Research Note

Objectivity and the Scientific Study of Religion

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Abstract: The concern for and the debate on "objectivity" in the scientific study of religions led scholars to advocate two major approaches known as "History of Religion" and "Phenomenology of Religion." Both approaches are claimed to be "descriptive" and "value-free" as they stringently enforce the principle of *epochê* or distanciation to ensure objectivity. However, there are scholars who argue that objectivity (be it "descriptive" or "value-free") is ontologically questionable and epistemologically impossible. It is a self-defeating concept and a myth. They argue that objectivity is principally and directly concerned with "the object" under investigation regardless of the types of approach used.

Key words: *Religionswissenschaft*, *epochê*, objectivity, *al-ʿadl,* Muslim scholarship

Religionswissenschaft (Science of Religion or Comparative Study of Religion) is a new scientific field that is barely a century old. The origin of this field is attributed to Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) especially to two of his publications: *Chips from German Workshop* (1867) and *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (1873). The scientific method in the study of the world's religions, according to him, should be similar to the one applied in the field of *Comparative Philology*[1]

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of which he was one of the leading experts. Because of his emphasis on "objective" and "scientific" method and also because of his provocative statement that "He who knows one knows none,"[2] Max Müller has been crowned as "the father of Comparative Study of Religion." Using the "objectivity" criteria, scholars rejected the works on religions carried out before the modern era, the bulk of which were contributed by Muslim scholars, as inappropriate in any listing of categories in the field of *Religionswissenschaft*. These studies were not objective and hence not scientific or at least their "scientificity" is debatable. This seems to be one of the reasons for Western researchers to look down upon classical Muslim scholarship.

Western Scholars and Muslim Scholarship

Western scholars dealing with the writings of Muslim classics are of many types. Seymour Cain, for instance, omits Muslims altogether in his study of religion. He traces the history of the study of religion from the ancient Greeks through the Roman thinkers to the Western trends of thinking in modern times, to precisely the second half of 19th century, to the so-called pioneering era of Friedrich Max Müller. He clearly states that it was only towards the end of the 19th century that the discipline of the Scientific Study of Religions, in its truly technical sense, was born.[3] He implies that in this development the Christian and Islamic civilisation has produced no contribution worth noting in this discipline. Clearly, there is a serious gap and a significant "missing link" in the chronological development and the unfolding of the discipline as sketched by Cain.[4] However, there are some Western scholars like Mircea Eliade and Eric J. Sharpe who in their studies made a mention of some classical works by Muslim scholars but conclude that the discipline of Comparative Religion did in fact come into being at the end of the 19th century of CE, thanks to the serious works by a philologist Friedrich Max Müller.[5]

There are some Western scholars or Orientalists who study, edit and translate the major works of classical Muslims scholars into European languages. For instance, Edward Sachau, a German scholar, has translated *Al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah ʿan al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah* and *Taḥqīq Mā li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fī al-ʿAql aw*

Mardhūlah of Abū al-Rayḥān Al-Bīrūnī (d. 442AH./1050CE.).[6]
David Thomas edited and translated into English a work of Abū Īsā
al-Warrāq (d. circa 247AH./862CE.);[7] Daniel Gimaret, Guy Monnot,
and Jean Jolivet translated into French *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* of al-
Shahrastānī (d. 548AH./1153CE.);[8] and Thomas F. Michel, S.J.
translated into English a work of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728AH./
1328CE.) entitled *Al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-Man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ.*[9]

Finally, there are Western scholars or Orientalists who study the
works of classical Muslim scholars in this field. The most well-known
among this group is Jacques Waardenburg, a Professor of
Comparative Study of Religion at Utrecht University, who was
concerned with the issue of "objectivity-subjectivity" in the
discipline.[10] This is reflected in his *Classical Approaches to the Study
of Religion* (2 vols.), and *Reflections on the Study of Religion.*[11]
Apparently, Waardenburg's main concern is to "criticise" the works
of Muslim scholars, the classical as well as the contemporary, in the
light of the dominant Western concepts and methodologies. To
Waardenburg, the classical Muslim scholars have failed to
understand and represent other religions objectively. What the
Muslims saw, according to him, were "images" (subjective
understandings) "developed within their own cultural and religious
orbit."[12] To him, this is the main problem that has prevented the
emergence of the discipline of "objective" and "scientific" study of
religions in the Muslim world. This is all the more difficult, according
to Waardenburg, because of the adage that "Islam is the final and
true religion."[13]

Objectivity According to the West

The Western conception of objectivity is that the researcher's "belief"
or "religion" should not intervene in the process of studying other
religions. Failure to observe this golden rule, the output of the
research and study will inevitably be biased and subjective or simply
not objective. According to the experts of *Religionswissenschaft*,
one has to absolutely maintain distanciation between him/herself
(as the "subject") and the religion under study (as the "object"),
observing vividly and scrupulously the two phenomenological
principles: (i) *epochê* (from the Greek word: *epechô*, meaning "I
hold back," which means also: stoppage, disengagement or

bracketing); and (ii) *eidatic vision* (the ability to observe without "prior beliefs and interpretations" influencing understanding and perception). A researcher or practitioner of *Religionswissenschaft* is not allowed strictly to pass any judgment, either for or against, the religion under study.[14]

Western conception of objectivity is well summarised by Wilfred Cantwell Smith saying that "No statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers." Referring to his own study, Smith is of the opinion: "Anything that I say about Islam as a living faith is valid only as far as Muslims can say 'amen' to it."[15] It is not realized that this principle, although seemingly promising, is flawed when faced with reality. William Roff, for instance, questions Smith by saying: "How many–or how few– Muslims may in such circumstances constitute a court?"[16] Al-Fārūqī has a similar question: "The consent of which adherents of the faith may be taken as proof, and how many such consent be expressed?" He goes further and says:

> Moreover, it must be at least theoretically possible that the adherents of a religion may have gone so far in interpreting their religion that they have missed its primeval essence, that they do not find it any longer meaningful. This is of course tantamount to their acquiring a new religion, despite the fact that the new may still be called by the name of the old; and Smith's criterion cannot therefore be taken as a test of validity in the strict sense.[17]

Yet, the West insists that "objectivity" (Arabic: *al-mawḍūʿiyyah*) in research cannot be compromised, especially in the field of *Religionswissenschaft* whose very object of study is religion (something that, according to Søren Kierkegaard, towards which neutrality is not possible).[18] In the scientific or scholarly tradition, there is absolutely no room for subjectivity (Arabic: *al-dhātiyyah*) and prejudice (prae + judicium: a judgment that has been passed before the issue has been subject to test or trial).

However, this issue of objectivity in reality has left a question mark at the level of theory or epistemology and of practice. In particular, it is necessary to examine their insistence on "*value-free-ness*" as the determining principle of objectivity. The majority of practitioners of the field, especially the pioneers, almost unanimously

agree that the spirit of "value-free-ness" must be pervasive in every step of the process of research. Value-judgment is "unlawful" and, thus, must be avoided.

The ontological and epistemological question is whether there is something called "value-free" on earth? It is easier to talk about "value-freeness" but difficult, if not impossible, to explain or verify its existence. This is simply a "slogan" which has developed into a "dogma" for the practitioners and students of *Religionswissenschaft*. When looked at realistically, human beings (whoever, wherever and whenever he/she is) cannot live without "a set of values" believed to be the ultimate "truth." And the source and supplier of value is religion, or "substitute of religion" (whatsoever its form and manifestation), or what is identified by the scholars as "quasi-religion," "worldview," "semi-religion," "*weltanschauung*" or what could be simply called "new religion."[19] In fact, the very insistence on "value-free-ness" is a "value" which is, in the belief of its adherence, the ultimate "truth." Without being consciously thought by the claimant, such an understanding has actually defeated the claim of objectivity ("value-free-ness"). Senay dubs this principle a "myth" which

> distorts the study of religion's aim to understand its subject, by implicitly taking up an agnostic stance in relation to nature of knowledge or reality. The apparent objectivity or neutrality of the phenomenological approach is, on closer scrutiny, a judgment *against* religious worldviews.[20]

Thus, the attempts made by the practitioners of the discipline to avoid value-judgment is of no avail, "for the contexts themselves contain presuppositions that are not value-free."[21]

It has been argued by many that scientists, despite themselves, cannot avoid being ethically and morally responsible for the formulation, direction, methodologies, and consequences of their work. Earlier, Paul Tillich, a well-known Christian theologian and philosopher, has stated that a researcher or an observer is a human being who, like all other human beings, thinks and acts in accordance with the configuration and framework of value or a set of values in which he/she believes. If it is not based on religions proper, it is nevertheless based on the substitutes of religion (quasi-religions). To him:

> The outside observer is always an inside participant with a
> part of his being, for he also has confessed or concealed
> answers to the questions which underlie every form of religion.
> If does not profess a religion proper, he nevertheless belongs
> to a quasi-religion, and as consequence he also selects, judges,
> and evaluates.[22]

What is being emphasised here is that full-fledged descriptive studies
in social sciences and humanities, as required in both
Phenomenology and History of Religion, are humanly impossible.
To identify Phenomenology of Religion (which necessitates the two
principles of *epoché* and *eidatic vision*) with the so-called "Scientific
Study of Religion" is untenable and baseless. Wiebe concludes that
"the scientific study of religion must go beyond mere description to
explanation. And to explain a thing requires a knowledge of its true
character–it involves the 'truth question.'"[23] Isma'il al-Faruqi opined
that the phenomenological descriptive approach is necessary in order
for the study of religion to be objective, but it alone is insufficient.

In the study of religions, al-Faruqi points out, judgment or
evaluation is not only necessary, but as a matter of fact also desirable
and possible.[24] However, this judgment has to be based upon valid
principles and methodologies verifiable logically and rationally. In
this regards, Al-Faruqi introduced a methodology called meta-religion
which guarantees "objectivity" of a study.[25] Ontologically and
epistemologically, the "truth question" constitutes an organic part
of *Religionswissenschaft* and is inseparable from it. Therefore,
passing of judgment directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly,
has been taking place in most, if not all, of the works of the
practitioners of the field. The difference is only in the matter of
intensity and degree. It is this intensity in Muslim scholarship which
Seymour Cain, Mircea Eliade and Jacques Waardenburg disdain.
As stated above, Cain did not acknowledge the intellectual
contribution of the classical Muslim scholars. Mircea Eliade and
Jacques Waardenburg gave it a partial coverage but tried
systematically, and pejoratively, to prove Muslim scholarship as of
no value.

It is worth noting, however, that the Orientalists did indulge in
passing judgments, for instance, by naming Indian traditions as
Hinduism and Buddhism. These terms were not known to the ancient

world. These terms are not found in Indian religious scriptures nor
in al-Bīrūnī's well-known, *Taḥqīq Mā li al-Hind,* an "anthropological
study" of India based upon rigorous field research.[26] Al-Bīrūnī,
instead, uses prevalent terms like *al-Barāhimah* (Brahmanism), *al-
Barahman* (the Brahmin), and *al-Shumaniyyah* (for the followers
of Buddha).[27] These and other terms, as Cantwell Smith concurs,
were introduced by *the outsiders* (most probably, the Orientalists
and colonialists) in the modern era.[28]

Conclusion

Objectivity, as defined by Western scholars, is to be "value-free"
and "descriptive." In this sense, objectivity is impossible in the study
of religion. "Objectivity" (*al-mawḍūʿiyyah*) has something to do
with the "object" (*al-mawḍūʿ*) directly and how to deal with it. In
dealing with the "object," it is possible to evaluate it following clearly
laid down methodology. In the Qur'ān, this "objectivity" is
associated with *al-ʿadl* (justice), a principle that must be enforced in
all situations.

The Qur'ān is categorical: "Be just: that is nearer to piety; and
fear Allah" (*Sūrat al-Mā'idah,* 5:8). Muslim scholars in the field of
Religionswissenschaft, and in every other fields, made serious
attempts to translate and articulate this sublime Qur'ānic values and
principles into everyday practice. They did this as an act of *ʿibādah*
(sincere worship) to Allah. They knew well that "objectivity" in the
sense of treating the "object" justly (as enjoined by al-Qur'ān) is
humanly possible.[29] It is precisely because of this very "translating
and articulating of the Qur'ānic values and principles into practice"
that the works of the Muslim scholars were termed as "subjective,"
"biased" and unscientific by Western scholars. Their judgments on
Muslim scholarship emanate from their superiority complex and from
their religious and intellectual prejudices. As Fazlur Rahman points
out:

> ... pre-nineteenth century Western treatments of Islam suffered
> from ... [religious prejudice], while nineteenth and early
> twentieth century scholarship suffered particularly from ...
> [cultural and intellectual prejudice].[30]

A just and positive attitudinal shift in Western scholarship towards
the East, especially Islam, is yet to take place.

Notes

1. Friedrich Max Müller stated: "It was supposed at one time that a comparative analysis of the languages of mankind must transcend the powers of man: and yet by the combined and well directed efforts of many scholars, great results have been obtained, and the principles that must guide the students of the Science of Language are now firmly established. *It will be the same with the Science of Religion....* The Science of Religion may be the last of the sciences which man is destined to elaborate...." Friedrich Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop I* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1872), xix. (emphasis added).

2. Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1873), 16.

3. Seymour Cain, "Study of Religion: History of Study", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), vol. 14, 64-83.

4. Cain's article appears in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* which is promoted as an easily accessible primary reference concerning religions and everything religious. Its contributors are viewed as the experts in their respective fields.

5. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. R. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), 229; J. Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 27-28.

6. C. Edward Sachau ed. and trans., *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Āthār-ul-Bākiya of Al-Bīrūnī, or "Vestiges of the Past"* (London: Allen, 1879); idem ed. and trans., *Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about AD 1030*, 2 vols. (London: Trübner, 1910).

7. David Thomas ed. and trans. , *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8. Daniel Gimaret, Guy Monnot, and Jean Jolivet eds. and trans., *Livre des Religions et des Sectes*, 2 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, dan Paris: UNESCO, 1986 dan 1993). B. Bruce Lawrence in his, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), did a special researh on al-Shahrastānī's descriptions of Indian religions.

9. S.J. Thomas Michel ed. and trans., *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawab al-Sahih* (Delmar, N.Y: Caravan Books, 1984).

10. Jacques Waardenburg, 'World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam,' in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, eds. T. Alford Welch and Pierre Cachia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 245-75; idem, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); idem, *Muslim and Others: Relations in Context* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

11. Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1973); idem, *Reflections on the Study of Religon* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

12. Jacques Waardenburg, 'World Religions as Seen in the Light of Islam,' 268-9, (italics added). This conclusion could still be read clearly in his *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions*, 56; and with a little editing in his *Muslim and Others*, 196.

13. Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim and Others*, 233.

14. For the detail, see for instance: Jacques Waardenburg, *Reflections*, 9-21; J. Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 220-50.

15. C. Wilfred Smith, 'Comparative Religion: Whither - and Why?,' in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds. Mircea Eliade and M. Joseph Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 42-43.

16. William Roff, "Pilgrimage and the History of Religions: Theoretical Approaches to the Hajj," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 78.

17. R. Isma'il Al-Faruqi, "Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 3, no. 1 (1986): 24-25. Similarly, Senay questioned the feasibility of the methodology promoted by Smith above. See: Bülent Senay, "Another Introduction to Islam: The Myth of the Value-Free Study of Religion," in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 15, no. 2 (1998): 82.

18. Quoted in Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 9.

19. On "New Religion," see: Anis Malik Thoha, *Al-Taʿaddudiyyah al-Dīniyyah: Ruʾyah Islāmiyyah* (Kuala Lumpur: Research Centre IIUM, 2005), 144-71.

20. See Bülent Senay, "Another Introduction to Islam: The Myth of the Value-Free Study of Religion,"76-7.

21. Ibid., 77.

22. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 2.

23. Donald Wiebe, *Religion and Truth: Towards an Alternative Paradigm for the Study of Religion* (The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 3, 174.

24. For the detail, see: Isma'il al-Faruqi, "History of Religions: Its Nature and Significance for Christian Education and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue," *Numen*, XII (January, 1965): 47-58. Then, he sharpened this approach further in his later essay, "Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology," 13-57.

25. See the detailed account on the "meta-religion" in Isma'il Al-Faruqi, "Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology"; also the introduction to his *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967).

26. As he mentioned clearly towards the end of the introduction to the book that Al-Bīrūnī has translated into Arabic two Indian scriptures, one of which is Patanjali. Al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq Mā li al-Hind*, 6.

27. See: Al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq Mā li al-Hind*; also *Al-Āthār*.

28. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, even the names of all religions existing today, except Islam which is *built-in*, are given by *the outsiders*. For further detail, see: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London: SPCK, 1978).

29. On the issue of "objectivity," Paul Tillich holds more or less a similar opinion. See: Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 2.

30. Fazlur Rahman, "Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 193.