



BĪRŪNĪ, ABŪ RAYḤĀN VII. HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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viii. History of Religions

Bīrūnī is one of the most important Muslim authorities on the history of religion. In this article some of his remarks on pre-Islamic Iranian religions, on Christianity and Judaism, and on Muslim sects will be discussed (for Indian religions, see viii, below).

There is some uncertainty about Bīrūnī's own religious position within Islam. In *Ketāb al-āṭār al-bāqīa 'an al-qorūn al-ḳālīa* (Book of vestiges from past centuries), which belongs to the first period of his scholarly career, many passages reveal profound sympathy for Shi'ism. Aside from repeated conventional blessings on 'Alī and on the family of the Prophet in general, this sympathy is especially apparent in his accounts of the celebrations of 'āšūrā' and *ḡadīr ḳomm* (*Āṭār*, pp. 329, 334; the latter section is truncated in the printed edition). In another passage (p. 67) Bīrūnī invokes the protection of God specifically for the Zaydī Shi'ites, though his disparaging remarks about Nāṣer 'Otrūš (p. 224) show that he did not support this claimant to the Zaydī imamate. In his account of Muslim chronology (Garbers, pp. 59-68), however, Bīrūnī counts as "caliphs" Abū Bakr, 'Omar, 'Oṭmān, 'Alī, and Ḥasan; the Omayyads are designated only as "kings," the 'Abbasids as "imams." These



designations are in clear contradiction to the Shi'ite insistence that the caliphate/imamate belonged exclusively to 'Alī and his descendants. It appears that Bīrūnī, like quite a few other scholars of the 4th/10th century, combined an intense attachment to 'Alī and the *ahl al-bayt* (members and descendants of Moḥammad's own family) with recognition of the first three caliphs and, in part, of the 'Abbasids as well, this attitude was particularly clear among some of the Mu'tazilites of the period, for example, Ebn 'Abbād. In Bīrūnī's later works, written after his forced removal to Ġazna (408/1017; see i, above), Shi'ite sympathies are less apparent, which is not surprising in view of the strict Sunnism of the Ghaznavid rulers. For example, the full account of Muslim observances given in *Āṭār* (pp. 328-35, supplemented by Fück, text VI) can be compared with the abridged version in *al-Qānūn al-mas'ūdī fi'l-hay'a wa'l-nojūm* (Mas'ūdic canon on astronomy; I, pp. 255-57). Nonetheless, Bīrūnī continues to speak of the family of the Prophet with the greatest respect and to present the Shi'ite and Sunnite positions fairly side by side. In a discussion of Muslim prayer times (*Zelāl*, p. 162), for example, he quotes in succession the opinions of 'Omar and of Ja'far al-Ṣādeq. He also defends the Mu'tazilites against a slanderous misrepresentation of their doctrines (*Hend*, p. 3). In a curious passage in the *Ketāb al-jamāher fi ma'refat al-jawāher* (Book of the sum of knowledge about precious stones, p. 215) he mentions that the Shi'ites used white stones in their signet rings, the Sunnites black ones. "For my part," Bīrūnī continues, "I used to combine the two stones in a double ring as a way of outwitting both factions." This passage certainly reflects the author's distaste for factional squabbling; it is also possible, however, that here Bīrūnī is feigning sectarian indifference in order to disarm criticism of the impassioned pro-Shi'ite writings of his youth.

Bīrūnī's approach to other religions must be viewed against the background of his own Muslim convictions. He displays remarkable fairness and open-mindedness toward other faiths without, however, any trace of syncretism or religious relativism. He is as unequivocal in rejecting beliefs unacceptable to Muslims as he is in condemning unfair criticism of other faiths. A typical example is his assessment of reports by Muslim authors about a celebration during which the Nestorian Christians supposedly engage in promiscuous orgies: He rejects them as "defamations." "May god protect us," he continues, "from slandering anyone, whether friend or foe, and especially the sect of the Christians. For, although their doctrines are bad, their way of life is the highest pinnacle of chastity and integrity and kindness toward everyone" (*Tafhīm*, p. 179; see also de Blois, 1984, pp. 85-86). (The Persian translator of *Tafhīm*, ed.



Homā'ī, p. 251, has misread *tajrīḥāt 'alayhem*, “defamations of them,” as *takrījāt 'alayhem* and has translated it as *bar išān bīrūn āmadand*, which makes no sense in the context; contrary to what has often been claimed, it is thus clear that the Persian version of *Tafhīm* cannot be the work of Bīrūnī himself.)

Bīrūnī's works contain frequent references to Zoroastrianism. Much of his information on this subject, as on Persian secular history and chronology, was derived from the writings of Ḥamza Eṣfahānī, whom Bīrūnī often cites by name; much, however, seems to have come from other sources as well. His account of the life of Zoroaster (Fück, pp. 75-79) is largely devoted to a discussion of the eschatological expectations that Zoroastrian and Muslim sects attached to the 1,500th anniversary of the appearance of the Iranian prophet. Particularly valuable is his detailed description of the Zoroastrian feasts (*Ātār*, pp. 215-33; Fück, text IV; Khalidov, texts II and III), which contains much information on Zoroastrian beliefs, as well as on popular Persian superstitions of the author's own day. On the other hand, his accounts of the celebrations of the Sogdians (*Ātār*, pp. 233-35) and of his own compatriots, the Khwarezmians (pp. 235-38), contribute little to our knowledge of their religions. Bīrūnī himself notes (p. 235) that the Khwarezmian Zoroastrians of his day were few in number and largely ignorant of their own religious principles.

Although Bīrūnī has no sympathy for the doctrines of the Manicheans, he displays an astonishing degree of interest in the writings of Mānī. He quotes verbatim an important passage from Mānī's *Šābuhragān* (*Ātār*, p. 207), which strongly resembles that in Turfan fragment M 5794 (cf. Boyce, p. 29). He uses the same book to correct the chronology of the Arsacid kings (p. 118), going out of his way to emphasize Mānī's reliability: “Mānī is one of those who teach that the telling of lies is forbidden; besides he had no need to falsify history.” In another passage (*Fehrest*, pp. 3-4) Bīrūnī reports that he had looked for Mānī's *Book of Mysteries* for more than forty years before discovering it in K̄vārazm.

Bīrūnī is familiar with the names of Bar Dayṣān and Marcion but has little of substance to say about them (*Ātār*, p. 207). He also gives a brief account of Mazdak (p. 209; Fück, pp. 79-80).

Bīrūnī evidently had Arabic translations of the Old and New Testaments, as well as of other Jewish and Christian writings, at his disposal. He devotes much space in *Ātār* to a description and critique of the Jewish calendar,



concerning which he is apparently the oldest surviving source of any substance. In his description of the celebrations of the Melkite (Greek Orthodox) Christians (pp. 288-302) he gives valuable bits of information about the Christians of eastern Iran, apparently supplied by Christian informants. After a briefer account of the holy days of the Nestorians (pp. 309-15) he apologizes for not also informing his readers about the rites of the Jacobites, which he omits because “we have not succeeded in finding anyone who belonged to their sect or knew their principles” (p. 315). Bīrūnī dismisses unreliable reports on Christian beliefs with the observation that “there is nothing of this in the Gospel” (p. 301), yet in another passage he himself erroneously attributes a curious version of the story of Jacob and Esau to “the Torah” (Khalidov, p. 156). As a Muslim Bīrūnī cannot accept the Christian concept of the Trinity, yet, in a remarkable passage (*Hend*, p. 18), he goes a long way toward exonerating the Christians by showing, through various biblical quotations, that the Jewish and Christian scriptures use the words “father” and “son” in a metaphorical, as well as a literal, sense.

The open-mindedness which the author displays in his treatment of non-Muslim religions is less apparent when he turns to Muslim “heresies.” His principal contribution to Muslim heresiography was evidently the lost early work, *Aḵbār al-mobayyeẓa wa’l-qarāmeṭa* (History of the Mobayyeẓa and the Qarmatians), to which he refers in *Āṭār*, in his rather lurid accounts of Moqanna’ (p. 211) and the “Qarmatians” of Bahrain (pp. 213-14). This work, which was clearly of a polemical nature, seems to have been used, or rather plagiarized, by Baġdādī in his book *al-Farq bayn al-feraq* (cf. Madelung, p. 79 n. 2). In *Āṭār* Bīrūnī also gives brief and rather unsubstantial accounts of Mosaylema (pp. 209-10), Beh-Āfarīd (pp. 210-11), Ḥallāj (pp. 211-12), and Moḥammad Šalmaġānī (Fück, pp. 80-81).

Whereas in *Āṭār* the author’s approach to religious history is essentially descriptive, in his late work, *Ketāb taḥqīq mā le’l-Hend men maqūla maqbūla fi’l-‘aql aw marḍūla* (Book of detailed description of the doctrines of the Indians, whether rationally acceptable or unacceptable), he makes a number of excursions into the field of comparative religion. In several passages (e.g., pp. 4, 16, 43) the author compares the beliefs of the Hindus with those of the Greek philosophers and the Muslim Sufis. As he does not show any particular sympathy for Sufism, it is likely that these comparisons are intended to cast doubt on its orthodoxy. Elsewhere (pp. 23, 27) he draws attention to parallels between Indian and Manichean teachings and concludes that Mānī borrowed



his beliefs—notably the doctrine of metempsychosis—from the Indians. In another passage (p. 82) he compares the Indian holy syllable *ōm* with the Muslim *basmala* and the ineffable name of god in Judaism. Finally, Bīrūnī correctly observes (p. 44) that the word *dēv/dēva* is used by Hindus to designate the “angels” (as a monotheist he is reluctant to speak of “gods”) but by the Persians to refer to “demons.” Like Mas‘ūdī and other Muslim authors, Bīrūnī labors under the illusion that the Iranians, before the time of Zoroaster, had followed the Buddhist religion (*šamanīya*, for Mid. Ind. *śamaṇa-*, Skt. *śramaṇa-* “ascetic”; see *Hend*, p. 10; cf. *Ātār*, p. 204, where the pre-Zoroastrian Persians are said to have been followers of Būdāsaf/Bodhisattva), and he thus concludes that Zoroaster changed the meaning of the word *dēv* in order to distance himself from the Buddhists. If the term “Buddhists” is replaced by “followers of the old Indo-Iranian religion,” however, Bīrūnī’s analysis is very close to that of modern students of Zoroastrianism.

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