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AL-BIRUNI AND THE STUDY OF
NON-ISLAMIC RELIGIONS

by

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In the Al-Bīrūnī Commemoration Volume published by the Iran Society of Calcutta in 1951 there is an article of nearly forty pages (pp.125-160) by the late Arthur Jeffery of New York entitled 'Al-Bīrūnī's Contribution to Comparative Religion'. Jeffery concludes by suggesting that 'in this field of the sciences of the spirit' al-Bīrūnī's contribution to learning was possibly greater than 'in the field of the more exact sciences'. 'It is rare until modern times,' he says, 'to find so fair and unprejudiced a statement of the views of other religions, so earnest an attempt to study them in the best sources, and such care to find a method which for this branch of study would be both rigorous and just.' (160) In the course of the article he first describes al-Bīrūnī's method, of which the sentence just quoted summarizes the main features, and then gives some account of his treatment of special topics, like idols and demons, and of his views on Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions. In the present lecture it would be pointless to repeat what has already been very competently done by Jeffery. I am in general agreement with what Jeffery has said, and my remarks here must therefore be understood as complementary to his study in so far as they extend the discussion to further aspects of the general subject.

In the period of about a quarter of a century since the writing of the article the very concept of 'Comparative Religion' has been falling into disfavour. This does not mean that the discipline so described is ceasing to be practised; on the contrary it is rather increasing. As it develops, however, it is being subtly transformed by a number of factors beyond the control of its practitioners; and in consequence most of these practitioners feel that the designation 'comparative religion' is no longer suitable, since 'comparing religions' is now a small part of what they are doing. The old name lingers on, however, in some quarters, because there is no agreement on a replacement. The commonest alternatives, 'history of religions' and 'religious studies', are too wide.

It must not be supposed that this is a mere hair-splitting argument about names, of the type so dear to the academic mind. The discipline itself has been radically changed, especially by two factors: firstly, the greatly increased amount of printed material available, and secondly, the still greater increase in contacts between adherents of different religions, meeting one another as social equals. The term 'comparative religion' conjures up the picture of a late-nineteenth-century scholar sitting in his study with shelves of books and learning from these practically all that was to be known about half a dozen or more religions.

This is no longer possible, for the amount of material is such that virtually no scholar is able to become an expert on more than one religion besides that which he practises. It is of course still desirable to have scholars who can discourse acceptably about half a dozen religions, but those who do so would be the first to admit that their knowledge of each of these religions is relatively slight.

The late-nineteenth-century scholar was also in the position of hardly ever meeting adherents of the religions about which he wrote or visiting the countries where they were practised. He could scarcely avoid being inaccurate here and there, but it was unlikely that anyone professing the particular faith would read what he had written and correct it. Now all this has changed. Ease of travel has made contacts possible between the religions at many different levels, from the Asian student who goes to Europe or America to work for a doctorate to the European or American 'hippie' who comes to Asia seeking spiritual enlightenment. A scholar who writes on Islam in English must expect to have his books read and his statements checked by dozens of well-educated Muslims. One of the popular ways of describing this situation is to say that we live in an age of 'dialogue'.

The first thing to be noted about al-Bīrūnī's study of religions is that, while on the one hand he made comparisons between them, he was also living in a world in which 'dialogue' was taking place. In the introduction to his India (7/4) he says that his master Abū-Sahl at-Tiflīsī 'incited me to write down what I know about the Hindus as a help to those who want to discuss religious questions with them, and as a repertory of information to those who want to associate with them'. At the conclusion of the whole book he refers again to the possibility of 'dialogue'. 'We think now that what we have related in this book will be sufficient for anyone who wants to converse with the Hindus, and to discuss with them questions of religion, science or literature, on the very basis of their own civilisation.' He was also alive to the fact that statements about a religion would be open to the criticism of its adherents, and insisted that a scholar must be 'alive to the requirements of a strictly scientific method' and must not be content with 'some superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherents of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it' (6/4). In these respects, then, it may be claimed that al-Bīrūnī had gone beyond the Comparative Religion of the late nineteenth century.

Another contemporary trend in this discipline, especially among those concerned with religious education, is the attempt to discern a unity in the total religious experience of mankind and to present this to others. Something of this trend is also to be found in al-Bīrūnī. Although he is admirably objective and unprejudiced in his presentation of facts, this does not mean that he has no views of his own. On the contrary he selects facts in such a way that he makes a strong case for holding that there is a certain unity in the religious experience of the peoples he considers, even though he does not appear to formulate this view explicitly. His view is implicit, however, in such statements as that 'all peoples understand by the punishment of Hell the most dreadful things which are known to them' (67/33).

At the centre of al-Bīrūnī's view of the unity of religions is a distinction between the beliefs of the ordinary men and those of the intellectual minority. Thus he says: 'The belief of educated and uneducated people differs in every nation; for the former strive to conceive abstract ideas and to define general principles, whilst the latter do not pass beyond the apprehension of the senses, and are content with derived rules, without caring for details, especially in questions

of religion and law, regarding which opinions and interests are divided' (27/13). In respect of the application of family relationships to divine beings he says: 'the educated among the Hindus abhor anthropomorphisms of this kind, but the crowd and the members of the single sects use them most extensively' (39/19). On the basis of this distinction al-Bīrūnī identifies Hinduism with the beliefs of the educated, and is therefore able to describe it as a pure monotheism. 'The Hindus believe with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free-will, almighty, all-wise, 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' (27/13). He justifies this assertion by quotations from Hindu texts.

In his chapter on the sources of religious and civil law he notes that the Greeks and Hindus received their laws from sages or kings, and he further notes that the Greeks, including Plato in the Laws, thought that the law-givers were divinely inspired. Al-Bīrūnī does not speak of divine inspiration in the case of the Hindus, but tells a somewhat scandalous story to prove that their laws have in fact been changed and are not, as their scholars contend, immutable. He concludes the chapter

by emphasizing that the institutions of Islam are vastly superior to the foul customs and usages he has just described.

His treatment of idols is interesting. As one would expect, he regards the worship of idols as exclusively a characteristic of the common people, with which the educated have nothing to do. He holds that the practice is due to a kind of confusion or corruption. In this he follows a Greek theory - he quotes the case of Galen and Asclepius (35/16f.) - and applies it universally, asserting that the physical images are 'monuments in honour of certain much venerated persons, prophets, sages, angels, destined to keep alive their memory when they are absent or dead, to create for them a lasting place of grateful veneration in the hearts of men when they die' (111/53). He then goes on to maintain that in the course of generations the origin of the veneration of the images is forgotten, and further that the ancient legislators, seeing that the veneration of images is advantageous, made it obligatory for the ordinary people. He mentions the view of some people that, before God sent prophets, all mankind were idol-worshippers, but he apparently does not accept this view. He presumably held that, apart from the messages transmitted by prophets, men could know the existence and unity of God by the rational methods of philosophy.

So far as the ordinary people go, then, there are differences from religion to religion between the idols, forms of worship and moral rules. What makes it possible for al-Bīrūnī to regard the religious experience of mankind as essentially one is his insistence on the cleavage in respect of religion between the masses and the educated minority, whom he tends to identify with the philosophers. He expresses himself as follows:

> The heathen Greeks, before the rise of Christianity, held much the same opinions as the Hindus; their educated classes thought much the same as those of the Hindus; their common people held the same idolatrous views as those of the Hindus. (24/12)

After a remark to the effect that he is not trying to correct these views, since heathenism, as a deviation from the truth, cannot be corrected, he continues:

> The Greeks, however, had philosophers who, living in their country, discovered and worked out for them the elements of science, not of popular superstition, for it is the object of the upper classes to be guided by the results of science, whilst the common crowd will always be inclined to plunge into wrong-headed wrangling, as long as they are not kept down by fear of punishment.... (He gives Socrates and the crowd as an example of

his point.) The Hindus had no men of this stamp both capable and willing to bring sciences to a classical perfection. Therefore you mostly find that even the so-called scientific theorems of the Hindus are in a state of utter confusion... (24-5/12)

This last remark is probably intended to apply to the sciences of the Hindus in a limited sense and not to their philosophy, for in other places it is made clear that there are educated Hindus who engage in philosophical studies and who, like the Greek philosophers, believe in one God.

> For those (sc. among the Hindus) who march on the path to liberation, or those who study philosophy and theology, and who desire abstract truth which they call <u>sāra</u>, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent him. (113/54)

His statement of what he regards as the central Hindu belief in monotheism has already been quoted. In short, the Hindus, no less than the Greeks, have philosophers who are believers in monotheism.

In the course of these remarks it will have become clear that al-Bīrūnī, in his conception of the religious experience of mankind, was greatly influenced by Greek philosophy. This is not at all

surprising. In other papers of this conference we have heard of his great achievements in science; and this means that he must have read all the Greek scientific books available in Arabic before proceeding to make his own contributions. Greek philosophy was grouped together with the sciences in such a way that anyone who studied the sciences was bound to study philosophy. According to Edward Sachau in the preface to his translation of al-Bīrūnī's India (p.xii), over a dozen Greek authors are mentioned in it, and for some of them several books are named. Thus he was both well-versed in Greek thought and also sympathetic to the Greek standpoint. It is in line with this that he should for a time have been in correspondence with Ibn-Sīnā. On the other hand, there is nothing to show that he fully accepted the Neoplatonism of men like al-Fārābī and Ibn-Sīnā; it is unlikely that he could have been deeply influenced by the latter, who was seven years his junior, but he had doubtless heard of al-Fārābī. It is possible, however, that his sympathies for Greek philosophy were balanced by some degree of sympathy for Ismā'īlism. In the biography in the Irshād of Yāqūt (vi.310f.) it is stated that he was suspected of Qarmaṭian views; and in his own India (64/32) he quotes an Ismā'īlite writer, Abū-Ya'qūb as-Sijzī (GALS, i.323; GAS, i.574), on the subject of metempsychosis. Ismā'īlism, in addition to its interest in

Greek philosophy, was characterized by a positive attitude towards other religions, though it also claimed to supersede them.

Another small point to notice in this connection is that al-Bīrūnī regards the Ṣūfīs, to whom he refers several times in his India, as a type of philosopher. He introduces them (33/16) as persons holding a form of philosophical monotheism, and insists that their name - which he here spells with sīn instead of sād - is derived from the Greek word sūf meaning 'wisdom' (ḥikmā), adding that the Arabic faylāsūf is in Greek paylāsūpā or 'lover of wisdom'. He is aware of the suggested derivations from suffā, sūf and safā, but holds emphatically that these are all erroneous, though he is apparently less critical of the derivation from safā, 'purity', than of the others.

In view, then, of al-Bīrūnī's sympathy with Greek philosophical and possibly Isma'ilite attitudes, what is to be said about his loyalty to Islam? It is known that he had an important position under sultan Maḥmūd of Ghaznā, and that the latter was a strong supporter of Sunnite Islam against the Imāmism of several autonomous princes of the time. The presumption is thus that he was a Sunnite, or at least that he was careful to say nothing that would offend the susceptibilities of Sunnites. The general impression given by his writing is that he sat lightly to the niceties of Sunnism; but from time to time he introduces remarks whose chief purpose seems to be to silence critics; examples of this already quoted are what he said about the superiority of Islamic practice to that of other religions, and about the impossibility of correcting heresy since it is deviation from the truth.

This general statement may be filled out by one or two small points. Thus, after speaking about the excellence of the Qur'ān (263/132), he mentions certain sectarians who quote things from their books - and it is implied that these are religious books - although 'God had created nothing of them

(sc. of what they say), either much or little'. The translator of the book, Edward Sachau, had some difficulty with this passage and failed to recognize the sect, but he correctly notes that this implies that al-Bīrūnī held that the Qur'an was the eternal word of God. What must also be noted, however, is that the word 'created' is contrary to the usual Sunnite view that the Qur'ān is the uncreated speech of God, and in line with Shī'ite, Mu'tazilite or possibly minority-Sunnite views.

In another passage (31/15), after mentioning the 'abominable errors' of the common people among the Hindus, al-Bīrūnī speaks of doctrines in Islam which must be rejected, 'such as tashbīh, ijbār, and the prohibition of discussion in respect of some (religious) topic'. The last phrase makes one think of the prohibition of discussions about the createdness of the Qur'ān by al-Mutawakkil. Tashbīh or anthropomorphism is criticized by theologians of many schools. Ijbār, however, or 'compulsion', meaning something like a denial of human free will, was a term applied chiefly by Mu'tazilites to the Ḥanbalites and other Sunnites and, within Sunnism, by the Māturidites to the Ash'arites. This might indicate that al-Bīrūnī had mixed in Māturidite circles, since the Māturidites were the chief rational theologians in the eastern provinces. In other passages he is critical of Mu'tazilite writers: of al-Jāḥiẓ for confusion in matters of geography (204/100), and of Zurqān (7/4) for errors about Buddhism.

Finally it may be noticed that in a short Risālā dealing with the physician and philosopher Muḥammad ibn-Zakarīyā' ar-Rāzī he attacks the latter's sympathy with Manichaeanism and tells of his own great disappointment when after much searching he came across Mānī's book Sifr al-Asrār. To a man like al-Bīrūnī who sympathized with the monotheistic trend in philosphy the dualism of Mānī would clearly be abhorrent.

In conclusion may I express the hope that this short paper has shown that Abu-Rayhān was no mechanical collector and classifier of facts about other religions, but a thinker with a positive approach to other religions, in which they were seen as parts of a whole, though in a way which did not conflict with his acceptance of the truth of Islam.

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The quotations are from Edward Sachau's translation entitled Alberūnī's India (London 1888). The references give first the page of the translation, then that of the text (London 1887). The relevant part of the Risālā about ar-Rāzī may be found in D.M. Dunlop, Arab Civilization to AD 1500, London 1971, 237-9.

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