kulin tribes who created man whom he fashioned of clay, breathing a soul into him through the nose, the mouth and the navel. But Bunjil has in the end given his son, Bimbeal power over the earth, and his daughter Karakarook power over the sky, and he himself withdrawn from the world.⁹⁹

By means of comparative studies of the supreme gods of the different tribes of Australians, Eliade – who took a very early interest in the study of Australian religion – summarizes the striking similarities of these divine beings, who preserve a direct and concrete connection with the sky. All of them made the universe and created man. 'They are good (they are called 'Our Father'), they reward the upright and defend morality.'¹⁰⁰

Puluga is the Supreme being of the Andaman Islanders, thought of anthropomorphically, he dwells, in the sky and his voice is the thunder hurricanes are the sign of his anger, for he sends thunder bolt to punish all who infringe his commandments. Puluga is believed to have created the first man, Tomo and after the death of Tomo, mankind grew ever more forgetful of its creator. One day Puluga got angry and a flood covered the whole earth and destroyed mankind, only four people escaped him. They believed that after this man still remain recalcitrant and so Puluga reminded him of his commandments, once and for all and then the god withdrew, and men have never seen him since.¹⁰¹ Similar concepts and qualities of the Supreme Being

⁹⁸ ibid. pp. 40-41.

⁹⁹ ibid., pp. 41-42.

¹⁰⁰ ibid. p. 42.

¹⁰¹ ibid. pp. 43-44.

of the sky are found in all other parts of the world like Africa, e.g. the Olorun of the Yoruba, Nsambe of the Fang, Nzambi of the Bantus; all possess somewhat similar qualities; and in the Arctic and Central Asia, where their religions are considered higher than those of the 'primitive' peoples due to the influence of history on them, we find in these regions sky gods who have acquired the quality of sovereignty, like Num of the Samoyeds, 'the one on high' of the Koryaks, 'the heavenly being' of the Central Eskimos, he is, above all, an Omnipotent god, often the only one, and master of the universe..... the list and similarities are endless.¹⁰²

The historian of religions is startled by the similarity in concept and even in the details of the concept. The phenomenon noticed above, of the sky god withdrawn and showing noninterest in the world, and in some cases like in the Mongols and in China, the ruler is the son of the supreme god or his representative, furthers the quality of passivity in the sky god. Not only this, Eliade in the application of the comparative method in this diverse world of sky beings noticed some sort of abstraction, where the quality of omniscience in these gods changed in some religions into abstract divine figures, personified concepts, etc. like Iho the sky god of New Zealand and Tahiti.¹⁰³ Through this last point Eliade proceeds in finding the origin of God in higher religions, by showing that the above-mentioned supreme Gods of the sky could be transformed into philosophic concepts that mark the changing of the divinity into metaphysical principles.³⁶¹ He also believes that the Indian Dyaus, the Roman Jupiter, the Greek Zeus and the Germanic god Tyr Zio are forms of that sky divinity, and by giving example of the Indian Varuna sky god, he shows how it at certain time enjoyed that autonomy of a real divinity. Later on Dyaus gave place to another divinity and it ceased to function as a Supreme God of the Sky.¹⁰⁴ The final result of Eliade's comparative study of this important aspect of

¹⁰² ibid., p. 47 and pp. 58-59.

¹⁰³ ibid. p. 57.

¹⁰⁴ ibid. pp. 66-67.

religions, is that though these Supreme Beings of the sky were found in most communities and are a universal phenomenon, these divine figures tend to disappear from the cult', no where do they play a leading part, but have become remote especially in archaic and primitive religions. They used to be replaced by other religious forces, like ancestor-worship, worship of the spirits and gods of nature...., this shows that there is a sort of shift towards a more concrete, more dynamic, more fertile divinity."¹⁰⁵ Eliade then admitted of the religious revolution of the Semitic world, in form monotheistic, prophetic and messianic. Through that revolution 'heavenly' values were brought anew into the field of man's life as against the "earthly".¹⁰⁶ The Qur'anic message which is the latest of revelations from God explains this phenomenon with simple statements, that God has revealed His message to every part of the world, in which His attributes and actions were elucidated, so also His creation of the heavens and the earth and man as a vicegerent of God on earth.¹⁰⁷ It also shows that mankind was initially one nation then they differed, and so messengers were sent to them from God. On the issue of the gradual concretization of God, when we see the transcendence of God being substituted with the worship of ancestors, spirits and their images and so on, this in accordance with the Qur'anic message is a deviation from the true spirit of the one religion of God, through the efforts of the devil, who took it upon himself to mislead the whole mankind, and so he showed man the worship of beings other than God and showed them how they can make images of those beings and worship them.¹⁰⁸

Sacred and Profane Space:

Another kind of comparative study carried by Eliade is between the two conceptions of space, by the religious man of the archaic and primitive societies on the one hand and that of the modern non-religious Western man of our time. Eliade finds a

¹⁰⁵ ibid. p. 109.

¹⁰⁶ ibid. p. 110.

¹⁰⁷ See Surah al-Nahal: 36, Surah Fatir: 24 and Surah Yunus: 47, Surah al-Baqrah: 30-39.

lot of meanings in this kind of study, which he starts by finding types or structures of space for example, as experienced by the religious man, and another different type of space experience of the nonreligious, then he compares the two types. This is what we have seen as phenomenological typology. As for the religious man, space is not homogeneous 'he experiences interruption, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others'.¹⁰⁹ A manifestation of the sacred (hierophany) or a manifestation of (spiritual) power (kratophany) transforms the place where it occurs, hitherto profane, to a sacred place.¹¹⁰ But for a purely non-religious person space is homogeneous and the same, only some few places like his birthplace, scenes of some major happenings that had great impact on his life like, according to Eliade, scene of his first love or a foreign city visited in youth, these are the 'holy places of the private universe' of the modern man.¹¹¹ This is because in those places he received the revelation of reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary life.¹¹²

Eliade then explores the mental universe of the religious man, who conceives the threshold of a mosque or a church as the meeting place of the two worlds of the sacred and the profane and that it serves as a passage from one world to another. In his comparative study of religious data he found that the primitive religious man believes that there are guardian spirits of this threshold, to whom sacrifices should be offered.¹¹³

Inside the sacred space of most archaic religions, a symbol of an opening exists, considered a door to the world above, by which gods descend and man can symbolically

¹⁰⁸ See Surah al-Baqrah:213, Surah al-Nisa: 117-119.

¹⁰⁹ Eliade, The Sacred and the profane, op. cit. p. 20.

¹¹⁰ Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. p. 367.

¹¹¹ Eliade, The Sacred and the profane, op. cit. p. 24.

¹¹² ibid. p. 24.

¹¹³ ibid. p. 25.

ascend to the heavens. This Eliade found in many religions like in the Old Testament Gen: 28:12-19 as mentioned above, an irruption of the sacred makes a place or territory different. In other words, a theophany (appearance of God) in a place consecrates it and results in detaching that territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu.¹¹⁴ According to the primitive man, one can search for sacred places not known to him before by means of, for instance, letting loose an animal, wherever it fell down will be recognised as a sacred place and the animal will be sacrificed there.¹¹⁵ He has mentioned other ways of consecrating space, like where man will inhabit, it will have to be consecrated by construction of an in the centre, or by sacrifice. By consecrating, the archaic man believes, he is creating the space anew, then only it can be his. The primitive religious man believes that in consecrating it, he is repeating the paradigmatic work of the gods.¹¹⁶ There are two main ways of the sanctification of habitation with the religious man:

- 1- by assimilating it to the cosmos by the projection of the four horizons from a central point or by the symbolic installation of the axis *mundi* (the universal pillar, which is believed to connect and support heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below) in the house;
- 2- by repeating through a ritual of construction, the paradigmatic acts of the gods, by virtue of which the world came to birth from the body of a marine dragon or of a primordial giant, as is found in various cosmological myths.¹¹⁷

In contrasting the behaviour of the non-religious man with respect to the sacred space, according to Eliade, that will suffice to make the difference in structure between

¹¹⁴ ibid. p. 26.

¹¹⁵ ibid. p. 28.

¹¹⁶ ibid. pp. 31-36.

¹¹⁷ ibid., p. 52.

the two attitudes clearly visible. The attitude of *homo religiosus* seems strange to the modern man of today who has rebelled against religion. Infact it is that strangeness that show how different the two are. From the experience of the primitive and archaic man, as regards the sacred space, Eliade contrasted him from the modern non-religious man of today. To the religious ^{man,} any place where the sacred manifested itself, where 'the real unveils itself, the world came to existance'.¹¹⁸ The irruption of the sacred into profane space opens communication between the cosmic planes (between earth and heavens). Because the religious man perceives the sacred as real and he wants to stay or be in such space where the sacred has manifested itself or was consecrated, this shows that he can live only in a sacred world because it is only in a such a world that he participates in being, that he has a real existance.¹¹⁹ As we have shown earlier, Eliade witnessed the occupation of his homeland while a young boy and other strong historical happenings that left a lasting effect in his conscience, we see him here putting his ideas in the person of the religious man of old. He claims that the religious 'man thirsts for being'. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness!¹²⁰ These partly existential ideas from Eliade show as if he is speaking for himself. Religious man also has a nostalgia to inhabit a 'divine world' and this religious nostalgia 'expresses the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands.'¹²¹

In another comparison made by Eliade between the religious man - the *homo religiosus* and the modern technological man – the *homo faber* recently, he showed the consistent desacralization of nature and of human existance due to the efforts of

¹¹⁸ ibid. p. 63.

¹¹⁹ ibid. pp. 63-64.

¹²⁰ ibid. p. 64.

¹²¹ ibid. p. 65.

laws.¹²⁶ He cited parallels in this connection from European, Rig Vedic, Chinese and Roman sources. Almost similar to what Eliade discovered in the dialectic between the sacred and the profane space, he found in the issue of time.¹²⁷

These are the different ways Eliade has compared religions. As is evident throughout the process, he has been theorising, discovering meaning and finding the underlying structures and systems in the various religious phenomena studied. The types he was so interested in, are discerned by means of comparative studies and the similarities or otherwise in the phenomena are determined. As mentioned earlier, Eliade being chronologically the last of the scholars studied in this humble work, and being a well respected figure in the modern scientific study of religion, shows from his work that the science of religion has come of age, it is interpreting its data and employing in interpreting it other spheres of human endeavour.

¹²⁶ See Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit. pp. 139-141.

¹²⁷ See Eliade, The Sacred and the profane, op. cit. pp. 68-85 and Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit. pp. 388-408.

THREE - EVALUATION AND CRITICISM OF THE TWO WESTERN MODELS OF THE COMPARATIVE METHOD:

In the two models explained above we can discern the well known fact of the intellectual progress in the *homo sapiens*. No one can know all the sciences of the world himself alone, and the successors depend considerably on the predecessors whether they admitted is or not. The Western 'scientific' study of religion is no exception. The Westerners may confess to their indebtedness to their Greek ancestors in all sciences, they seem more likely not to admit having taken any idea of substance from other rival civilizations, especially Islam.

Both Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade were Europeans who migrated later in life to the New World (America) where they refined and sharpened their intellect by means of the great and vast religious traditions of mankind. They saw the diverse types of religious experience (to use Wach's preferred expression), and have also been face to face with the dialectic of the sacred and the profane, (to borrow from Eliade), and as a result of that provided the history of religions library with a lot of valuable works, some of them being considered as classics. We will in the following pages try to give our separate evaluations of each of the two giants of the Chicago tradition of Religionswissenschaft.

A- Joachim Wach:

As we have seen in our discussion on Wach and his comparative method, he has greatly contributed to the discipline of Religionswissenschaft, especially as he expounded the broad outlines of the discipline. In his articulate and thought provoking habilitation thesis of 1924, Wach showed the necessity of emancipating the field from normative disciplines of theology and philosophy of religion. He also gave clear insights on the different aspects of the discipline, both its historical and systematic sides. He also explained the tasks and methods of the study of religion. In all these Wach was not only narrating what had happened, but as if he is another founder of the field, he was explaining fresh issues and giving independent views as well as criticising earlier scholars in

areas he believes they have missed the point. He also discussed a lot of problems in the discipline, in solving which he gave his views.

Wach's general concept of religion which he has been elucidating is enlightening. The religious experience he believes tends to expression and that the three ways the religious man expresses his religious experience are, in theoretical or mental ways and in practical or behavioral ways, or in institutional or societal ways. He discovered a lot of parallels in his comparative study of the different religions later complied in his 'Universals in Religion'. He believes the religious urge is in every human being.¹ He says: "We agree with Rudolf Otto that the *sensus numinis* is universal. All men possess potentially a sense of the Divine."² In his study of religion, he was showing concern with man, death, salvation etc. He saw one of the most important achievements of modern scholarship in the discovery of a new inner unity of all genuine religion, in unconditional obligation and holiness. Some of his insights in the religious realm include his belief that 'Homines Religiosi' everywhere consider all life as an expression of worship and communion with God.³ To Wach the whole intellectual endeavour of man is to search for the one truth that is universal and as he says:

"We have learned to become suspicious of local, ethnic or parochial limitations of truth".⁴

In his lifelong struggle with religious data, Wach tried to understand that data and wanted to present it to others after its comprehension. His life was seen by Kitagawa as having passed through three distinct stages of hermeneutics and trying to find meaning in and understand the religious data, being the first phase of his academic life. At the

¹ See Wach, J. Understanding and Believing (ed.) Kitagawa, J. M. (New York: Harper Torch books, 1968), p. 75.

² ibid. p. 75.

³ Wach, J. Types of Religious Experience (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1951), p. 42.

second phase, Wach stressed systematic study of religious experience which he saw in the symbiotic relationship between religion and society. This he discovers in his 'sociology of religion', in which he studied comparatively religious data after integral understanding of it. Wach due to that integral understanding pass a lot of normative judgements, which led some scholars of religion to describe him as one who 'neither knew nor cared where comparative religion ended and theology began'.⁵ In the last phase, Wach not only evaluate religious data, but was also trying to see what benefit this discipline brings to man. He declares:

"A comparative study of religions such as the new era made possible enables us to have a fuller vision of what religious experience can mean what forms its expressions may take, and what it might do for man"⁶

Wach's greater contributions to the science of religion were in the articulation of the nature, scope and method or methods to be employed in treating religious data. He conceives this field in the first phase of his academic life, as a non-normative but descriptive study, he even fought for its emancipation from the normative disciplines. He saw the discipline as situated between empirical sciences on the one hand and philosophy on the other due to its subject matter. Wach showed great interest in understanding the religions of others which he admitted was a difficult task. He recognised like Pettazoni and Eliade, the structure of the discipline as comprising of both historical and systematic studies. It is to Wach's credit that despite being trained mostly by theologians he was able to scale his way as a historian of religions.

⁴ Wach, Understanding and Believing, op. cit. p. 148.

⁵ Zwi Werblowsky, R. J. in review article on Wach's The Comparative Study of Religion, in Sharpe, E. J., Comparative Religion, A History, (New York: Charles Scribner's 1975), p, 239.

⁶ Wach, J. The Comparative Study of Religions, (ed.) Kitagawa, J. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1958), p. 9.

Wach was much concerned with comparison, its uses and necessity seen by him as a useful tool. He employed it as seen above, frequently in his efforts to understand his subject matter. The comparison is to discover what others have and he believes it should not be superficial and shallow but after a thorough perusal of what is to be compared. He was also concerned with typologies like his study of the relations of different religions to the state.⁷ He discussed the issue of judgement in the study of religion, which he generally rejects in the first phase of his thought, but which he affirms later. He believes historians of religions must find meaning in the manifestations of religious phenomena and should do justice to those meanings.⁸

Criticism:

Wach has been criticised due mostly to his writings in the third phase of his academic writings. In those works he clearly advocated evaluation as a culminating stage in the study of religion. He opines: 'The historian of religions will study them (religions) and because he must be more than a registrar of facts and phenomena, he will attempt to evaluate them.'⁹ This change of attitude tends to depict Wach's statements as contradictory. For instance he believes in his Introduction to the History of Religions of 1924 that the history of religions must certainly abandon specific norms'¹⁰. Elsewhere he says, 'The history of religions is not a normative discipline. It is therefore, just as impossible for the history of religions to undertake and accomplish theological goals as it is

⁷ Whaling, F. (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Whaling (ed.) Contemporary Approaches, op. cit. vol. I, p. 234.

⁸ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 27.

⁹ Wach, Understanding and Believing, op. cit. p. 82. cp. Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p.7

¹⁰ Wach, J. Introduction to the History of Religions, (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 103.

for theology to replace the history of religions'.¹¹ In a more general statement on this issue, Wach declares:

"The history of religions can neither ask nor answer the question of truth. The field of scholarship does not deal in personal decisions but in generally valid research."¹²

All these statements made by Wach in the first stage of his study of religion were seen to contradict what came out to be his matured thoughts. As we have seen above, he believes the final stage of the discipline is evaluation and that abandoning judgement will lead to relativism. So also he wrote in Types of Religious Experience that 'the search for truth is the prime motive in all our desire for knowledge.' Wach even considered it as a mistake of the earlier scholars of religion to advocate a complete elimination of value-judgement in favour of completely objective approach.¹³

Not only this was found in Wach's later writing, but that judgement for or against all religions should be passed based on a criterion of knowing the truth from falsehood.¹⁴ And that criterion must be 'religious' in nature.¹⁵ That religious criterion he stated elsewhere, can only be one, that of the concept of the Holy spirit of God which alone can guide to and determine germs of truth anywhere.¹⁶ In one of his works not available to us, Wach who aspires to understand the religious history of human race, was inclined to

¹¹ ibid. p. 159.

¹² ibid. p. 163.

¹³ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 27.

¹⁴ Wach, Understanding and Believing, op. cit., pp. 146-147.

¹⁵ ibid., p. 152.

¹⁶ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 29.

accept Christianity as a high peak, if not the highest, in the long process of man's search for salvation.¹⁷

Still on the criterion of judging for or against religion, Wach in what seems to be a consistent belief he rules out reason as a criterion in this regard. This can be no other than generalising a Christian idea on all religions. In his early work on religions, Wach who quotes Novalis approvingly in his statement "The highest is that which is most understandable,"¹⁸ in the same work, and due to his fear of being accused of rationalism if he tries to compare the study of religion with the study of a work of art where one deals with theoretical and aesthetic forms, he backed down. Because as he asserts, in religion one deals with something deeper and greater, that cannot be understood by reason, "for religion only discloses itself in faith". This, we fear is a purely Christian notion. He further says, "The history of religions does not posit reason (ratio) as its highest norm...." Again to make himself clear Wach adds, "... nevertheless, it is certain that our understanding is in error if we merely dissects a religion before the forum of reason."¹⁹

Wach maintained this same position even in his later works. In his Types of Religious Experience (1951), he says that one of the mistake of the Enlightenment was to believe that they can find a 'natural religion' based on the criterion of reason. He believed they failed due to this 'inappropriate' yardstick, as that prevented them according to him, to do justice to the true nature of religious experience, which cannot be grasped by means of reason.²⁰

¹⁷ See Kitagawa, J. (art) 'Introduction: Verstehen and Erlosung' in Wach's Introduction to the History of Religion, op. cit. pp.xviii-xix quoting Wach's Das Verstehen, vol. I, p. 184.

¹⁸ Wach, Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit. p. 29.

¹⁹ ibid. pp. 25-26.

²⁰ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. 12-15.

We may ask here by means of what can man understand? Is it not by means of his reason? If the answer is in the affirmative, and as Wach quoted 'the highest' being the most understandable then the highest of religions or the best of them must definitely be the most rational, which will also be the most understandable. We believe as do al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī, that that religion is Islam.

In many places we see Wach passing explicit theological judgements on other religions and some times in a tricky manner. He says in Understanding and Believing, "It is arrogance to subsume all non-Christian expressions of religious experience under the heading of 'human self-enfolding'" and after a little while he showed that God has revealed himself in Christ, so repent, believe and adore!²¹

He also believes that all religions especially those before Christianity are '*preparatio evangelica!*'²² He even saw the realisation and acceptance of Christ as the way of the history of religions?²³ So the study of religion, it seems from this statement is another way of realising the lordship of Christ, which means it has a proselytizing message in it, according to Wach.

We discover in Wach's writings that sometimes he explains similarities between religions as due to borrowing as in his comparison of Christianity to Buddhism.²⁴ Wach also made some unscrupulous statements or rather accusations of the Quran and the Muslims, which are signs of prejudice and biasness. He said that the Quran had not much to say on the nature of man,²⁵ which shows either that he has never read the whole Quran or he is making unfounded imputations on this sublime Book. He also claimed that

²¹ Wach, Understanding and Believing, op. cit. p. 76.

²² ibid. pp. 77-78.

²³ ibid. p. 84

²⁴ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit. p. 102 and p. 127.

²⁵ ibid. p. 76.

John, the Damascene was the one who taught Muslim Mutakallimun an acquaintance with some of the basic problems to be discussed on the basis of revealed truth, as well as teaching them the method of systematic exposition of issues!²⁶ Other criticisms of Wach have already been alluded to before, there may not be any need for repeating them again here. This is one model of employing comparative method in the study of religions. With all their claims and attacks against value-judgement, which is usually interpreted as doing theology, we see many of the Westerners consciously or unconsciously passing judgement in favour of their religion - Christianity.

A- Mircea Eliade:

Mircea Eliade's was another model of the scientific study of religions of mankind in his own characteristic style. He belongs to the same tradition as Wach, and being the latest and chronologically the last of the scholars we focussed on in this work, we notice a new kind of emphasis and a new way of comparing religions. Most of the positive achievements of Eliade have already been outlined above, due to that we will give only a quick and brief review of some of the outstanding achievements of this scholar in his comparative study of religions.

Eliade like Wach, wrote his Ph. D. dissertation ⁱⁿ the field of the history of religions entitled, 'Yoga, Essay on the Origin of Indian Mysticism' published in 1936, which placed him right in the centre of 'Religionswissenschaft'. His added experience in the study of Indian philosophy and religions and the Sanskrit language under Indian scholars gave him one of the rare opportunities, one can get in the truly scientific and objective study of religion, when one studies under the learned adherents of that particular religion. Eliade had an edge over others in this particular point. And as seen above, Eliade remained in India after his studies for six months to experience the sacred in a Hindu hermitage, in a similar way the Hindu experience it.

One of the outstanding feature of Eliade is that he was a prolific writer who wrote nearly 20 works of in-depth scholarship and erudition and dozens of articles

published in academic journals. The one singularly achievement is this appointment as the editor-in-chief of the latest encyclopedia of religion in English language comprising of 15 volumes, with each volumes extending to over 500 pages. It may not be an exaggeration if we say that this exceptional honour given to Eliade puts him above all others in the field of scientific study of religion at that time.

It is also to Eliade's credit that two academic journals were established by him which shows his concern with the overall progress of this discipline in all areas. One each of these two journals was established in Europe and America respectively. Together with this, Eliade like Wach taught the history of religions in two continents. Both at the University of Bucharest and the Sorbonne, Eliade taught and trained students in this kind of studies, upto 1956. Later, with his migration or rather invitation to come to Chicago, that gave him the opportunity of exchanging views and ideas with his American colleagues.

Eliade tried to maintain a consistent view on the discipline of the science of religion seeing, it as both a historical and a systematic study of the religious data in order to find meaning of the data and know its history. He contributed to both kinds of studies, something which very few people were able to do. In the systematic side of the general science of religion which is also called comparative religion, Eliade has contributed immensely. His work, Patterns in Comparative Religion, was a masterpiece of erudite scholarship and deep insight into the religious realm. In this work, Eliade expounded his theory of Patterns, types and structures, as we have seen above. He advanced his theory of the different modalities of the sacred, focussing mostly on the primitive and archaic religions as the ideal religions, the adherents of which represent the *homo religiosus*. That theory as we have seen above was hailed by some and attacked by others.²⁷ Of those who attack Eliade, and who focussed particularly on his thought, we have Douglas Allen, Thomas J. J. Altizer, J. Z. Smith, N. Smart, Edmund Leach etc. These scholars of religion expressed their different views on his ideas. Others admire Eliade's boldness like U. Bianchi, while others like Guilford Dudley advocated, as mentioned above, the acceptance of Eliade's theory as a core

theory around which the whole study of religion should revolve. This last view in a way, taken together with all the achievements and contributions of Eliade, will give us an idea of his position in the western study of religion in modern times.

Eliade in his works, has shown that the historian of religions should not be only a mere recorder of facts, but must try to understand and find meanings in them.²⁸ As the way Eliade conceives the study of religious data is in trying to discover the systems and structures that he believes to be in the religious phenomena when studied comparatively, it follows that for understanding the process of obtaining enriched meanings, the historian of religions have to 'disengage' the structure he discovered.²⁹ Eliade like Wach was very much concerned with the sources out of which he studies religion.

Eliade's other clear contribution to this field rests around his belief that a scholar of religion should be a learned generalist not a dilettante. As the nature of this discipline warrants comparison, one must have thorough knowledge of more than one religion, and this will require a lot of efforts and hard work. Eliade is known also for his strong attacks on the reductionists and his belief in the irreducibility of the sacred. And that religious data must be viewed as religious. He also stressed on the dialectic of the sacred and the profane in all aspects of man's life, in space, time, objects, trees, stones etc. So also his coinage of 'hierophany' which seem to cover any idea of sacredness. It is really difficult if not impossible to outline Eliade's achievements and novel ideas in the space available, moreover that many of them have already been alluded to above.

Criticism:

As is expected, Eliade by presenting a new theory of studying religion was hailed and attacked by different scholars for various reasons. His clear religious inclinations, explicit statements and judgements, ^{are} sometimes very clearly theological. We saw him

²⁷ Kitagawa, J. M., (art) 'Eliade, Mircea' in The Encyclopedia of Religion, op. cit., vol. 5, pp. 89-90.

²⁸ Eliade, M. (art), 'Methodological Remarks on the study of religious symbolism in Eliade and Kitagawa (eds.) The History of Religions, Essays on Methodology, op. cit. p. 93.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 94.

typologies rather than historical contexts and narratives. This leads to decontextualisation; his interest is in the structure of hierophanies and archetypal symbols rather than the individuals or groups who interpret them;³² his criterion of internal coherence is attacked by Westerners but in our humble opinion that is not justified as this is the main argument by means of which we can confirm say, the authenticity of a Revealed Book.³³ He was also in his comparative study and theorisation very selective as he tends to go for the primitive, archaic and exotic data rather than that of the higher religions. The reason we think why he does this is, because the three great world religions, Islam, Judaism and Protestant Christianity are iconoclastic, and do not give much emphasis to myths (they may not even have them), symbols and hierophanies, the three most loved words to Eliade. Much more can be said, but due to space constraint we believe what has been said seems to be a balanced assessment of Eliade's comparative method in the study of religion.

It has been a study much interested in primitive or extinct religions and that has little to say on the contemporary religious life of man. It interprets, theorises and explains the past religions of man. Eliade aims to make definite ontological claims about the nature of man and his experience. His study of religion carries a very important message for the modern non-religious man of modern West, but it seems he is still not ready for that, and this is enough to show us the great spiritual difference that is there between the East and the West.

³³

See Surah Al-Nisa: 82

CHAPTER FIVE

**A COMPARISON AND
CONTRAST OF THE GENERAL
PRINCIPLES IN THE MUSLIM
AND WESTERN APPROACHES
TO THE COMPARATIVE
METHOD**

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A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN THE MUSLIM AND THE WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

ONE Treatment of the Original Sources.

TWO Objectivity and Value Judgement.

Three Criteria of Judgement.

Four The Problem of Truth.

CHAPTER FIVE

A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES IN THE MUSLIM AND WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

We have attempted in the pages above to give the different ways by which both Muslims and Westerners (who are mostly Christians) study the different religions of the world. The focus of our study has been the various ways both Muslims and Westerners compare religions, their conceptions of that kind of study, their insights either put into, or gained from that study and the methods they believe to be most appropriate and adequate for the study of man's religious life through the ages.

After having been abreast of the study of religion as a modern discipline in the universities of both Western and Muslim worlds of today, and of the different approaches to that study, the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods employed in the study of religious phenomena and the problems being faced by this discipline, in modern times, it is time for us to compare and contrast these 'two' comparative methods from the two different civilizations and world views, the Muslim and the Western. We hinted in our first chapter on the constant neglect by Western historians of religions of the contributions of the Muslims in this kind of study. Our study of al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī has given us a very clear picture of what the study of religion was among the Muslims, especially in the 4th and 5th centuries of Hijrāh, at the height of Muslim intellectual glory. Al-Āmirī's philosophical and at the same time Islamic comparative study of the religions that possess political and historical importance depicts him as a great believer in the religion of Islam and a great believer in reason and its reliability to settle many issues in comparative religion. Al-Bīrūnī, whose contributions started some 20-30 years after the death of al-Āmirī, studied other religions and especially the Indian religion from a different perspective. Al-Bīrūnī was essentially a Muslim scientist, astronomer, mathematician, geographer and historian, who despite that, remained a committed Muslim as showed above. These

two Muslims having accepted the truth of Islam in the sense of being the universal message of Allah to all mankind, they studied other religions as different and earlier versions of the one religion of Allah corrupted and changed or lost due to the vicissitudes of time. Al-Bīrūnī as seen above, particularly focussed on Indian religions, law, science etc., and was not ready to affirm the superiority or inferiority of their religion or of Islam except in some few cases. His main criterion was reason and that can easily be seen in the title of his masterpiece on India-*Tahqīq mā li al-Hind Min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fi al-Aql aw Mardhūlah* (Determining the Doctrines of India (both those) Acceptable by reason or Rejected (by it). The issue of reason will be mentioned later, as of now, we want to show that both al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī studied religions while they remain believers in Islam. The Qur'anic message is the only Revealed Book today in which all religions of earlier Prophets were shown to have originated from one source. The earlier Prophets were described as Muslims. In two places at least Allah says that all *mankind* were of one nation,¹ which shows an initial unity of mankind on the path of righteousness, but then they differed. Allah says:

“Mankind was one single nation. And Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings....”²

He also says:

“Mankind was but one nation but they differed (later). Had it not been for a word that went forth from thy Lord, their differences would have been settled between them.”³

These verses tend to show us the real beginning of the history of religions or the origin of religion. In the verse of Surah al-Baqarah above, the cause of the difference has been mentioned as ‘through selfish contumacy’.

¹ Surah al-Anbiya: 92 and Surah al-Muminun: 52.

² Surah al-Baqarah: 213.

³ Surah Yunus 19.

For al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī having been brought up in this religion and having chosen it after reflection upon it, its teachings and injunctions, it is natural to judge or to look at other religions through this final ring of that noble spiritual chain.

The Western study of religion as seen in the first chapter evolved in different circumstances. The general mistrust that was there between science and the Church, the various means by which the Christian clergy tried to stall the progress of science and free thought, the reaction of the scientists and the other consequences of the Enlightenment age, all these helped in creating a different, not all that congenial atmosphere for the inception of the scientific study of religion, which struggled a lot in the beginning to emancipate itself from theology and from the control of the Church. As Wach mentioned at the time of Enlightenment, outstanding European thinkers developed a 'natural religion' based on reason⁴ and independent of Christianity, which at that time seriously studied and criticized it or otherwise, based on its own merit. That 'religion' was not necessarily based on the belief in God. So when the Science of Religion evolved as an academic discipline, most of its proponents were not strictly believers in God, or rather committed to any religion, except that of reason and positivistic empiricism.

It is one of the paradox of the Western study of religion that as one Western scholar mentioned, the humanist interest of European society since the Renaissance led to 'a tendency to exclude God from active participation in his creation', and while its more intellectual side was concerned with a steadily increasing secularism of all forms of thoughts including, of course, the religious.⁵ . This is the same desacralization of the world by the modern Western man as we have seen with Eliade.

Due to this secularization of the study of the religion in the West at its inception God seems to be expelled from religion and its study in modern times. Gerardus van der Leeuw seen as the founder of the phenomenology of religion believes that God is not an object nor subject of this (phenomenological) study, to be either of these, he maintains, he has to be a phenomenon, i.e., He would have to appear so that He can

⁴ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit., p. 12.

⁵ Brockington, J., Hinduism And Christianity, (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p.17.

be studied!⁶ That secularization process of the West was seen by Sharpe as having to affect religion of necessity, because religion, to him, can hardly be studied independent of it. Another authority in the study of religion asserts,

"It is taken as axiomatic that a scientific approach to religion can not accept the existence of God".

He also adds that God or Ultimate need neither be affirmed nor denied, but be seen as something present in human experience.⁷ This means that there is in the Western approach to the study of religion a sort of methodological atheism or agnosticism due to the Westerners' claim of limiting themselves to historical demonstrable data of religion.⁸ This scientism was not whole-heartedly accepted by all the students of religion, and we see that from the turn of this century, religion tends, to be viewed religiously especially in North America. That view continued to gain ground, and around the middle of this century there was a paradigm shift to a new perspective 'of studying a reality (e.g. religion) on its own terms'.⁹ Later scholars of religion lament on this paradoxical situation of the exclusion of the transcendent from the study of religion. In this way the scholar leave out of account its possible significance in the fundamental structure of a religious consciousness.¹⁰

This very clear change in the Western study of religion makes it different from that of the Muslims, not only at the time of al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī, but also today. The Muslims, in a clear point of difference from the Westerners, do not start their study of religion as agnostics or atheists, even in terms of methodology only, because to them

⁶ See Waardenburg, J. Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) p:424.

⁷ Smart, N. Concept and Empathy, (London: Macmillan, 1986) p. 215.

⁸ See Whaling, (art) 'Comparative Approaches' in Whaling (ed) Contemporary Approaches... op. cit., vol. 1, p.206.

⁹ Eliade and Kitagawa (eds), The History of Religion, Essay in Methodology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p.viii (Intro).

¹⁰ Whaling, (art) 'Contrast Between the Classical and Contemporary Periods', in Contemporary Approaches.... op. cit., vol.1, p.15.

religion is a reality and is part of man's nature being created on that particular pattern.¹¹

This fundamental difference has been somewhat minimized in this study, especially that both the two Western scholars studied in it are not so much die-hard positivistic empiricists, and moreso, both represent the American Study of religion which views religion pragmatically and was trying to reconstruct global religious experience and a new humanism.¹²

The circumstances at the inception of this field, the reasons that led to its establishment, the tradition and movement out of which it evolved, all made Western study of religion different from the Muslim study of the same religious phenomenon. Despite this there are areas of agreement in the two enterprises. We will now take up some of the general principles that help determine what course comparative religion takes in both the two civilizations.

ONE- TREATMENT OF ORIGINAL SOURCES

In the Muslim study of religion, we find al-Bīrūnī as a great theorist in this regard. We have seen above (Chapter Three) that it was his love for academic precision and scholarly disinterestedness that prompted him into writing his work on India. As he said in the preface to that work, that in their discussions with Abu Sahl Abd al-Mun'im al-Tiflisi, they agreed that many Muslim writers tend to misrepresent the theories of other sects in Islam which can however, be recognized easily. But when it involves another different religion, there would be great difficulty in detecting such misrepresentations in entirely foreign systems and religions. Al-Bīrūnī even added "The same tendency prevails throughout our whole literature on philosophical and religious sects".¹³ He, being a scientist wants himself as well as others, to employ a strict scientific method that will guarantee freedom from prejudice and biasness. For anyone

¹¹ See Surah Rum: 30.

¹² Sharpe, Comparative Religion, A History, op. cit., pp.273-278.

¹³ Sachau, E., (ed) Alberuni's India, op. cit., vol.1, p.6

who does not do that, will depend, in terms of sources, on some 'superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherents of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it.' It was in this kind of intellectual atmosphere when the conscience of a scholar is trying to overcome all selfish and personal interests, that al-Bīrūnī conceived his work on India, moreover that the doctrines of the Hindus were specifically singled out as an example on that occasion, and it was indicated that no any good literature exist on them. It is mostly secondary sources that were depended on, copied one from the other, 'never sifted by the sieve of critical examination'. This is al-Bīrūnī's way of treating the sources. He tells us elsewhere "... although I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I supposed they were likely to be found, and in procuring for myself, even from very remote places, Hindu scholars who understand them and are able to teach me."¹⁴ He clearly recognized the need not only for consulting primary sources of another religion, but of also learning the language in which it has been mostly recorded. Al-Bīrūnī also shows that as regards tradition on an event that does not contradict either logical or physical laws, it will invariably depend for its character as true or false, upon the character of the reporters.¹⁵ He then outlined the diverse interests, animosities and antipathies between different peoples, that tend to influence their reportage. He at last extolled the truth and the one who stands by it, even if it goes against him.¹⁶ So to al-Bīrūnī two criteria seem to be basic in acceptance or rejection of a narration or an event. It should not contradict reason but must be within what can be accepted by it. Secondly, the physical laws of nature or the natural laws placed in the universe should not be contradicted, as they are perfect and universal. Al-Bīrūnī has a good knowledge not only of Arabic, but also Persian, Sanskrit and working knowledge of Greek, Hebrew and the local vernaculars in India. This placed him well in an advantageous position to study the Holy Scriptures of various religions in their originals. Even in his earlier work

¹⁴ ibid., p.24.

¹⁵ ibid., pp.3-4.

¹⁶ ibid., pp.4-5.

The Chronology of Ancient Nations in which he studied the eras, famous festivals and commemoration days of different nations of the world, al-Bīrūnī was ready to gather his information from ear-and eye-witness and by reflection. He hopes in that work to get the required information in the history of these nations especially those with a written tradition and he intends to compare the traditions of the various sects among themselves, so as to establish a system. He outlined his critical way of checking false reports that may contradict reason and observation. He emphasized the need for greatest care in trying to confirm the true statements out of many lies, some being undetectable easily.¹⁷

As for al-Āmirī, even though he was chronologically earlier than al-Bīrūnī, not much was said by him in this regard. It was believed by Ghurab that he depended on the Arabic translation of the Old and New Testaments, which means that even if he did not have the knowledge of Hebrew or Greek languages, he had before him a reliable translation of these primary sources. Al-Āmirī also relied on the Persian editions of the Avesta and was also well informed of the religion of Mani.¹⁸

In the modern Western comparative study of religion, the situation differs in terms of the quantity of data available for the modern student of religion, perhaps one-hundredth or so of it only might have been available for both al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī. The vastness of the data has been indicated by both the Wach and Eliade.¹⁹ Wach wrote an article squarely on this issue entitled 'The Concept of The Classical in the Study of Religion', in which he suggested some order in the diverse material by identifying the classical which "represent something typical; they convey with regard to religious life and experience more than would be conveyed by an individual instance".²⁰

¹⁷ Sachau, E. (ed & trans) The Chronology of Ancient Nations of al-Bīrūnī (Lahore Hijrah International, 1983), pp. 1-3.

¹⁸ Ghurab, A-A. (ed) Kitab al-Ilam bi Manaqib al-Islam of al-Āmirī. (Riyadh: Dar al-Assala, 1988) pp. 61-62.

¹⁹ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit., pp. 7-8, cp. Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit., pp. 2-9.

²⁰ Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op.cit., p. 51.

He calls for careful analysis of the procedure of fact-finding. He believes that sources have to be examined with the utmost care, and by the use of the method of combination, that should be followed by the critical task of correlating the material with the thoughts and intentions to which it bears witness. Wach asserts,

"The question of the genuineness of the material has to be answered with reference to its possibility or impossibility as judged by our knowledge of human experience and the circumstances".²¹

He believes that – and this gives us an idea of the advancement of knowledge in all fields in modern times – conditions such as time, place, technological level, and the prevailing moods and thoughts of the period and place will all have to be taken into consideration. It is by this means that some insights could be gained as regards the material under investigation. Critical study of the tradition has also been stressed by Wach. He calls for the avoidance of two extreme attitudes as regards notions and practices, i.e. accepting them uncritically for no other reason than that we have inherited them; and also of rejecting them uncritically because they are tradition.²²

Eliade also has elaborated on the issue of the enormity of the data of the historian of religions. In his A History of Religious Ideas (in 3 volumes), Eliade attempts to gather the most important and influential data of the whole history of religions of man from the pre-historic man to the modern times. Somewhat similar to Wach's concept of the 'classical' Eliade's two criteria of selection of data are 'moments of crises in depth (during the history of a tradition) and creative moments'. In these two 'moments' Eliade thought a religious tradition contributes more to the development of religious ideas and beliefs²³. He indicated the opaqueness of the pre-historic documents particularly. He then added that every document, even of our time, is spiritually opaque, 'as long as it has not been deciphered, by being integrated

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

²² *ibid.*, p.xii (Introduction).

²³ Eliade, M. A History of Religious Ideas, (trans) Trask, W.R. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), Vol. 1, p. xiv (Preface).

into a system of meanings.²⁴ Eliade shows the range of material that the historian of religions has to cope with being: 'a few fragments from a most oral priestly learning, allusions found in travelers' notes, material gathered by foreign missionaries, reflections drawn from secular literature, a few monuments, a few inscriptions and what memories are remembered in local traditions.'²⁵ This gives us an idea of the diverse sources for the Western study of religion, in which all material is taken into consideration, including idols, symbols, folklore, superstitions etc. For Eliade, even though the explanation of the elite in a tradition may be the most authentic explanation in that religion, both his and that of the common man will be equally treated as valuable for his purpose of tracing the history of the manifestation of the sacred (hierophany) and also establishing its modality.²⁶

A common feature discovered here is that as al-Bīrūnī indicated the essential difference between the elites in a given religion and their predilection towards abstract concepts and philosophical understanding of religion on the one hand, and the tendency of the popular mind towards the sensible world and concretisation of the sacred on the other,²⁷ we find similar idea with all the other scholars studied in this work.

The purpose of al-Āmirī's main work in comparative religion is, as he has shown, for an individual to ascertain the superiority of what he chooses in religion over what he rejects, not on the basis of followership of the earlier scholars (i.e. being one of the common masses) but by means of rational investigation and of choosing religion based on pure reason,²⁸ thus becoming one of the elites.

Wach has also indicated that difference in terms of the religious authority resting in the expert who is well-versed in the tradition. He quotes approvingly Wenger's statement "The authority that man recognizes in religion is one who, in his character

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁵ Eliade, M. Patterns in Comparative Religion, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 6-8.

²⁷ See Alberuni's India, op. cit., vol. I, p. III.

²⁸ Al-Āmirī's al-Ilam bi manaqib al-Islam, op. cit., p. 122.

and manner of life, gives the impression of having insight into truths that ordinary man cannot fathom".²⁹ The expert is more learned and possesses the capacity to see the whole of life and to have a message adequate to it, which the ordinary man does not possess.

Eliade indicated this distinction clearly, when he wanted to show the enormity of the data in the science of religion. He maintains that 'a given hierophany may be lived and interpreted quite differently by the religious élite and by the rest of the community'. In asking which of the two interpretations is to be taken as the true meaning of that religious phenomena, he affirms here that he will treat both as equally valuable.³⁰ But a little before this, Eliade states that in a Christian village for instance, it is only the village priest's interpretation of Christianity that should be accepted as the right one, being the one who more truly preserved the tradition, against the interpretation of the rest of the community.³¹ Why this difference in judgement or contradiction? It is a well-known fact in the world of religion that as people can be categorized into two, in terms of the knowledge and understanding of a particular religion to which they belong, into the élite class and the masses or common people, in the same way it is recognized that if these two give two conflicting explanations on a matter of religion, then the scholarly and in a way, closer-to-the-original explanation of the élites should be taken not both.

To conclude our discussions on the sources we would like to show that the two Western scholars studied above, even though they claim to possess better knowledge than say, al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī in the religious data of the world, we find in them some statements that show either a falsification of that claim or a tincture of prejudice and biasness. Wach, for example, as shown above (Chapter Four) claimed that "the Koran had not much to say on the nature of man...." and he then immediately went to mention the views of "the circles of the secret societies such as the *Carmatians* and the

²⁹ Wach, J., Essays in the History of Religions, Kitagawa, J. and Allen, G. (eds.), (New York : Macmillan, 1988), p. 151.

³⁰ Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, op.cit., p. 7.

³¹ ibid., p. 6.

"ichwan as-safa" as representing Islamic views on man.³² He also claimed depending on another source that it was John, the Demascene from whom Muslim scholars learned an acquaintance with some of the basic problems like doctrine of man, his nature, freedom etc. They also learned from him the method of systematic exposition.³³ Eliade on his part, while giving a history of study of religion states: "Shahrastani (d:1153) was the author of a treatise on the Islamic schools,"³⁴ no mention was made by him of all the religions and philosophies of the world studied in that treatise. In fact, another Western scholar described that work of al-Shahrastani – al-Milal wa al-Nihal –as the first written history of the religions of the world, in the following words:

"The honour of writing the first history of religion in world literature seems in fact to belong to the Muslim Shahrastani (d.1153), whose Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy describes and systematises all the religions of the then world, as far as the boundaries of China".³⁵

TWO – OBJECTIVITY AND VALUE JUDGEMENT

The scientific study of religion started in the West as indicated in the first chapter of this work as an objective study of the religious data. As Wach has shown in his later works it has been a mistake of the Enlightenment age, characterized by him in increased interest in non-Christian beliefs and also in great progress in the study of those beliefs, their rites, lore, etc.³⁶ At that time outstanding European scholars recoiled from 'dogmatic controversies' and with the mentioned increased knowledge of other religions, a new 'natural' religion or theology was developed with human reason as a

32 Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit., p. 76.

33 ibid., p. 77.

34 Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit., p. 225.

35 See Sharpe, Comparative Religion A History, op. cit., p. 11.

36 Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit., p.12.

pivot.³⁷ Due to positivism and philological and historical concerns of the scholars of religion at the beginning of this discipline, description took the place of evaluation that obtains hitherto in theology. All norms and values were to be 'explained' historically, psychologically, and sociologically. At that time objectivity was the supreme demand in that study.³⁸ But then with the First World War the age of historicism came to an end, although the critical studies continued. This period was seen by Wach, as significant to the Study of religion, in it Rudolf Otto wrote his work, The Idea of the Holy, in which he lays powerful stress upon the objective character of Ultimate Reality and the non-rational as well as rational elements in religion.³⁹ This saw the beginning of a split in the field of *Religionswissenschaft* between the subjective phenomenologists, especially as found in North America, and those who continued on the descriptive, positivistic and objective line in the study of religion particularly in Europe. Both the two Western scholars studied above as seen in the concerned chapters, fall within the first group with Eliade for example declaring that any attempt to grasp the religious phenomenon by means of other approaches from different disciplines is false and 'It misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred.'⁴⁰ Wach in this point as in other points we mentioned above, seems to have two opinions. In his Introduction to the History of Religions of 1924, he maintains the opinion that says an imminent stand point hinder or prevent an objective evaluation of a phenomenon, as some distance is required, and the saying goes 'Love is blind' also. He agrees that 'every emotion, every passionate involvement with an object threatens to destroy the Investigator's ability to make a fair and objective judgement concerning it'.⁴¹ He also shows that objectivity has been demanded on the part of the scholar, even

³⁷ See Wach, J., The Comparative Study of Religions, Kitagawa, J. (ed) (New York: Columbia University Press 1958), p.4.

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰ Eliade Patterns, op. cit., p. xi (Author's Foreword).

⁴¹ Pp. 107-108.

though, it was not understood to mean the same thing for all people even today. The various meanings are: to 'some it means setting aside personal prejudices, or political, dogmatic and confessional assumptions; to others it means renouncing every personal point of view, or suppressing personal decisions etc'.⁴² Elsewhere in the same work, he states: 'only if we abstain from personal opinions and convictions can we ever fully understand the intentionally of the phenomenon at hand..... There is no need for us to renounce personal convictions altogether; it is only necessary to be methodologically clean'.⁴³ These statements clearly depict Wach as a believer in what he calls 'relative' objectivity. He even mentioned factors related to objectivity, among which is the recognition 'that critical reflection on perception, integration, and presentation is needed to prevent prejudice... and a partisan presentation of one's results'.⁴⁴ Wach is of the opinion that there are factors that help one attains objectivity like interest in the subject- matter, so also congeniality and experience in life.⁴⁵

In Wach's Types of Religious Experience, he showed that, part of the confusion found at his time in the discipline of religious studies was due to the failure to distinguish between statements of facts and value judgements. This he views as having been caused by the mistake of the school of comparative religion at the beginning of the century especially for them "to advocate the elimination of value judgements in favour of a completely objective approach". The result, to him, has been an unsatisfactory relativism incapable of contributing to the eternal quest for truth.⁴⁶ In his last phase of life Wach recognised 'truth' as the prime motive in man's desire for knowledge. From the above it means for Wach to be objective means to strive not to put any personal judgement of prejudice or biasness in your investigation. But mere description will not be enough, since all knowledge seeks for the truth, a scholar of

⁴² ibid., p. 108.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 163.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 108-111.

⁴⁶ Wach, Types, op. cit., p.7.

religion should evaluate his data and formulate his reaction to it. Wach even attacked the hypocrisy of many scholars of religion when it comes to addressing these issues, he says:

"To me there is something pathetic about the modern historian of religion who uses strong words only when he wants to convince us that he has no convictions. His interest is antiquarian or the result of sheer intellectual curiosity. He is 'neutral' as far as religion is concerned".⁴⁷

These opinions have drawn sharp criticisms against Wach, but to him that is what we should understand as our stand towards objectivity and value judgement, i.e. you strive for objectivity and assess your data carefully. He was in his last works giving clear value judgements. For instance in Understanding and Believing, Wach discussed the problem of truth in religion and opined that the criterion of truth can only be a religious, which he mentions elsewhere as the Holy Spirit of God.⁴⁸ He even clearly advocated for criteria to be developed for the evaluation and explanation of the variety of religious experience.⁴⁹

Eliade as we have seen has his own way of looking at the religious data. As he wants to find meanings, structures and types, he holds the opinion that historical explanation (description) is not enough, one has to interpret the meaning the data reveals, like the origin or diffusion of a hierophany or a religious symbol, so also deciphering in fact, what made it possible.⁵⁰ He believes the discipline uses empirical method and seeks to understand religio-historical facts. But despite that, the historian of religions tries to systematize his results and find meanings in them. Eliade's stand on objectivity is implicit, but with it he believes the scholar of religion should theorize, and

⁴⁷ Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions, op. cit., p. 8.

⁴⁸ See Wach, Understanding and Believing, Kitagawa J. (ed), (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), p. 152, cp. Wach, Types, op. cit., p. 29.

⁴⁹ Wach, Types op. cit., p. 11.

⁵⁰ Eliade M (art), 'Methodological Remarks on the study of Religious Symbolism, in Eliade and Kitagawa (eds), The History of Religions, Essays in Methodology, op. cit., p. 89, cp. Allen, G. Structure and Creativity in Religion, (The Hague: Mouton 1978) p. 177-178.

should not wait for the other disciplines to do that for him.⁵¹ Theorization or integration or finding meanings and any hermeneutic endeavour is not generally welcomed in this discipline. As Eliade is more interested in the structure, he developed a criterion of coherence on the basis of which he pass judgement like 'true', 'false' in accordance to their conformity to internal coherence. The completeness or otherwise of religious acts or experience are judged by him as genuine and authentic or the vice versa.⁵²

Al-Āmirī's stand on the two issues discussed are elaborate. He believes in value judgement as an essential part of the present order of things in the world, as well as doing justice to the religion being studied. His two principles that guarantee correct comparison have connection with objectivity and the passing of right judgements on the aspect of religion studied.

The first being the comparison of similar and commensurate or 'equal' elements of different religions, a fundamental to a fundamental, etc. which means he has to identify these equals or similar objectivity before comparing them. In the second principle he believes that the stand of a religious community should be determined objectively as truly representing the mainstream of that religion, not a minority view.⁵³ Al-Āmirī's mention of the truth and its being sticked to, presupposes his taking guidance from while explaining the ideas of others. For instance as opening statements to one of the chapters, he states how the truth is available for any one who strives for it with sincerity.⁵⁴ On the issue of superiority and clear value judgements, al-Āmirī stated clearly that he wants to show the superiority of Islam and how it deserves to be the final message of Allah to mankind. He made his case very clear by showing that superiority of something over others is ^a/well-known fact in the life of man on earth.⁵⁵ We have seen above some of/criteria based on which he pass value judgement fore

51 Eliade (art), 'Methodological Remarks...' op. cit., pp. 89-92.

52 See Allen's critique of Eliade in his Structure and Creativity in Religion, op.cit., pp. 203-216.

53 Al-Āmirī al-l'lam be manaqib al-Islam, op. cit., p. 125.

54 ibid., p. 121.

55 ibid., pp. 95-96.

most among them being reason. al-Āmirī's judgements were logical and can be confirmed by others. It is not exactly as most Westerners try to categorize judgements given in a religion against or for another religion as theological or unjustified.

Al-Bīrūnī states his objectivity in the prefaces of both his two works al-Athar al-Baqiyah and 'Tahqiq ma li al-Hind'. In 'al-Athar al-Baqiyah' written earlier, al-Bīrūnī stated as regards the knowledge of the history and tradition of former nations, drawn from remains of their customs and institutes, that he was intending to make their opinions a basis. Not only this al-Bīrūnī also states that in order to avoid any blame of one-sidedness in his presentation, he will cross-examine and compare their traditions and opinions among themselves to establish an objective system of what he investigates. In his 'India' al-Bīrūnī was more explicit. He states that his work on Indian religions, society, customs, sciences is not a polemical work and that he did not intend to refute what he believes to be wrong, as he wants it to be a simple historic record of facts. He says, "I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are....."⁵⁶ It is in his mention of their different kinds of marriage that we see al-Bīrūnī making or passing judgement due to the unnaturalness of these kinds of marriage. In giving them al-Bīrūnī wants the reader to learn through comparison the superiority of the institutions of Islam and also see how all other customs and usage appear in their 'essential foulness'.⁵⁷ Apart from these very few cases, al-Bīrūnī's study of Indian religions and society has been seen as truly scientific and he described their beliefs and practices objectively as we have seen above.

This study has shown that though students of religion claim to study religion objectively and without prejudice and biasness, we see that as Kierkegaard has said 'religion is something towards which 'neutrality' is not possible'. The lack of neutrality may only vary, with some keeping it at the most minimal level. In terms of objective description, that can be somewhat easier than the avoidance of all kinds of presuppositions and value judgements.

⁵⁶ Sachau, E. (ed. and trans.) The Chronology of Ancient Nations of al-Bīrūnī, op. cit., p.3.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 110.

Al-Āmirī very clearly declare that Islam is the best of religions and the most superior, not due to any subjective factor, but in line with the comparative study he carried out. He affirms the truth of Islam called 'the religion of truth, true to his philosophical school of al-Kindi, that always stand on the side of Islam.

Wach on his part wants to also affirm the truth of Christianity, but his way of doing it, is much more barren and ambiguous, and seems that he is only championing the cause of Christianity due to subjective reasons and as a theologian with no concrete and strong arguments to present in this regard. Wach in many of his articles turns to be a missionary through the discipline of *Religionswissenschaft*. At one occasion he says, "..... that behind the religious motive all other motives must retreat to the background, and that the people whom we missionize ought to be led to a religiosity appropriate to themselves, to this, too, *Religionswissenschaft* can contribute its share".⁵⁸

THREE-CRITERIA OF JUDGEMENT

We have seen in the last chapter that both Wach and Eliade agreed on a point while al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī agreed on its contrary. It is the issue of reason as a criterion to study or judge religions. Both Wach and Eliade, may be due to the influence of Otto, believe in the irrational aspects of religion and emphasized them in their studies.⁵⁹ Al-Āmirī being philosopher of religion interested in comparative studies of religion has employed reason as a tool to determine for instance, the closeness of Islamic beliefs to reason and the contrary in other religions, and so are superceded by Islam. Al-Bīrūnī also studied Indian beliefs and customs in line with reason giving all, those beliefs and ideas in line with reason and those repugnant to it.

Human reason has a great and important place in Islam. It is a well-known fact that it is so vital to man, as it makes him distinct from other species of animals. On the

⁵⁸ Wach, Understanding and Believing, op. cit., p. 140.

⁵⁹ Wach, The Introduction to the History of Religions, op. cit., p. 26, cp. Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit., pp. 14-15, for Eliade see his article 'Methodological Remarks.....' op.cit., p.98 and The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit., pp. 8-10.

basis of reason man is made responsible before religious injunctions and prohibitions and in Islam it is protected through the provision of the prohibition of all intoxicants. In the Quran, it is very evident that man's response to the revealed guidance depends almost entirely on him employing his reason rightly and judiciously.⁶⁰

This point is very important to our modern study of religion. If the Enlightenment movement has opted for reason as the basis for determining the right beliefs that should be accepted – perhaps due to the general permeation of rationalism in their thoughts – and if their way of reason and observation had won the day not the way of Church dogmatists, then in our humble opinion we suggest reason to be taken once again as criterion for the comparative study of religions.

If individual truth-claims from the different religions will lead to competitive religion, and the claims of having and possessing the authentic revelations are also conflicting, then let students of religion opt for another criterion or criteria. The most important, in our view is that of reason and its relation to the tenets of a religion. Some of them mentioned by Wach in his Types of Religious Experience from Hocking can be accepted and be proved scientifically, like the faith proving its genuineness by its fruits; its redeeming contemporary man from his deep sense of frustration and the vices that plague him; its being the most fertile in stimulating man's capacities; its being capable of legitimately asserting its authority.⁶¹ We may add that, that religion must be the most understandable one due to the conformity of its basic and foundational tenets to human reason which alone makes man different from beasts. That religion should also be the one that best solves all the problems of man both material and spiritual, both worldly and other-worldly. This issue need to be addressed by the so-called scientific study of religion the world over. It is necessary due to the further role anticipated for religion globally. The global religious re-awaking and the influence of religion, more often implicitly than explicitly, in world politics and economy all point to the importance of this suggestion.

⁶⁰ See Surah al-Insan : 2-3 and Surah al-Mulk: 9-11.

⁶¹ Wach, Types, op. citd., p. 3

FOUR: THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH

In the Muslim Study of religion truth is taken as the Divine message sent to man. As indicated above, the two Muslims studied in this work consider Islam as the final truth revealed by Allah. The concept of the 'religion of truth' is very clear in the Quran (Surah al-Taubah: 29).

Al-Āmirī had a clear concept of the 'religion of truth' which seems to have a separate essence whose features are well-known and which serves as a criterion and a standard by which other religions are 'gauged'.⁶² This concept is also clear in al-Bīrūnī's works for in discussing what he wants to record about the Indians in his Tahqiq ma li al-Hind, he states, "If the contents of these quotations happen to be utterly heathenish, and the followers of the truth, i.e. the Muslims find them objectionable, we can only say that such is the belief of the Hindus....."⁶³

The idea of truth was also discussed by Wach. He showed in his Types of Religious Experience, that the call for a completely objective approach to the study of religion has led to a relativism that is incapable of contributing to the eternal quest for 'truth' "that quest which is actually the prime motive in all our desire for knowledge".⁶⁴ That truth has not been clearly defined by Wach, perhaps due to the fear of being branded as a 'pure theologian'. He pointed to Soderblom's concept of revelation as the criterion of truth.⁶⁵

It is this criterion of determining the truth (not explicitly defined) that Wach applied in his article specifically discussing that concept entitled "General Revelation and the Religions of the World". He came to the conclusion that all religions (Islam was mentioned to be a special case, but not treated later) are, *praeparatio evangelica* or preparation for the Gospel.⁶⁶ In another article discussing the same problem of truth entitled "The Problem of Truth in Religion", he opined that the criterion of truth can

⁶² Al-Āmirī, al-İ'lām bi manaqib al-Islam, op. cit., p. 83, 101, 167.

⁶³ Alberuni's India, op. cit., Vol 1, p.7.

⁶⁴ Wach, Types, op .cit., p.7.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁶ Wach, Understanding and Believing, op cit., pp. 69-86.

only be 'religious' (not rational ?). In attempting to understand this criterion he offered the following questions: what is it that your faith can do? What has it done, what can it be expected to do? What can it do for you, for those related to you, and for all men? And so on.⁶⁷ At the end Wach seems to have no other choice than to show his true face. He says "..... if the great spiritual principle of reconciliation and redemption which we affirm in the name of Christ is the truth, then no other can be truer or equally true, at least from the Christian point of view".⁶⁸ If Wach will say this, then the followers of various religions will say the same, and thus the problem remains unsolved. Eliade seems to be more interested in universal spirituality and the communion with the 'sacred', in that he recognises power and reality. He is more disturbed with the non-religiousness of the modern man than any exclusive idea of 'truth'.⁶⁹

The above paragraphs confirm that the problem of truth-claims is not an issue that can be easily solved. But that does not warrant or necessitate its complete abandonment. In our humble opinion the issue of truth should be tackled head-on due to its importance.

It is very evident that in the case of the Muslim study of religion the issue of truth is most crucial. Their concept of religion and its study is not just for the sake of knowledge that has no relation with man's religious life in this world or his hope for future success in the next life. This concept necessitates the search for that definite and one truth, ^{the truth that} can lead man to success in both the worlds. To al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī , all evidences show that that one truth is Islam, the religion of all Prophets (P.B.U.TH).

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁹ Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, op. cit., pp.12-13 and pp. 201-213.

CONCLUSION

This humble work started with an outline of the general methods of the study of religious phenomena especially in the West, where the study is more flourishing today. We saw the inception of the discipline that takes religion as its sole subject-matter evolving in an atmosphere inimical to religion, and the transcendent. Religion and its texts were studied critically using mostly methods from the other disciplines, which eventually led to the reduction of religion. One of the earliest methods employed in that study, the one by which the discipline came to be known was the comparative method, the main focus of this study.

In the first chapter which reviewed the most important ideas on the methods employed in the study of religion, a brief mention was made of the Muslims and their interest in the study of other religions, an issue that is very clear in their Revealed Book – al-Quran. Unfortunately, of the many books on the history of the study of religion, only three^{or four} to our knowledge gave even the most brief mention of their contributions. It became imperative and desirable that a history of that study and of those contributions be written, as Wach has indicated.¹

In the second and third chapters of this work the focus was on two outstanding scholars of religion and philosophy among the Muslims, with the intention of studying their works on religion (those that are still extant), so as to see their concept of comparing religions, and the way(s) they did that and what possible contributions were made by/to the general science of religion. The two scholars are Abu al-Hasan Muhammad bn Yusuf al-Āmirī (d. 381 A.H.) and Abu Rayhan Muhammad bn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/442 A.H.)

We found that al-Āmirī, also known as the 'Philosopher of Khurasan' did compare religions normatively. He was clear from the onset that he wants to show the superiority of Islam over other religions in the different aspects common in the religions chosen. Al-Āmirī outlined the principles that will guide his endeavour. He used reason as the main criterion in ascertaining which religion is superior to the other. He relied

on the sources available to him, and did his comparison objectively. His is a model of Muslim study of religion in which rational arguments and societal circumstances and their bearing on religions were used to see which religion is most beneficial to man. We found that al-Āmirī had great interest in comparative religion from the indication we got in his lost works. He shows that in terms of doctrines, Islamic aqeedah is most rational. That Islam is the most moderate of religions in terms of worship and the most caring to its weak adherents in the society, and the religion that encourages more the pursuit of knowledge in all fields. And the religion that contributed the most culturally and intellectually to the world than all other religions of importance then.

Al-Bīrūnī's is another model of the Muslim study of religion which is closest to the modern study of religion in the West, or to be more precise in Europe today. He studied Indian and other religions objectively without any attempt at refuting them, in order to understand the phenomenon of religion.

He sometimes chooses a phenomenon which he studies across the board of religions, like idol worship, fasting, holy scriptures etc, to see if any theory or hidden meaning can be adduced from that. Al-Bīrūnī known more for his mathematical, astronomical and scientific contributions, proves himself also as a great historian of religions. Except in some very few places al-Bīrūnī did not pass judgement on other religions, despite that his commitment to Islam can be seen clearly in his works. This tends to disprove the claim that studying other religions leads to relative religiousness or it weakens a person's faith. Moreover, al-Āmirī's work has a lot to say in proving the contrary.

In the modern Western study of religion, we discover the non-committal attitude of the pioneers of that discipline and the relativization of the truth and even the Divine. These two vital elements of religion were expunged from the Western comparative study of religion as part of the secularization of all aspects of life.

in the West or the desacralization of life as Eliade will say. One has to be a skeptic or methodologically an atheist or an agnostic before

¹

Wach, Types of Religious Experience, op. cit., p. 3.

one can be accepted as a comparative religionist or a historian of religions. Mostly, their comparison was non-normative or least on the face of it.

In the two examples or models studied we found Joachim Wach in the first phase of his academic life in the mid -1920's expressing the views of that early period of the science of religion with objectivity and value-free description of the religious phenomena being stressed. But later in life, Wach moved towards evaluation of religious data as a final stage in the study of religion.

The Western study of religion despite its shortcomings and debatable presuppositions that led to the reduction of religion, has contributed immensely in unearthing a lot of information on man's religious realm and some important universal truths about religion which reinforce religion in man's life instead of undermining it as might have been intended.

We found some similarities -- which may or may not be due to the contact between the two civilizations which has been long and persistent—in the study of religion in the two worlds especially in the way religious sources are generally treated and in the claim and sometimes in the application of the principle of objectivity in studying the religions of others. Value judgements are also passed in the two worlds particularly by those who believe and want to prove that the truth they possess is the only real truth.

There is also a clear contrast between the two kinds of studies most especially with relation to reason and on whether it should be taken as criterion in judging and evaluating religions or not. For the Muslims, and in line with their Revealed Book they opted for reason as the only possible criterion to be used in order to discover the most perfect of religions and the one most beneficial to man. Reason can also be used to discover the religious beliefs or practices not natural and not in line with the most general notion of religion.

The Western scholars studied in this work agreed on the non-reliability of reason as a criterion of assessing a religion as there are irrational elements in 'all' religions as they claim. The Christian religion, confessed explicitly by Wach, but only implicitly by Eliade seems to contain this irrational elements more than the others.

We can easily discern from this work that two kinds of comparative method were existing in the modern Western study of religion as we have shown in Chapter Four. The pre-20th century normative comparative study of religions in this sense – evolutionary, and this resembles al-Āmirī's value-laden comparison. The other kind of comparative study of religions as is practised today, is the phenomenological comparison that suspends or brackets judgements in most cases. This resembles al-Bīrūnī's study of religious phenomena.

In the end, it is hoped that further researches should be conducted on the many works written by Muslims on the different religions of the world. Such works should be compared with the modern study of religion. It may be that some more similarities and some more differences can be found, which we hope if used appropriately can go a long way in advancing further the scientific and objective study of man's religions.

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