

BIRUNI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT: *Abū al-Rayhān Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī is a pioneer in the study of comparative religion. He born 5 September 973 in Kath of Khwarezm and died 13 December 1048 in Ghazni. This artical focuses Al-Biruni's Contribution to Comparative Religion which is one of the outstanding achievement of his thought. Our study is informative and suggestive, especially based on his two famous books `kitab al-athar` (999) and `kitab al-hind` (1030). He wrote Kitab al-Athar mainly to satisfy his curiosity as to why different people used different cylindrical systems. And also clarify why certain nations preferred certain times and events for their festivals and commemoration days. In addition, this book pays great attention to festivals of various civilizations. 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. He provides in this book a detailed account of Indian life, religions, languages, and cultures and includes many observations on geography. Both Kitab al-Hind and Kitab al-Athar also include material on other religious communities, primarily the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Although Biruni's knowledge of Hind's civilization grew rapidly while he served Mahmud in northern India. 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. He suggests five inportent elements to understand its people's religious life. these are : the main Indian language (Sanskrit), major religious treatises, religious attitudes, their customs, and the Hindus' attitudes toward others. Al-Biruni divides Hindus into an educated and an uneducated class. He describes the educated as monotheistic, believing that God is one, eternal, and omnipotent and eschewing all forms of idol worship. He recognizes that uneducated Hindus worshipped a multiplicity of idols yet points out that even some Muslims (such as the Jabiriyya) have adopted anthropomorphic concepts of God. He collected a lot of data about Buddhish cosmology from Abu Sahl `Abd al-Mun'im ibn `Ali ibn Nuh al-Tiflisi Zurqan, and Abu al-`Abbas al-Iranshahr. Biruni studied more about Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Manichaeism Greek religion, Judaism, Christianity, Sabeans, Khawarizmians, Arabian paganism and Islam. He explain religions objectively and tried hard to understand them on their own terms. Biruni expresses his thought in three Methods. Phenomenological Method, Dialogical Method and Comparative Method. In order to those methods we have tried to express his religious view elaborately.*

key word : Biruni, comparative religion, Kitab al-Hind, Kitab al-Athar, Hinduism, Monotheism, polytheism, methods, philosophy.

Introduction: Mediaeval Muslim age, a period of philosophical development this began in the 2nd century AH of the Islamic calendar (early 9th century CE) and ended until the 6th century AH (late 12th century CE). The period was known as the Islamic Golden Age. During this time, Indian, Asyriac, Iranian and Greek knowledge was translated into Arabic. These translations became a wellspring for scientific advances, by scientists from the Islamic

civilization, during the middle Ages. Scientists within the Islamic civilization were of diverse ethnicities. Most were Persians, Arabs, Moors, Assyrians, and Egyptians. They were also from diverse religious backgrounds. The achievements of this period had a crucial influence in the development of modern philosophy and science. 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” (Rosenthal¹¹, 1973:p 546). For example, from the eighth to tenth centuries, Muslim historians, geographers, and travelers focused on seven great ancient civilizations: the Persians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Egyptians, Turks, Indians, and Chinese. In this period Al-Biruni was well known as a pioneer in the study of comparative religion. I used here his famous book *Tahqiq Ma li al-Hind min Maq’lah Maqb’lah fi al-`Aql al-Mardh’lah*⁶ and *Kitab al-Athar al-Baqiyah ‘an al-Qur’n al-Khaliyah* and tried to present his religious view elaborately.

Biography and works: Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Khwarizm¹ was emerged as a famous scholar of Central Asia, Pakistan and India. He was also a prolific writer. His writings covered the areas of history, philosophy, society, culture, astronomy, mathematics, geography and others. The available literature does not agree on when and where Al-Biruni was bornⁱⁱ. There is no any historical record of his burial place. But some scholars mentioned that, he was born in 973 A.D. in Khawarizm, near modern Khiva in Uzbekistan, and died in 1048 A.D. probably in Ghaznah, today’s Afghanistan (G. Allana⁴, 149:1979). 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 (Sidu¹⁷, 1999: p 15), religious life, or childhood. His first teacher was an unknown Greek scholar. Afterward, he studied with `Abd al-Samad ibn `Abd al-Samad, who introduced him to scientific knowledge. He learnt astronomy and mathematics from his teacher Abu Nasr Mansurⁱⁱⁱ, who was a member of the royal family at Kath. Al-Biruni made several observations with a meridian ring at Kath in his youth. In 995 A.D. Jurjani ruler attacked Kath and drove Al-Biruni into exile in ‘Ray’ in Iran. There he remained for some time and exchanged his observations with Al-Khujandi^{iv}, a famous astronomer. Biruni later discussed about it in his work ‘*Tahdid*’. In 997 A.D. Al-Biruni returned to Kath, where he observed a lunar eclipse that Abu al-Wafa observed in Baghdad. On the basis of his observation he invented time difference between Kath and Baghdad. In the next few years he visited the Samanid court at Bukhara and Isfahan of Gilan and collected a lot of information for his research work.

At the age of twenty, he traveled to Jurjan (Hyrcania) and met Abu Sahl ‘Isa al-Masih^v, an astronomer and physician. In addition, he was trained by Abu al-Wafa’ a.k.a. Nasr ibn `Ali ibn `Iraq al-Jabali (Dimirdash², 1980:p 18), an astronomer and mathematician. Al-Biruni lived in Jurjan for many years and enjoyed the protection of Kabus ibn Washmgir Shams al-Ma’ali^{vi}, 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-Qur’n al-Khaliyah*. (Al-biruni¹, 2001:p2-3). 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 AD. Mahmud^{vii} 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^{viii} and Abu Nasr ibn `Iraq^{ix}. Mahmud also attempted to bring Abu Sahl `Isa al-Masih and Abu `Ali ibn Sina^x; however, they had already escaped Jurjan and Khwarizm (Right¹⁰, 1934: preface).

ⁱ He is also known as Al-Biruni, some pronounce his name as al-Birawni or al-Bayruni instead of al-Biruni.

ⁱⁱ Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni*, 17; F.A. Shamsi mentions fourteen different views on Al-Biruni’s birth date and place. For a detailed discussion of the subject, see F.A. Shamsi, "Abu Al-Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Bayruni 362/973-CA.443/1051," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 260-288.

ⁱⁱⁱ 960-1036 A.D

^{iv} 940-1000 A.D

^v He died in a dust storm in the deserts of Khwarezmia in 999–1000 CE

^{vi} 997-1012

^{vii} 971-1030

^{viii} 942-1017 A.D

^{ix} 970-1037

^x 980-1037

Al-Biruni was then sent to the region near Kabul where he established his observatory. (Encyclopedia³, 1937:p578) Later he was deputed to the study of religion and people of Kabul, Peshawar, and Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan and other areas of Pakistan and India under the protection of an army regiment. Biruni began studying languages at an early age because for him, language was one of the key elements for comparative study. Since Khawarizmian was his mother language, he was able to communicate well in both the Arabic and Persian languages. Later in his life he learned Sanskrit, Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew. (Kennedy⁶, 1989: p 155) His command of Sanskrit reached a point where, with the aid of pundits, he was able to translate some Indian books into Arabic, and Arabic books into Sanskrit, as Al-Biruni himself informs us. (Sachau¹², 1958: p 7)

By this extraordinary skill, he wrote about 180 books in Arabic and Persian languages. Of these 103 were published in his own lifetime, 12 were completed after his death in his name by Abu Nasr, 12 by Abu Sahl and one by Abu Ali al-Hassan b. Ali Djili, thus making a total of 138, few have survived the test of time. (The Encyclopedia of Islam, 1954-2005: p 1237) after the death of Sultan Mahmud in 1030 AD, he completed his *Kitab al-Hind*, where he elaborately expressed his comparative religious thought.

He wrote *Kitab al-Athar* (390/999 AD) 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. (Sachau¹³, 1879: p 2) In addition, this book pays great attention to various civilizations' festivals. In his *Kitab al-Athar*, al-Biruni collects information on various civilizations' calendrical systems, which are related to religious events. The festivals and feast days, religious traditions, calendrical systems of the Jews, Persians, Christians, pre-Islamic Arabs, Sabians, and Muslims were the main topics of *Kitab al-Athar*. He discusses about them from two points of view. Some of the topics are discussed by astronomical and astrological views. Other topics are elaborated upon the religious events and festivals in various religious traditions. He tries in this book to observe the chronology of ancient nations, but he provides no proper method of classification. For the most part, the topics of discussion are collected from festivals or religious events. He finds the similarities and differences of traditions, religious institutions, and opinions within various groups or nations. On basis of them he presents a wide-ranging discussion of the divisions of religious festivals. We may also say that, this book is written from his aspects as an astronomer, astrologer, and geographer, and not especially as a religionist. So he didn't discuss elaborately the significant types of each religious traditions and theological doctrines in his *Kitab al-Athar*.

In this book he points out that, the beginning of the Muslim era *al-Hijra* corresponded with the first of Ramadan according to the pre-Islamic calendar. He calculates that exactly 3472 days had elapsed between *al-Hijrah* and Yezdgerd. He informs us that the ancient Arabs had learnt the system of inter-collation from the Jews of Yathrab 200 years before the Prophet's migration to Medina. They fixed seasons for the pilgrimage of Mecca as well as the marketing days and festivals. In the year of the Prophet's migration, the pilgrimage fell in *Sha'ban*, and so the Prophet did not like to perform it and restored it to its ancient position after the conquest of Mecca. It is also notable that according to al-Biruni, the Prophet died on the 8th of *Rabi'ul Awwal*, and not on the 12th as it is generally believed now. He calculated that nine years, eleven months and twenty days had elapsed since the date of his migration. He also points out that the Jews and Christians are very much differed in calculation the date of Adam's birth. He wrote that it was not possible to assign any exact date for the remote events for which no reliable reports were available. On the other hand like our modern Geologists, he believed that very long periods of time were needed to account for the past history of the Earth. (Sachau¹³, 1879: p 20)

His brief scrutiny in his *Kitab al-Athar* about the Indians' lunar system (*sami`tu anna al-hind, yasta`mil`na ru`yat alahillah fi shuh`rihim*) indicates that he was well informed with aspects of Indian civilization. (Sachau¹³, 1879: p 15) · 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. He analyzed Hind's religious traditions closely and conducted field observation in certain Indian regions. He referred to Zurqan and Iranshahri, both of whom provided a lot of data about Buddhist cosmology. He discussed at least twelve religions and religious communities. 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*. He did this because Buddhism probably had disappeared from northern India by that time (the end of the eleventh century). (Waardenburg¹⁹, 1999: p 33) ·

On the other hand, *Kitab al-Hind* (1030 AD) is based on his journey to Hind while Mahmud (998-1030) was setting up his political institutions in northern India. (Nizami⁹, 1961: p 75-76) · Although al-Biruni was a part of Mahmud's mission, but 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.”(Sachau¹², 1958:p 7). Thus, *Kitab al- Hind* presents wide descriptions of Indian culture, including its scholars’ scientific knowledge of cosmology and astronomy. Both *Kitab al-Hind* and *Kitab al-Athar* have different aspects. As *Kitab al-Hind* offers a precise analysis of Hind’s religious traditions. On the other hand *Kitab al-Athar* includes material on other religious communities, primarily the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. In addition, both books deal with different subjects, which are used as complementary. (Saliba¹⁵, 2004: p 341-363)

Biruni’s Method Of Studying Other Religions:In contrast, al-Biruni offers a more detailed explanation about his methodological approach. He suggests five important elements to understand Hindu’s people’s religious life. These are: the main Indian language (Sanskrit), major religious treatises, religious attitudes, their customs, and the Hindu’s attitudes toward others. Moreover, in *Kitab al-Hind* al-Biruni announce himself as a dispassionate scholar who seeks to study other religions as they are. In his introductory comments, 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).” (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p7)

This dispassionate attitude is a major reason to consider him as a distinguished scholar and religious historian of his time. For example as a Muslim believer, he remarks about Hindu belief system:

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. (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p7)

Al-Biruni used a comparative method in *Kitab al-Hind* and *Kitab al-Athar*. He investigated of Hind’s religious tradition and compared its theological and philosophical thought with the classical Greek religions, Christianity, Judaism. He also gave a conclusion of comparative method by applying critical insight, a careful outlook, and an accurate stance in looking at one or more religious traditions. About 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. (Jeffery⁵, 1951: p 128)

A dialogical method also found in` *Kitab al-Hind*’. Al-Biruni wrote *Kitab al-Hind* to helping those who wished to enter into dialogue with Hindus. According to Al-Biruni, dialogue with Hindus was necessary since there were many intricate and obscure subjects, which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between Muslims and Hindus. (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p17)

Since Abu Sahlⁱ shared Al-Biruni’s judgment on this matter, as stated in the preface of *Kitab al-Hind*: “He asked Al-Biruni to write what he knew about the Hindus "as a help to those who wanted to discuss religious questions with them (Hindus), and as a repertory of information to those who want to associate with them”. (Sachau¹²,1958:p 547) " This can be explain as that there were people in Muslim society who tried to discussion

ⁱ Abu Sahl must have been one of Al-Biruni’s teachers. Al-Biruni tells us that he (Abu Sahl) too studied the current literature on Hinduism and found that the scholars were biased when it came to describing the religion of the Hindus. He then asked Al-Biruni to write what he knew about the Hindu culture, religion, and science as he was the best qualified to do so.

with Hindus in matters of religion, science, philosophy, and so on. In *Kitab al-Hind* he makes a discourse between Jews, Persians, Christians, pre-Islamic Arabs, Sabians.

Al-Biruni used a phenomenological method in his *Kitab al-Hind*. The phenomenology of religion concerns the experiential aspect of religion, describing religious phenomena in terms consistent with the orientation of the worshippers. It views religion as being made up of different components, and studies these components across religious traditions so that an understanding of them can be gained.(see wikipedia.org). It focuses on research question, such as what it is like to experience a particular situation. There is a distinction to be made between phenomenology (which is a philosophical school) and phenomenological methods (which is an approach to research). Phenomenology has roots in both philosophy and psychology. The scholar who has been most influential in the philosophy of phenomenology is Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Husserl emphasized the centrality of the human context in understanding life; that is, researchers and readers of research can understand human experience because they are participants in the human condition. Thus the task of understanding is to retain continuity with what is already experientially evident and familiar to us as humans. Husserl developed the concept of the life world (Lebenswelt) which refers to the everyday experiences that we live.(sagepub.com)

This position is stated in the very beginning of Al-Biruni's book, *Kitab al-Hind*. where he states clearly that his book was not polemical, and that he was interested to explain Hindu religion as they presented it by them. Al-Biruni says:

I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them, as I believe to be in the wrong. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them. (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p7)

In other words, Al-Biruni attempts to understand the Hindu culture in its own terms, letting the subject matter (*Sache*) speak for itself, The concern to record facts as they are, without any prejudgments. This is one of the most significant aspects of Al-Biruni's methodology. (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p7)

Al-Biruni too concerns himself with the phenomena, but he is also interested to finding out what lies behind appearances by paying special attention to the historical-cultural context. He explains religions objectively and tried hard to understand them on their own terms. Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions presupposes, first of all, a genuine willingness to see truth and value in other cultures, without being forced to insist that there are universal truths in all religious traditions or, like a radical pluralist, that all cultures are equally valid in their religious and social expressions. Rather, what Al-Biruni seems to be arguing is that there is a common human element in every culture that makes all cultures distant relatives, however foreign they might seem one to another? (Rosenthal¹¹, 1976:p10) Hence, Bruce Lawrence comments that Al-Biruni must have "postulated a pattern of human conduct, belief and relationship to the natural environment that was the same among Indians as among other civilized peoples."(Lawrence⁷, 1976: p 31) This is the main argument that underlies Al-Biruni's whole project. This theme is discernible in the passages on *India* where Al-Biruni compares and contrasts the views and customs of different cultures.

Monotheistic and polytheistic view of different religion:From investigations, we see that each religion has a philosophical dimension and a popular manifestation. For the elites, the religious tradition is monotheistic, is monotheistic as like other religious communities, especially to defining the concept of the Highest Being (God). But at the popular level, the iconographic representation and figurative symbols (e.g., idols or statues) is also expressed in other religious traditions. In his 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. States al-Biruni, "and worshipped them under the names of the stars and the highest substances. 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.' (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p7);

In those books, Al-Biruni investigated elaborately about Hindus' monotheistic or polytheistic tendencies and compared it with Sabians'ⁱ theological concept. Before analyzing Hindu's religious tradition, he discussed other religions. Biruni wrote *Kitab al-Hind* after *Kitab al-Athar*; there he focuses on the history of religion and religious rituals/festivals, This also can be seen in his discussion of Sabianism. Al Biruni presents data about several ancient religious communities that Muslim scholars have considered to Sabian. Biruni does not connect the Hindus directly with the Sabians, as a religious community that allegedly had a monotheistic inclination. He sees that Hinduism is monotheistic in nature. 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. 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. (Rosenthal¹¹, 1973: p 546) .

As a believing Muslim, he simply welcomed certain differences among different peoples. In other words, he believed that "God has created the world as containing many differences in itself," (Morgenstern⁸, 1973: p 6) and these differences should be welcomed. For prove his argument, he attempted to explore some of the most disputed issues, such as God, polytheism,ⁱⁱ creation, caste system and so on, in different cultures.

Al-Biruni begins his treatment of Hindu religion and philosophy by a definition of their concept of God as understood by the educated people.

The Hindus believe with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free-will, all-wise, almighty, living, giving life, ruling, preserving; one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything nor does anything resemble him... (Jeffery⁵,1951:p 129)

According to Al-Biruni what the educated Hindus believe about God.ⁱⁱⁱ As for the uneducated class, Al-Biruni finds most of their views on the concept of God are simply worthless. But he argues that, similar errors also occur in other religious traditions. He specifically refers to Islam, criticizing what he calls the anthropomorphic doctrines and teachings of the *Jabriyya* sect, for instance. (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p 31-32)

The discussion of the concept of God is closely related to the much-discussed issue of the Indian idol worshipping (*Shirk*). It is well known, idol worshipping is considered to be the greatest sin in Islam^{iv} and Muslims had regarded Hindus as idol worshippers, at least in the theological language. Although there was no clear reference to the Hindu religion in the Qur'an, Al-Biruni attached Quranic term " *the mushrikun* " to Hindus.

ⁱ The **Sabians** (arabic:صابئة) of Middle eastern tradition are a variety of monotheistic : Gnostic (Mandeans), (*Harranian*) as well as Abrahamic religions mentioned three times in the Quran with the people of the Book, "the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians".^[1]In the *hadith*, they are described merely as converts to Islam,^[2] but interest in the identity and history of the group increased over time, and discussions and investigations about the Sabians begin to appear in later Islamic literature

ⁱⁱ Polytheism is a religious construct and a type of theism. Within theism, it contrasts with monotheism, the belief in a singular God. Polytheists do not always worship all the gods equally, but can be henotheists, specializing in the worship of one particular deity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Instead of commenting on the possible differences between the Islamic concept of God and the Supreme Being of the Hindus, Al-Biruni quotes extensively from the Hindu literature, notably from *Patanjali*, *Gita* and *Samkhya* to give a correct definition of the Hindu concept of God as it is described in their own literature. However, even a superficial analysis will reveal the fact that Al-Biruni seems to avoid deliberately the subtler theological discussions-discussions about the nature of personal versus impersonal God in Hindu and Islamic theologies. See *India*, 27-30; *Tahqiq*, 20-22.

^{iv} The Qur'an reads explicitly that shirk is the one sin that God will not forgive (Qur'an, 4:48, 116); paradise will be absolutely denied to a person who is guilty of this sin (Qur'an, 5:72).

He is aware about that idol worshipping is abominable. He argues that, all the Hindus are not idol-worshippers. With this argument Al-Biruni has the educated class in mind. About this classification he writes:

"Those who march on the path to liberation or those who study philosophy and theology and who desire abstract truth, which they call sara, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone and never would dream of worshipping an image to represent him." (Sachau¹⁴, Edward, 2002: p113)

For uneducated class, Al-Biruni admits that:

The majority of the Hindu people, who are uneducated, may be regarded as idol-worshippers although he is hesitant to label them with that derogatory term. However, he attempts to justify the beliefs and actions of uneducated people, who have an "aversion to the world of abstract thought which is only understood by the highly educated."(Sachau¹², 1958: p 84)

About creating idol Al-Biruni argues that:

certain cultures create idols initially not to worship them, but to honor certain venerated persons or places to keep their memory alive when they are absent or dead, or, more importantly, to meditate on an invisible, imperceptible God. With the passage of time, however, the origin of, and the reason for, setting up these idols are forgotten, becoming a matter of custom, and the veneration of the idols becomes a rule for general practice. This disposition is deeply rooted, according to Al-Biruni, not only in the nature of the common people of India, but also in the nature of all uneducated human beings in every culture including Islam.(Sachau¹²,2002: p112)

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. In his argument, Hinduism indicates a monotheistic tendency. Monotheism is not the only theological desire among Hindu philosophers, since there is also a pantheisticⁱ mystical view.

To represent his argument, Al-Biruni gave an example that, if a picture of the Prophet of Islam or of the Ka'ba were made and were shown to an uneducated man or woman, he or she would kiss the picture, throw him or herself before it. He or she were not seeing the picture but seeing what the picture represented. In other words, although the actions and attitudes of these imaginary actors may apparently look like idol worshipping, in reality these people would never dream of worshipping any but God alone. The same can be said, Al-Biruni seems to suggest, for the practices of the uneducated people in Hindu society. (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p111)

In this context, Al-Biruni compares the custom of idol worshipping among Hindus to the old Hellenistic belief that the images or representations of divine beings have no magical power. Since, the ancient Greeks, "considered the idols as mediators between themselves and the First Cause, and worshipped them under the names of different stars and the highest substances." (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p123). In other words, people do not worship these images as deities; they rather function only as reminders for the non-philosophical pious man and woman of existence of the divine. In this context Al-Biruni gave the example of "heathen Arabs" and argued, they worshipping idols hoping that they (idols) would mediate for them with God.

Moreover, from this categorization of educated and uneducated Hindu, we may draw some theoretical notes as that, why and how, according to al-Biruni, a monotheistic view can diverge from a 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. (Shlomo¹⁶, Gelblum, 1989: p52) His conclusion that the

ⁱ **Pantheism** is the belief that the universe (or nature as the totality of everything) is identical with divinity, or that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent God. Pantheists thus do not believe in a distinct personal or anthropomorphic god. Eastern religions are often considered to be pantheistical inclined.

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" also generate the "deviation." Human beings have a tendency to decode such figurative objects as "supernatural," "God," "angel," and "demon".

Defining tradition and religion: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*). He also recognizes that castes or colors (Sans. *varna*; Ar. *alwan*). "We Muslims," al-Biruni states, "stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal, except in piety (*taqwa*)." (Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p 100)

He also mentions a sort of caste system found in ancient Persia that bears certain similarities to caste system of Hind. For example, Ardhasir ben Babak divided the following social hierarchy: the knights (*al-usawirah*) and princes (*abna' almul 'k*); 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-'ul'm*); and, finally, the farmers or peasants (*al-zarra'i*) and artisans (*al-sunna'i*). Sachau¹⁴, 2002: p100) 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.

This, according to Al-Biruni, was inconsistent with the ethical framework provided by the Scriptures of both Christianity and Islam. He illustrates his argument by referring to the Qur'an and the Bible respectively. The Qur'an reads, "Speak the truth, even if it were against you."ⁱ In a similar vein it is stated in the Bible that "Do not mind the fury of kings in speaking the truth before them. They only possess your body, but they have no power over your soul"ⁱⁱ It is therefore safe to argue that it was religious and ethical concerns, more than anything else that led Al-Biruni to study other cultures from a comparative perspective.

Thus, towards the end of *India*, he says, "We ask God to pardon us for every statement of ours which is not true," acknowledging the fact that as human beings we see the world through the lenses provided to us by the society and culture in which we find ourselves.

Conclusion: Al-Biruni presents a large number of data about several ancient religious communities, history of religion, religious rituals/festivals in his both book *kitab al-athar* and *kitab al-hind*. 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. 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. 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 is also constructed by the structure of a given society's language 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.

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ⁱ Qur'an: 4, 134;

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