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Studying the "Other": Challenges and Prospects of Muslim Scholarship on World Religions[1]

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INTRODUCTION

In institutions of higher learning in the Muslim world, in contrast to similar institutions in Western countries, scant attention is paid to the field of comparative religion. This, however, was not always the case. Between the third/ninth and sixth/twelfth centuries, Islamic civilization witnessed the rise – and also eclipse – of the discipline of *'ilm al milal wa n-nihal* (literally, "knowledge of religious groups and sects"). According to Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, interest in learning about other faiths and in interreligious debate and discussion during this period was so high that these areas became subjects of "salon conversation" and a "public past-time."[2]

Among the works written during the heyday of comparative religious studies in Islamic history are: *Ar-Radd 'ala n-Nasara* ("Refutation of the

Christians") by 'Umar b. Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 255/869), *Al-Farq bayna l-Firaq* ("Differences among Muslim Groups") by 'Abd al-Qahir b. Tahir al-Baghdadi (d. 429/1038), *Al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Nihal* ("Decisive Treatise on Religious Sects and Divisions") by 'Ali b. Ahmad b. Hazm (d. 456/1064), *Al-Radd al-Jamil li Uluhiyyat Isa bi-Sarih al-Injil* ("Proper Refutation of the Divinity of Jesus with Clear Evidence from the Bible") by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1112), and *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal* ("Religious Sects and Divisions") by Abu l-Fath ash-Shahrastani (d. 548/1154). Mention may also be made of such writers as Muhammad b. Jarir at-Tabari (d. 313/926), who wrote about the religion of the Persians; Abu l-Hasan al-Mas'udi (d. 346/958), who wrote two books on Judaism, Christianity, and the religions of India; al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 415/1025), who devoted part of *Al-Mughni* to Muslim sects and to religions other than Islam; and Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 440/1053), who wrote about religion in India and Persia.

After a lapse of about six to seven centuries, there is, today, renewed interest among Muslims in studying other religions and faiths. Notable works in this connection are: Faruqi's *Christian Ethics*, *Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, and *Islam and Other Faiths*; Ahmad Shalabi's four-volume *Muqaranat al-Adyan* ("Comparative Study of Religions"); Taha al-Hashimi's *Tara'ik al-Adyan wa Falsafatuha*) ("Religions: Their History and Philosophies"); Muhammad Abu Zahrah's *Muhadarat fi n-Nasraniyyah* ("Lectures on Christianity"); Muhammad 'Abdallah Daraz's *Ad-Din* ("Religion"); and Sulayman Muzhir's *Qissat ad-Diyanat* ("Story of the Religions").

As in the early Islamic period, so today Muslims scholars and students face several challenges in their study of world religions. Some of these challenges are common to Muslim and Western scholarship on the subject, while others are peculiar to Muslim scholarship. They range from the challenge of defining and delimiting the field to those associated with methodology. This paper examines some of these challenges, drawing upon the classical Islamic heritage, the experience of Western comparativists, and the works of modern Muslim scholars in the field. First, however, it will deal with the question, "Why do Muslim scholars need to make a serious study of other major world religions?" To be sure, some Muslims are opposed to such an exercise, arguing that it will do more harm than good. It is, therefore, necessary to ask what led Muslim scholars, especially in the past, to study other religions.

MUSLIM STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS: MOTIVATING FACTORS

Historically, several factors have motivated Muslims to undertake study of other religions:

1. *Qur'anic Injunctions.* For a Muslim, the main impetus for studying other peoples and their faiths comes from the Qur'an itself. Numerous Qur'anic verses urge human beings to reflect and ponder on the world around them. In so doing, Muslims cannot help but notice the diversity of belief professed by people. The Qur'an not only affirms such differences but also contains a wealth of information about other religions – both revealed and man-made – including Judaism, Christianity, paganism, and idolatry. Though not a textbook on other religions, the Qur'an encourages Muslims to investigate and study religious differences. For example, 49:13 says: "O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)."

Exposure to different beliefs often contributes to greater mutual understanding and to collaboration among people of different faiths, reducing hatred and suspicion born of ignorance and prejudice. According to Qur'an 4:48, God has created differences among human beings as a means of testing the latter: "To each among you have we prescribed a Law and an open way. If Allah had so willed he would have made you a single people, but [His plan is] to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues."

2. *Dialogue and Discussion.* The Qur'an stresses the importance of a healthy exchange of ideas among different religious communities: "Invite [all] to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious, for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path and who received guidance" (16:125). The Prophet Muhammad, whom Muslims regard as the living embodiment of the Qur'an, was on several occasions known to have engaged in religious discussion with both Jews and Christians.

3. *Addition to Knowledge*. In the very early Islamic period, Muslims were sometimes surrounded by, and sometimes had as their neighbours, Jews and Christians, Magians, idol-worshipers, as well as star-, sun-, and moon-worshippers. Inspired by the above-quoted and other Qur'anic verses, classical Muslim scholars studied the beliefs of the various groups they encountered. Initially, they focused primarily on differences between the Muslims and the "People of the Book" – that is, the Jews and Christians. With the expansion of the Islamic State, however, they enlarged the scope of their inquiry to include the new religions they came into contact with, particularly Hinduism. Today, large numbers of Muslims live in multireligious societies. Muslims who live as a minority religious community in a land or region – as in North America – interact with non-Muslims on a daily basis. On the other hand, sizeable non-Muslim minorities exist in many so-called Muslim majority countries. Furthermore, modern systems of communication and transportation have increased interaction among diverse religious groups. Such interaction inevitably raises a question: Why do people hold the beliefs they do or practice their religion the way they do? While some people may choose to ignore the fact of diversity of belief and to associate with like-minded people only, such an attitude of aloofness is becoming more and more difficult to maintain in a world that is becoming increasingly cosmopolitan.

4. *Truth and Falsehood*. Many classical Muslim scholars were motivated to study religious differences out of a desire to compare false religions with Islam – which they regarded as the religion of truth. Frequently, such studies were undertaken with the intention of refuting, either directly or indirectly, un-Islamic beliefs or philosophies – especially those that were perceived to have had a deleterious effect on the Muslims' faith. Such refutation was supposed to make Islam intellectually stronger, and also more attractive to others.[3] According to Faruqi, study of other religions should aim at bringing out the commonalities rather than the differences among the religions. He thinks that it is up to the researcher to determine the extent to which the various religious traditions agree with "*din-al-fitrah*, the original and first religion."[4] Keith Roberts opines that a scientific study of other religions can be beneficial in that it will force one to be rigorous in the search for truth and in that it demands logical coherence in the articulation of faith.[5]

5. *Colonial Powers and Missionary Activities.* Muslim interest in studying other religions peaked in the sixth/twelfth century, declining thereafter. It resurfaced with the arrival of the colonial powers in the Muslim world. Muslims, on the one hand, wished to acquire a sounder understanding of the religion of those who had defeated them – namely, the Christians – and, on the other, hoped to counteract the work of the Christian missionaries who accompanied the colonial powers. Thus, we notice the appearance of such works as the *Mahomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*, written by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898)[6]; among the later works were those written by Abu Zahrah, Faruqi, and Shalabi. Interestingly, many Orientalist works written during this period were prompted by the desire to gain a better understanding of the mores and practices of the colonized people – with the eventual aim of strengthening administrative and political control over those people.

6. *Affirmation of One's Religious Commitment.* Study of other religions and philosophies may serve to increase one's own religious belief and commitment. Those who interact with people of different faiths often feel the need and pressure to find out more about their own faith. It is not uncommon for Muslim students in recent times to express the view that it was only after they had travelled overseas to study in non-Muslim countries that they truly came to understand Islam.

DEFINING AND DELIMITING THE FIELD

A variety of terms have been used, particularly in the Western scholarly tradition, to designate the field under discussion. They have ranged from "comparative religion" to "religious studies" to "history of religion."[7] But first we will take a brief look at the relevant Qur'anic terminology.

The Qur'an uses three main terms for "religion": *din, millah*, and *ummah*. Although *din* has a number of meanings, including "obligation, direction, submission, retribution,"[8] it is frequently used to denote religion in the generic sense of the word.[9] In some cases, it refers to the primordial, monotheistic religion that, being one and the same, has subsisted throughout history. In others, it alludes to one of the false or corrupted forms (for example, polytheism) of a once true religion – a falsehood or corruption that may be regarded as *din* by those who accept it as a true and

uncorrupted religion. This latter meaning is evidenced 109:1–3, 6: "Say: O you who deny the truth! I do not worship that which you worship, and neither do you worship that which I worship.… Unto you, your moral law (*dinukum*) and unto me mine." Commenting on these verses, the classical scholar Qurtubi says that the religion of the infidels has been referred to as a religion (*din*) because "they believed and adhered to it."[10]

Millah denotes a religious tradition, a worldview, or a faith.[11] The term implies a system of doctrines, creeds, and rituals that is followed by a group of people regardless of whether, from a social and political standpoint, that group does or does not make up an independent polity.

Ummah stands for a religio-moral and socio-political community. Aasi maintains that, although *ummah* sometimes gives "the meaning of a nation, a people, a culture or a civilization, basic to all these groups of people is the idea of one binding religio-moral system of law and values."[12]

Islamic tradition does not assign an official name to the study of religious communities and sects. Faruqi says that the discipline was called *'ilm al-milal wa n-nihal*.[13] But there is no scholarly consensus on the term. According to Shalabi, the discipline of comparative religion, which he calls *muqarant al-adyan*, can be traced back to al-Hasan b. Musa an-Nawbakhti's (d. 202/816) *Ara' wa-d-Diyanat* ("Opinions and Religions"). On this view, the discipline originated about the same time as a number of other Islamic sciences, including those of *Fiqh*, *Tafsir*, and *Hadith*.[14] Shalabi goes on to list a number of reasons for the decline of the discipline in later times. First, since, in Islamic societies, non-Muslims came to occupy high positions in the administrative and political fields, and since many members of the Muslim ruling elite were married to non-Muslim women, comparative works that showed Islam to be superior to other faiths – and the other faiths to be deficient in comparison with Islam – were ill-suited to the political climate of the times. Second, the Crusades, which aimed at wiping out Islam and Muslims by means of the sword, left little hope for religious dialogue and discussion. Third, most of the *fuquha'* ("jurists") developed a fanatical loyalty to their own *madhhabs* ("schools") and had little interest in studying other *madhhabs*, much less other religions. Finally, some scholars refused to acknowledge the existence of other religions and felt that no comparison could be made between them and Islam.[15]

In the modern period, the most commonly used Arabic term to describe the discipline of study of other religions is *muqaranat al-adyan*, which is a direct translation of the Western term "comparative religion." The word *muqaranah* ("comparison") may mean *muwazanah*, *tashbih*, *qiyas*,[16] or *muqayasah*.[17] Generally, however, the word "comparative" in this context refers to comparison of two or more kinds of phenomenon.[18] It is also used to describe the method whereby likenesses or dissimilarities between two or more items are determined through a simultaneous examination of those items.[19]

The classic Western definition of "comparative religion" is that offered by Louis H. Jordon in 1905. According to Jordon, comparative religion is:

> The science which compares the origin, structure and characteristics of the various religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another and their relative superiority and inferiority when regarded as types.[20]

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the German-British philologist F. Max Müller (1823–1900) extended the comparative approach, which he had used in his philological studies, to the study of religion.[21] Central to this conception of comparative religion was application of the comparative – or scientific – method to the data supplied by the world's religions, past and present, in order to discover the laws that are operative in the realm of religion. In Germany, however, the newly developed school had a narrower scope, limiting its research to the background of the Old and New Testaments.[22] The term "comparative religion" remained in use until the end of World War II, even though, by the end of World War I, the discipline had already started to split up into a number of interrelated disciplines, such as history of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and philosophy of religion.[23] Although, initially, the main discipline involved collecting, in a dispassionate manner, a massive amount of information about other people's religions, there has been, since World War II, a large-scale direct interaction among persons of diverse faiths, both on professional and on personal levels.[24] This has, in turn, led to a shifting of the focus of study. One result of the shift has been that Western scholars have almost entirely ceased to concern themselves with

the "relative superiority or inferiority" of religions. A second outcome is that Western scholarship has almost abandoned the term "comparative religion,"[25] replacing it with a wide variety of terms, which reflect both diversity of thought and methodological uncertainty. One of the more popular of these terms is "religious studies," which came into existence in the 1960s, which was a period of growth of higher education in the West.[26] According to Sharpe, "religious studies attempts to study religion not on the basis of one tradition (or a part of a tradition) only, but 'in the round.'"[27] In his view, religious studies can, at best, reveal the principles on which all religious belief and behaviour, viewed from the believer's angle, rests – principles which, once grasped, can be applied in other, separate areas.[28]

It seems, however, that the discipline of religious studies began to lose its focus in the 1980s. Its curriculum has increasingly become "a crazy quilt of courses encompassing many disciplines, areas, regions, languages and methods of inquiry."[29] At the end of the millennium, Juschka argues that "the discipline of religious studies is seen to be void, empty, [or] whimsical at best. Since it lacks an identity it also lacks cultural capital, and lacking cultural capital its survival in the changing world of the university is uncertain."[30]

In light of this overview of the historical origins and development of the terms "comparative religion" and "religious studies," as well as of the status of these disciplines, in the West, the next question to ask is, "Where do Muslim scholars in the field stand in relation to such developments?" The chasm between modern Western and Muslim scholarship in the field is very wide. While in the Western academic tradition the discipline appears to be on the wane owing to a lack of direction and focus, in academic institutions in the contemporary Muslim world the field is still in the early stages of revival.

Western historical experience has demonstrated that each new scholarly attempt to define the field is based upon a new understanding, not only of the goal of the research to be undertaken, but also of the methodology to be employed in the research. While the term "comparative religion" may have gone out of vogue in Western academic circles, comparison is still a valid method in Islamic intellectual circles. This method is frequently used in the Qur'an, and was also used by early Muslim scholars, particularly the *fuquha'*, who were known for their use of *qiyās* ("analogical

reasoning"). At the same time, some of the assumptions underlying the new term "religious studies" seem to be questionable from an Islamic point of view. The Western religious studies programs are predicated on the assumption that, epistemic certainty being unattainable, no religion has an exclusive claim to truth. On this view, we are left with three possibilities: (1) all religions are equally true; (2) all religions contain bits of truth; (3) none of the religions contain any truth at all. But while the above-stated assumption is in keeping with modern trends in Western philosophical thought, in which "no form of knowledge can be absolute" and all truth is relative, it would not appeal to a Muslim, since the denial of absolute values in favour of relative ones serves to negate God and the hereafter.[31]

Having said that, we must add that some of the issues that Western scholars in the field have grappled with must be addressed by Muslims as well. For example: "Should study of world religions focus on the external – namely, doctrinal, legal, and social – aspects and manifestations of religion or on the internal – namely, experiential – aspects of religions, or on both?" "To what extent is it possible for an individual who is committed to a given religious belief to make an objective study of another religion?" "Should the study of other religions include an evaluative aspect or should it defer evaluation in light of the difficulty in reaching epistemic uncertainty?" Some of these questions will be dealt with in the following sections.

CHALLENGES OF METHODOLOGY

The classical Greeks, who were critical of the popular native religion, were curious about other religious traditions – and, therefore, open to studying them. In their quest for information and truth, they recorded and described what they saw, read, and experienced; they also compared and contrasted the material thus collected with their own tradition and culture.[32] But, according to Sharpe, the Judeo-Christian tradition, in contrast to the Greek, has been exclusivist and intolerant in the matter of religion. In his view, the New Testament exhibits a total lack of objective interest in other religious traditions and virtually rules out even the possibility of an objective study of other religions.[33]

The classical Muslim approach – insofar as one can speak of one – to the subject is in stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian. It is true that Muslim

scholars viewed other religions from the perspective of the foundational sources of Islam, the Qur'an and Sunnah. At the same time, however, they felt free to approach the subject from several different angles. In this connection, we will briefly compare the methodologies of three representatives of the classical period – Biruni, Ibn Ḥazm, and Shahrastani.

Biruni made an extensive and profound study of Hindu civilization, including Hindu religion, philosophy, manners, customs, and scientific achievements. In both *Kitab al-Athar* (English trans.: *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*) and *Kitab al-Hind* (translated as *Al-Biruni's India*), Biruni discusses a total of twelve religions and religious communities and then compares their traits with corresponding features in Islamic and other known cultures.[34] He makes three types of comparisons: interreligious, intrareligious, and intersectarian.[35] This enables him to make use of his knowledge of the Greek and Indian philosophical systems to reach conclusions and make observations that would be understood and appreciated by his fellow Muslims. It is noteworthy that Biruni wrote about Hindu doctrine in a completely detached manner. He quoted Hindu sources verbatim at length when he thought they would contribute to elucidating a subject. Biruni himself confirms that his book "is not a polemical one," and that it is "nothing but a simple historical record of facts."[36] Biruni was highly successful in describing Hinduism in an objective manner, without identifying himself with the religion.[37]

Ibn Ḥazm was the first Muslim comparativist to use a critical analytical approach to study other religions, particularly the Jewish Torah and Christian Gospel.[38] Although both the Christians and Jews kept rejecting his analysis for three-quarters of a millennium, Faruqi states that today some Christians have come to acknowledge the worth of Ibn Ḥazm's study.[39] As far as his methodology was concerned, Ibn Ḥazm would report all the beliefs of the group in question and then critically analyze them with a view to showing their merits and demerits. Using the *Zahirite* methodology, he rejected interpretations of the Old Testament offered by clergymen and Christian theologians, who, he thought, might have committed errors in interpreting that scripture. Ibn Ḥazm preferred to examine the original texts and arrive at new conclusions, taking an approach similar to that taken by the Protestant Reformers in understanding the Bible.[40] He would, however, reject the texts if he found contradictions in them.

Shahrastani's *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal* is a virtual short encyclopedia on all the religions, sectarian groups, and supernatural and philosophical systems known at his time. According to Sharpe, Shahrastani has the honour of having written the first ever history of religion. In his view, Shahrastani's work "far outstrips anything which Christian writers were capable of producing at the same period."[41] In contrast to Ibn Ḥazm, who bases his analysis strictly on a study of original and primary sources, Shahrastani does make use of a number of secondary sources – for which he is severely criticized by A. J. Arberry, who remarks that Shahrastani's *Milal* "is little more than a farrago of quotations from older writers, loosely arranged and inconsequently strung together without the slightest acknowledgment."[42] A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, who are less critical of Shahrastani, argue that, although Shahrastani draws heavily on Asha'ri's *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin*, he does make use of other sources as well and often differs considerably from Asha'ri – especially in terms of arrangement of material and classification of the subsects – and gives a fuller account of some of the sects than Asha'ri. Kazi and Flynn point out, furthermore, that Shahrastani's section on the Isma'iliyyah seems quite independently written.[43] Nevertheless, they admit that Shahrastani rarely mentions his sources, with the exception of Abdallah b. Mahmud al-Ka'bi (d. 319/931), whose name occurs quite frequently.

Unlike Ibn Ḥazm, Shahrastani does not critically analyze the ideas of the groups he discusses. Generally, he reports the views of the sects without elaboration and without comment, though he offers an occasional brief criticism.[44] "I have," he says at the beginning of his book, "stated their beliefs as found in their books without favouring them and without attacking or criticizing them."[45] This approach, however, has not found favour with some Muslim scholars. Mahmoud Ali Himaya, for instance, criticizes Shahrastani for not correcting the mistaken ideas he described. Himaya thinks that the major problem with such an approach is that false ideas may stick in the readers' minds, without these readers knowing whether such ideas are false or wrong. He further says that it is easy to learn about the ideas of another group and report them but that it is more difficult to respond to the wrong ideas.[46]

This brief review of the differing methodologies of three Muslim scholars has shown that there is no such thing as a single "classical Muslim method" for studying other religions. Both Biruni and Shahrastani

preferred to take a descriptive approach, but Biruni obtained his information from first-hand field research, while Shahrastani relied more heavily on secondary sources. Ibn Ḥazm, on the other hand, preferred the critical analytical approach and relied exclusively on original religious texts, ignoring second-hand commentaries on those texts.

In the modern era, Western scholars have used an increasingly wide variety of methods to study the field. The so-called Orientalist methodology reigned supreme in nineteenth-century Western Europe. The Orientalists treated the religions of the world as "dead-cold data and static external observables in human behaviour or as enemy territory, which must be reconnoitered in order to be conquered with the least possible effort."[47] In their view, the ideal scholar was a detached academic who surveyed material impersonally, almost majestically, and subsequently reported on it objectively. This detachment meant that the scholar studied the religion without participating in it.[48] In addition, many Orientalists were evolutionists in the sense that they tended to classify religions historically, geographically, and culturally, systematizing them into various "isms," each a rough equivalent of a biological species.[49]

One of the shortcomings of the Orientalist methodology is that it failed to recognize that "religion is not a 'scientific' fact that can be coldly examined in the manner of a geological or biological sample."[50] To be sure, several dimensions of religion are amenable to scientific study, but these may not be religion as such, the heart of a religion consisting of the meaning a religion holds for those who believe in it.[51]

A second shortcoming is that the great majority of the Orientalist writings were prejudiced by Western – if not strictly Christian – categories of thought and analysis.[52] Sharpe says that comparisons frequently involved "undue and conventional selectivity, which chose not what is most important in an exotic tradition, but what is accessible and superficially attractive." In addition, many Western students tended to treat the "other" tradition as a mirror for their own concerns.[53]

As already mentioned, "comparative religion" since World War I was broken down into a number of subdisciplines, each with its own methodology or approach. The anthropological approach examines the role of religion in early or traditional societies – particularly the ways in which religious rites and ceremonies bind a community together – the role of a chief or *shaman* in the life of the people, and the function of myth in

revealing a tribe's self-understanding and identity.[54] Anthropologists are also interested in finding out how society's religious beliefs and institutions sanction or elicit acceptance of a certain behaviour and how these factors assist in making that society integrated and cohesive.[55] A favourite method of the anthropologists is that of participant observation, which requires an open, serious, and respectful attitude toward alien ways of life and thought.[56]

Many of those who used the anthropological approach to study other religions were criticized for being arm-chair scholars, in the sense that their methods were skewed by unreliable data obtained at second hand, by unsifted sources, and by inauthentic comparisons and haphazard synthesis in which bizarre phenomena were focused on, or certain types of examples selected, to prove preconceived theories. The latter-day anthropological method – that of undertaking intensive fieldwork – has also been criticized as impressionistic, haphazard, or simply meaningless busywork, while even the technique of "participant observation" has been dismissed as the romantic illusion that one can get an inside view of a foreign culture in a few months or years.[57]

The sociological approach to other religions focuses on group or social behaviour and on the way religion interacts with other dimensions of our social experience.[58] The psychological approach, on the other hand, tends to emphasize the study of such experiences as conversion, prayer, and mystic ecstasy, using such methods as questionnaires, personal interviews, autobiographies, and other empirical data that could be analyzed, classified, and statistically measured.[59] The historical approach is concerned with establishing the role that religious experience and ideas play in the lives of individuals and communities, and also with determining how religion influences the development of larger societies, nations, and whole cultures. In reconstructing a religion's past or by attempting to distinguish historical fact from myth, legend, saga, and religious tradition, the historian draws on a vast range of non-textual sources, including archaeology, numismatics, and geography.[60]

The phenomenological method attempts to supply the deficiencies of the Orientalist approach and of the reductionism of several of the above-noted approaches. It is designed "to portray each religion in its own terms as a unique expression, as a reality that is not to be reduced." In order to achieve this goal, the phenomenologist must remain detached and

impartial. But insightful description and interpretation also requires a genuine feel for, and empathy with, religious experience.[61] The phenomenologist must exercise *epoche*, or the suspension of judgment, a state that allows him or her to see through the eyes of those who believe – or of those who are committed.[62]

CONCLUSION

This chapter has critically examined a number of challenges facing Muslim scholars and students of world religions. It commenced with a discussion of why Muslim scholars in both the past and present have undertaken investigations of people of different faiths.

Upon examining the issue of "defining the field," it was revealed that there has never been any agreed upon term for the discipline of studying "other" religions. In the contemporary Muslim scholarship, some such as Faruqi refer to the discipline as *'ilm al-milal wa al-nihal* (knowledge of religious groups and sects). The vast majority of present-day Muslim scholars, however, employ the term *muqaranat al-adyyan*, which is essentially a direct translation of the Western term "comparative religion." It was argued that, although the term "comparative religion" is no longer in vogue in Western academic circles, it can still be considered valid in the Muslim world since the comparative technique is frequently used by the classical Muslim scholars in various fields of study, especially jurisprudence. At the same time, it was also evident that the term "religious studies," which has found a place in Western academic circles since the 1960s, is considered questionable by Muslims due to its epistemological foundations.

The next issue this chapter addressed was the challenge of methodology. It was argued that there was no one classical Muslim method of studying world religions. While some scholars preferred a descriptive approach, others preferred to undertake a critical analysis of the religion in question. Moreover, while some scholars preferred to undertake the investigation directly in the field, others preferred to rely on secondary sources. The common thread between these divergent approaches, however, is that their perception of reality was derived from Islamic epistemology, which is based on the Qur'an and/or the prophetic traditions.

As far as a contemporary methodology for Muslim scholars in the field is concerned, it was maintained that there is no one precise "Islamic methodology" *per se*. Instead, Muslim intellectuals are encouraged to study and investigate different religious beliefs held by people in a manner that is objective and fair to the people under investigation. In fact, it is unacceptable for Muslim scholars to maliciously attack or downgrade "other" religions.

Finally, the third issue addressed by the chapter was the extent to which a Muslim's religious commitment affects his or her objectivity when studying other religions. It was argued that every scholar is committed – either consciously or unconsciously – to certain convictions or presuppositions about what constitutes reality, rationality, or evidence. The key to overcoming any inherent bias is to state one's fundamental presuppositions from the beginning, rather than keeping them unclear, under the claim of being "objective."

While the issues discussed are hardly an exhaustive list of challenges facing Muslim scholars and students of world religions, they do represent some of the greater difficulties in academic institutions of higher learning. While some insight has been offered into a scientific methodology of comparative religion, much more work has to be done to further develop and refine such a methodology.

Notes

1 This paper was originally published in *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 2, no. 1 (2000):1–27.

2 Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, ed., *Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*. (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991), ix.

3 Mohammad Rafiuddin, "The Meaning and Purpose of Islamic Research," in *Research Methodology in Islamic Perspective*, ed. Mohammad Muqim (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1994), 11–12.

4 Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1967), 15–16.

5 Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (New York: Wadsworth, 1995), 35.

6 C. W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Re-Interpretation of Muslim Theology* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1978–79), 58, 70.

7 "History of religions is an academic pursuit composed of three disciplines: reportage or the collection of data; construction of meaning-wholes, or the systemization of data; and judgment, or evaluation, of meaning wholes." Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Other Faiths*, ed. Ataullah Siddiqui (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1998), 161.

8 L. Gardet, "Din," in B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960, continuing), 2:293.

9 Ghulam Haider Aasi, "The Qur'an and Other Religious Traditions," in *Essays on Islam*, Felicitation Volume in Honour of Professor W. Montgomery Watt. Hakim Mohammed Said, ed. (Karachi: Hamdard Foundation Pakistan, 1993), 212.

10 Muhammad Sayed Ahmad al-Masir, *Al-Madkhal li-Dirasat al-Adyan* ("Introduction to the Study of Religions") (Cairo: Dar at-Tiba'ah al-Muhammadyyiah, 1994), 34.

11 Aasi, "The Qur'an and Other Religious Traditions," 226–27.

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