

Chapter 2

Is an Islamic Scientific Study of Religion Possible? A Preliminary Discourse with Reference to the Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft

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Abstract This paper discusses the possibility of the Islamic scientific study of religion in the academia. In the Muslim scholarship of religionswissenschaft, many scholars had emerged and contributed to this particular field. Many international scholars, Muslims or non-Muslims alike, recognized Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft. However, no scholars ever acknowledge Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft as an Islamic scientific study of religion due to the issue of the relationship between religion and science, philosophies of science, as well as the demarcation theory. This paper suggests that the Islamic scientific study of religion is possible based on the justifications highlighted by a number of scholars on the possibility of the Islamic science. In simulating the actual model of Islamic scientific study of religion, this paper highlights preliminary and precursory samples found in the works of Al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun on religions, altogether with the acknowledgements they received by modern readers of their epoch-making works.

Keywords Islamic scientific study of religion • Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft • Scientific methodology • Al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun

2.1 Introduction

When does science scholarly known to begin? Are there any scientific discoveries of whatever of its kind in the past? If there are the sciences of the past, can there be a science of religion? If so, is an Islamic scientific study of religion possible? These are among many other debatable questions, which are related to the discussion of

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this paper. In the comparative study of religions or religionswissenschaft [9, Vol. 6, p. 4065; 10, Vol. 3, p. 1872; 31, pp. 191–192; 34, p. 91], scientific method is of utmost important element that constitutes an objective and fruitful study.

With scientific methodology, then it is a scientific study. In highlighting the importance of methodology, Jacques Waardenburg (b. 1930) has this to say: “Now it is our contention that in a scholar’s work his methodological statements are utmost importance for our understanding not only of the concepts he used, but also of the perspective from which he worked and the very intentions of his investigations” [46, p. 4]. The application of the “scientific method” signifies a total change as this field has expanded beyond the traditional confines of theological or philosophical study of religion and to become part of other modern disciplines of knowledge such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology [47, pp. 13–37].

In the Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft, many scholars had emerged and contributed to this particular field. Many international scholars such as H. U. W. Stanton (1851–1937), Franz Rosenthal (1914–2003), Eric Sharpe (1933–2000), Bruce Lawrence, and Ghulam Haider Aasi recognized and acknowledged Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft [16, p. 65; 24, p. 5; 41, p. 11]. According to the late Professor Dr. Ahmad Shalaby, the Muslims were the earliest to contribute the intellectual development in this discipline as many other non-Islamic religions denied and condemned the existence of other religions [2, p. 24]. It is worth mentioning here, among the early Muslim scholars in this discipline were Al-Nawbakhti (d. 202H) through his *Al-Ara’ Wa Al-Diyanat*, Al-Mas’udi (d. 346H) through his *Al-Diyanat*, Al-Musabbihi’s (d. 420H) *Dark Al-Bughiyyah Fi Wasf Al-Adyan Wa Al-‘Ibadat*, Al-Baghdadi’s (d. 429H) *Al-Milal Wa Al-Nihal*, Ibn Hazm’s (d. 456H) *Al-Fasl Fi Al-Milal Wa Al-Ahwa’ Wa Al-Nihal*, Al-Shahrastani’s (d. 548H) *Al-Milal Wa Al-Nihal*, and Al-Biruni’s (d. 440H) *Tahqiq Ma Li Al-Hind Min Maqulah Maqbulah Fi Al-‘Aql Aw Mardhulah* [2, pp. 27–28]. However, with such recognitions and acknowledgements, is an Islamic scientific study of religion even possible?

2.2 The Scientific Study of Religion

The understanding of religion calls the need for a study of religion as what was initiated by the previous generations of academic scholars and religious sages. Ninian Smart (1927–2001) signified the study of religions as an attempt to understand the various aspects of religion, especially through the use of other intellectual disciplines [43]. In contrast, Waardenburg suggests that the study of religion “includes all studies concerned with religious data, their observation, ascertainment, description, explanation, analysis, understanding, [and] interpretation” [30, p. 5]. As such, the study of religion includes the whole universe of religions as its subject of study, for instance, history, creeds, rituals, saints, scholars, sacred texts, holy places, and many more [5, p. 8761]. In consequence, we could find today numerous theories and methods of understanding religion that are rooted in many

disciplines of modern academia such as theology, history, philosophy, psychological, sociology, and anthropology [13, pp. 1031–1033].

In the experience of German scholars, “religious studies” is called *religionswissenschaft* (literally, science of religions), in contrast to *naturwissenschaft* (natural science) or *geisteswissenschaft* (human science). Evidently and even until today, the German term *wissenschaft* (science, study, or learning) includes humanistic and social studies that are regarded as science, whereas the English usage of the word science tends to refer most of the time to the natural scientific model. Thus, the German term *wissenschaft* (science) is much wider in its concept and scope than the English term [30, p. 5].

It should be known that the emergence of the scientific study of religion is one of the “fruits” of the Enlightenment. As told by Frank Whaling (b. 1934), it was the changes in the philosophy of science that influenced this impact. The scientific methods, which lie behind the practical achievements of modern science, had influenced the approaches to the study of religion [48, Vol. 1, p. 379]. John Milton Yinger (1916–2011) had defined the scientific study of religion as the simultaneous anthropological, psychological, and sociological approach to the study of religion; that is, it must deal with the individual forces, the cultural systems, and the social structures that, in interaction, shape religion and are shaped by it [49, p. vii].

In other words, the scientific study of religion is much more specific and exclusive from the previous (study of religion), which evidently the main difference between both lies beneath the theorization and its methodologies [11, p. vii]. Among the earliest major figures in this trend of study were Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) through his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* [28] and *Chips from a German Workshop: Essay on the Science of Religion* [29], Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830–1902) through his *Elements of the Science of Religion* in two volumes [45], and Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920) through his *Manual of the Science of Religion* [39]. They were among the earliest who intended *religionswissenschaft* (or *les science des religion* or scientific study of religion) to be a descriptive and objective science, which is free from the religious dogma and only subject to the use of reason.

Majority of scholars agree that it was the Enlightenment spirit that catalyzed toward this new feature of the study of religion in the West. However, these scholars also agree that scientific pursuits and discovery had already begun since the Greeks, which is nearly 2000 years prior to the Enlightenment [25, pp. 218–222]. Yet ironically, these scholars, for whatever reasons, did not unveil if there were any scientific features in the study of religion by the earlier non-Western scholars but remained to the idea that scientific study of religion or *religionswissenschaft* is the youngest of the sciences. This standpoint has left a gap of knowledge for present and future researchers to further discover and validate this issue. Due to that, this paper will shed some light on a preliminary discourse with reference to the Muslim scholarship in *religionswissenschaft*. As a result, findings from this specific analysis will benefit in proposing Islamic scientific study of religion.

2.3 Is There an Islamic Science?

Obviously, within the passage of time, the meaning of the term “science” developed from one period of time to another [18, p. 781]. Etymologically, the term “science” derived from the Latin *scientia* or *scire*, which means knowledge or to know [26]. Some of the scholarly definitions of science are as follows [15, pp. 1269–1338]:

1. Albert Einstein (1879–1955), German-born physicist: “Science as something existing and complete is the most objective thing known to man.”
2. Karl R. Popper (1902–1994), Austrian/British philosopher of science: “...it is the aim of science to find satisfactory explanations, of whatever strikes us as being in need of explanation.”
3. Stephen William Hawking (b. 1942), English theoretical physicist: “In effect, we have redefined the task of science to be the discovery of laws that will enable us to predict events up to the limits set by the uncertainty principle.”

There are many reasons to why there are many definitions and conceptions of science. In brief, all of that reasons can be summed up as due to the different philosophies of science, which are professed and articulated by many scholars, especially of different periods of time. This event of different philosophies of science had brought forth the demarcation theory, which is used to distinguish between what constitutes a science or scientific from the unscientific, pseudoscience, or myth [17, pp. 781–791].

It is worth noting here that in the case of relationship between science and religion, the tension caused by the demarcation theory is far greater and more complicated than in the case of the relationship between science and language, science and philosophy, or science and culture [27, pp. 18–25]. Nevertheless, some great scholars such as Charles Singer (1876–1960), George Sarton (1884–1956), Rosenthal, Deming (b. 1954), George Saliba, and John Freely (b. 1926) continue to recognize the place of religion in the history of science. Not only that, these scholars also to some extent even recognize the influences of religion on science, which later on authenticated the religious sciences, such as Mesopotamian science, Egyptian science, Christian science, and Islamic science in the mapping of the historiography of science [12, Vol. 1 & 2; 38; 42].

Interestingly, from such recognition on the possibility of religious sciences to recognition on the viability of Islamic science, the recognition does not just stop right there. Some scholars had delved and investigated deeper on the historiography of science in world’s civilization and extended the recognition on Islamic scientific contributions to the whole mankind, especially Islamic scientific contributions to the Western civilization right after the Medieval Period [14; 35, p. 340; 37, 38; 42].

In the specific case of disputing the possibility of Islamic science, many Muslim philosophers-scholars had answered and responded to this case in the likes of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1931) through his *Knowledge and the Sacred* [40], Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (b. 1931) through his *Islam and Secularism* [3],

Osman Bakar (b. 1946) through his *Tawhid and Science* [32], and Ziauddin Sardar (b. 1951) through his *Explorations in Islamic Science* [50]. In brief, Islamic science is supposed to be understood as an enterprise of systematic knowledge, which is imbued and upheld with Islamic fundamental values and teachings from the Holy Quran and the Sunnah.

2.4 Precursors of Islamic Scientific Study of Religion: Al-Biruni (362H/973 AD–443H/1051 AD) and Ibn Khaldun (732 H/1332 AD–804H/1406 AD)

As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the comparative study of religions is regarded as one of the great contributions of Muslim's civilization to mankind's intellectual progress. This is due to the nature of this Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft, which recognizes and calls for the understanding of the pluralistic nature of human faith. In Islam, the religion of God is only one, but the religion of humankind is multiple and manifold (Al-Quran, Aali 'Imran, Chapter 3, verses 19 and 85) [1, 33]. This recognition and calling for the understanding of the various kinds of human religions are enshrined in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah. Muslims learn this fact from the Quran and the Sunnah, whereby in the passage of time many prominent ulama emerged as scholars of religionswissenschaft.

Stewart Sutherland (b. 1941) underlines that whatever reasons that one may have to study religion or religions, be it due to one's interest or existential answers that religion provides, evidently it is "for the successful outcome of anything worth studying ought to be an extension of knowledge and understanding" [44, p. 29]. In such case, it might be said then that the Muslim scholarship in religionswissenschaft is a process of extending knowledge and understanding of religions other than Islam.

This process of extending one's knowledge and understanding religions other than Islam is considered worthless and insignificant, if a correct methodology and an objective approach are not consciously undertaken by a meticulous researcher. This urgency of undertaking a correct methodology and an objective approach and being meticulous in treating the subjects of other religions has been among the basic principles of Islamic knowledge pursuit, whereby Allah, the Most Wise, said: "And follow not that of which you have not the knowledge; surely the hearing and the sight and the heart, all of these, shall be questioned about that" (Al-Quran, Al-Israa', Chapter 17, verse 36). Therefore, a scholar must be just and unbiased, as Allah, the Most Knowledgeable also said: "O you who believe! Be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably; act justly, that is nearer to piety, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah; surely Allah is Aware of what you do" (Al-Quran, Al-Ma'idah, Chapter 5, verse 8). Muslim scholars, "they did this as an act of 'Ibadah (sincere worship) to

Allah. They knew well that ‘objectivity’ in the sense of treating the ‘object’ justly (as enjoined by al-Quran) is humanly possible” [6, p. 89].

Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, in her published PhD thesis [23, pp. 3–6], stresses that Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni (362H/973 AD–443H/1051 AD) as the earliest Muslim scholar in religionswissenschaft due to two main factors, namely, first, methodology and guidelines provided by Al-Biruni and, second, his study based on primary sources and direct, personal observations. These two factors, methodology and sources, are among the important elements that constitute a scientific study of religion. As confessed by Al-Biruni himself in the earlier page of *Fi Tahqiq Ma Li Al-Hind Min Maqulah Maqbulah Fi Al-‘Aql Aw Al-Mardhulah*, he stated: “I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are” [5, p. 5; 36, Vol. 1, p. 7].

These two main factors, evidently even though differently, were also stressed by ‘Allamah Wali Al-Din Abu Zayd cAbd Al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad (732 H/1332 AD–804H/1406 AD) or known as Ibn Khaldun in his study of *Umran*. Ibn Khaldun in the earlier pages of his *Muqaddimah* subscribes his methodology as scientific. Ibn Khaldun’s unique method in treating religion as his focus of study was shaped through his exceptional academic development in many fields, namely, aqidah, fiqh, tasawwuf, history, and philosophy. By combining his maturity and steadfastness in all disciplines of study of humankind, he embarked more on the “why,” instead only on the “what” and “how” questions. For that reason, he coherently subscribes his method as scientific [19, Vol. 1, pp. 77–78; 20, p. Lxviii; 21, Vol. 1, p. 56]. Due to that, his works and ideas are listed in-line with the other scholars of religionswissenschaft, namely, Auguste Comte (1798–1857), Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920) [22, p. 73], who are among the proponents of Western scientific study of religions.

Both scholars, Al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun, had been recognized and acknowledged by many scholars as prominent social scientists, whereby their contributions are still presently reviewed and benefited in the modern academia of many disciplines, namely, sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, and politics, as to name a few. George Sarton, a prominent researcher of the history of science from its earliest inception to the modern age, had included both names as among the great social scientists during the medieval period of the Western world [38, vol. 1, pp. 707–708 and vol. 3, pp. 1767–1779].

2.5 Conclusion

To sum up, this issue, which is discussed in this paper, is actually debatable. As a result of that, to debate on this issue, namely, the viability of the Islamic scientific study of religion, is not something that is peculiar and impossible to happen along the history of this discipline. For instance, Hans H. Penner (1934–2012) and Edward A. Yonan had questioned on the possibility of science of religion from the bases of the definition, reduction, explanation, and understanding in religion

(pp. 131–133), whereas the groundings for the scientific study of religion, as claimed by many scholars, are widely accepted all around the world [8, pp. 309–310].

Perhaps, everyone should ponder on this interesting remark by Francis Bacon (1561–1626): “Those who have treated of the sciences have been either empirics or dogmatical. The former like ants only heap up and use their store, the latter like spiders spin out their own webs. The bee, a mean between both, extracts matter from the flower of the garden and the field, but works and fashions it by its own efforts” [7, p. 349]. With such remark, the Islamic scientific study of religion is a middle way in the study of religion between the empirics and dogmatical.

Due to that, this paper suggests that the Islamic scientific study of religion is possible based on the previous justifications highlighted earlier with precursory samples found in the works of Al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun. In short, it could be said that with Islamic science, there is Islamic scientific study of religion.

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