The Phenomenological Approach of Religion from the Viewpoint of Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni in the Mirror of New Religious Studies

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article **Article history:** Received: 06 November 2024 Received in revised form22 February 2025 Accepted: 25 February 2025 Published online: 21 March 2025 **Keywords:** *Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Comparative study of religions, Phenomenology of religion, Religious studies.*	Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1048 CE) stands out as one of the few Muslim scholars who approached religious studies with notable innovation. A distinguishing feature of his scholarship is his phenomenological method in understanding diverse religious traditions. Given the significance of examining his theological perspective—particularly within the framework of the phenomenology of religion—and the lack of focused research in this domain, the present study aims to explore his theological views and his method of engaging with various religions. Using a comparative approach, this research draws upon al-Biruni's major works and his most significant contributions to the study of religion, alongside contemporary scholarship analyzing his perspectives. The findings suggest that al-Biruni's religious approach closely parallels modern methodologies in the study of religion, especially in the field of religious phenomenology. He undertook a cautious and objective comparative analysis of religions, consciously avoiding bias. In his encounters with the "religious other," al-Biruni adopted an empathetic and non-judgmental stance, striving to understand each religion from the standpoint of its adherents. He viewed truth as a pluralistic concept, accessible to all of humanity, and regarded all religions as potential paths to salvation.

1. Introduction

1-1. Statement of the Problem

Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni al-Khwarizmi (973–1048 CE) is among the few scholars in the Islamic world who, in addition to mastering various scientific disciplines, studied different cultures and religions from the perspective of a religious scholar. His approach closely resembles that of contemporary phenomenologists of religion, and he provided valuable historical information about the customs and sects of various nations and religious traditions.

Al-Biruni adhered to the principle of scientific impartiality in his research, striving to examine facts as they appeared, and thereby minimizing the influence of cultural and social biases (Azad Aramaki, 1993: 30). He evaluated the truth or falsehood of narratives with objectivity, refraining from hastily rejecting ideas that may have seemed unacceptable in his own time (Nasr, 1963: 161). As a Muslim scholar, he conducted some of the most rigorous research on non-Islamic religious traditions. After him, no other scholar approached the study of Hindu thought with comparable impartiality until the late medieval and early modern periods. In the nineteenth century, European scholars drew inspiration from the path he had pioneered (Lawrence, 2000: 285).

This study aims to examine al-Biruni's perspective on religions through a comparative lens. To this end, following a review of contemporary approaches to the academic study of religion—particularly the phenomenology of religion—we will compare al-Biruni's phenomenological method with those of modern scholars in the field.

1-2. Purpose

This study aims to investigate Abu Rayhan al-Biruni's phenomenological perspective on religion through a systematic approach. It draws upon his key works that reflect his approach to religious studies, as well as recent scholarship that has examined his religious views, employing a comparative methodology. The research then juxtaposes his perspective with contemporary approaches in the academic study of religion and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Can al-Biruni's approach to religion be classified as phenomenological?
2. What are the similarities and differences between his approach and those of contemporary scholars in the study of religion?

The hypotheses of this study are as follows:

1. A review of al-Biruni's writings and the scholarly literature about him suggests that his attitude toward religion is phenomenological, empathetic, and non-judgmental.
2. His approach—particularly in his presentation of Indian (Hindu) religious thought in *Kitab al-Hind*—closely parallels the methodologies employed by modern phenomenologists of religion.

1-3. Background

Numerous studies have explored the ideas and intellectual contributions of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni. Some have only briefly touched upon his methodology in the humanities; others have examined his cultural perspectives or his general approach to culture and religion. A number of works have addressed the relationship between al-Biruni and the phenomenology of religion, including:

- Karamipour and Nasiri (2017). *Abu Rayhan Biruni: Phenomenology, Methodology, and Anthropology of Religion*;
- Kamarzaman (2003). *Al-Biruni: The Father of Comparative Religion*;
- Ahsan Al-Hadi (2015). *Biruni's Contribution to the Comparative Study of Religion*;
- Nourhaniseh Senin et al. (2019). *Understanding the "Other": The Case of Al-Biruni*;
- Ataman (2002). *Biruni's Approach to Other Religions, with an Analysis of the Blending of Gadamer's Horizons*.

Despite these contributions, none of these studies have specifically focused on articulating al-Biruni's phenomenological approach to religion or on comparing his perspective with contemporary approaches in the academic study of religion.

2. Methodology
The methodology of this study is descriptive and comparative. It involves describing and analyzing Abu Rayhan Biruni's approach to other religions, followed by a comparison with the perspectives of contemporary religious scholars. The data collection method is primarily library-based. Initially, Biruni's key works that discuss his views on various religions and cultures were examined. Subsequently, his perspectives were compared with modern approaches to religious studies, particularly within the phenomenology of religion.

3. Findings
A few years before Orientalists began systematically studying different religions and cultures, Abu Rayhan employed a method in religious studies that closely resembles modern approaches used by contemporary scholars, particularly in the field of phenomenology of religion. Among the notable similarities are the following: To thoroughly research Hindu customs, religion, and culture, Abu Rayhan learned Sanskrit, adopting a method akin to that of modern religious scholars; in composing his works, he first gathered historical facts about various religions like a historian and then, from a phenomenological perspective, critically examined, analyzed, and compared them. Similar to Cantwell Smith, he defines religion as a collection of accumulated traditions and beliefs, arguing that the accumulation of Hindu religious traditions has created a distinct religious identity. By investigating the accumulated traditions in Hinduism, he regards this religion as a "religious other," approaching it free from value judgments. Given Abu Rayhan's pluralistic view of religion, he does not claim exclusive possession of truth for himself or his co-religionists.

4. Conclusion
The primary conclusion of this research is that Abu Rayhan was a methodical religious scholar who studied religions comparatively through a phenomenological approach. His perspectives largely align with those of modern religious studies, particularly in the field of phenomenology of religion. In his engagement with other religions, he employed an empathetic and non-judgmental method, striving to understand each religion from the viewpoint of its adherents. Furthermore, he regarded truth as pluralistic and accessible to all humanity, thereby considering all religions as sources of salvation. This scholarly methodology has firmly established his reputation as a phenomenologist.

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