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Muhammad Akram

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# Foundations of the Descriptive Study of Religions in Muslim History: A Conceptual Analysis

Muhammad Akram\*

Department of Comparative Religion,  
International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

## Abstract

The classical Muslim scholarly tradition produced an assortment of literature on different religions including a considerable number of descriptive studies, a phenomenon that leaves imposing questions. Most importantly, how a pre-modern civilization was able to generate a tradition of descriptive scholarship on different religions in the absence of conditions such as the western modernity that supposedly factored the emergence of the modern academic study of religion needs to be explored. The current paper ventures to answer this question. It argues that certain features of the Qur'ānic worldview, such as the repeated invitation to observe the signs of God in time and space through travel in the land/across the world and to ponder upon the history of various nations coupled with the exhortation to use reason generated curiosity about different civilizations of the world as well as their religious heritage. Moreover, the Qur'ānic view of the universality of the religious phenomenon as a divine plan also encouraged a sober disposition towards religious others in cases under discussion. On the other hand, the meticulous historiographical techniques and methods for the interpretation of texts developed by Muslim historians, theologians, and jurists afforded the needed methodological apparatus for the said undertaking. The current paper further concludes that the same epistemology and methodological foundations can be appropriated according to/keeping in view the needs of the time to promote a credible study of religion/s in contemporary Muslim societies.

**Keywords:** descriptive study of religions, epistemology, historiography, history, methodology, Muslim civilization, Qur'ān, reason, textual criticism

## Introduction

During its heydays, the Muslim civilization produced a wide range of literature on religions other than Islam.<sup>1</sup> A significant part of this literature was polemical and disputative, written to demonstrate Islam's status as the only true religion and refute other religions.<sup>2</sup> However, this corpus of literature also contained many writings on different

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\*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Muhammad Akram, Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Religions, International Islamic University, Islamabad at m.akram@iiu.edu.pk.

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix.

<sup>2</sup>Zafar Ishaq Ansari, "Foreword," in *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, ed. Ghulam Haider Aasi (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2014), v.

religions which were by and large descriptive. The examples of these works include *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (The Book of Idols) by Hishām ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī (747–821),<sup>3</sup> A chapter devoted to the description of various religions in *Kitāb al-Fihrist*<sup>4</sup> (The Index) written by Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm (d. 995 or 998), *Tahqīqu mā li'l-Hindi min Ma'qūlah Maqbūlah fi al-'Aqli aw Marzūlah* (An Inquiry into the Indian Pronouncements be They Rational or Irrational), commonly known as *Kitāb al-Hind* (The Book on India) by Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (973-1048)<sup>5</sup>, *Bayān al-Adyān*<sup>6</sup> (A Description of Religions) written in 1092 CE by Muḥammad ibn 'Ubaydullāh Abū al-Ma'ālī, and last but not least, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*<sup>7</sup> (The Book of Denominations and Creeds) written by 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahraṣṭānī (1086-1153). According to a study, around one-fourth of the Muslim writings on other religions that appeared from the eighth to the nineteenth centuries CE can be considered more or less descriptive.<sup>8</sup>

This tradition of descriptive writings on different religions in the premodern Muslim civilization leaves imposing questions. For, in the modern West, a series of cultural movements like Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and Romanticism had played a vital role in shaping the scientific outlook towards religion, which is characterized by rational and critical inquiry. Such a perspective is generally supposed to have caused the rise of the contemporary scholarly study of religion.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the question is, how in Muslim history, a kind of descriptive treatment of different religions could become possible in the absence of cultural experiences similar to the European societies and ensuing modernity? In other words, what prompted some classical Muslim scholars to produce descriptive writings on other religions? Was it a search for religious truth? Or, had some intrinsic features of the Muslim intellectual culture been at play behind this development? Did the interest in studying different religions appear at the center of the Muslim culture, or was it a peripheral phenomenon? The present paper digs into epistemological and methodological foundations of this premodern literary tradition to answer such questions.

<sup>3</sup>Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, trans., Nabih Amin Faris (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952).

<sup>4</sup>Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (Karachi: Nūr Muḥammad Kārkhāna Tijārat-e-Kutb, 1971), 383-414.

<sup>5</sup>Abū Rayhān Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī, *Alberuni's India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. Ltd., 1910).

<sup>6</sup>Abū al-Ma'ālī Muḥammad ibn 'Ubayd Allah, *Bayān al-Adyān* (Tehran: Mauqūfāt-i Maḥmūd Afshār Yazdī, 1957).

<sup>7</sup>'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahraṣṭānī, *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup>Patrice Claude Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), 128.

<sup>9</sup>Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), ix.

### 1.1. The Question of Center and Periphery

To begin with the discussion, most of the scholars who wrote on different religions belonged to those Muslim societies, which were in direct contact with the other civilizations and religions. For instance, the region of Khurāsān, which overlapped with some parts of today's Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, had been especially crucial in this regard. Eminent writers on different religions, including al-Bīrūnī, Abū al-Ma'ālī, and al-Shahrastānī, came from this region. In the western part of the classical Muslim world, al-Andalus/Muslim Spain had been a center of the debates between different religious traditions. In this connection, a notable scholar from that region is Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Ḥazm (994-1064), who rose to prominence for his crucial methodological contributions to historical and textual criticism, notwithstanding his apologetic and polemical approach. Hence, we surmise that the encounters between different religious traditions facilitated the exchange of views between different cultures and served as an initial catalyst for interreligious debates, and resulted in descriptive writings on different religions. In other words, actual increasing exposure to religious diversity had been a critical factor behind the descriptive works on religions that appeared in Muslim history.

Using the notion of center and margins, which scholars sometimes employ to explain the degree of acceptance for an idea or movement in a given society,<sup>10</sup> it appears that the interest in studying religions was more substantial at the borders of the classical Muslim world. Extending the metaphor of center and margins to the Muslim theological tradition (*al-kalām*) itself can be helpful for the present undertaking. If one were to consider the intellectual background of the writers under discussion, some of them primarily happened to be jurists and theologians (*mutakallimūn*) like Abū al-Ma'ālī<sup>11</sup> and al-Shahrastānī, some others were historians, biographers, and scientists like al-Kalbī, ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm, and al-Bīrūnī. Undoubtedly, al-Bīrūnī is the foremost scholar concerning the descriptive study of religions in Muslim history.<sup>12</sup> He was not a theologian as such. Instead, his main interests lay in the positive sciences, such as geography, astronomy, mathematics, and gemology. That is why his approach to religion is historical and displays a manifest tendency towards observation and direct personal contact with the people from the culture under study.

<sup>10</sup>See, for instance, Peter Beyer, "Glocalization of Religions: Plural Authenticities at the Centres and at the Margins," in *Sufis in Western Society Global Networking and Locality*, ed. Ron Geaves Markus Dressler, Gritt Klinkhammer (London: Routledge, 2009), 14-24.

<sup>11</sup>Carl W. Ernst, "Bayān al-Adyān," in *Perso-Indica. An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, ed. Fabrizio Speziale and Carl W. Ernst, (2015), [http://www.perso-indica.net/work/bayan\\_al-adyan](http://www.perso-indica.net/work/bayan_al-adyan), (accessed 09 August 2020).

<sup>12</sup>Wassilios Klein, *Abu Reyhan Biruni Und Die Religionen. Eine Interkulturelle Perspektive* [Abu Reyhan Biruni And the Religions. An Intercultural Perspective], (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2005), 50.

The second outstanding figure of this intellectual legacy is al-Shahrastānī, who is known to be an Asharite (*al-Ash'arī*). His unbiased and descriptive approach to different religious convictions earned him accusations of Shi'ism or belonging to an Isamā'īlī sect.<sup>13</sup> However, scholars have convincingly discarded these speculations.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Ḥazm, in turn, was a veteran of a minor theological school, namely Zahirite (al-Zāhirī/ literalists).<sup>15</sup> Still, the Zahirite School is a part of the broader *Sunni* kalām and *fiqh* ambits.

Similarly, Ibn al-Nadīm, the author of *Al-Fihrist*, is said to have an inclination towards Imāmī Shi'ism and Mu'tazilite doctrines.<sup>16</sup> However, little is certain about his beliefs, and even if this tendency was factual, it hardly proves a shaken faith in religion. The book *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* (A Kaleidoscope of Religions) from the seventeenth century India is a unique case concerning its authorship. Scholars generally attribute it to Muḥsin Fānī, whose theological standing remains in mist. Some sources claim that the author of this book was a Parsi (Zoroastrian settlers in India), not a Muslim.<sup>17</sup>

The above discussion indicates that the interest in the study of other religions was more substantial at the geographical, theological, and cultural boundaries of the classical Muslim world. However, this interest can hardly be related to the shaken faith of scholars concerned. A thesis of their distance from the mainstream religious doctrines of Islam seems hard to establish. On the contrary, a more convening argument would be that, as they were confessing Muslims, confidence in the truth of their religious convictions gave these scholars intellectual courage to face their religious others openly.

Again referring back to the modern Western academic study of religion, it is noteworthy that, according to some scholars, certain developments within the Christian theology also played a crucial role, apart from the modernity in general, behind the emergence of this discipline. There is some evidence that Muslim theology (*kalām*) had also gone through some intrinsic developments that facilitated descriptive writings on religions other than Islam in Muslim history. Therefore, a look into the *kalām* legacy would be pertinent to understand the literary tradition under discussion. Firstly, one should keep in mind that the stated objective of *kalām* was to delineate the authentic creed of Islam and defend it against any objections directed to it. In other words, the primary function of *kalām*

<sup>13</sup>Diana Steigerwald, "Al-Shahrastānī," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/shahras/>, (accessed 10-Aug-2020).

<sup>14</sup>Muhammad ibn Nāsir al-Saḥaybānī, *Manhaj al-Shahrastānī fī Kitābhī al-Milal wa al-Niḥal: 'Ard wa Taqwīm* (Riyyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1992), 90-92; Shiblī Naumānī, *'Ilm al-Kalām aur al-Kalām* (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1979), 59-60.

<sup>15</sup>Mahmud Ahmad et al., "Ibn Hazm on Christianity: An Analysis to His Religious Approaches," *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization* 1, no. 2 (2011): 242-43.

<sup>16</sup>Rudolf Sellheim, and Mohsen Zakeri, François de Blois, Werner Sundermann, "Fehrest," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2012, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/fehrest>, (accessed 10-Aug-2020).

<sup>17</sup>Sudev Sheth, "Manuscript Variations of Dabistān-i Mazāhib and Writing Histories of Religion in Mughal India Histories of Religion in Mughal India," *Manuscript Studies* 4, no.1 (2019): 23-30. [https://repository.upenn.edu/mss\\_sims/vol4/iss/2](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol4/iss/2), (accessed 10 August).

was to standardize the doctrine of Islam and discard any deviations from it.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the *kalām* scholars produced an assortment of literature that classified various Muslim sects and described their beliefs. Some modern academics call this body of literature as Muslim Heresiography.<sup>19</sup> Occasionally, such analytical treatment of the Muslim sect used to extend to religions other than Islam. Hence, various genres of writings appeared such as *al-rudūd* (refutations), *al-mīlāl wa al-nihl* (religious denominations and creeds), and *maqālāt al-firaq* (pronouncements of sects), which simultaneously related to Muslim sects and different religions. Out of these genres, *al-rudūd* was mainly polemical, while the latter two genres also included some descriptive works on religions.

Still, the pivotal question remains unanswered, how could *kalām*, whose stated purpose was to defend Islam, end up paving the way for descriptive writings on other religions? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the classical *kalām* had acquired a degree of methodological detachment. This development is noticeable in certain *kalām* debates in which an imaginary opponent's point of view is temporarily endorsed for the sake of argumentation. Occasionally, some *kalām* scholars would argue on behalf of their imaginary opponents to carry on theoretical discussions.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, an intricately articulated argument on behalf of the imaginary opponent would sometimes sound more plausible than its rebuttal. For instance, the famous Ash'arī theologian Muhammad ibn Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī is known for this style of argumentation.

So much so that Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī (1058 or 1059-1111 AD) wrote an entire book on philosophy titled *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah* (Opinions of the Philosophers) just to elucidate the philosophical positions of his opponents "without distinguishing their truth or falsehood."<sup>21</sup> His criticism and refutation of these positions appeared in another book titled *Tahāfat al-Falāsifah* (Incoherence of the Philosophers), which he wrote afterwards.<sup>22</sup> Methodologically speaking, he adopted a descriptive approach throughout his first book. These instances support the conclusion that temperament of an accurate and objective understanding of the opponents' viewpoint, as far as humanly possible, had developed in *kalām*. This fact possibly explains how some Muslim scholars could describe religions other than Islam objectively, to use the contemporary idiom.

There is no denying, that not all the descriptive texts on religions from Muslim history are directly related to *kalām*. As mentioned above, some crucial contributions to the subject

<sup>18</sup>Ḥasan Maḥmūd al-Shāfi'ī, *Al-Madkhal ila Dirāsāt 'Ilm al-Kalām* (Karachi: Idārat al-Qur'ān wa al-'Ulūm al-Islāmīyyah, 1988), 16-17.

<sup>19</sup>Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions."

<sup>20</sup>Al-Shāfi'ī, *Al-Madkhal ila Dirāsāt 'Ilm al-Kalām*, 179-81.

<sup>21</sup>Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1960), 31.

<sup>22</sup>Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfat al-Falāsifah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 2000), 41-43.

under discussion were made by scholars who were primarily historians and scientists, like al-Kalbī and al-Bīrūnī. Their interest in the field under discussion asks for a different explanation, which is coming below in its place. Similarly, we may also acknowledge here that the descriptive study of religions remained a relatively marginal intellectual tradition within the extended network of various branches of knowledge in the history of Muslim civilization.

## 1.2. The Qur'ānic View of Religious Others

Apart from encounters with different cultures and the existence of a sort of objective approach in individual strands of *kalām*, the practice of descriptive writings on other religions relates also to the Qur'ānic worldview, especially the Qur'ānic view of man, religion, history, and cosmos. The Qur'ān repeatedly invites its readers to ponder upon the signs of God in the cosmos and human nature and suggests traveling in the land and reflecting upon the acts of God in the history of various nations.<sup>23</sup> Such an invitation is conducive to curiosity and temperament to understand nature and human societies earnestly. Thus, some prominent scholars have elaborated on how the Qur'ānic worldview, and the epistemology that stemmed from it, fostered philosophical thinking in the Muslim civilization, on the one hand,<sup>24</sup> and the scientific method based on sense observation, on the other.<sup>25</sup> By the same token, the Qur'ānic exhortation to observe nature and ponder upon human history can also explain the possibility of a descriptive approach towards the religious others.

Another essential component of the Qur'ānic worldview is the oneness of humanity. According to the Qur'ān, all human beings are the progeny of Adam and Eve (peace be upon them). Allah Almighty divided them into different communities and tribes only for identification. The only criterion for esteem in the sight of Allah Almighty is piety.<sup>26</sup> So, all human beings share a common ancestral link as they equally share their humanity and human dignity. It is not difficult to understand that a belief in common human nature can invoke an urge to understand different human cultures and societies, and by extension, their religious beliefs.

Closely related to the oneness of humanity are the Qur'ānic teachings on the universality of the phenomenon of religion and explanations of the plurality of beliefs. Thus, according to the Qur'ān, various causes account for the factual diversity of religions. The first one relates to the divine scheme of human life on earth and its purposiveness, according to which God sent His messengers and prophets to every people to guide them

<sup>23</sup>Al-Qur'ān, Fussilat 41:53; al-Naml, 27:69; al-Rūm, 30:42.

<sup>24</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Qur'ān and Hadīth as Source and Inspiration of Islamic Philosophy," in *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Philosophy: Part 1* (Lahore: Sohail Academy, 2002), 27-29.

<sup>25</sup>Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 7-12.

<sup>26</sup>al-Ḥujurat, 49:13.

to the right path. The fundamental proclamation communicated by all the prophets was the belief in the unity of God and life after death. However, since God had also granted human beings free will to choose between the right and wrong path, they got divided into (*muslimūn*), who responded positively to the call of the prophets, and (*kuffār*), who denied it.<sup>27</sup> By granting human beings free will, God Himself allows religious diversity to exist and delays the ultimate judgment for the Day of Judgment.<sup>28</sup> Regarding this worldly life, the Qur'ān proclaims: "Let there be no compulsion in the matters of religion,"<sup>29</sup> which has the potential to inculcate in its readers a tolerant and sober view about different faith traditions.

The second explanation of religious diversity depends on the notion of *tahrīf*, according to which the leaders of various religious traditions corrupted and distorted the original Word of God for petty worldly gains.<sup>30</sup> Thus, interpolations of unwarranted teachings in the divine message, deliberate misinterpretations of the scriptures, or concealing of certain truths by hypocrite clerics led to differences in religious convictions. Besides, it also occurred that people fancied about religion without any legitimate guidance and validation from God (*sultān*)<sup>31</sup> and ended up fabricating false gods. In these cases, Muslim theology acknowledges religious diversity as a matter of fact but does not approve it theologically.

However, one type of religious diversity is approved theologically too. God sent all the messengers with the same religion (*dīn*) but with various laws (*shari'ah*) and approaches (*minhāj*) apt for different peoples and times. That Qur'ān states: "For each of you, We prescribed a law and a method."<sup>32</sup> Also, God communicated His message to different people, through messengers and prophets, in their respective languages.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, such diversification of the same religion (*dīn*) into multiple religious traditions (*milal*) and faith communities (*umam*) is not only recognized but also approved in Islam.<sup>34</sup> Thus, an essential classification of the religious diversity is found in the Qur'ān, according to which *dīn* (pl. *adyān*) refers to religion, *millah* (pl. *milal*) to religious tradition, and *ummah* (pl.

<sup>27</sup>al-Baqarah, 2: 213.

<sup>28</sup>al-Naḥl, 16:93; al-Mā'idah, 5:48.

<sup>29</sup>al-Baqarah, 2:6.

<sup>30</sup>al-Baqarah, 2:75, 79; Āl-i-Imrān, 3:78; al-Nisā' 4:46; al-Mā'idah, 5:13.

<sup>31</sup>al-A'rāf, 7:1.

<sup>32</sup>al-Mā'idah, 5: 48.

<sup>33</sup>Ibrāhīm, 14: 4.

<sup>34</sup>Ghulam Haider Aasi, "The Qur'ān and Other Religious Traditions," *Hamdard Islamicus* 9, no. 2 (1986): 65-91. However, according to the mainline Muslim theology, unlike the previous prophets who were sent for particular people, Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is sent for the whole humanity which implies that now all the people are required to accept his prophet-hood and follow his *sharī'ah*.



*umam*) to a faith community.<sup>35</sup> The subtle nuances of these notions signify how the Qur'ān affirms the universality of the religious phenomenon and recognizes the diversity of religious traditions in a distinct manner, which developed an interest in understanding different religions. It is interesting to note that in Muslim history, many descriptive works on religions appeared with *milal* in their titles. This fact also suggests that the study of religions in Muslim history was connected to the above discussed Qur'ānic view of the universality of religion and diversity of faith traditions.

Historically speaking, we know that Islam arose in religiously pluralistic settings where it presented itself in relation to the surrounding religious convictions and as a significant challenge to them. It is worth noting that the Qur'ān frequently refers to various religious groups, like Jews, Christians, Sabians, Magians, polytheists, and atheists, and not only affirms their existence but also captures their detailed picture when it discusses their views. Thus, some experts of the Qur'ānic sciences count the debate on religions (*mukhāsmat al-adyān*) as one of the central and recurring themes in the Qur'ān.<sup>36</sup>

For our present undertaking, the connection of Islam to the pre-Islamic religious traditions in general and Judaism and Christianity, in particular, is of utmost importance. The Qur'ānic view of these pre-Islamic religions is both affirmative and corrective at the same time. On the one hand, it acknowledges the divine origin of Judaism and Christianity and testifies that their sacred scriptures embodied God's will. Moreover, the Qur'ān loudly proclaims to be a vital link to and continuation of the previous messages from the same God, by confirming and complementing these divine revelations, namely, Torah (*al-Tawrāt*), Psalms (*al-Zabūr*), and Gospel (*al-Injīl*).<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the Qur'ān also proclaims that Jews and Christians have corrupted the original teachings of these scriptures over history. The following verse unequivocally manifests this two-dimensional Qur'ānic approach towards the previous scriptures: "And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it."<sup>38</sup>

From the perspective of Muslim theology, the Qur'ānic confirmation of the previous scriptures (*muṣaddiqan limā bayna yadayhi*) counts for an external witness to the divine origin of Judaism and Christianity. On the other hand, it is the 'watcher over it' (*muhayminan 'alayhi*) role of the Qur'ān, which warrants repudiation of the corruption (*tahrīf*) in the previous scriptures introduced by the followers of these religions.<sup>39</sup> In short,

<sup>35</sup>For a detailed discussion of these terms see Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2014), 3-15. It may be cautioned that religion is not the exact translation of the Qur'ānic term *dīn*.

<sup>36</sup>Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dhelawī, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*, trans. Rashīd Aḥmad (Lahore: Idārah-e-Islāmīyyāt, 1982), 4-6.

<sup>37</sup>The word *Injīl* occurs in the Qur'ān always in singular hence according to the Muslim belief there was a single Goswas revealed onto Jesus (*'Isā*).

<sup>38</sup>al-Mā'idah, 5:48.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

the Qur'ān recognizes the divine origin of Christianity and Judaism. However, at the same time, it admonishes the followers of these religions for their shabby practices and the corruption that they did in the original message of God and, for that matter, negates their exclusive truth claims.

One can compare the modern religious studies and the classical Muslim study of religions from a particular angle. The contemporary religious studies emerged from ambivalence towards religions, among other historical factors, accepting their historical importance but refusing their claim of privileged access to truth.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Islam, too, a similar ambivalence - for want of a better word - is noticeable. One side of this ambivalence triggers and sustains curiosity about religions while the other makes it possible to study them objectively from a distance. In both knowledge traditions, such simultaneous interest and objectification seem to have supported coming into existence of the study of religion and its thriving.

More of the same, the Qur'ān offers a multilayered classification of various faith communities. The categorization of Jews and Christians as People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) renders their status different from that of the pagans. From among the People of the Book, the Qur'ān especially admires Christians for their modesty, generosity, and close affinity with the Muslims.<sup>41</sup> Also, the fact that the Qur'ān requires considering the difference of individual temperaments within a single religious tradition provides a guiding principle to avoid stereotypes if one so wills.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, the Qur'ān discourages its followers from passing judgments on the ultimate salvation of other people and declares that God will decide about such matters on Judgment Day.<sup>43</sup> This aspect of the Qur'ānic teachings, too, aligns with non-judgmental and descriptive scholarship about religions.

In keeping with the above discussion, it is argued that some Muslim scholars successfully employed these Qur'ānic teachings to understand the religious plurality and explore the faith traditions that they came across. Consequently, these scholars, who were committed believers in Islam, could leave a legacy of descriptive writings on religions. Thus, they substantiated, in a way, the Qur'ānic view of religion and, by implication, deepened their understanding of Islam itself. That is why the classical genres of *al-milal wa al-nihal* and *'ilm maqālāt al-firaq* rendered the study of Muslim sects and non-Islamic faith as a unified discursive practice.

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<sup>40</sup>Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 191-95.

<sup>41</sup>al-Mā'idah, 5: 82. See also Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Christians in the Qur'ān and Tafsīr," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105-106.

<sup>42</sup>Āli Imrān, 3: 113.

<sup>43</sup>al-Ḥajj, 22:17; al-Ghāshīyah, 88:25-26.

To elaborate the point just made above, a particular dialectics of ‘self’ and ‘other’ explains the dynamics of the Muslim understanding of other religions.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, the Muslim scholars inquisitively approached different religious traditions as ‘Islams’ of various faith communities. While on the other hand, certain Muslim sects and groups were viewed as corrupted by tenets of the other religions.<sup>45</sup> The ‘other’ was seen through the prism of the ‘self.’ In contrast, the ‘other’ helped identify the ‘self.’ Consequently, a single disciplinary tradition invariably embodied both the study of Muslim sects and other religions, a part of which was descriptive and non-polemical.<sup>46</sup>

## 2. The Methodological Foundations

Having explored the theoretical underpinnings of the descriptive writings on religions in Muslim history, now let us delve into the methodological foundation of this body of scholarship. The early Muslim self-perceptions were influenced by the surrounding religious environment as maintained at the beginning of this section. Such an understanding, however, is not necessarily a constructionist position concerning the canon of the Qur’ān. The Muslim tradition itself considers the revelation to be reflexive vis-à-vis the historical events in space and time. The Muslims believe that the Qur’ān was revealed in two stages. First, the entire Qur’ān was sent down to the celestial station known as the House of Honor (*Bayt al-‘Izzah*), wherefrom it was gradually revealed, in the second stage, onto the heart of Prophet Muhammad (*SAW*) in about twenty-three years. Thus, the Qur’ān is the Book of God (*Kitāb-Allāh*) when viewed from its entirety. At the same time, it is the Word of God (*Kalām Allāh*), which was gradually revealed onto the heart of the Prophet Muhammad's (*SAW*) heart.<sup>47</sup> Muslim theology, therefore, perceives the Qur’ān both as text and speech.

Since a speech act without a communication situation is inconceivable, the Qur’ān, as the Word of God, includes several historical events. It comments on the actions of specific people and responses to the questions raised by particular individuals. Consequently, knowledge of the context of some verses of the Qur’ān becomes inevitable for their correct understanding.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, (*SAW*), have always been considered as an essential tool for the accurate knowledge of the Qur’ān as he had

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<sup>44</sup>Basit Bilal Koshul, “Studying the Western Other, Understanding the Islamic Self: A Quranically Reasoned Perspective,” *Iqbal Review: Journal of the Iqbal Academy Pakistan* 46, no. 2 and 4 (2005): 149-74.

<sup>45</sup>Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions*, 28.

<sup>46</sup>Muhammad Akram, “The Other Within and the Self Without: Muslim and Western Traditions in the Study of Religion,” (PhD diss., University of Erfurt, 2013), 181.

<sup>47</sup>William A. Graham, “Qur’ān as Spoken Word: An Islamic Contribution to the Understanding of Scripture,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 29-30.

<sup>48</sup>Richard C. Martin, “Understanding the Qur’ān in Text and Context,” *History of Religions* 21, no. 4 (1982): 361-84.

enlivened the Qur'ānic message and offered a practical role model (*uswatun ḥasanah*)<sup>49</sup> for his followers. Thus, the era in which the Prophet (SAW) lived became exceptionally crucial for Muslims, which imparted a historical consciousness in their minds. The significance of this historical consciousness manifested in the subsequent institutionalization of Islam and the Muslim civilization.

The nascent faith community eagerly embraced the mission of preserving the text of the Qur'ān and of providing the essential tools for its understanding as its religious duty. The task included the recording of the prophetic traditions and occasions of the revelation of the Qur'ān. To meet this end, the scholars thoroughly developed reliable methodologies to record an enormous amount of historical data and to preserve its minute details with the utmost care. This colossal undertaking led to the emergence of an entire range of sciences and their qualified experts. Along with the general history and historiography, these sciences include, as mentioned above, 'contexts and occasions of the revelations' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*),<sup>50</sup> 'science of reporting traditions' (*'ilm al-riwāyah*), and 'the science of authenticating reports/traditions' (*'ilm-dirāyah*). The distinction between *al-riwāyah* and *al-dirāyah* is worth mentioning to further the present discussion. *Al-riwāyah* is that skill in Hadīth Sciences, which is concerned with recording reports accurately, regardless of their textual content, by ensuring the empirical connection between reported events and their reporters. It also authenticates continuity between the series of transmitters through generations who have handed down the reports. In other words, *al-riwāyah* expertise pertains to the stringent standards of historical authenticity. *Al-dirāyah* science, on the other hand, is concerned with the content of the traditions received and their proper comprehension.<sup>51</sup> It is essential to note that separation of the historicity and authenticity of a report from its textual content bears interesting resemblance with two of the critical qualities required for any modern historical research: objectivity and methodological detachment.

Then, for understanding the Qur'ān as the 'Book of God,' a colossal mass of anecdotal reports required another kind of expertise, namely analysis and interpretation of a given text. For this purpose, scholars of the Qur'ān devised sophisticated hermeneutical techniques. For example, they set the criterion for distinguishing how a particular text meant, entailed, presupposed, or hinted at some meaning, and how these nuances could be prioritized in case of their apparent contradiction.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, they were also well

<sup>49</sup>al-Aḥzāb, 33: 1.

<sup>50</sup>Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Aḥmad Al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1991), 9-11; see also Andrew Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre "*Asbāb al-Nuzūl*": A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 48, no. 1 (1985):14-15.

<sup>51</sup>Muhammad ibn Ali Al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr: Al-Jāmi' Bayna Fannay al-Riwāyah wa al-Dirāyah min 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2007), 11-12.

<sup>52</sup>Abd al-Karīm Zaydān, *Al-Wajīz fī Usūl al-Fiqh* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1987), 340-65.

informed with the idea of hermeneutical circle, that is, interpretation of the part depends upon its whole, and vice versa. There is a famous maxim in the Qur'ān sciences that different parts of the Qur'ān explain each other.<sup>53</sup> The traditional Muslim scholars developed hermeneutics into a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary project and employed it for interpretation of the Qur'ān, Hadīth, and to standardize the juristic rulings. Resultantly, the Muslim intellectual tradition got super-structured on specific seminal texts with their associated glosses, super-glosses, marginal notes, summaries, and commentaries. Thus, a substantial textual corpus related to almost every branch of knowledge surfaced. Understandably, the expertise of textual interpretation and analysis helped understand any text, including the books that belonged to the other religious traditions.

We have already mentioned above that the Qur'ān prompts its reader to use reason and reflect on the signs of God (*al-āyāt*). It is worthy of mention that the same word is used in the Qur'ān to describe both verses of the Qur'ān and the signs of God in creation. The second type of *āyāt*/verse are divided further into those found in human beings (*āyāt al-anfus*) and those in the cosmos (*āyāt al-āfāq*),<sup>54</sup> corresponding to the micro and macro levels, respectively. The open and repeated invitation to reflect on creation sanctioned observation of the empirical world around, which, in turn, helped Muslims utilize and develop the inductive method in their search for knowledge. Through the use of the inductive method together with deduction and inference, a knowledge tradition developed which sought to integrate the abstract and concrete. Indeed, the Muslim civilizational and cultural achievements owed much to the borrowings from the previous civilizations of Persia, India, China, Greece, and Rome. Nevertheless, Muslims not only preserved the scientific heritage of humanity in various fields, but also developed it further, and transferred it to the next generations.<sup>55</sup> The most original Muslim contribution, culminated in the science of interpretation of texts and intricate historiography.

The thesis is that these two types of methodological novelties provided the foundations for the descriptive writings on different religions in Muslim history. Thus, the scholars like al-Bīrūnī, al-Shaharastānī, and Ibn Nadīm seem to be following the procedures of the science of reporting traditions (*'ilm al-riwāyah*), which allow them to separate their viewpoints from the task of reporting about other religions with historical authenticity. This approach is valued today chiefly for being “descriptive” and, for that matter, more scholarly. On the other hand, scholars like Ibn Ḥazm, al-Ghazālī,<sup>56</sup> and Ahmad ibn

<sup>53</sup>Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-'Alīm ibn Taymiyyah, *Muqaddimah fī 'Usūl al-Tafsīr* (Lahore: Al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 29.

<sup>54</sup>Fussilat 41:3.

<sup>55</sup>Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār, *Nash'at al-Fikr al-Falsafī fī al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1995), 22-23.

<sup>56</sup>Ibn Hazm al-Ghazali, *Al-Radd al-Jamīl li Ilāhiyyat al-Masīḥ bi Ṣarḥ al-Injīl* (Cairo: Dār al-Hidāyah, 1986).

Taymiyyah (1263-1328),<sup>57</sup> applied their hermeneutical skills on the seminal Jewish and Christian texts. Since the very nature of hermeneutics is to interpret and to seek meanings, their interpretations of these texts were prone to their subjective intentions, which render their scholarship to be “normative” according to the contemporary terminology, and thus lacking “objectivity.”

### 3. Conclusion

The above analysis concludes that various types of writings on religions that appeared in the classical Muslim civilization were a part of the broader world of knowledge. Overall, this knowledge world, favored an integrative approach vis-à-vis revelation and reason, abstract and concrete, and deductive and inductive modes of inquiry, the distinctions so crucial in modern academia. Generally speaking, the scholarly tradition in question was both “theological” and “scientific” simultaneously. Therefore, it is not surprising that even the descriptive works on religions are not entirely free from occasional judgments. On the other side, even apologetic works contain valuable historical data about different religious traditions.

The trend of descriptive and non-judgmental writings on different religions was more definite in those parts of the classical Muslim world that had a higher degree of social contact with other civilizations. However, these writings were not a revolt against mainstream Muslim theology. On the contrary, it has been a particular strand of *kalām* that paved the way for these writings to appear in the first place. More precisely, certain features of the Qur’ānic worldview generated curiosity about different religions, such as encouragement to use reason and observe the signs of God in the cosmos, human nature, and the history of various communities. Similarly, the Qur’ānic view of the universality of the phenomenon of religions and the endorsement of religious diversity as a factual reality had possibly also played a crucial role in the development under discussion. The advanced methodologies of historical criticism and textual interpretation already developed by the mainline traditionalists, historians, theologians, and jurists provided the needed conceptual paraphernalia and methodological foundations for the undertaking. Hence, the classical Muslim scholars who wrote on different religions did not need to invent the wheel afresh.

The descriptive writings on religions in Muslim history might not be enormous in terms of quantity; still, it deserves recognition in the global history of religious studies for its novelty. It also implies that the academic study of religion does not inevitably pivot on the Western modernity and can take roots and flourish in diverse historical and cultural settings. The legacy is even more meaningful for contemporary Muslim scholars who are working in the field of religious studies. They can conveniently appropriate the theoretical

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<sup>57</sup>His main contribution in this connection is *Al-Jawāb al-Saḥīḥ li man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āshimāh, 1992).

and methodological foundations of this indigenous tradition and transform it into a profound and plausible disciplinary practice in contemporary Muslim societies.

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