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Millenary of
Abū Raihān Muḥammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Birūni

AL-BIRUNI
ONE THOUSAND YEARS LATER

by

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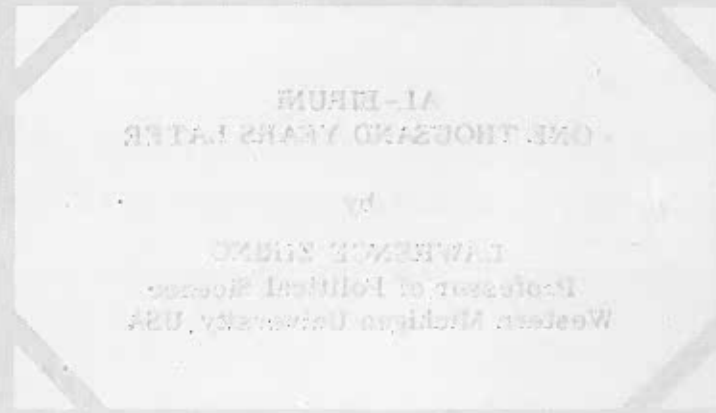
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Preface

What can a political scientist whose field of study focuses on contemporary political life say about the work of Abulhaihan Muhammad ibn al-Biruni? This was the principal question raised by your gracious invitation and it is not overstated when I note that long hours have been spent in finding an acceptable answer. My initial inclination was to draft an impressionistic piece outlining specific connections between al-Biruni's scholarship and the present period. It has been often stated that al-Biruni was in advance of his time. On this, his one thousandth birth anniversary, it can be argued that he still is. My original intention therefore seemed to be the most relevant theme I could pursue. It was one which a non-expert in mediaeval Indian and Muslim history might involve himself without seeming to stretch his credentials. Hence my decision is to briefly discourse on what appears to me to be one aspect of the contemporary value of al-Biruni's endeavor.

An Extrapolation

My source is Edward C. Sachau's translation of Alberuni's



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India. In this paper I refer exclusively to Chapter XI of Volume One which is entitled, "About the Beginning of Idol-worship, and a Description of the Individual Idols." I am drawn to this chapter not because it tells us about Hindu religious custom and ritual but because it reveals something at once timeless and at the same time universal in the human character. From the outset al-Biruni is concerned with the uneven division of humanity into educated and uneducated groups and the great problems involved in raising the consciousness of the masses. He writes:

It is well known that the popular mind leans towards the sensible world, and has an aversion to the world of abstract thought which is only understood by highly educated people, of whom in every time and every place there are only a few. And as common people will only acquiesce in pictorial representations, many of the leaders of religious communities have so far deviated from the right path as to give such imagery in their books and houses of worship, like the Jews and Christians, and, more than all, the manichaeans. (I, p. 111)

Following up this thought with an illustration that suggests Muslims can suffer from the same dilemma al-Biruni comments:

These words of mine would at once receive a sufficient illustration if, for example, a picture of the Prophet were made, or of Mekka and the Ka'ba, and were shown to an uneducated man or woman. Their joy in looking at the thing would bring them to kiss the picture, to rub their cheeks against it, and to roll themselves in the dust before it, as if they were seeing not the picture, but the original, and were in this way, as if they were present in the holy places, performing the rites of pilgrimage, the great and the small ones. (I, p. 111)

The power of these words cannot be avoided. Al-Biruni

is an apt and perceptive interpreter of human character. He at once realizes how ignorance at first mystifies and then leads men to accept authorities which may or may not be in their interest. Idols, he suggests, are created to provide the uneducated with a material replication of that which demands their respect and homage. Over time such monuments become a matter of ritualistic veneration and subsequent generations are kept in awe by authorities who sense their success is linked with the symbol being venerated. As they grope for answers to their existence, the unsophisticated become objects of manipulation and in most instances gladly give themselves over to the machinations of others.

The student of contemporary affairs cannot ignore such ideas. Symbols are of essential significance in the modern world. Who can deny that the mobilization societies of the current era are nothing without their emblems, banners, pictorial displays, and indeed, their idols. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy are prime examples in the use of rituals and ceremonies to rally their semi-informed, highly indoctrinated subjects. Those who would counsel against falling under the spell of the symbol-makers are soon made suspect and, history cites, quickly ostracized. Nevertheless, there are those who refuse to succumb to ignorance or betray their calling. Al-Biruni alludes to them when he explains:

For those who march on the path to liberation or those who study philosophy and theology, and who

desire abstract truth which they call sâra, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent him. (I, p. 113)

True faith according to al-Biruni requires no external reward or experience. Truth is the purpose of knowledge and it is through knowledge that man comes to grips with himself and his creator. Intertwined with this realization is selflessness and compassion. And al-Biruni's account of a Hindu tradition brings him to recite the Lord's message to a king whose goal is knowledge not power.

Occupy yourself with your empire in as straightforward and prudent a way as possible: turn your thoughts upon me when you are engaged in civilising the world and protecting its inhabitants, in giving alms, and in everything you do. (I, p. 115)

Although the above quotation is incomplete and actually aims at proving for al-Biruni how idol worship emanates from a desire to be in the presence of the eternal, it also stands to demonstrate the power of mind over matter.

But lest the point be lost it should be explained that al-Biruni was not one to deny even idols their place. The requirements of a population for representations of that which they can never see and only sense cannot be discounted. Al-Biruni does not argue in favor of spreading education among the masses. In fact, his purpose is almost never prescriptive. As a chronicler of his time it is his singular objective to describe to his co-believers how others, and in this particular case, the Hindus, conduct themselves. He is no idol destroyer,

nor is he an apologist. He is moved, however, by the intolerance exhibited by Muslims and Hindus toward each other. He is equally appalled by the rivalry existing between Muslim conquerors and in the following sequel seems to emphasize the need for Muslims and Hindus to find common ground upon which to sustain their traditions. In part the text reads:

A famous idol of theirs [the Hindus] was that of Multân, dedicated to the sun, and therefore called Âditya. It was of wood and covered with red Cordavan leather; in its two eyes were two red rubies. It is said to have been made in the last Kritayuga. Suppose that it was made in the very end of Kritayuga, the time which has since elapsed amounts to 216,432 years. When Muhammad Ibn Alkâsim Ibn Almunabbih conquered Multân, he inquired how the town had become so flourishing and so many treasures had there been accumulated, and then he found out that this idol was the cause, for there came pilgrims from all sides to visit it. Therefore he thought it best to have the idol where it was, but he hung a piece of cow's-flesh on its neck by way of mockery. On the same place a mosque was built. When then the Karmatians occupied Multân, Jalam Ibn Shaibân, the usurper, broke the idol into pieces and killed its priests. He made his mansion, which was a castle built of brick on an elevated place, the mosque instead of the old mosque, which he ordered to be shut from hatred against anything that had been done under the dynasty of the Caliphs of the House of 'Umayya. When afterwards the blessed Prince Mahmûd swept away their rule from those countries, he made again the old mosque the place of the Friday-worship, and the second one was left to decay. At present it is only a barn-floor, where bunches of Hinna (Lawsonia inermis) are bound together. (I, pp. 116-117)

Perfect harmony between opposed cultures is a recognized impossibility but mutual understanding and cooperation are not beyond the reach of well-intentioned leaders. In the episode

mentioned above it is important to grasp the pre-eminent role of leadership in bridging the vast distances existing between peoples. If this means acquiescing in the maintenance of specific rites, or overlooking the features of another culture which the beholder may judge grotesque because it is so alien to his own, it would be best to so behave. Rather than allow differences to influence our behavior it would be constructive if more attention were given to the excitement and even beauty that is demonstrated by our diversity. The existing variety of human customs and preferences should be a stimulant to learning. And from such efforts a larger concept of community might become possible without threatening the peculiar belief system of the individual or group.

One is drawn to establish a linkage between al-Biruni and those who are identified with the later Bhakti Movement. The author has searched in vain for such a connection although I must again stress my lack of depth in this field. But assuming that al-Biruni is not to be associated with the Bhakti Movement it is still intriguing to speculate as to how it began. Monotheism is perhaps the principal theme of the Movement and it is noteworthy that al-Biruni sought to emphasize Hinduism's monotheistic properties. Moreover, Islam is said to have influenced Hinduism in such a way as to cause the Hindus to revitalize this aspect of their beliefs. In the tenth Century the idea of a personal God gained wide appeal and this is also

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true in northern India where Vaisnava devotees came in contact with al-Biruni.

Al-Biruni's work stresses love and piety and his pursuit of knowledge is in keeping with his strong emotional convictions. Moreover, in Bhakti, devotion to the Creator who is all-knowing and all-powerful, not caste and its demands, took on greater significance. By de-emphasizing the importance of caste the followers of Bhakti also promoted an egalitarianism not easily associated with this historic period or environment. Could al-Biruni have experienced Bhakti? If he did could this have influenced his writing? And if it did, then why does he not mention it? If he did not, how do we account for his implicit notions that Muslim and Hindu communities have much to learn from one another; and indeed, that God is not different for Hindus and Muslims. This latter view is one put forward with exceptional energy by those genuinely identified with the Bhakti Movement such as Ramananda and Kabir.

Al-Biruni, however, does make mention of the egalitarian principle which is later attributed to these recognized leaders of Bhakti. Long before their emergence he was aware of the preponderant power wielded by the Brahmin caste. His insistence that only enlightenment or intelligence separated man from man and provided the Brahmins with the leverage required to keep lower castes controlled is seen in scattered portions of his treatise. The educated man, he argues, knows all castes are

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equal. More important in the context of this essay, however, al-Biruni declares that even "friend and the foe, the faithful and the deceitful" are equal. He further comments: "If to the eyes of intelligence all things are equal, to ignorance they appear as separated and different." (Sachau, II, p. 138.)

The latter theme as we remarked earlier is central to al-Biruni's scholarship. He seems to opt for the contention that scholars can communicate with each other. However, he apparently sees little chance their work will have much meaning for those who, on the one hand, would perpetuate their status through the exploitation of ignorance and, on the other, that great mass of humanity who can never know true wisdom and are destined to follow the dictates of their fears and misperceptions.

Al-Biruni, it is agreed, is influenced by the renowned Greek philosophers and there is a Platonic philosopher-king treatment in his writing. Al-Biruni's philosopher-king, however, is above all wise in the ways of humanity and tolerant of differences. He is perennially curious and always a student and scholar. He is therefore not so much one who rules but one who resolves disputes, promotes good-will, and constantly expands the circle of consciousness.

Observed in a contemporary context al-Biruni's purpose has not been well served. While the circle of intellectuals has grown, so has that of the ignorant, unaware and information-poor. Moreover, authorities still manage to reap advantages

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from those who respond more from instinct than knowledge. Xenophobia is virtually synonymous with the state of mind known as nationalism and exclusive characteristics not universal norms are fashionable. Mutual suspicion increases tension and hostile action is a direct outcome of orchestrated fear. Instead of constructing a foundation for the amelioration of disputes, nationalism gives unusual importance to particular cultures. It is the resulting conflict between antagonistic and/or competing culture-units whether across or within the frontiers of a state that makes for the current global disequilibrium.

Having taken the discourse this far it seems only proper to comment on the current global situation. How would al-Biruni, were he travelling among us today, chronicle the events of the last two and a half decades? And what might he say about the immediate present? In my judgment one thing above all others would be paramount in his writing. He would note that society is still very much divided between those who are informed and those who are not. He would quickly conclude that this being so, the stability of society and the purpose of civilization rests with those who have the power, wisdom and compassion to moderate differences and institutionalize ceremonies and rituals which diverse peoples can adopt without threatening their peculiar life-styles. Harmony not homogenization, cooperation not transformation is required. All people have a tendency to revere leaders both living and dead who they sense can protect

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them from adversity. The significance of this statement is verified by al-Biruni in the chapter that I have referred to in the beginning of this paper and from which I have already drawn numerous quotations. In this instance al-Biruni continues his treatment of idol worship but his comment supports the point made above. He writes:

The Hindus honour their idols on account of those who erected them, not on account of the material of which they are made. (I, p. 121)

In spite of the desire to move away from idolatry, the inability to raise the level of informed consciousness suggests the preservation of the custom in one form or another. As noted earlier, the modern state can demand obedience even in the face of what wise men judge to be irrational policy. Popular support for such state policies in many respects is not different from the unquestioning obedience involving idol worship in al-Biruni's time. What remains constant, therefore, is the need to understand national xenophobia so that it can be constrained. Al-Biruni comments on his reasons for presenting an explanation of Hindu idol development and usage, and perhaps he has something to say to us in regard to our coming to grips with nationalism.

Our object in mentioning all this mad raving was to teach the reader the accurate description of an idol, if he happens to see one, and to illustrate what we have said before, that such idols are erected only for the uneducated low-class people of little understanding; that the Hindus never made an idol of any supernatural being, much less of God; and lastly, to show how the crowd is kept in thralldom by all kinds of priest-

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ly tricks and deceits.

And to follow up this thought with a subsequent passage:

When the ignorant crowd get a piece of good luck by accident or something at which they had aimed, and when with this some of the preconcerted tricks of the priests are brought into connection, the darkness in which they live increases vastly, not their intelligence. They will rush to those figures of idols, maltreating their own figures before them by shedding their own blood and mutilating their own bodies.

Finally, al-Biruni says idols may have their place but there is no avoiding the reality that their use has "become a foul and pernicious abuse."

Nationalism too has its positive aspects but the essential dilemma is the negative force that it has become. In its original humanitarian and intellectual form, nationalism symbolized a belief in popular government, limited in its role and use of power. Sovereignty supposedly belonged to the people, and government merely reflected the interests of the ethnic and religious congeries comprising the nation. While political unity was hopefully sustained through the perceived enhancement of one's future by membership in the polity, individuals and groups were considered free to conduct their personal cum-social lives unfettered by controls of any kind. Individuality, and hence self-expression, were salient to democratic nationalism. Self-determination became the all-encompassing term which signified the right of a people to transform their cultural distinctiveness into political reality. It was believed that only when the latter was made manifest did the

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former have a chance to survive. No doubt the intentions of the early nationalists were both high and noble. But something went wrong with the quest for nationalist self-expression.

The humanitarian character of nationalism was long ago swallowed up in an effort to give it concrete form. Instead of freeing people from the strictures of arbitrary government, populations were made subservient to authority which came to represent the immortality of the nation-state. The threat posed to the nation-state, whether real or imaginary, could only be met by the combined actions of a total population whose supreme loyalties were owed maximum rulers. Fear therefore again proved more responsive than intelligence, and it is fear that has made a mockery of nationalism.

Now how does this apply to the situation in the subcontinent? Self-determination is no panacea as history can witness. Too much human sacrifice has already been spread upon the altar of national purpose. And this is certainly not to deny the individuality of nation-states, their independence or *raison d'être*. It is, however, essential to realize from where we have come and to what we are tending. Leadership is not infallible. Nor is nationalism in itself an acceptable final objective. This technotronic era requires recognition of the inchoate nature of nation-states. National sovereignties are by themselves unable to protect the humanity confined within their respective frontiers. Interdependence is an important feature of international life. No country is self-sufficient

and all look to others to compensate for their intrinsic weaknesses. It is foolish to worship the nation-state as primitive people worship their gods. The nation-state has much to offer its citizenry but it only represents one community among many, and it is the community of communities that promises a way out from the dilemmas of poverty, environmental degeneration and war.

And how, you might ask, is this new direction to be taken? Clearly, the responsibility rests with those who have the power and the accompanying wisdom and compassion to recognize the necessity for action. The statesman who is more concerned with protecting the status quo may be safe among his constituents, but his policies address themselves to sterility and ultimately to oblivion. It is only those leaders who are capable of reaching beyond the experience of the masses who must transform their visions of tomorrow into the realities of popular experience today if chaos is to be avoided. Such leaders must stand prepared to receive the villification of their political opponents who sense a loss of state sovereignty. But such has always been the case of men whose performance and thought have out-distanced their own times. Prophets are usually misunderstood in their own day. It is only after they have passed from our world that recognition of their great work is sometimes appreciated.

If al-Biruni were a statesman instead of a scholar, if he lived today instead of a thousand years ago, there would be much

unfinished work for him to consider. We who are assembled here to commemorate the millenary of al-Biruni are not statesmen but we do represent that scholarship which meant so much to this early thinker. It is incumbent on us to labor as al-Biruni labored to make the world a more intelligible place. You will permit, I trust, a political scientist to end with a quotation from one of the masters of his contemporary discipline. Harold Lasswell has written:

The question is whether the accelerating impact of the common world map will so modify systems of identity that members of sub-elites and mid-elites will refrain from blocking initiatives that contribute to the consolidation of a more potent and instantaneously operative system of public order. As systems of identity with all men eclipse identities with some men, the prospects of universal public order are improved.*

*Harold Lasswell, "Future Systems of Identity in the World Community," in C.E. Black and R.A. Falk, eds., The Future of the International Legal Order, Volume IV, The Structure of the International Environment, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 15.

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Al-Biruni One Thousand Years Later

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Abstract

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