

Comparative Religion in Medieval Muslim Literature

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Abstract

This article investigates medieval Muslim literature on the study of non-Islamic religions through the writings of al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani in their dealing with Hind (India) and the nomenclature of world religions. I focus on their perceptions of monotheism and polytheism. My findings show that they used different approaches, categories, and classification models of world religious traditions in general, and of Hind's religious traditions in particular. Al-Biruni classifies Indian religions according to the religious outlooks found in Hindu texts or sayings of Hindu philosophers/theologians and in the attitudes of ordinary people in a popular context. Al-Shahrastani categorizes the divisions and subdivisions of Hindu beliefs and practices according to types of "idol worshippers." This article points out that they dealt with some conceptual issues in their presentations, such as "religious representation," "intermediaries," and "anthropomorphism."

Introduction

This article examines medieval Muslim literature on the study of religions, with specific reference to the works of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 1048) and Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 1153). These scholars are comparable, since

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they discuss “major” and “minor” world religious traditions in general, and deal with the nomenclature of the religious traditions of Hind [India] in particular. Long known as important and admirable medieval Muslim scholars of comparative religion,¹ they wrote distinctive works that became primary references for modern Muslim religious historians and heresiographers. Yet, medieval Islam was likely the key developing period of religious and cross-cultural studies in Islamic intellectual history. As Franz Rosenthal points out, “the comparative study of religions has been rightly acclaimed as one of the great contributions of Muslim civilization to mankind’s [sic] intellectual progress.”² From the eighth to tenth centuries, for example, Muslim historians, geographers, and travelers focused on seven great ancient civilizations: the Persians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Egyptians, Turks, Indians, and Chinese.³

Modern scholars have recognized the two men’s scholarly contributions. For example, Arthur Jeffery states that al-Biruni’s contribution to the study of religion by establishing such scrupulous scientific principles as completeness, accuracy, and unbiased treatment is rare in his era and “unique in the history of his own faith.”⁴ And Eric J. Sharpe writes: “The honor of writing the first history of religion in world literature seems in fact to belong to the Muslim Shahrastani, whose *Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy* describes and systematizes all religions of the then known world, as far as the boundaries of China.”⁵

Although many scholars have studied al-Biruni’s and al-Shahrastani’s treatises, among them Edward Sachau, Arthur Jeffery, Kamar Oniah Kamaruzzaman, Franz Rosenthal, Bruce Lawrence, and Jaques Waardenburg, a specific comparison of their works remains rare. Therefore, to contribute to the above larger framework of the Muslims’ erudition of Hind, a comparative study should focus on a special theme. I have chosen the models of classifying Hind’s religious divisions and their theological thought in al-Biruni’s and al-Shahrastani’s works. How do these scholars portray the divisions of Hind’s religious communities, what approach do they use, and how do they perceive the doctrines of Hind’s religious traditions?

To derive a more elaborate assessment, this article analyzes the foremost writings of both scholars. For al-Biruni, I use his *Tahqiq Ma li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fi al-`Aql al-Mardhūlah*⁶ and *Kitab al-Athar al-Baqiyah ‘an al-Qurūn al-Khaliyah*.⁷ The former discusses India’s religious belief systems, metaphysical views, cosmological doctrines, literary traditions, mythical heritages, and artistic inheritances; the latter elucidates the history and tradition of former nations and generations (*akhbar al-umam al-salifah wa anba’ al-qurūn al-madiyah*) in dealing with the eras with which cultural and religious events were associated. For al-Shahrastani, I choose his *Kitab al-*

Milal wa al-Nihal,⁸ which establishes him as an outstanding Muslim historian of religions. This book primarily elaborates the range of religious sects, cults, and philosophical schools in Islam and other religious traditions. To complement his normative insight, philosophical exploration, and, perhaps, theological discourse toward other religious traditions, I also discuss his *Kitab Nihayat al-Iqdam fi 'Ilm Kalam*,⁹ in which he assesses foundations (*qawa'id*) of theological science.

Several ideological, political, and intellectual factors might have caused medieval Muslim scholars to analyze religions and religious sects. As to the ideological or doctrinal factor, some Qur'anic verses highlighting other religious communities, especially the Sabians (al-Sabi'un), Zoroastrians (al-Majusiyah), and People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab), have led Muslim theologians and exegetes to elaborate on the existence, status, and position of religions according to Islamic perspectives.¹⁰ Meanwhile, politically speaking, when Muslim power began to expand throughout South and Central Asia, North Africa, and Europe, the need to recognize other religions, either in terms of political conflict or polemical discourse, increased rapidly.

In line with the nature of political motivation and under imperial protection, certain scholars undertook "regional studies" that covered the materials of religious communities in the given regions. Moreover, after the "wave of Hellenism,"¹¹ interfaith discourse and the investigation of other religions became a main concern of medieval Muslim scholars. Translating Greek works on philosophy and logic into Arabic and Persian during the 'Abbasid period contributed tremendously to the development of theological and philosophical thought. Above all, this activity significantly enhanced the variety of scholarly works in the fields of mysticism, literature, intercultural studies, and religious studies. This period was also characterized by the emergence of prolific writers influenced by Greek thought, Arabic culture, and Persian intellectual environments, respectively.¹²

Indeed, scholars prior to al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani had penned more than a few works related to religious and inter-cultural studies. However, while the majority of scholars focused on the "biblical religions" or "Muslim heresies,"¹³ al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani elaborated on Hind's religious traditions. The first group's works were mostly polemical and apologetic. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, for instance, some prominent scholars elaborated on *tahrif* (falsification of scripture)¹⁴ to criticize Jewish and Christian scriptures as well as to define Islam's superiority over other religions.¹⁵

Medieval Muslims' Recognition of Hind

As a result of the close and intensive interaction between Islamic civilization and Hind in medieval times, a number of Arab-Muslim scholars wrote on aspects of Indian civilization. According to al-Baladhuri's reports, `Uthman ibn `Affan asked `Abd Allah ibn `Amir ibn Kurayz to send a knowledgeable person to Hind's harbor and report on what he saw. Other reports mention that the idea of reaching Hind existed during `Umar ibn al-Khattab's reign.¹⁶

Al-Hind was the Arabic term for India. Medieval Muslim writers might have used this word to mean "India" in proportion to the Arab-Persian conception. André Wink points out that this term was taken from "a pre-existing Persian term, not a Sanskrit term."¹⁷ In the Umayyad and Abbasid times, it referred to some areas in South Asia.¹⁸ The geographical term *al-Sind* was also used.

In his *Historical Encyclopedia*, al-Mas`udi (d. 957) says: "The Hindu nations extend from the mountains of Kurasan and of es-Sind as far as et-Tubbet."¹⁹ Maqbul Ahmad notes that while *al-Hind* encompasses certain areas from the Indus river up to border of Burma/Myanmar, *al-Sind* includes some areas from Makran up to the lower course of the Indus.²⁰ The Arabs later modified its scope by including the Bay of Bengal archipelagos as well as the areas of mainland Southeast Asia and the nearby islands of Southeast Asia that had been culturally Indianized since the seventh century. Some Buddhist areas, such as Central Asia, China, Japan, and Korea, were included in the term *al-Sin* (China), while Tibet and Mongolia were, for the most part, classified as *al-Hind*.²¹

Even though Arab-Indian interactions were probably deep rooted before Islamic civilization, especially through commercial contacts (*al-`alaqat al-tijariyah*),²² the Muslims' knowledge of Indian culture developed rapidly around the ninth and tenth centuries due to their military expeditions and considerable influence on the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean trade routes. Their recognition of Indian culture was engendered not merely by the resulting interaction between Arabian and Indian traders, but, more importantly, grew after the Arab-Muslims conquered the Persian regions where Persians were intermingled (*imtizaj*) with Indian culture (*al-thaqafah al-hindiyah*).²³

In addition to trade contacts, medieval Muslim scholars obtained information through largely regional and cross-cultural studies that occasionally covered discussions of religious ideas or religious communities. In line with Muslim political and cultural expansion, the observations of Muslim travelers and writers were not restricted to the societies, religions, and cultures of

the Arab peninsula and Persia, but extended to Hind²⁴ and even China.²⁵ As for Hind's religious traditions, at least three categories of information can be seen in their works: cultural studies, eyewitness accounts of a certain region and its geographical information, and encyclopedic works and digests.²⁶

For instance, in his *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (The History of Prophets and Kings), al-Tabari (d. 923) incorporates material on Hind's regions and religious traditions in connection with early human history. He presents various reports indicating that Adam was cast down from Heaven to the land of Hind, especially at a mountain called Budh. Adam left Hind after God told him to perform a pilgrimage to Makkah.²⁷ Accordingly, idolatry began when his descendants, the sons of Seth and Cain, worshiped their ancestors' bodies. During Noah's time, the flood carried the objects of worship from Hind to Arab territory.

By citing al-Tabari's account, I point out that the narrative of Hind was included in early Muslim literature. Yet this narrative also shows the long-standing interaction between Arabia and India, for Adam went to Makkah for pilgrimage and to find Eve, who, according to some accounts in al-Tabari, settled in Muzdalifah. The idea of idol worship in Arabia, based on al-Tabari's description, actually originated in Hind.²⁸

Other medieval Muslim travelers and geographers, in part, discuss Hind's religious traditions. The geographer Ibn Khurdadhbih (d. 912) briefly reports the types of Indian castes (*ajnas al-hind*) and their forty-two religious sects (*milal ahl al-hind*). Without presenting his supportive information, in his *Al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms) he classifies those sects into three main groups: Those who believe in the Creator, the Glorious and Powerful (*man yuthbitu al-khaliq `azza wa jalla*); those who reject the Prophet (*man yanfa al-rusūl*); and those who do not believe in all the above (*wa minhum al-nafi li kulli dhalik*).²⁹

In his commentary on Ibn Khurdadhbih's book, S. Maqbul Ahmad explains that Ibn Khurdadhbih's perception of these sects probably refers to Gardizi's *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind* (Accounts of China and India). Gardizi classifies the Indian religious philosophies and beliefs into ninety-nine divisions that can be simplified into forty-two sects. Based on this work, what Ibn Khurdadhbih means by the first type of sects can possibly be associated with the Brahmans, the second sects with Sramanas, and the last sects can be connected to the Hinayana Buddhists.³⁰

Another account of Hind appears in the traveler Sulayman al-Tajir's *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*, which presents a broad comparison between the geography, culture, and society of Hind and China. However, his attention to Hind's religion is not quite as deep as Gardizi's.³¹ He highlights the two

lands' cultural and religious connection by asserting that China's religious traditions, especially Buddhism, originated in Hind (*wa innama aslu dayanatihim min al-hind*). Then, the Indians moved their idols to China. Furthermore, he notes that both the Chinese (*ahl al-sin*) and the Indians (*ahl al-hind*) have similar belief systems, since they affirm that they communicate with their idols (*yaz'amūna anna al-bidadah takallamahum*). He also draws attention to the mystical dimensions of their religious systems. Although they practice their beliefs in their own ways, both peoples believe in metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls (*tanasukh*).³²

A brief presentation of Muslim works on Hind may reveal some profound descriptions and frameworks that will enrich our investigation of al-Biruni's and al-Shahrastani's opinions of its religious traditions. Their insights may have been influenced by their contemporaries' intellectual inclinations: either ideological–polemical discourse or historical–cross-cultural trends. Both scholars' investigations of this subject have contributed greatly to the Islamic intellectual traditions' theoretical framework of the study of religions.

The Intellectual Biographies of al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani

Al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani lived when medieval Islamic civilization had just passed its “golden age.”³³ This period was delineated intellectually by the appearance of abundant scientific literature and characterized sociopolitically by intensive encounters with other civilizations. Al-Biruni's and al-Shahrastani's investigation of Hind's religious traditions have variations and resemblances, depending upon their intellectual and sociocultural backgrounds, as well as, perhaps, the political situation in the regions of their era. This section provides intellectual sketches of these two scholars, explain why they decided to study this particular fields and the significance of their intellectual contribution to their fellow Muslims and political patrons.

Al-Biruni: A Scholar and Religious Historian

Al-Biruni³⁴ is the popular name of Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Khwarizm, who was born in 362/973 in Khwarizm, located in present-day Uzbekistan. According to a Persian lexicographer, the root *b-r-n* means “the outside” (noun) and “outside” (preposition), indicating that al-Biruni came from a suburb of Khawarizm. Muslim genealogists offer no further information about his ancestors,³⁵ religious life, or childhood. His first teacher was an anonymous Greek scholar. Afterward, he studied with `Abd al-Samad ibn

`Abd al-Samad, who introduced him to scientific knowledge. At the age of twenty, he traveled to Jurjan (Hyrcania) and met Abu Sahl `Isa al-Masih, an astronomer and physician. In addition, he was trained by Abu al-Wafa' (a.k.a. Nasr ibn `Ali ibn `Iraq al-Jabali),³⁶ an astronomer and mathematician. Al-Biruni lived in Jurjan for many years and enjoyed the protection of Kabus ibn Washmgir Shams al-Ma'ali, a prince who ruled this city from 366-71 AH and 388-403 AH and to whom he dedicated his *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah `an al-Qurūn al-Khaliyah*.³⁷

Al-Biruni later returned to Khawarizm and stayed there until Mahmud of Ghazna conquered it and established his political authority throughout South and Central Asia in 1022. Mahmud carried off scholars and respected people from Khawarizm, including al-Biruni, to India/Afghanistan. Among the savants were the physician Abu al-Khayr ibn Khammar and Abu Nasr ibn `Iraq. Mahmud also attempted to bring Abu Sahl `Isa al-Masih and Abu `Ali ibn Sina; however, they had already fled Jurjan and Khwarizm.³⁸

Although al-Biruni's knowledge of Hind's civilization grew rapidly while he served Mahmud in northern India, he had already acquired some knowledge of it by the time he learned astrology and astronomy in Khawarizm or Jurjan. For instance, his concise scrutiny in his *Kitab al-Athar* regarding the Indians' lunar system (*sami`tu anna al-hind, yasta`milūna ru'yat al-ahillah fi shuhūrihim*) indicates that he was acquainted with aspects of Indian civilization.³⁹ His duties at that time were to explore Hind's sciences and geography, observe the people's customs and religious traditions, and discover their literature and philosophical thought.⁴⁰

As a versatile scientist, prolific writer, and enthusiastic traveler, al-Biruni made extensive contributions to various branches of knowledge⁴¹ and enlightened his intellectual contemporaries as regards inter-cultural studies. Most of his scholarly works were written in Arabic; a few were in Persian.⁴² For him, Arabic was superior because it was the scriptural language, the *lingua franca* of the Muslim world, and the language of science (*lughat al-`ilm wa al-fikr wa al-hadarah*).⁴³ During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Persian was also commonly used as "a vehicle of literary expression and satisfied Persian national aspirations,"⁴⁴ given that the `Abbasid cultural and intellectual movements employed and recruited countless Persian intellectuals. Nevertheless, the scientific and Islamic literature constantly developed in Arabic. In addition, the ongoing inter-cultural dialogues and intellectual encounters helped Muslim scholars master various languages. Therefore, al-Biruni, as his scholarly works show, was well versed in several languages, primarily Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and probably Greek.⁴⁵

Al-Biruni wrote numerous natural and social science books. He wrote *Kitab al-Athar* (390/999) mainly to satisfy his curiosity as to why different people used different calendrical systems and to clarify why certain nations preferred certain times and events for their festivals and commemoration days.⁴⁶ In addition, this book pays great attention to various civilizations' festivals. On the other hand, *Kitab al-Hind* (1030) is based on his journey to Hind while Mahmud (998-1030) was setting up his political institutions in northern India.⁴⁷

Although al-Biruni was a part of Mahmud's mission, as a scientist he had his own view of Hind. For Mahmud, as Sachau notes, "the Hindus were infidels, to be dispatched to hell as soon as they refused to be plundered," while for al-Biruni, "the Hindus were excellent philosophers, good mathematicians and astronomers."⁴⁸ His interest in studying their religious traditions apparently could not be separated from his role as a geographer, astronomer, astrologer, and historian who sought to grasp Hind's natural/physical geography and cultural and historical dimensions.⁴⁹ Thus, *Kitab al-Hind* presents extensive descriptions of Indian culture, including its scholars' scientific knowledge of cosmology and astronomy.

Both *Kitab al-Hind* and *Kitab al-Athar* have different emphases: the former offers a precise analysis of Hind's religious traditions, and the latter includes material on other religious communities, primarily the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. In addition, although both books deal with different subjects, they are, in light of the methodology used, complementary. During his journey in Hind, al-Biruni wrote *Kitab al-Tafhim li Awa'il Sina'at al-Tanjim* (The Principle of the Art of Astrology). Astrology (*'ilm al-tanjim*, *'ilm aūkam al-nujūm*) was among the basic works of eleventh-century science, in addition to geometry (*'ilm al-handasah*) and astronomy (*'ilm al-falak*).⁵⁰ This material also can be found in his *Kitab al-Qanūn al-Mas'ūdi*, an encyclopedic treatise of astronomical sciences.⁵¹ Several of his other books focus on the natural sciences.⁵²

Al-Shahrastani: A Theologian and Heresiographer

Al-Shahrastani (b. 479/1086) was born in Shahrastan, located in northern Khurasan,⁵³ and lived in Persia about a century after al-Biruni's death. He was also known as *al-Imam*, *al-'Allamah* (the Knowledgeable), *al-Afdal*, (the Best), and *Taj al-Millah wa al-Din* (the Crown of the Islamic Community and the Religion), reflecting his expertise in religious knowledge. Unlike al-Biruni, whose educational background was largely in the natural and pure sciences, his was influenced by honored religious scholars. The formative peri-

od of his intellectual development began when his parents taught him Qur'anic recitation and exegesis (*tafsir*). After memorizing the Qur'an before his tenth birthday, his father sent him to study with some shaykhs in Khurasan who had a better collection of religious books for studying Qur'anic exegesis. His enthusiastic quest for knowledge led him to travel to Naisapur, Khawarizm, and Makkah. In Naisapur, al-Shahrastani studied hadith and *'ulūm al-hadith* with 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Madani (d. 494/1100); Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) with Ahmad al-Khuwafi (d. 500/1106); and theology (*'ilm al-kalam*), exegesis, and the foundations of Islamic jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*) with Imam Abu Nasr al-Qusayri (d. 514/1120). He also met Abu al-Qasim Sulayman ibn Nasr al-Ansari, who taught him theology, Islamic mysticism (*tasawwuf*), and all about the history of the House of the Prophet's (Ahl al-Bayt) nobility and graciousness.⁵⁴

Al-Shahrastani continued his intellectual wandering, moving from Naisapur to Khawarizm, where he studied with As'ad ibn Abi Nasr al-Mayhani (d. 527/1129) and Muhammad ibn Mahmud al-Khawarizm (d. 568/1172). At this time, his intellectual maturity encouraged him to study and criticize philosophy and philosophical schools. (Philosophy was to become one of the main concerns.) He stayed there for ten years and then made hajj in 510/1116. After that, he went to Baghdad, where he stayed for three years,⁵⁵ and where Ash'arite theology was predominant. Ibn Khallikan (d. 681/1282), as cited by Diane Steigerwald, ranks al-Shahrastani as an Ash'arite theologian (*al-mutakallim 'ala madhhab al-Ash'ari*).⁵⁶ Finally, he returned to his hometown in Persia around 514/1117 and stayed there until his death in 548/1153.

Al-Shahrastani's intellectual adventure indicates that he learned the religious science from teachers whose religious backgrounds were quite varied. As for his religious affiliation, Wilfred Madelung writes:

Born and educated as a Shafi'ite Sunnite, he continued to identify with the Sunnite community and followed the Shafi'ite ritual and legal practice to the end of his life. Yet his concept of Sunnism evidently moved far away from the contemporaneous orthodox understanding of it and expanded to allow Shi'ite veneration of the Family of the Prophet and recognition of the religious authority of the Shi'ite Imams.⁵⁷

He was appointed a chancellor of the chancellery (*diwan al-rasa'il*) when Sanjar, the Saljuq sovereign, ruled Khurasan in 511/1118. The *Kitab al-Milal*, considered al-Shahrastani's most influential work on Muslim heresiography, was dedicated to his two patrons: Nasr al-Din Mahmud ibn Abi Tawba al-Marwazi and, upon his imprisonment in 529/1132, to Sayyid Majd al-Din Abu al-Qasim 'Ali ibn Ja'far al-Musawi (his new patron).⁵⁸

According to Bruce Lawrence, *Kitab al-Milal* “surpasses its predecessor in objectivity and insight as well as detail and scope.”⁵⁹ Similarly, George C. Anawati explains: “In contrast to Ibn Hazm, the author (Shahrastani) does not aim at refuting errors, but merely strives to state the doctrines as objectively as possible.”⁶⁰ Even though the book describes Islamic theology’s divisions and subdivisions, the discussion is more concerned with each division’s uniqueness. He presented several Islamic theological divisions, based upon his system of categorization, but failed to elaborate upon the main theological and philosophical theme in a comprehensive manner.

Specific themes with which Muslim theologians and philosophers primarily dealt, such as the assertion of divine unity (*tawhid*), the problem of divine predestination, free will, the issues of prophecy and the concept of imamate, were elaborated upon in his *Kitab Nihayat al-Iqdam fi `Ilm Kalam*. As Guillaume states, it “was clearly designated by al-Shahrastani as a complementary sequel to his *Kitab al-Milal*.”⁶¹ Although his *Kitab Nihayat al-Iqdam* covers a vast scope of Islamic theological and philosophical discourse, al-Shahrastani expanded his concern with “theological philosophy” by presenting a special analysis of Ibn Sina’s (Avicenna) works and thought in his *Kitab al-Musara`ah*, which he dedicated to Majd al-Din al-Musawi.

While al-Biruni spotlighted and criticized Ibn Sina’s concept of the nature of the universe, al-Shahrastani tried to refute Ibn Sina’s concept of metaphysics.⁶² In this refutation, however, he did not include al-Ghazali, even though al-Ghazali was among the foremost medieval Muslim scholars to criticize philosophers and his *Al-Tahafut al-Falasifah*, as Wilfred Madelung and Toby Mayer have noted, “provided the most persuasive answer to Ibn Sina’s philosophy from the Sunni point of view.”⁶³ The impact of Isma`ili teachings on al-Shahrastani can be observed in *Al-Majlis*, in which he discusses the theory of creation (*khalq*) in the context of God’s divine order (*al-amr*).

Al-Shahrastani wrote most of his works in Arabic; however, *Al-Majlis*, compiled by Muhammad Rida Jalali Na`ini and based on al-Shahrastani’s speech delivered in Khwarizm, is in Persian.⁶⁴ Al-Shahrastani also wrote a commentary on the Qur’an, *Mafatih al-Asrar wa Masabih al-Abrar*,⁶⁵ and other works mentioned by al-Bayhaqi, which are apparently lost, such as *Al-Manahij wa al-Ayat* and *Qissat Mūsa wa al-Khaydir*.

Approaches to Hind’s Religious Traditions

Some information on Hind had circulated among Muslim scholars during and prior to al-Biruni’s time. However, in his *Kitab al-Hind*, al-Biruni does not mention the works of al-Mas`udi, al-Tabari, Ibn Khurdadhbih, and Sulayman

al-Tajir as his sources, perhaps because he was able to conduct actual field research. We do not have much information about why he did not refer to these earlier works. He probably, borrowing Ainslie T. Embree, “mistrusted them” and preferred “to work from the Sanskrit original.”⁶⁶ Yet, this does not seem to be a sufficient answer. Perhaps his decision was also a geographical matter. Overall, it is worth noting that in his *Kitab al-Hind*, al-Biruni mentions Abu Sahl `Abd al-Mun`im ibn `Ali ibn Nuh al-Tiflisi, Zurqan, and Abu al-`Abbas al-Iranshahri.⁶⁷ It seems that he could access and interact with the works of earlier Muslim writers, given that he does offer some comments, appreciations, and critiques of them.⁶⁸

Al-Biruni analyzed Hind’s religious traditions closely, conducted field observation in certain Indian regions, and referred to Zurqan and Iranshahri, both of whom provided a lot of data about Buddhist cosmology. However, he dealt mainly with Hinduism. This is quite strange, considering that he did not give enough space to Buddhism in both *Kitab al-Hind* and *Kitab al-Athar* and yet discussed at least twelve religions and religious communities. The majority of scholars, among them Sachau, Jeffery, Lawrence, Kamaruzzaman, and Waardenburg, speculate that he did this because Buddhism probably had largely disappeared from northern India by that time (the end of the eleventh century).⁶⁹

This speculation is quite acceptable, especially if we consider that al-Biruni sought to be consistent with his methodology by conducting field research and that he did not find enough Buddhist informants.⁷⁰ Yet this leaves a room for a further question: Did al-Biruni, as a historian or historiographer, only focus on existing religions in composing his *Kitab al-Athar*? Unlike such earlier Muslim scholars as Zurqan and Iranshahri or such later ones as Rashid al-Din, was al-Biruni not interested in Buddhism, given that he discusses other major and minor religious traditions?

Similarly, in his *Kitab al-Milal* al-Shahrastani did not explicitly mention his sources. This occurrence is slightly unusual, because he said in this book: “These are what I can achieve from the sayings of the experts, and I have quoted [such information] as they are” (*Hadha ma wajadtu min maqalat ahl al-`alim, wa nuqiltuhu `ala ma wajadtuhu*).⁷¹ This signifies that he used other sources, although he did not present them explicitly in his work. For the same reason, Lawrence notes:

Whatever Shahrastani’s sources may have contained about India was derivative, and Shahrastani himself did not supplement its data through conversation with Hindus or Buddhists nor did he consult with Muslim

travelers who had gone to India and been exposed to the beliefs and practices of Indians. Though he wrote in the first half of the twelfth century A.D., Shahrastani obtained the bulk of his information on Indian sects from a report compiled at the beginning of the ninth century.⁷²

In regards to this case, Lawrence shares two themes that illustrate al-Shahrastani's connection to his predecessors based on the similar types of works that they wrote. Minorski, as cited by Lawrence, writes that al-Shahrastani, similar to al-Biruni, might refer to Zurqan, who paid attention specifically to Hind's religious tradition, rather than to other such Muslim geographers as Ibn Khurradadhbih, Jayhani, Gardizi, or Marvazi. However, according to Lawrence, the connection between Zurqan and al-Shahrastani is difficult to establish.

But in a certain manuscript version of the *Kitab al-Milal* (ed. Muhammad Badran), al-Shahrastani refers to Jayhani while discussing Zoroastrianism. Thus, he could have been in touch with Jayhani, even though he does not explicitly mention this scholar when exploring Hind's religious tradition.⁷³ However, the resemblances between al-Shahrastani's "Ara al-Hind" and other sources do not automatically signify that he really referred to them, since the *Kitab al-Milal's* chapter on Indian religious divisions covers various aspects that are not discussed in his predecessors' works. Thus, it is probable that al-Shahrastani selected some material from several available sources of information on Hind.

In contrast, al-Biruni offers a more detailed explanation about his methodological approach. He suggests five crucial elements of Indian culture that must be considered by observers in general, and Muslim readers in particular, to understand its people's religious life: the characteristics of the main Indian language (Sanskrit) and the land's major religious treatises, the Indian religious attitudes, their customs, the religious types, and the Hindus' attitudes toward others.⁷⁴ Moreover, in *Kitab al-Hind* al-Biruni reveals himself as a dispassionate scholar who seeks to study other religions as they are. In his introductory remarks, he says: "This book is not a polemical one (*laysa al-kitab, kitab hujjaj wa jidal*) ... My book is nothing but a simple historic record of fact (*wa innama huwa kitab hikayat*)."⁷⁵ This dispassionate demeanor is a major reason why he is considered a distinguished scholar and religious historian of his time. Regarding his intention as a Muslim to study the Hindu belief system, he justly remarks:

I have done and written this book on the doctrines of the Hindus, never making any unfounded imputations against those, our religious antago-

nists, and at the same time not considering it inconsistent with my duties as a Muslim to quote their own word at full length when I thought they would contribute to elucidate a subject. 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 the best qualified to defend it.⁷⁶

Compared to al-Biruni's model of investigation, which tends to be anthropological, al-Shahrastani's description of Hind is more theological. Al-Shahrastani consistently employs his heresiographical approach in categorizing and classifying that land's religious belief systems. Accordingly, there are at least two modes of categorization: a division of regions or a division of people. The former principle divides regions into four main classes: the East, West, South, and North, and includes the characteristic of each one's natures (*al-taba`i*) and laws (*al-shara`i*); the latter principle divides the world into four major nations (*kibar al-umam*): "the Arabs, `Ajam (Persians), Romans, and Indians."⁷⁷

Therefore, al-Shahrastani analyzes and categorizes Hind's religious tradition in a slightly different way than al-Biruni does, although they might have a similar theological outlook as regards its religious tradition. While al-Shahrastani tries to show his neutrality as a scholar, his bias is evident when he discusses the various Islamic sects:

I impose upon myself the obligation of giving the views of each sect as I find them in their works without favour or prejudice, without declaring which are correct and which are incorrect, which are true and which are false; although, indeed, the glimpses of the truth and the odour of lies will not remain undetected by minds versed in intellectual matters. And God will be our help.

We cannot generalize this view as being entirely applicable to non-Islamic religious traditions, since al-Shahrastani uses certain terms and methods to classify other religions and philosophies. Nevertheless, he says: "The Indian people constitute a large nation (*ummah kabirah*) and a great religious community (*millah al-`adimah*), and they vary in their views (*wa arawhum mukhtalifah*)."⁷⁸ Similar to al-Biruni, whose views are considered relatively moderate, al-Shahrastani approaches the Indian religions "sympathetically" and, as Lawrence points out, "employs a unique analytical model (Sabianism) to portray Indian idol worship."⁷⁹

Defining Traditions and Religions: Some Methodological Issues

In his *Kitab al-Athar*, al-Biruni collects information on various civilizations' calendrical systems, which are related to religious events, and arranges them into certain themes. Some of the topics correspond solely to his curiosity and competency as an astronomer and astrologer. Other topics elaborate upon the religious events and festivals in various religious traditions. Since this book seeks to observe the chronology of ancient nations, as opposed to inspect world religious traditions, he provides no precise method of classification as al-Shahrastani does. For the most part, the topics of discussion are derived from festivals or religious events. Even so, he presents a wide-ranging discussion of the divisions of religious festivals by describing the similarities and differences of traditions, religious institutions, and opinions found within various groups or nations.

The festivals and feast days, the main topics in addition to the calendrical systems that so interest al-Biruni, are fine instances of how he effectively portrays the differences and resemblances among the religious traditions of the Jews, Persians, Christians, pre-Islamic Arabs, Sabians, and Muslims. His method of selection implies that he formulated a classification based on how people deal with religious festivals, dates, and calendars.

Furthermore, if we take the modern-day study of religion into account, we may say that his mode of presentation in *Kitab al-Athar* tends to be more "functionalist," for he begins with a discussion based on "religious events" as the main issue, rather than "substantivist,"⁸⁰ meaning one who is concerned mainly with religious doctrines. In the functionalist point of view, religious practices may reflect what people believe. For al-Biruni, in this case perhaps, a portion of religious doctrine is presented as the supportive information, not as the main argument, needed to give a religious event's theological background. We may also say that this book is written from his perspective as an astronomer, astrologer, and geographer, and not especially as a religionist. Therefore, his failure to elaborate further upon the significant types of each religious tradition's theological doctrines mentioned in *Kitab al-Athar* is not so strange.

Another comparative method used by al-Biruni can be traced back to his *Kitab al-Hind*, in which he conducts a profound investigation of Hind's religious tradition and compares its theological and philosophical thought with those of the classical Greek religions, Christianity and Judaism, and also confronts their opinions so that he can reach a certain conclusion. To be sure, one who applies a comparative method must have critical insight, a careful

outlook, and an accurate stance in looking at one or more religious traditions so that one can reach a reasonable conclusion. Regarding al-Biruni's comparative method when studying Hind, Jeffery notes,

[H]e will place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and where there are similar theories among the Greeks, or in the teaching of the Christian sects, or the Sufis, as for example in the matter of transmigration of souls, or pantheistic doctrines of the unity of God with his creatures, he will accurately report their theories also for comparison.⁸¹

Though al-Biruni makes no attempt to locate Hind's religious traditions within the world's religious traditions, we can deduce his perspective of the general classification of religion. In *Kitab al-Hind*, he argues that the idolatry found in Hind and classical Greece can be measured as a kind of tradition that deviates from the truth (*al-haqq*). On this subject, Kamaruzzaman concludes that al-Biruni implicitly offers two typologies of religions: (1) *al-haqq* (the Truth) or Islam, and (2) *kufir* (rejection of, or deviation from, the Truth) or *inhiraf* (deviation from the Truth). Here, Kamaruzzaman interprets *al-haqq* as "Islam," since Muslims often employ this term to identify their own religion.⁸² However, since al-Biruni's statements refer to the people of Hind and pre-Christian Greece who held idolatrous views, it is more accurate, in my opinion, to interpret *al-haqq* as "the pure truth" or "monotheism" as employed by Sachau, rather than as "Islam" as used by Kamaruzzaman and based upon Naquib al-Attas' translation.⁸³ My argument is that in this passage al-Biruni simply talks about the idolatry of Hind and classical Greece vis-à-vis the monotheistic tradition.

Al-Biruni uses *inhiraf* in the context of deviating from monotheism, as opposed to deviating from Islam. As we shall see below, he distinguishes between the *khawass* (elites) and the *ammah* (ordinary) of Hindu believers, which also deals with the monotheistic view and the deviation from it. Moreover, Kamaruzzaman's above argument is beyond the scope of this discussion, because al-Biruni also talks about Socrates, "who died faithful to the truth (*al-haqq*)" for not partaking in his people's idolatry. In sum, al-Biruni employs *al-haqq* not only to distinguish monotheism from idolatry, but also for the "truth" (*al-haqq*) that Socrates defended. Thus, the "truth" in this case is not simply Islam as an "organized religion," but rather Islam as a monotheistic tradition.

Nevertheless, in another place he discusses the divisions of Hind's society from a theological point of view and its cultural castes or social classes (*al-tabaqat*). In addition to his two types of Hindus, mentioned above, he also recognizes that castes or colors (Sans. *varna*; Ar. *alwan*) are an important cul-

tural aspect and that Muslims will perhaps find this feature difficult to understand, since these sociocultural classes determine the Hindus' spiritual types and rights. "We Muslims," al-Biruni states, "stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal, except in piety (*taqwa*)."⁸⁴

Such social classes or castes are not unique to Hind. Before describing its castes, for instance, he mentions a sort of caste system found in ancient Persia that bears certain similarities to that of Hind. For example, along with his effort to restore the Persian empire, Ardhasir ben Babak resurrected the following social hierarchy: the knights (*al-usawirah*) and princes (*abna' al-mulūk*); the monks or pious men (*al-nussak*), fire-priests (*sadanat al-nayyiran*), and lawyers (*arbab al-din*); the physicians (*al-atibba'*), astronomers (*al-munajjimin*), and scientists (*ashab al-'ulūm*); and, finally, the farmers or peasants (*al-zarra'i*) and artisans (*al-sunna'i*).⁸⁵ The Hindus, as al-Biruni explains, have four major castes, each of which is determined by their texts and associated with Brahman's primordial existence: *brahmana* (brahmins [priests and teachers]), *kshatria* (warriors and rulers), *vaisya* (farmers, merchants, artisans), and *sudra* (laborers) and other low-caste people.

In contrast to al-Biruni, who offers no precise taxonomy of world religious traditions, al-Shahrastani arranges them through a precise model of classification. In addition, as a heresiographer, he offers various technical and theological terms associated with Islamic and other religious sects. First, he proposes a general classification of world religions by presenting what "scholars" have posited, such as a classification based on the great ancient regions and great nations,⁸⁶ of which Hind is one. His classification is not restricted to regions or nations, because he also classifies world religious traditions according to their belief systems, especially when elaborating upon various sects within each religion.

Indeed, his *Kitab al-Milal* mainly seeks to arrange world religious traditions based on their opinion (*al-ara'*) and doctrines (*al-madhdhahib*).⁸⁷ To display his taxonomy sharply and systematically, he proposes such technical terms as "people of religions and sects" (*ahl al-dayanat wa al-milal*) and "people of opinion" (*ahl al-ahwa wa al-nihal*). While the former comprises the Magians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the latter comprises the philosophers, materialists, Sabians, star and idol worshippers, and Brahmins.⁸⁸

While al-Biruni's discussion of each religion's theological or philosophical view is not profound, al-Shahrastani, as a theologian or a heresiographer, makes a clearer distinction between their doctrines. In defining and categorizing religions or philosophical thought, he formulates such concepts as rationality, regulation or law, body of laws (*shari'ah*), and prophecies that each tradition may have rejected or accepted.⁸⁹ In addition, he mentions

another one of religion's important and necessary aspect: scripture. In this case, he distinguishes world religious traditions based on their scriptures and divides them into categories: those that have books (Ahl al-Kitab), those who have "pseudo-books" (*man lahū shubhat kitab*), and those who have laws and regulations "without books." Hind's religious traditions, especially those of the Brahmins and the star worshippers, appear to belong to the third category. Apparently, al-Shahrastani had limited direct access to Hindus, so some Hindu scriptures are missing from his *Kitab al-Milal*. This is in contrast to al-Biruni, who elaborates to a great extent upon several Hindu scriptures to which he refers in his *Kitab al-Hind*.

One more issue I would like to highlight here concerns both scholars' insights on the relationship between philosophy and theology. This issue, in my opinion, is relevant because both of their investigations embrace several philosophers when discussing religions. Al-Shahrastani describes several philosophical systems in his *Kitab al-Milal* and incorporates an extensive discussion of Greek, Arab, and Hindu thought in his *Kitab Nihayat al-Itqan*. On the other hand, Greek thought becomes the object of al-Biruni's comparative analysis of Hind's religious and philosophical thought.

In the Islamic scientific tradition, philosophy and theology are considered rational sciences (*'ulūm al-'aqliyah*) instead of transmitted sciences (*al-'ulūm al-naqliyah*). Even so, they have different concerns or objects of study: "While theological discourse (*kalam*) is concerned with God's existence and attributes and with human's destiny, philosophy is concerned with rational truth, being and non-being, and the nature of things, of God, and of the cosmos."⁹⁰ Yet al-Biruni is better recognized as a scientist, astrologer, and religionist than as a philosopher or theologian, while it is just the opposite with al-Shahrastani. However, their works imply that philosophy can somehow be a kind of theological thought. Therefore, studying religion and theology must involve a discussion of philosophy.

In regards to the terminological ambiguity of philosophy and theology in Islamic intellectual history, Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes:

In the context of classical Islamic civilization the name "philosophy" (*al-falsafah* or *al-hikmah*) is reserved for a particular set of disciplines associate with the well-known schools of "Islamic philosophy" such as the Peripatetic (*mashsha'i*), Illuminationists (*ishraqi*) and the like, and not other schools, like theology (*kalam*), which often deal with philosophic ideas but are not officially recognized as philosophy. Therefore, the title of "philosopher" (*al-faylasuf*) is usually reserved for those who are masters of the doctrines of one these "philosophical" schools with all the different ramifications and nuances that various branches of these schools contain.⁹¹

Whether al-Biruni and al-Sharastani should more appropriately be regarded as philosophers or theologians is beyond the scope of this paper. My point here is how they distinguish philosophy from religion, since philosophical thought is intimately embodied within and attached to religious judgments. According to al-Shahrastani, the philosophers (*al-falasifah al-ūla*), along with the Brahmans and the star worshippers, are those who may have laws and regulations without a scripture (*min man lahū hudūd wa ahkam dūna kitab*).⁹² By including philosophers in his discussion of religion, he shows that he considers philosophy as a sort of religion.

Muhammad Kamal Ja'far mentions that al-Shahrastani connects philosophy to religion in the context of their objective (*fi nitaq al-ghayah*) and compares the positions of prophets (*al-anbiya'*) and philosophers (*al-hukama'*).⁹³ Accordingly, prophets confirm the spiritual support for establishing the matter of practical purposes and also take a stand as regards the logical dimension (*al-anbiya' ayyadū bi imdadat rūhaniyat li taqrir al-qism al-'amali, wa bi turafi ma min al-qism al-'ilm*), while philosophers provide sensible supports for establishing the logical or scientific dimensions and also take a stand on the matter of practices (*ta'rudhū li imdadat 'aqliyah, taqīran li qism al-'ilm, wa bi turafi ma min al-qism al-'amali*).⁹⁴

This means that both religion and philosophy have an equivalent goal: the quest for the truth. Therefore, the fundamental correspondence in terms of purpose between religion (prophets) and philosophy (philosophers), as described by al-Shahrastani, is coherent with his method of classification, which includes spiritual and philosophical traditions that have no book or prophets. In this regard, Ahmad Khalifah assumes that “according to the arrangement of this classification, religion seems to be rooted in philosophy.” Al-Shahrastani even points out that Sabianism’s essence lies somewhere between religion and philosophy.⁹⁵

As a result, the way al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani categorize religions and define religious elements influence how they examine Hind’s religious tradition. Even though al-Shahrastani is more systematic and “comprehensive” than al-Biruni in arranging and examining world religious traditions and each of their sects, some important aspects of religion (e.g., religious practices and religious festivals) are missing from his work. The idea of comprehensibility in examining religion, however, is not entirely plausible, especially when we observe how al-Biruni deals with Hind’s religious tradition, since he conducted actual field research in Hind. Al-Biruni’s work covers various aspects of the Hindu traditions, such as society, theology, scripture, and festivals.

The Hindus: Between Monotheism and Polytheism

One issue that can be discussed about Hinduism's divisions and theological doctrines in both scholars' writings is their opinion on the monotheism-polytheism discourse. Since Islamic theology stresses the Higher Being's unity (*tawhid*) and purity, it is probable that they might attach dissimilar theological evaluations to Hind's religious traditions. As Rosenthal notes, "monotheism in al-Biruni's time," and perhaps in al-Shahrastani's, "did not allow of reconciliation with any form of pagan idol worship or theology."⁹⁶

Tawhid is a core Islamic belief, as seen in the *shahadah* (the testimony of faith): "There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Even though Muslims agree on God's oneness, their understanding of His attributes, manifestation, and authority differ. The resulting heated theological debates are long-standing and were especially vigorous during the eighth to the tenth centuries.⁹⁷ Given that both scholars recognize that Hind's religious traditions are among the oldest living traditions, the Islamic creed can apply only "partially," namely, the concept of God's oneness, and not the concept of Muhammad's prophethood. Even so, the concept of prophecy is one to which al-Shahrastani devotes a great deal of major attention.

Both men raise different opinions concerning the Hindus' monotheistic or polytheistic tendencies. Although al-Biruni does not connect the Hindus directly with the Sabians, a religious community that allegedly had a monotheistic inclination, he sees that Hinduism is monotheistic in nature. As a matter of course, some Hindu texts contain opinions indicating that God is the One, the highest reality, eternal, unique, and beyond all likeness and unlikeness. Therefore, he sees polytheism as a common accidental deviation from the monotheistic outlook, one that is caused mainly by the people's inability to understand "non-symbolic" philosophical and theological matters. Thus, in this case polytheism is simply a matter of the "symbolic shapes" of religiosity that typically exist when people need a concrete manifestation or representation of the Higher Beings.

Moreover, al-Biruni identifies two hypotheses of idolatry's origin: it existed before God sent His Messenger, and it might be a deviation from the "true religion." His opinion of the types of idolatry appears to be quite similar to al-Shahrastani's idea that idolatry does not come in just one form. The pagan Arabs, Greeks, Romans, and Indians all have the same tradition of worshipping idols; however, some of them think that the idol becomes a mediator, an intercessor with God, His manifestation, as well as His representation,⁹⁸ whereas others see it only as a memorial.⁹⁹ "The classical Greeks also considered idols as mediators between themselves and the first cause,"

states al-Biruni, “and worshipped them under the names of the stars and the highest substances.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, he explicates: “The Hindus honor their idols on account of those who erected them, not account of the material of which they are made.”¹⁰¹

In connection with the above case, al-Shahrastani observes the variety of Hindu perceptions as regards the Higher Beings’ symbolic representation by presenting his types of idol worshippers. According to him, their perception of idols is not monolithic. Some perceive them as God’s representation or manifestation through divine messengers in the form of human beings and, at the same time, use them as intermediaries; others regard idols or such things as water, fire, and tree as “angels” or “the higher beings.” Even though al-Shahrastani does not claim that the Hindus are monotheists, he implies that some of them need symbolical representation while worshiping the higher beings, such as when he describes the followers of spiritual beings (i.e., the Basawiya, Bahuwadiya, Kabaliya, and Bahaduniya) and the star worshippers (i.e., the Dinakitiya and Jandrikaniya). His opinion on their idolatry is, in short, based on the types of idol worshippers and their basic understanding of the relevant idols.

The variety of Hind’s religious traditions shows that Hindus differ both culturally and spiritually. The structure of Hindu theological doctrines, as articulated by Hindu theologians and philosophers through their holy books and respected scriptures, still leaves room for the ordinary people to modify and contextualize such doctrines in accordance with popular points of view. The gap between philosophical-theological formulations and [popular] religious practices exists in almost all religious traditions.

From al-Biruni’s and al-Shahrastani’s investigations, we may also see that each religion, including Hinduism, has a philosophical dimension and a popular manifestation. For the elites, the religious tradition, like that of other religious communities, is monotheistic, especially with regard to defining the concept of the Highest Being. At the popular level, namely, that of religious symbols, the iconographic representation and figurative symbols (e.g., idols or statues) is also expressed in other religious traditions. In both scholars’ opinion, the particularity of religious traditions can be observed in how the religious communities connect the Highest Reality to the figurative symbols they have created to represent the highest (monotheistic) Reality.

Conclusion

The relevance and contribution of medieval Muslim scholars and theologians to the study of religion cannot be disregarded in forming the modes of

comparative religion (*muqaranat al-adyan*), especially in modern Muslim literature and, perhaps, in contemporary western scholarship. In our case, the classifications or categorizations of religions made by these two scholars can be regarded as their contribution to the modern study of religion.

Before exploring Hind's religious tradition, they discussed other religions. Al-Biruni wrote *Kitab al-Hind* after *Kitab al-Athar*; al-Shahrastani's chapter "Ara al-Hind" is the last chapter of his *Kitab al-Milal*. Differences are also apparent in how they investigate each religious tradition. Whereas al-Biruni focuses on the history of religion and religious rituals/festivals, al-Shahrastani is more interested in the divisions of theological doctrines and religious sects. Thus they present different insights in classifying world religions. It is hard to find a systematic and detailed explanation of each religion's doctrinal teachings in al-Biruni's writings, excluding his exploration of Hind, because his interest is the ancient nations' religious festivals and calendrical systems. In contrast, while we can easily read a detailed narrative of the doctrines of world religions in al-Shahrastani, it is hard to find any attention given to religious festivals or practices in his work. Therefore, I would say that their approaches to world religious traditions are complementary.

This also can be seen in their discussion of Sabianism. Al-Biruni presents data about several ancient religious communities that Muslim scholars have considered to be Sabian. In the context of our discussion, it is correct, as modern scholars say, that al-Shahrastani was the first Muslim scholar to connect the Sabians with Hind's religious communities, since he discovered that their teachings are similar to those of the Brahmans. On the other hand, there is no clear clue that al-Biruni ever brought up such an issue when discussing Hind's religious tradition. However, in regards to the discourse of Sabianism, al-Biruni, al-Shahrastani, and other Muslim scholars opined that the Sabians might have had monotheistic tendencies or at least had "deviated" from or "modified" their monotheistic views.

In presenting the types of Hindu believers, al-Biruni differentiates between philosophers and ordinary people. This workable categorization is still used by modern scholars of religion and, perhaps, some anthropologists who study religious systems. Al-Biruni's journey in Hind and his chance to examine some Hindu scriptures and investigate Hindu religious practices allow him to make such a distinction by presenting a categorization of Hind's religions at both the philosophical and the popular levels. More importantly, he introduces the distinction between *khawass* and *'ammah*, as a general theory, to show how the theologians and the philosophers or "the elites" (*khawass*) apprehend religious ideas and how "the vulgar" (*'ammah*) might perceive and actualize such religious doctrines in the popular context.¹⁰²

Moreover, from this categorization we may draw some theoretical notes as to why and how, according to al-Biruni, a monotheistic view can diverge within a given society. First, people may “deviate” due to their limited ability. Different people with different educational backgrounds might produce different views about philosophical and abstract concepts.¹⁰³ His conclusion that the Hindus’ theological concept is monotheistic is unusual and surprising, but his assertion of an intellectual gap between the educated and the uneducated believers is a common phenomenon and can be used to analyze other religious communities. Second, a “natural process” may also generate the “deviation.” Human beings have a propensity to decode such abstract concepts as “supernatural,” “God,” “angel,” and “demon” by presenting them as figurative objects. Therefore, anthropomorphism is very common and can be found in almost all religious traditions. Even the elites have a tendency to be anthropomorphist.

Third, it still relates to the previous point: People venerate religious symbols, statues, or temples long after they forget the original motive of the given symbol’s creation. An earlier community builds a sculpture to honor and commemorate a specific person (e.g., the Buddha) and give him respect, and a later community transforms that tradition into a “religious ritual.”¹⁰⁴ Finally, anthropomorphism as a “deviation” from monotheism can occur due to linguistic limitations within societies. Al-Biruni’s comparative explanation about this, as in the case of Greek, Arab-Islam, Hebrew, and among Christians, reveals different probabilities in producing anthropomorphism. Interestingly, as modern scholars point out, theology (i.e., doctrinal systems) is also constructed by the structure of a given society’s language.¹⁰⁵

As al-Biruni explains, idolatry is a major tradition within Hind’s religious traditions, especially among those Hindus who need symbolic and iconographic representations of the Highest Being, various deities, and angels. This tradition absolutely contravenes Islam, which is totally against idolatry and all other iconographic symbols. Even so, al-Biruni highlights another viewpoint of Hinduism: At its philosophical core, Hinduism exhibits a monotheistic tendency. Monotheism is not the only theological inclination among Hindu philosophers, since there is also a pantheistic mystical view. When al-Biruni writes that idolatry is a “deviation” from the truth, it echoes his Islamic perspective (the idea of monotheism) as a central theological tool in his investigation of other religions. Nevertheless, this field observation, which led him to encounter Hindu religious ideas and practices objectively, is not very popular among Muslim scholars and heresiographers, who traditionally have considered religions from a doctrinal point of view.

In contrast, al-Shahrastani's classification represents how Muslim heresiographers classify sects and Islamic theological schools of thought. He presents the founder of each religious sect and then examines its subsets' characteristics. Such heresiographers as Ibn Hazm, Tahir ibn Muhammad al-Baghdadi, and Muhammad ibn Isfara'ini use a similar style. He also formulates some criteria of religions and religious communities in their dealings with scriptures, prophets, and a deity/deities.

Al-Shahrastani's distinction reveals that his model of classification determines his view. We may summarize his view as follows: First, almost all of these divisions and subdivisions deal closely with the concept of "idol." As depicted by al-Shahrastani, the Hindus have different ways of perceiving their idols; some consider them to be the actual deity/deities, while others just see them as the "representation" of the Higher Being. Therefore, the existence of an idol does not necessarily indicate that all Hindus worship it; instead, some of them use it as a symbol of a higher being and so may worship what the symbol represents.¹⁰⁶ Second, he distinguishes between idol worshippers (i.e., the tree-water-fire worshippers) and star worshippers (i.e., the Sun and Moon worshippers). But it is hard to discover this difference, as perhaps the only difference between them is the way they associate their "respect" or "admiration" with the Moon, the Sun, water, fire, or a tree. However, as regards their creating and honoring the idol and performing rituals, there is no fundamental disparity.¹⁰⁷

In this case, we may say that he discusses idol worshippers as a special case. However, worshipping stars is not unique to Hindus: ancient religions or the Sabians in Mesopotamia, Iraq, or Syria also had such a tradition.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, this categorization is probably his way of emphasizing his concern with differentiating this group from the tradition that purely worships idols. Third, there is a connection between the Brahman (*al-barahimah*) and Indian philosophers (*hukama' al-hind*) in the matter of thought and tradition: Both deal primarily with reason and wisdom.¹⁰⁹ The highest potentiality of human beings is found in their endeavors by using reason to distinguish between right and wrong, as well as between true and false.

In al-Shahrastani's depiction, the concepts of "intermediaries" and "representation" in the context of the human–divine relationship within Hind's religious sects and subsects is discussed frequently. Through this point, he offers a basic supposition of how Hindus conceptualize their theological ideas and attaches the concept of intermediaries to the notion of iconographical representation of the higher beings (e.g., gods, goddesses, and angels). Therefore, idolatry is one of his main concerns. Al-Shahrastani presents five main sects or religions, some of which, especially among the star worshippers and idol

worshippers, deal with idolatry, while other main “sects,” especially the Brahmins and Indian philosophers, mainly deal with either “reason” or mysticism and therefore do not really involve themselves with idols.¹¹⁰

Even though both scholars employ different approaches, the intersecting notion between them of Hind’s idolatry is seen in some conceptual keys: religious representation, intermediaries, anthropomorphism, and “deviation” from monotheism. It is understandable that their investigations would reveal a common phenomenon within a religious discourse: the distinction between philosophical thinking and religious practice. Idolatry, as far as they are concerned, is a natural human tendency, especially among religious communities that are faced with describing abstract ideas.

Their works may also represent a typical study of religion conducted by medieval Muslim scholars who used their own frameworks. Al-Biruni’s concept of “deviation” from monotheism and al-Shahrastani’s refutation of the Brahmins concerning prophecy show that Islam’s basic teachings are still in play in their analyses. It may say that their arguments and judgments regarding other religions are polemical and apologetic. However, this is not really the case, for their description, evaluation, and analysis of other religious beliefs and practices reveal a genuine interest in understanding non-Islamic religions through comparison.

Furthermore, critical notes can be addressed to both scholars and their perceptions or judgments of how the Hindus perceive monotheism and polytheism. I mentioned above that al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani issued some conceptual terms in their divisions, such as “deviation,” the “elites” and the “vulgar,” “representation,” and “intermediaries.” Such an approach, borrowing Peter Brown’s term, is called the “two-tiered model” and is still used today. Without neglecting the two scholars’ efforts to study non-Islamic religions as they are, both still used their own religious and theological views to judge other religions.

Moreover, we can raise some questions regarding their classifications: Is it true that polytheism is a “deviation” from monotheism? Do polytheistic views and monotheistic doctrines exist independently? Can we say that monotheism is a perfect form and a result of the “evolution” of religious belief systems? Why do al-Biruni and al-Shahrastani say that paganism or polytheism is a “deviation” from monotheism? Is it true that the “vulgar” or “ordinary people” are commonly ignorant? Who has the right to say that “popular religion” is worse than “formalized religion”? What is the standard? Do religious beliefs and practices require philosophical thinking?

Other Muslim theologians have used this two-tiered model of analysis. As Brown rightly observes, Christian scholars working in Late Antiquity

were already using this perspective. This standpoint even appeared in modern western scholarship in the 1970s when David Hume, in his essay “The Natural History of Religion,” discussed the “intellectual limitation of human mind.”¹¹¹ For Hume, the history of religions is characterized “by the tension between theistic and polytheistic ways of thinking.” Hume assumes that there are “intellectual and cultural limitations among the masses” concerning the original monotheism and, therefore, “the vulgar” (borrowing from al-Biruni) have fallen into anthropomorphism and (borrowing from al-Shahrastani) needed “representation.”

In the case of Christianity’s Late Antiquity era, this “intellectual limitation” engendered the cult of saints. But if we employ Brown’s findings to analyze al-Biruni’s and al-Shahrastani’s viewpoints, we may say that this cult does not simply represent “the vulgar” or comes from “the masses” who, due to their intellectual limitations, need “representation.” Instead, the cult of saints, burial practices, and the veneration of idols, temples and shrines are elitist in nature, for the clergy formulates them to bridge the gap between the elites and the masses. Although the majority of modern scholars have accepted Brown’s critical remarks, the two-tiered model remains popular and continues to be used by many contemporary Muslim scholars.

Endnotes

1. The term *comparative religion* was first used as an academic term by Joachim Wach in 1952, when he taught courses on the religions of India. He saw that the term *science of religions* or *history of religions* could distort his students’ understanding, since he would discuss many religions. Therefore, he used a more descriptive and non-technical term: *the comparative study of religion*. See M Joseph Kitagawa, “Introduction: The Life and Thought of Joachim Wach,” in Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1958), hlm. xiii.
2. Franz Rosenthal, “Preface,” in Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions* (Moulton: Moulton & Co., 1976), 5.
3. Tarif Khalidi, *Classical Arab Islam: The Culture and Heritage of the Golden Age* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1985), 62.
4. A. Jeffery, “Al-Biruni’s Contribution to Comparative Religion,” in *Al-Biruni: Commemoration Volume* (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1951), 125.
5. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2d ed. (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1991), 11.
6. Al-Biruni, *Tahqiq ma li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fī al-‘Aql al-Mardhūlah*, ed. Edward C. Sachau (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1925). In this paper, I use *Alberuni’s India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws, and Astrology of*

- India about AD 1030*, 2 vols., tr. Edward Sachau (Delhi: Low Price Pub., 2003).
7. Al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah `an al-Qurūn al-Khaliyah*, ed. P. Azkaei (Tehran: Miras al-Maktub, 2001). In this article, I use *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athar al-Baqiya of Al-Biruni or Vestiges of the Past*, tr. Edward C. Sachau (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1879).
 8. For the Arabic version, I use al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2 vols., ed. Abd. Latif Muhammad al-`Abd (Cairo: Maktabah al-Anjlu al-Misriyyah, 1977). Bruce Lawrence's *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, which focuses mainly on the *Milal wa al-Nihal's* chapter on Hind's religions, is a valuable case study in how modern scholarship acquires and evaluates medieval Muslim sources in the study of religion. Lawrence has done work with the observation of Muslim literature on Hinduism prior to al-Shahrastani. He translates part II, book III, and section B of al-Shahrastani's "Ara al-Hind." More importantly, in the last part of his book, Lawrence offers detailed commentaries and comparisons of various aspects of Indian religion reflected in al-Shahrastani's book with other Muslim literature, such as Ibn al-Nadim's *Al-Fihrist*, Gardizi's *Zayn al-Akhhbar*, Marvazi's *Taba'i` al-Hayawan*, and Maqdisi's *Kitab wa al-Bad' wa al-Tarikh*. For the translation of *Al-Milal's* section on Islam, see al-Shahrastani, "Muslim Sects and Divisions," in *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, tr. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London and Boston: Kegan Paul Intl., 1984).
 9. Alfred Guillaume, tr. and ed., *Kitab Nihayat al-Iqdam fi 'Ilm al-Kalam and The Summa Philosophiae of al-Shahrastani* (bilingual) (London: Humprey Milford, 1934).
 10. There are some basic categories in the Islamic medieval era regarding non-Muslims. By referring to the Qur'an's general notions, Jacques Waardenburg divides these categories into three: (1) the Qur'an distinguishes between believers and unbelievers as well as Muslims and non-Muslims. The latter have three specific characteristics: they do not confess God's oneness, they deny Muhammad's prophetic attribute, and they do not accept the Qur'an as a definitive word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad; (2) The Qur'an also divides non-Muslims into two categories: such religious communities as Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Sabians are included in the first one, whereas the polytheists (*al-mushrikūn*) are in the second category; and (3) The dissimilarities between those who believe in God's oneness and those who believe in and worship something or somebody in addition to God. Jaques Waardenburg, *Muslim Perception of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For Muslim works, see, for example, Mahmoud ibn Sharif, *Al-Adyan fi al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, 1970); `Abbas ibn Mansur al-Saksaki, *Al-Burhan fi Ma`rifah `Aqa'id Ahl al-Adyan*, ed. Khalil Ahmad Ibrahim al-Haj (City: Dar al-Turath al-`Arabi li al-Taba'i wa li al-Nashr, 1980); Sulayman ibn Abd al-Qawi al-Tufi, *Al-Intisar al-Islamiyah fi 'Ilm Muqarannah al-Adyan* (Cairo: Matba`ah Dar al-Bayan, 1983).

11. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Theology and Philosophy* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1987); Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 437.
12. Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) is an appropriate example of how a fine research library existed during the `Abbasid period where Greek thought, Arabic cultures, and Persian intellectual environments intermingled. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. by Mehdi Amin Razavi (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1996), esp. chapter 1, "Islamic Thought and Persian Culture," 3-58.
13. See, for example, Abu Mansur al-Baghdadi, *Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq wa Bayan al-Firqah al-Najiyah minhum: `Aqa'id al-Firq al-Islamiyah wa Ara Kibar A'lamaha* (Cairo: Maktabah Ibn Sina li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi' wa al-Tasdir, n.d.); also *Muslim Schisms and Sects*, tr. Kate Chambers Seeley (New York: AMS Press, 1966); Abu al-Muzaffar Tahir ibn Muhammad al-Isfarayni, *Tabsir fi al-Din wa Tamyiz al-Firqah al-Najiyah `an al-Firq al-Halikin* (Cairo: Matba'ah al-Anwar, 1940); 'Ali ibn Ahmad Ibn Hazm, *Al-Fisl fi al-Milal wa Ahwa wa al-Nihal*, eds. Muhammad Ibrahim Nasr and `Abd al-Rahman Umayrah (Jeddah: Shairkah Maktabah Ukad, 1982).
14. Muslim theologians have accused Jews and Christians of *tahrif*, namely, "having modified, falsified" and misinterpreted their scriptures "to suppress predictions of the prophet." See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, "Tahrif," 445.
15. For the variety of Muslims interpretations of *tahrif* and their perceptions of Hebrew Bible, see Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and The Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden, New York, and Koln: E. J. Brill, 1996).
16. Abu al-Futuh Muhammad al-Tawanisi, *Abū Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Birūni: Al-`Alim al-Falaki, al-Jiyālūji, wa al-Riyadi al-Mu'arrikh Mutarajim Thaqafah al-Hind* (Mu'assasah Dar al-Tahrir li Tab'i wa al-Nashr, 1968), 15.
17. André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1, *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th-11th Centuries* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997), 190.
18. K. A. Mubarakpuri, *Al-`Arab wa al-Hind fi `Ahd al-Risalah*, tr. Abd al-`Aziz `Izzat `Abd al-Jalil (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Mishriyyah al-`Ammah li al-Kitab, 1973), 13. Elsewhere, he briefly describes the `Abbasids' political, cultural, and intellectual policies in regards to Hind from Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah (750-754) until al-Mu'tadid (892-902). See his *Al-Hind fi `Ahd al-`Abbasiyin* (Cairo: Dar al-Ansar, 1980).
19. Al-Mas'udi, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar* (Beirut: Makshurat al-Jami'ah al-Libaniyah, 1966), 1:91. See also *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, tr. Aloys Springer (London: The Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1841), 1:177.
20. For a further discussion of the early Muslim geographical accounts of Hind, see Maqbul Ahmad, *Indo-Arab Relations: An Account of India's Relations with the*

- Arab World from Ancient up to Modern Times* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations; Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969), 95-106.
21. Wink, *Al-Hind*, 1:191-92; Karl Jahn, *Rashid al-Din's History of India: Collected Essays with Facsimiles and Indices* (London and Paris: The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1965). In his *Jami`a-Tavarikh*, Rashid al-Din is more concerned with Buddhism than Hinduism.
 22. Mubarakpuri, *Al-'Arab wa al-Hind*, 10.
 23. Al-Tawanisi, *Abū Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Birūni*, 19-20; Wink, *Al-Hind*, 1:7-9.
 24. Even before the "wave of Hellenism" in the eight and ninth centuries, Arab-Persian Muslim scholars had interacted with the Indian scientific materials in the fields of astronomy, astrology, mathematics, and medicine, for some of these texts had been translated from Sanskrit into Arabic or Persian. See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society [2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries]* (London: Routledge, 1998), 24.
 25. Sulayman al-Tajir and Abi Zayd Hasan al-Sirafi, *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*, ed. Yusuf al-Sharuni (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyyah al-Bananiyah, 1999).
 26. Bruce B. Lawrence presents some important works written by Muslim travelers, geographers, and writers on Indian civilization. Among them were such ninth-tenth century scholars as Suhrah (*Kitab 'Aja'ib al-Aqalim as-Sab'a*), Ibrahim ibn Wasif Shah (*Mukhtasar al-'Aja'ib*), Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (*Kitab al-'Aja'ib al-Hind*), Abu Zayd Hasan al-Sirafi (*Silsilah al-Tavarikh*), al-Mas'udi (*Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawahir*), and Ibn al-Nadim (*Fihrist*). In addition, al-Maqqdisi's (d. 985) *Kitab al-Bad' wa al-Tarikh* contains a discussion about Brahmans. He also mentions some Indian religious sects. According to Lawrence, most of the materials on Indian religion in Maqqdisi's book are similar to al-Nadim's report in his *Fihrist*, even though it also provides some new information. For further discussion, see Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 18-25 and Waardenburg, *Muslim Perception of Other Religions*, esp. chapter 2, "The Medieval Period (650-1500)."
 27. Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari (Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, tr. and annotated by Franz Rosenthal) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1:291-92, 308.
 28. See Yohanan Freidmann, "Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, no. 95 (1975): 214.
 29. See Ibn Khurdadhbih, *Al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* (Damascus: Manshurat wa Zarar al-Thaqafah, 1999), 105. See also S. Maqbul Ahmad, *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China* (Calcutta: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1989), book 1, 7.
 30. Maqbul Ahmad, *Arabic Classical Accounts*, 29
 31. Sulayman al-Tajir and Hasan al-Sirafi used the same title for their treatises. The book version I use, edited by Yusuf al-Sharuni, is divided into two parts. The first part belongs to Sulayman al-Tajir, while the second one belongs to

- Abi Zayd Hasan al-Sirafi. See *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*, ed. Yusuf al-Sharuni (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyyah al-Bananiyah, 1999).
32. Al-Tajir, *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*, 56; Maqbul Ahmad, *Arabic Classical Accounts*, 55-56 and 79. See also al-Mas`udi, *Murij al-Dhahab*, 91.
 33. See Maurice Lombard, *The Golden Age of Islam*, tr. Joan Spenser (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co. and New York: Oxford American Elsevier Pub. Co., 1975).
 34. While the majority of historians and biographers agree with this date, some sources mention that al-Biruni was born in 364 AH. In addition, some pronounce his name as al-Birawni or al-Bayruni instead of al-Biruni.
 35. Amin Sulayman Sidu, *Abū Rayhan al-Birūni: Dirasah `an Hayatihi wa Nitajih al-Fikri* (Riyadh: Markaz al-Malik Fa`al li al-Bu`, 1999) al-tab`ah 1, 15.
 36. *Ibid.*, 1:16-19; Ahmad Said Dimirdash, *Abū Rayhan Ahmad ibn Ahmad al-Birūni* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, 1980), 18.
 37. Al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah*, 3; Sachau, *The Chronology*, 2-3.
 38. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) is one of the leading philosophers of the Islamic tradition's golden age. The young Ibn Sina corresponded with al-Biruni. See Ramsay Right, "Preface," in al-Biruni, *The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology*, tr. R. Ramsay Right (London: Luzac & Co., 1934), iv-v. Seyyed Hossein Nasr briefly discusses the debate between Ibn Sina and al-Biruni on cosmology in his *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition*, esp. subchapter 2, "Biruni versus Ibn Sina on the Nature of the Universe."
 39. Al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah*, 16; Shacau, *The Chronology*, 15.
 40. Badr `Abd al-Rahman Muhammad, *Al-Mujtama` al-Hindi fi al-Qarnayn al-Rabi` wa al-Khamis al-Hijriyayn: Ka ma Sawwarahu al-Birūni fi Kitabihī "Tahqiq Ma li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fi al-`Aql aw Mardhūlah" al-Ma`rūf fi "Tarikh [a]l-Hind"* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlu al-Misriyyah, 1990), 8-9.
 41. For a further elaboration about the scope of al-Biruni's works, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Al-Biruni: An Annotated Bibliography* (Tehran: High Council of Culture and Art, 1973).
 42. Historians differ over al-Biruni's religious affiliation, since he does not say whether he was a Sunni or Shi'i. His identity as a Muslim can be traced to his claims of Islam's superiority over Brahmanic India. His ancestors were considered Persian, and al-Biruni is critical of the Arabs. Even so, this does not automatically mean he was a Shi'i. Concerning al-Biruni's examination in *Kitab al-Athar*, Sachau notes in his introduction to al-Biruni's works that "he reproaches the ancient Muslims with having destroyed the civilization of Eran, and gives us to understand that the ancient Arabs were certainly nothing better than the Zoroastrian Eranian." Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, xix. See also M. A. Saleem Khan, *Al-Biruni's Discovery of India: An Interpretative Study* (Denver: Jamia Hamdard and iAcademicBooks, 2001), 12. Abdus Salam Nadvi, without providing any adequate evidence or supporting argument, claims that al-Biruni was inclined to be a Shi'i, while E. S. Kennedy, in line with Sachau's

- investigation, asserts that nothing indicates that al-Biruni was affiliated to any particular Islamic sect. Khan, *Al-Biruni's Discovery*, 12-13. The latter argument has been supported by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who underlines the difficulties in determining al-Biruni's religious sincerity. Nasr reasonably notes that "the writings of Abu Rayhan do not specify in a clear manner whether he was a Sunni or a Shi'i. He writes of both parties with much knowledge and insight but rarely gives any indication that of his own preference." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 114.
43. Since his mother tongue was neither Arabic nor Persian, al-Biruni said, "writing in Arabic is more preferable for me, even though I found a better way in Persian" (*wa al-hajwu bi al-'arabiyah ahabba ilayya min al-madh bi al-fari-siyah*). See Muhammad Yusuf Zaid, "Ba'dha Jawanib min al-Thaqafat al-Biruni," in *Al-Biruni: Commemorative Volume*, ed. Said, 791-92; see also Shalahuddin al-Munjid, "Al-Biruni wa al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah," *Al-Biruni: Commemorative Volume*, 784-86; Dimirdash, *Abu Rayhan*, 18-19.
 44. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (New York, Chicago, and San Fransisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 4; Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, esp. chapter 5, "The Life, Works, and Significance of al-Biruni."
 45. Arvind Sharma elaborates on al-Biruni's technique and method in working on Hindu texts, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*. In his analysis about the correspondences between the *Bhagavad Gita* quoted by al-Biruni in the eleventh century and the *Bhagavad Gita's* present text, Sharma discovers four types of correspondences: (1) cases of both literal and ideological correspondence; (2) cases of ideological rather than literal correspondence; (3) cases of literal rather than ideological correspondence; and (4) cases of neither literal nor ideological correspondence. Arvind Sharma, *Studies in Alberuni's India*, (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1983), 9:4-74. Although Sharma gives a detailed analysis of how al-Biruni employed and quoted the *Bhagavad Gita* and has raised some critiques for al-Biruni's accuracy in doing so, Kamar Kamaruzzaman does not fully accept Sharmas' critiques. He argues that Sharma's critiques are not based on al-Biruni's original works, thus lacking an explanation about what he means by "the *Bhagavad Gita* as we know today," and out of context in reading al-Biruni's comment on Hindu sociocultural aspects during the eleventh century. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religions-wissenschaft: Work and Contribution of Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC IIUM, 2003), 72. In addition, Gonda, in his article "Remarks on al-Biruni Quotation from Sanskrit Text," discovers that al-Biruni's quotation from the *Puranas* is more accurate than al-Biruni's quotation on Sanskrit astronomical texts. See also David Pingree, "Brahmagupta, Balabhadra, Prthudaka, and al-Biruni," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 103, no. 2 (April-June, 1983): 353.
 46. Sachau, *The Chronology*, 2; Adang, *Muslim Writers*, 58-59.

47. Sultan Mahmud, under the superiority and hegemony of the Turko-Persian empire, invaded many strategic places in northern India. See Khalid Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (London and New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), 75-76; see also André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 2, *The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest 11th-13th Centuries* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997), esp. chapter 2: "The Coming of the Turks," 43-78; Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 5-7; Muhammad, *Al-Mujtama` al-Hindi*, 8.
48. Sachau, "Preface," *Alberuni's India*, xvii.
49. In describing the sources and characteristics of Hind's rivers and mountains, for instance, al-Biruni gives information of each place's mythological background and explains how they become sacred places for the local people. See, for example, Nafis Ahmad, "Some Glimpses of al-Biruni as a Geographer," in *Al-Biruni: Commemorative Volume*, 143; Ahmad Hasan Dani, *Alberuni's Indica: A Record of the Cultural History of South Asia about 1030* (Islamabad: University of Islamabad Press, 1973), chapters 2 and 3.
50. Al-Biruni, *The Book of Instruction*, vii. Concerning astrology's important position in medieval Islam, see George Saliba, "The Role of the Astrologer in Medieval Islamic Society," in Emilie Savage-Smith, *Magic and Divination in Early Islam* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, Variorum, 2004), 341-363.
51. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Qanūn al-Mas`ūdi* (Haydarabad al-Dakkan: Matba`at Majlis Da'irat al-Ma`arif al-'Uthmaniyah, 1954-56).
52. Al-Biruni on transits; a study of an Arabic treatise entitled *Tamhid al-Mustaqqarr li Tahqiq Ma'na al-Mamar*; trs. Muhammad Saffouri and Adnan Ifram, with a commentary by E. S. Kennedy (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1959); Al-Biruni, *Saydanah fi al-Tibb (Al-Biruni's Book on Pharmacy and Materia Medica)*, ed. Hakim Mohammed Said (Karachi, Hamdard Academy: 1973); Al-Biruni, *Al-Jamahir fi al-Jawahir*, ed. Yusuf al-Hadi (Iran: Sharikat al-Nashr al-'Ilmi wa-al-Thaqafi, 1995) al-Thab`ah 1; etc.
53. Guy Monnot, "Sa Vie, Ses Euvres, Son Secret," in *Shahrastani: Livre Des Religions et Des Sectes*, tr., intro., and notes by Daniel Gimaret et Guy Monnot (Paris: Peeters/UNESCO, 1984), 3
54. Muhammad Husayni Abu Sa'dah, *Al-Shahrastani wa Manhajuhu al-Naqd: Dirasah Muqaranah ma'a Ara al-Falasifah wa al-Mutakallimin* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-Jam'iyyah li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi`, 2002) al-Tab`ah al-Ula. 21-22.
55. *Ibid.*, 23.
56. Diane Steigerwald, *La Pensée Philosophique et Théologique de Shahrastani* (Canada: Le Presses de l'Université Laval: 1997), 53.
57. Al-Shahrasthani, *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (a new Arabic edition and English translation of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim ibn Ahmad al-Shahrastani's *Kitab al-Musara'ah*), trs. Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer (London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Insti-

- tute of Ismaili Studies, 2001), 3-4. See esp. the translators' "Introduction: Al-Shahrastani, Ismailism, and Philosophy."
58. Al-Shahrasthani, *Struggling with the Philosopher*, 7; Guy Monnot, "Sa Vie, Ses Euvres, Son Secret," 4.
 59. Bruce C. Lawrence, "Al-Shahrastani (1086-1153)," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), 13:199-200; Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religion*, 15. See also Steigerwald, *La Pensée Philosophique*, 59-60; Alfred Guillaume, "Introduction," in al-Shahrastani, *The Summa Philosophiae*, xi.
 60. Georges C. Anawati, "Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism," in *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. Joseph Schacht with C. E. Bosworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 362; Muhammad Khalifah Ahmad Khalifah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study in the Methodology of Saadia al-Fayyumi and Muhammad al-Shahrastani" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1976), 278.
 61. Based on this book, Guillaume opines that al-Shahrastani was a deeply religious man. Any one who reads this work, which in itself is a sufficient refutation of the calumnies of his detractors, cannot doubt the intensity of his devotion to Islam: "It would not be germane to this presentation of the author's book to discuss the gulf between the learned and uneducated Muslim which may well account for the suspicion which gathered round his memory." Guillaume, *The Summa Philosophiae*, xi.
 62. Madelung and Mayer, "Introduction: Al-Shahrastani, Ismailism, and Philosophy," 8; Steigerwald, *La Pensée Philosophique*, 66-67; Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, 100-02.
 63. Madelung and Mayer, "Introduction: Al-Shahrastani, Isma'ilism, and Philosophy," 14
 64. See al-Shahrastani, *Majlis: Discours sur l'Ordre et la Création*, tr. with intro. and notes of the last edition of Jalali Na'ini by Diane Steigerwald] (Canada: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1998); Steigerwald, *La Pensée Philosophique*, 68-69.
 65. Al-Shahrastani, *Mafatih al-Asrar wa Masabih al-Abrar* (Tehran: Center for the Publication of Manuscripts, 1989). This article uses the facsimile edition of the unique manuscript at the Library of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, which was edited by Parviz Adhkaki and contains an introduction by 'Abd al-Husayn Ha'iri.
 66. Ainslei T. Embree, "Introduction," in Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, x-xi.
 67. Jeffery, "Al-Biruni's Contribution," 126.
 68. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 3-4; Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, 1:5-7.
 69. Waardenburg, *Muslim Perception*, 33.
 70. See Bruce B. Lawrence, "Shahrastani on Indian Idol Worship," *Studia Islamica*, no. 3, (1973): 63-64.
 71. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:613. Al-Shaybani also state: "We mention these writings as we have achieved from their famous works (*wa nahnu*

- nadhkuru maqalati hawlai kama qad wajadna fi kutubihim al-mashūrah*). Muhammad ibn Nasr ibn Shalih al-Suhaibani, *Manhaj al-Shahrastani fi Kitab-ihī al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (Riyadh: Dar al-Wathan, 1417 AH), 647.
72. Lawrence, "Shahrastani on Indian Idol Worship," 29.
 73. For further investigation see Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 29. See also al-Suhaybani, *Manhaj al-Shahrastani*, 647-48.
 74. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 9; Sachau, trans., *Alberuni's India*, 1:17-19.
 75. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 4; Sachau, trans., *Alberuni's India*, 1:7.
 76. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 4; Sachau, trans., *Alberuni's India*, 1:7.
 77. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 1:12; Khalifah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution," 278. Also A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, trs., *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 9.
 78. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:593.
 79. Lawrence, "Shahrastani on Indian Idol Worship," 65.
 80. For the distinction between *functionalist* and *substantivist* in the study of religion, see Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspective*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 12-24.
 81. Jeffery, "Al-Biruni's Contribution to Comparative Religions," 128.
 82. Kamaruzzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship*, 81. See also al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 24; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:12.
 83. Kamaruzzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship*, 81, footnote 20.
 84. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 48; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:100.
 85. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 48; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:100.
 86. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 1:12.
 87. Ibid.
 88. Ibid.
 89. Khalifah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution," 285-86.
 90. Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History* (Oxford: One World, 2004), 168.
 91. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Al-Biruni as Philosopher," *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, 92. This article, which also appeared in *Al-Biruni: Commemorative Volume*, also deals with the thought of al-Biruni that causes his to be viewed as a "philosopher."
 92. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, I, 12. 40. In another context, Khalifah's findings of al-Shahrastani's categorization of religion show that the third category (laws and regulations without a scripture), applies to the Sabians, while the philosophers, Brahmins, materialists, and star worshippers are classified in the fourth category (those who do not have book, laws, or legal principles). This categorization appears because Khalifah highlights this topic in light of "sharī'ah," which can be defined as "divine law," in which the philosophers do not believe. See Khalifah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution," 288.
 93. Muhammad Kamal Ja'far, *Al-Insan wa al-Adyan: Dirasah Muqaranah* (Qatar: Dar al-Thaqafah, 1985), 142.

94. Ibid.
95. Ahmad Khalifah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution," 287.
96. Franz Rosenthal, "Al-Biruni between Greece and India," in *Biruni Symposium*, Ehsan Yarshater, ed., 5.
97. Some Muslim heresiographers have recorded the variety of Islamic theological views, such as al-Baghdadi's *Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, al-Shahrastani's *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, Ibn Hazm's *Al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa wa al-Nihal*, and al-Isfara'ini's *Al-Tabsir fi al-Din*. Unlike Christian theology, which developed systematically and was mainly the product of theoretical reflection, Islamic theology (*kalam*), for the most part, appeared as the result of political and social tensions among Muslims or between Muslims and non-Muslims. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, esp. chapters 5 and 10; Madjid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," in *Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 6.
98. Jeffery, "Al-Biruni's Contribution, 137.
99. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 60; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:124.
100. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 59; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:123.
101. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 58; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:121.
102. In this case, "the educated believers" or the elites (*al-khawass*) al-Biruni means those Hindu scholars or theologians who can "conceive abstract ideas and define general principles (*yunazi'u al-ma'qul wa yuqsadu al-tahqiq fi al-usul*)," while "the uneducated believers" are the common and ordinary people (*al-'ammah*). Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 13; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:27; Muhammad Murad, *Al-Biruni Faylasūfa*, 48.
103. To support his conclusion as to the educated believers' theological conception, al-Biruni, quotes some verses from Hindu texts, primarily the *Yogasutra*, the *Bhagvata Gita*, and the *Samkhya*. Some scholars have discovered al-Biruni's intellectual contribution, such as in his direct citation of original Hindu texts. First, he introduced the Hindu belief system as directly reflected by Hindu texts to his fellow Muslim. This contribution of interfaith discourse and comparative religion can be traced to when he translated the *Yogasutra* and the *Samkhya* into Arabic. The former consists of "the emancipation of the soul from the fetters of the body (*wa takhlis al-nafs min ribath al-badan*)"; the latter describes "the origins and a description of all created beings (*fi al-mabadi wa sifat al-mawjudat*)." According to al-Biruni, these two books might represent the elements of the Hindus' worldviews. See al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 4; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 8. See also Pines Shlomo and Tuvia Gelblum, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra: A Translation of the Fourth Chapter and a Comparison with Related Text," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (University of London) 52, no. 2 (1989).
104. Interestingly, al-Biruni goes further by theoretically explaining idolatry's origin as a deviation from "the right path." The veneration of idols or temples continues because people find it difficult to comprehend abstract matters. In addition, they forget the history of why such idols or temples were built. Above

- all, such a phenomena is the result of a natural human tendency to commemorate one's ancestors. Al-Biruni clarifies: "This is the cause which leads to the manufacture of idols, monuments in honour of certain much venerated persons, prophets, sages, angels, destined to keep a live their memory when they are absent or dead, to create for them a lasting place of grateful veneration in the heart of men when they die. But when much time passes by after the setting up of the monument, generations and centuries, its origin is forgotten; it becomes a matter of custom, and its veneration a rule for general practice." Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 53-54; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:111-12.
105. To support his insight on the variety of theological doctrines, al-Biruni makes a theological and a philosophical comparison between religious traditions by highlighting the term *God* semantically and conceptually in Greek, Arabic, Hebrew/Syriac, and Sanskrit, as well as applying each concept in the discourse of idol worship and anthropomorphic notions. His account implies that the variety of the concept of God in every tradition, at least within major religious traditions, have been generated by the differences in the scope of linguistic concepts applying to God. Al-Biruni, *Kitab al-Hind*, 16-19; Sachau, tr., *Alberuni's India*, 1:31-37.
 106. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:601-02; Lawrence, *Al-Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 48-50.
 107. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:604-11; Lawrence, *Al-Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 50-59.
 108. See also their discussion on Sabianism; al-Biruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah*, 244; Sachau, tr., *Chronology*, 188; al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:281-345. For a comparison, see also Jane Dammen McAulife, "Exegetical Identification of the Sabiun," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (April 1982): 95-99; Christopher Buck, "The Identity of the Sabiun," *The Muslim World*, 76, nos. 3-4 (July-October 1986): 173-74; see also J. Waardenburg, "World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam," in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. A. Welch and P. Cachia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 248; Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 109.
 109. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:611; Lawrence, *Al-Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 58-59. See also al-Suhaybani, *Manhaj al-Shahrastani*, 636.
 110. Al-Shahrastani, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, 2:594; Lawrence, *Al-Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 40-41; also his *Kitab al-Nihayat al-Iqdam*, 428; Guillaume, *The Summa Philosophiae*, 137.
 111. See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13.