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# **Understanding Other Religions:**

## **Al-Biruni and Gadamer's “Fusion of Horizons”**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One. Ways of Encountering the Other	5
a. Background of the Problem	
b. Exclusivism: Karl Barth	
c. Inclusivism: Karl Rahner	
d. Pluralism: John Hick	
e. Evaluation	
f. Conclusion	
Chapter Two. On the Way to Understanding Other Religions: Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons ( <i>Horizontverschmelzung</i> )	31
a. Hermeneutical Significance of Horizon	
b. Fusion of Horizons: Assimilation or Participation	
c. Conclusion	
Chapter Three. Al-Biruni's Understanding of Other Religions	53
a. Background and Context	
b. Biographical Background and Historical Context of Al-Biruni	
c. Al-Biruni's Method of Studying Other religions	
d. Conclusion	
Chapter Four. Between Exclusivism and Pluralism	77
a. The Objectivism-Relativism Debate Revisited	
b. Between Exclusivism and Pluralism: A Questionable Attempt	
c. Conclusion	
General Conclusions	101
Bibliography	105
Index	115

## CHAPTER TWO

# ON THE WAY TO UNDERSTANDING OTHER RELIGIONS: GADAMER'S FUSION OF HORIZONS (*HORIZONTVERSCHMELZUNG*)

### INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter analyzed the current literature on the issues of cross-cultural encounter, presenting roughly three general categories in which the attitudes we take towards others are classified: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The chapter argued that none of these categories is sufficiently comprehensive to explain the radical diversity we are experiencing today precisely because of the lack of genuine interest in the business of understanding the Other. Therefore, to appreciate and promote the notion of understanding as an indispensable element in cross-cultural studies, the preliminary requirement is to understand what "understanding" (*verstehen*) itself is.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore the possibility, meaning, and significance of understanding from a philosophical point of view in order to pave the ground for the issues discussed in the subsequent chapters. The present discussion, therefore, will evolve around the following question as a recurring theme of this study: how is it possible to understand others in their "otherness" without reducing them to a mere projection of our own subjectivity.

In pursuing this subject, the issue will be analyzed through Gadamer's doctrine of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) for it provides a compelling hermeneutical framework that renders the possibility of understanding others a valid project. As a metaphor,<sup>1</sup> it

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<sup>1</sup> In his analysis of metaphor, Ricoeur gives a schematic summary of the theory of metaphor within the history of rhetoric, tracing it back to the Greek sophists. Ricoeur criticizes the classical interpretation of metaphor for reducing its function to an abridged comparison of two similar entities. This means, among others, "since it [metaphor] does not represent a semantic innovation, a metaphor does not furnish any new information about the reality." P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 48-49. Contrary to this argument, Ricoeur's analysis makes it clear that metaphor, as a surplus of meaning, *does* give rise to knowledge about reality because not only does it have an emotive function but a cognitive one as well. It is in this sense that I am referring to the fusion of horizons as a metaphor to make the event of understanding perceivable in the hermeneutical act.

illustrates the expansion and transformation that occurs on both sides when two horizons fuse as an event or happening of truth. This procedure presupposes a dialectical play (dialogue) between one's own horizon (understanding) and the horizon of the text (Other) one is trying to understand, and thereby reaches a new understanding of the subject matter (*Sache*) in a fusion of horizons. Since every understanding also is self-understanding,<sup>2</sup> one not only comes to understand what the Other is in its otherness, but gains an even better understanding of oneself (*sich versteht*), projecting one's possibilities,<sup>3</sup> and one's own culture.<sup>4</sup>

In order to analyze Gadamer's doctrine of the fusion of horizons, it behooves us to try to clarify the phenomenological concept of horizon upon which the entire argument is based.

### HERMENEUTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF HORIZON (*HORIZONT*)

Drawing on the Husserlian phenomenological concept of horizon,<sup>5</sup> Gadamer describes it as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."<sup>6</sup> In another passage it is described not as "a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further."<sup>7</sup> On another occasion Gadamer refers to horizon as "something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving."<sup>8</sup> A careful reading of the

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For an insightful discussion of the role of metaphor not only in the social sciences, philosophy, and literature, but also in science and religion see, Stephen Happel, *Metaphors for God's Time in Science and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *TM*, 260; *WM*, 264-265.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William A. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 107.

<sup>5</sup> *TM*, 245; *WM*, 250; Helmut Kuhn, "The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon,'" in *Philosophical Essays: In Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968): 106.

<sup>6</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307-308

<sup>7</sup> *TM*, 245; *WM*, 250.

<sup>8</sup> *TM*, 304; *WM*, 309; One of the most comprehensive descriptions of the term horizon, as a visual metaphor, is given by Bernard Lonergan. According to Lonergan, "Horizons...are structured results of past achievements and, as well, both the condition and the limitation of the further development. They are structured. All learning is, not a mere addition to previous learning, but rather an organic growth out of it. So, all our intentions, statements, deeds stand within contexts. To such contexts we appeal when we outline the reasons for our goals, when we clarify, amplify, qualify our statements, or when we explain our deeds. Within such contexts must be fitted each new item of knowledge and each new factor in our attitudes. What does not fit, will not be

above definitions allows one to discern at least three characteristics that show the import and function of horizon in the process of understanding.

First, by its very nature every horizon (range of vision) has its limits since it is considered to be the ultimate circumference within which all things, real and imaginable, are bound to appear.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, to have a horizon means that one's vision is always limited to what can be seen in a given time from a particular vantage point. This seemingly limits the possibility of seeing what is beyond the current range of vision.

Secondly, a horizon gives anyone or anything, whomever/whatever we think might have a horizon, a distinct identity that differs one from others even if there are family resemblances. Because horizons are initially distinct, they divide us, making us who or what we are.<sup>10</sup> If we accept the validity of this description of horizon, we have to accept the argument that the Other always remains as an Other, hence the irreducible character of the Other. In other words, the Other is always more than what I, the subject, make of him or her.

On the other hand, by limiting the totality of a given thing, as suggested above, a horizon also frames it. The frame of a picture, though forming no part of it, helps to constitute its wholeness.<sup>11</sup> Necessarily, the horizon determines that which it frames.<sup>12</sup> Helmut Kuhn further remarks:

The fact that the object is framed by a horizon is relevant to its mode of appearance. Its way of being is essentially a "being within." Hence horizon as a guiding notion enables us to reveal shades of meaning cast on the object by its environment."<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, horizons are open and therefore can be expanded and transformed, since as one moves from the center towards the circumference new horizons open up. It is in this sense that Gadamer speaks of narrowness

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noticed or, if forced on our attention, it will seem irrelevant or unimportant. Horizons then are the sweep of our interests and of our knowledge; they are the fertile sources of further knowledge and care; but they also are boundaries that limit our capacities for assimilating more than we already have attained." B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1973), 237.

<sup>9</sup> Kuhn, "Horizon," 107.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134.

<sup>11</sup> The picture-frame metaphor is taken from Helmut Kuhn's above-cited article "The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon'" in *Philosophical Essays: In Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968): 106-123.

<sup>12</sup> Kuhn, "Horizon," 107.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

of horizon, of a possible expansion of horizon, of opening up new horizons.<sup>14</sup> However, it is only through our willingness to change our position, figuratively speaking, that we are constantly invited to move beyond the boundary of our current field of vision. This is the point where horizon sheds light on the possibility of knowing what lies beyond our immediate horizon, for as Gadamer argues “what makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it. It is the dialectic of the limit to exist only by being superceded.”<sup>15</sup> In view of the phenomenological concept of horizon, it is now possible to investigate the ways in which the analysis of the term ‘horizon’ provides insight in explicating the event of understanding.

The project of philosophical hermeneutics and of the phenomenological movement considers the Other as a genuine interlocutor in the event of understanding achieved through dialogue in the medium of language.<sup>16</sup> One of the issues that needs to be clarified in this context is the question of what constitutes a text. The question is whether the purpose and manner of dialogue with a text is any different from dialogue with a person. Put differently, is it admissible to use the terms Other and text interchangeably in the process of explaining the event of understanding?

Gadamer notes that interpretation is not applied only to written texts or verbal expressions. Interpretation, rather, is applicable to everything that has been handed down to us by tradition. Therefore, we not only interpret (understand)<sup>17</sup> historical text, figures, or events, we also interpret, and attempt to understand spiritual and mimed expressions.<sup>18</sup> On another occasion Gadamer states that:

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<sup>14</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

<sup>15</sup> *TM*, 343; *WM*, 348.

<sup>16</sup> *TM*, 385; *TM*, 389.

<sup>17</sup> Following Gadamer, the terms interpretation and understanding are used interchangeably throughout this exposition. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer explains how romantic hermeneutics fused understanding and interpretation into a unity while relegating application to a position ancillary to hermeneutics proper. Pietism, on the other hand, saw the interpretive process consisting of three separate subtleties: *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation), and *subtilitas applicandi* (application). Gadamer, however, maintains that understanding, interpretation, and application are not distinct events; rather they constitute the components of a unified hermeneutic act. Thus, understanding is always interpretation, and interpretation is nothing but the explicit form of understanding. *TM*, 307; *WM*, 312; Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 185.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 111.

Conversation occurs, no matter when or where or with whom, wherever something comes to language, whether this is another *person, a thing, a word, a flame* (Gottfried Benn)--this is what constitutes the universality of hermeneutic experience.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of the above remarks, we can argue that anything “from fleeting speech to fixed documents and mute reminders, from writing to *chiffres* and to artistic symbol, from articulated language to figurative or musical interpretation, from explanation to active behavior ...”<sup>20</sup> can be regarded as an Other or a text. In sum, any text or text analogue,<sup>21</sup> which is

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<sup>19</sup> As cited in Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 124.

We should note that Ricoeur, Sokolowski, and Mehta, among others, hold to the same position. Ricoeur, for instance, defines the text as “any discourse fixed by writing.” On the other hand, in another article he widens the meaning of the text when he considers the human sciences to be hermeneutical inasmuch as their object displays some of the futures constitutive of a text as a text. In this second sense, it seems that the meaning of a text is not limited to written discourse. See, Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, trans and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145,197.

In a similar vein, Sokolowski, when referring to the indispensability of a conversation in the pursuit of truth, refers to different manifestations of the Other. He remarks that “sometimes the Other is *bodily present* and the conversation takes place in speech, but sometimes the other *mind is present in a text* or in an image, and then the conversation takes place in reading, whether the reading be of something written or of something depicted.”(My emphasis). See, Robert Sokolowski, “Gadamer’s Theory of Hermeneutics,” in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 225. According to Sokolowski, then, an Other need not be necessarily a bodily presence, a person or a written discourse.

In his remarkable book *India And The West* J.L. Mehta, following Heidegger and Gadamer, takes text to mean both person and tradition. J.L. Mehta, *India and the West: The Problem of Understanding* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), 130.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 53.

<sup>21</sup> I borrowed this two-word concept (text-analogue) from Charles Taylor. He writes that “interpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. This object must, therefore, be a text, or a text-analogue, which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory--in one way or another, unclear.” See, Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 25.

an event, action, or other entity that can be understood or read or communicated as if it were a text, may also be considered as the text or the Other. In this context, we need to call attention to two fundamental issues that are closely related to the subject under study.

First, the subject-object dichotomy, which results from what Richard Bernstein calls Cartesian Anxiety, is untenable in the process of understanding.<sup>22</sup> In other words, there is no subject "over here" and an object "over there" standing independent of one another in constant tension. Rather, subject and object belong together and constitute a total unity in which the process of understanding takes place in the history of interpretation, tradition. Thus, whatever might be called an object is not regarded as a passive entity waiting to be understood by its superior, the subject; but the Other, having an active role to play in the process. Hence, following the above remarks it can be argued that while I, the subject, see the Other as an object, the Other, as a subject, sees me as an Other, therefore an object. Thus, whatever can be said for the object to be studied, can also be said for the subject who is studying the object, hence the equality of the partners in dialogue.

Second, there is no place for a subject to stand outside or apart from a line of events (tradition), no neutral observing Archimedean point, and no place where objects can appear apart from the history of understanding.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, was the focus of concern for modern hermeneutics when it attempted to develop a positivistic hermeneutics with a solid epistemological grounding.<sup>24</sup> Even though philosophical and radical hermeneutics (deconstruction) are said to be exclusive of each other in the context of some of the hermeneutical issues, they, nonetheless, share the conviction that the project of modernist positivist hermeneutics is an unattainable ideal.<sup>25</sup> That is, both camps are allied in their opposition to traditional epistemology.

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16, 116.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-20.

<sup>24</sup> This, of course, has been the position taken by the classical hermeneutic tradition stemming from Schleiermacher up to Betti and Hirsh. See, G.B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.), 109; Joseph Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 27,30.

<sup>25</sup> Feldman's interpretation of Gadamer and Derrida supports this argument. He maintains that "Like Gadamer, Derrida emphasizes that any text or event has many potential meanings, many possible truths; no single meaning remains fixed or stable in all contexts.... Derrida insists that every textual interpretation denies or suppresses some alternative meanings, some alternative interpretations-some Other. For that reason, Derrida considers the meaning of a text to be *undecidable*; Gadamer, meanwhile, deems textual meaning to be



Thus, the Other is referred to not only as a text to be studied and to be understood (object), but as another Other that has the right to question me as a subject for the Other.

The above considerations are important for our analysis of the process of understanding vis-à-vis the concept of horizon. It makes the Gadamerian notion that every Other has its own horizon, which makes it different from other Others, intelligible. Moreover, because every horizon is open, there is always a possibility that these different horizons, supposedly existing independently of one another, can interact and eventually fuse, an event called fusion of horizons.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, because every horizon is also limited, the Other with its otherness remains forever irreducible to our own subjectivity as an object.<sup>27</sup>

What is the nature of the situated and limited nature of our horizons? According to Gadamer, we live in a stream of tradition, history. We always find ourselves in a tradition. We are historical beings. In fact, as Gadamer puts it:

[H]istory does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-

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*inexhaustible.*" (My Emphasis). Stephen M. Feldman, "Made For Each Other," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26 no. 1 (2000): 58. In other words, both Gadamer and Derrida question the claims of the positivist hermeneutics, which aims to propose a methodology that guarantees *the* true meaning of the text that is single and definite.

<sup>26</sup> *TM*, 306; *WM*, 311.

<sup>27</sup> This is akin to Husserl's interpretation of the I's experience of the other Egos as elucidated in his famous Fifth Meditation. Here, Husserl makes it clear that total access to other Egos is impossible because of their plural character. He maintains that "this being there in person does not keep us from admitting forthwith that...neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. *If it were, if what belongs to other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.* (My emphasis). Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 109. This interpretation does not, however, preclude the I's ability to communicate with other Egos. The I can still understand other Egos, but this understanding is only by analogy because "...the two intersubjectivities are not absolutely isolated. As imagined by me, each of them is necessarily [in] communion with me (or with me in respect of a possible variant of myself) as the constitutive primal monad relative to them. Accordingly they belong in truth to a single universal community, which includes me and comprises unitarily all the monads and groups of monads that can be conceived as co-existent." *Ibid.*, 140.

evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live.<sup>28</sup>

For Gadamer, then, we cannot exist as an isolated, individual mind or consciousness. We belong to society and culture in the sense of unquestioning internalization of its norms and customs before we have the capacity to reflect and criticize. The very Enlightenment notion of the detached (or superior) subject is itself a cultural form created in time and space by certain minds that were also part of a certain tradition. Failing to recognize this point leads one to failing to see our being-with-others. This line of argument allows us to argue that the subject side of the subject-object dichotomy is neither primary nor self-aware. The subject cannot be what it claims to be because it cannot isolate itself from the world; it is always in the middle of things; it is always along with others. The subject cannot be isolated either, for it is as much collective and social as it is individual.

In the quoted passage, Gadamer speaks about the process of self-examination through which we understand ourselves. By this Gadamer does not even remotely imply that we can eventually understand others or ourselves like detached objects (by objectifying the Other) or subjects as the Enlightenment spirit argued. For, he further argues, because we are historical beings living in history “we are always already affected by history,”<sup>29</sup> hence the principle of the historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichte*). If we are constantly being exposed to the effects of history by living in it and not outside of it, it follows that the idea that we can have a Cartesian kind of objective knowledge of it (history, world) or of ourselves is untenable.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, as Gadamer says, “to be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.”<sup>31</sup>

Gadamer's exposition of the historical character of being is grounded in Heidegger's notion of “thrownness” according to which Dasein is thrown by the circumstances of birth into the world of time and place.<sup>32</sup> This world is not the natural world of science, objectified into observable objects and processes. Rather it is the world of everydayness or what Gadamer calls tradition. This world has an ever-evolving horizon of meanings that prestructures everything we encounter. However, Dasein should not be considered to be imprisoned in tradition. Although Dasein always already finds itself in this world, it does not mean that the latter has complete control over the former, for as Heidegger argues, “Dasein is

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<sup>28</sup> *TM*, 276; *WM*, 281.

<sup>29</sup> *TM*, 300; *WM*, 305.

<sup>30</sup> *TM*, 301; *WM*, 307.

<sup>31</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 164.

initially and for the most part together *with* the ‘world’ it takes care of.”<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, on the other hand, is more optimistic about our relation to tradition, for he argues, “tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves.”<sup>34</sup>

The foregoing does not negate Gadamer’s main argument, that we belong to tradition long before it belongs to us. Rather it confirms it, for by creating the tradition we are not being freed from it but participating in it. After all, we are not creating a tradition as such out of nothing; but we are giving back to tradition what we have received from it by way of participation. To be sure, even criticism of ourselves or of tradition takes place within tradition. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship, a circle. We create the tradition, and the tradition shapes our horizons. However, precisely because we are born into a preinterpreted world, it makes or shapes us to a much greater extent than we make or shape it. As indicated repeatedly, we are always already living (interpreting) a preinterpreted existence. In other words, we always find ourselves in a situation. This is what Gadamer calls the hermeneutic situation.<sup>35</sup> The hermeneutic circle, states Gadamer, is in fact fulfilled with content [*inhaltlich erfüllter*] circle, which joins the interpreter and his [her] text into a unity within a processual whole. Understanding always implies a pre-understanding which is in turn pre-figured by the determinate tradition in which the interpreter lives and which shapes one’s prejudices.<sup>36</sup>

What is the relevance of the above remarks in explaining the process of understanding? To answer this question we need to remember the meaning and function of horizon.

As indicated earlier, every Other (text) has an horizon, and we can only see whatever can be seen from a particular vantage point. This means that our understanding of the world outside of our horizon remains to some extent strange or alien. This forces us to be conscious of our limitations and our finite character. It follows that I, as a person with a limited horizon, can have only a limited understanding of the world (Other) in a particular time and place. Now, this point raises another question: namely, if we are limited by our horizons, how can we ever understand others who have different (alien) horizons? How can we venture into alien “worlds?” Moreover, does not this notion negate our hypothesis that understanding others in their otherness is possible?

Every horizon can be expanded and changed if one is willing to change one’s position to acquire a wider horizon. If we accept that there are Others who are other than us, then we have to assume that every Other has a horizon. If one does not have a horizon, one “does not see far enough and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *TM*, 293; *WM*, 298.

<sup>35</sup> *TM*, 301-302, *WM*, 307.

<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, “Historical Consciousness,” 108.

hence overvalues what is nearest to him [her].”<sup>37</sup> This statement should not be read to mean that it is possible for a person not to have a horizon at all. Rather, Gadamer seems to refer to particular cases when a person has a limited or narrow horizon. The following passage sheds more light on the issue.

...[T]o have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond. A person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small.<sup>38</sup>

Although every finite horizon is limited, no horizon is infinitely closed, for “what makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, understanding becomes a possibility if we become cognizant of our limited horizon on the one hand, and its potential to be able to be enlarged by the encounter with the Other on the other.

The tradition in which a person lives shapes his or her horizon. In other words, one sees, understands, and makes sense of the world through one’s prejudices (pre-opinions).<sup>40</sup> We are what we are because of our horizons, and therefore our prejudices. As Gadamer puts it: “It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudgments [pre-opinions] that constitute our being.”<sup>41</sup> The Heideggerian notion that we see things “as things” is helpful in this regard.<sup>42</sup> In other words, prejudices let us see things “as.” If we fail to see things “as,” we do not see them at all; to understand is to exist already in preunderstandings. Since a horizon consists of prejudices, without them we cannot have any experience at all. In this sense, there is an indispensable relationship between horizon, experience, and prejudice since “when one’s prejudgments change, so does one’s horizon, and vice versa.”<sup>43</sup>

If prejudices comprise our horizons, how is a genuine understanding possible? Does not accepting prejudices as the constitutive

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<sup>37</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

<sup>38</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307-308.

<sup>39</sup> *TM*, 343; *WM*, 348.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics Versus Science*, trans and ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 74.

<sup>41</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 9; *TM*, 276-277; *WM*, 281.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Gelven, *A Commentary On Heidegger's Being and Time*, 2nd rev. ed. (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 95.

<sup>43</sup> Jan E. Garrett, “Hans-Georg Gadamer On ‘Fusion of Horizons,’” *Man and World*, 11(1978): 393.

elements of our horizons mean that it is impossible to communicate with others? There is no one easy answer to this question.

The Enlightenment spirit argues that prejudices can only be a barrier to understanding truth. In order to obtain an objective knowledge of the world we must somehow shed our prejudices since truth is the opposite of prejudice. This is what Gadamer calls “the prejudice of the Enlightenment against prejudice itself, which denies tradition [the Other] its power.”<sup>44</sup>

Against this Enlightenment idea of truth, Gadamer argues, “the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world.”<sup>45</sup> Although we live in a stream of tradition in which we acquire our horizons that are shaped by prejudices as a result of our experience of the world around us, we can nonetheless rehabilitate our unjustifiable prejudices through self-critique and the encounter with other horizons, thereby testing and rehabilitating our prejudices. It is only through this encounter that we can understand others in their otherness by overcoming the foreign element in a text (horizon of the Other).<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, Gadamer does not argue that every prejudice leads us to a correct understanding, to truth. Rather, he tells us that it is through prejudices that we understand or misunderstand, for there are justifiable prejudices that lead to understanding, and then there are unjustifiable ones that lead to misunderstanding.<sup>47</sup> The important thing is to be aware of one’s prejudices, and accept them, for “it is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition [Other].”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, instead of trying to overcome all prejudices or to ignore them, Gadamer asks us to rehabilitate them by encountering with the Other because the prejudices are there whether we accept them or not. Even the Enlightenment project of suspending prejudice itself was, as Gadamer argues, a prejudice against prejudice,<sup>49</sup> and a hopeless one.

In order to shed more light on the problem of the possibility of understanding the Other, we need to refer to Gadamer’s two insights as premises for the remainder of this discussion. Both of these premises are answers to a series of questions Gadamer himself asks:

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<sup>44</sup> *TM*, 270; *WM*, 275.

<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 9.

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice. R. Wachterhauser (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 396.

<sup>47</sup> *TM*, 270; *WM*, 275; *TM*, 277; *WM*, 281-282.

<sup>48</sup> *TM*, 270; *WM*, 274.

<sup>49</sup> *TM*, 270; *WM*, 275.

[A]re there really two different horizons here--the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon [horizon of the Other]within which he[she] places himself [herself]? Is it a correct description of the art of historical understanding to say that we learn to transpose ourselves into alien horizons? Are there such things as closed horizons?<sup>50</sup>

First, by emphasizing the communal character of *Dasein*, Gadamer argues that an individual is never an isolated entity; an individual always lives alongside, and therefore understands with the others in a tradition. Similarly, thanks to the expandable character of a horizon, a culture, which has its own horizon as a genuine Other, is never closed. Thus, when we say, for instance, that in order to understand others we need to transpose ourselves into the horizons of others, "this does not entail," says Gadamer, "passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own.... Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single horizon."<sup>51</sup> It is due to this assumed all-encompassing horizon that there is a differentiated commonness among horizons, however alien they may look. It is a dialectical play (give-and-take structure) between the familiarity and strangeness of every horizon that makes understanding possible.

The second premise is related to another aspect of the concept of horizon, which presupposes an interrupted reciprocal interaction among horizons of different kind. As Gadamer says:

The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we continually have to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons, which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.<sup>52</sup>

Our earlier insights into what constitutes a text, and what or who the Other is, allows us to argue that Gadamer's remarks are not limited to the relationship between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present. Rather, it describes what happens when two horizons, whether historical, cultural, or individual, encounter each other.

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<sup>50</sup> *TM*, 304; *WM*, 309.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *TM*, 306; *WM*, 311.

The quoted passages make it clear that however different our horizons might be, we still understand the Other. This is due to the fact that we share some common elements in tradition, language, the world. Because of our situatedness within tradition, which has an all-encompassing horizon, we do not regard what the Other says as totally alien, for it is always part of us, and vice versa.

On the other hand, because every horizon has its limits, and every horizon bears with it a kind of alien element, understanding others is never complete. Hence, there cannot be any single interpretation that is correct “in itself.” Rather, it is through the process of overcoming this foreign element that horizons fuse. As Gadamer puts it, like different standpoints, the separate horizons enter into one another<sup>53</sup> in the medium of language through an open encounter with the Other.

### FUSION OF HORIZONS: ASSIMILATION OR PARTICIPATION?

Gadamer’s account of the event of understanding as a fusion of horizons has been criticized by several scholars. There are two central arguments around which all the critiques seem to evolve. The first one is that Gadamer’s project of philosophical hermeneutics gives tradition an unquestionable authority that makes critical reflection impossible. Caputo, for instance, argues that in Gadamer’s hermeneutic project “the truth of the tradition is never put in question, only [the] dynamics of its communication, extension, renewal, and constant reification.”<sup>54</sup> He goes on to argue, “His [Gadamer] ‘tradition’ is innocent of Nietzsche’s suspicious eye, of Foucaultian genealogy. He does not face the question of the ruptures within tradition, its vulnerability to difference, its capacity to oppress.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, according to Caputo, Gadamer “offers us the most liberal possible version of a fundamentally conservative idea. He allows as much movement and play as will not disrupt the ageless truths of tradition or cause it too much difficulty.”<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, Habermas charges that

Gadamer’s prejudice for the rights of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection. The latter proves itself, however, in being able to reject the claim of tradition. Reflection dissolves substantiality because it not only confirms, but also breaks up, dogmatic forces.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 396.

<sup>54</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 112.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>57</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 237.

What Habermas finds troubling in Gadamer is that by giving tradition, and therefore prejudice, ultimate authority Gadamer is denying the power of reason in the hermeneutic act.

The second critique can be formulated into a question: if understanding is what is agreed at the end of conversation with the Other, and if the event of understanding takes place only when two horizons fuse with the conquest of the alien element, then how can we sustain the otherness of the Other. The critics pursuing this argument charge that Gadamer's interpretation of tradition tends to approach the Other only to assimilate him/her. Robert Bernasconi, for instance, argues that although Gadamer recognizes the otherness of the Other as a hermeneutical virtue, the doctrine of the fusion of horizons "seems fundamentally antagonistic to alterity."<sup>58</sup> He continues his criticism with the charge that according to fusion of horizons, "I can recognize myself in what appears to be the Other only insofar as that other is a reflected other, the other of myself."<sup>59</sup>

In a similar vein, Marina Vitkin argues that "one of Gadamer's metaphors for the hermeneutic project, that of 'alienness and its conquest gets across, contrary to his [Gadamer's] explicit intentions, the violence involved in 'fusing' the unfusable."<sup>60</sup> Thus, she argues:

[I]n radical interpretation, 'fusion of horizons' is impossible without violence to the alien one, and hence 'fusion,' 'synthesis,' and 'integration' are euphemisms for, and so inadvertent invitations to, yoking others by force into a frame of reference alien to them.<sup>61</sup>

Expressing his indebtedness to Derrida, John Caputo argues that because the aim of philosophical hermeneutics is to come to an agreement within a conversation through the fusion of horizons, the Other is assimilated and reduced to a mere projection of my subjectivity, losing his or her otherness.<sup>62</sup> The remainder of this chapter will investigate the two arguments to see if their allegations can be sustained.

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 287, 194.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>60</sup> Marina Vitkin, "The 'Fusion of Horizons' on Knowledge and Alterity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no.1 (1995): 73.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>62</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 112-115; Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Knowing Who We Are* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 41-59.



In order to respond to the first critique, namely, that prejudice denies the power of reason and reflection, we need to revisit the way Gadamer explains our relation to tradition vis-à-vis the problem of understanding. Gadamer argues that understanding others is possible, and takes place in the medium of language. However, contrary to Enlightenment philosophers, Gadamer argues that “all understanding is interpretation.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, “it is not possible to isolate the indisputably correct, normative understanding that could then be distinguished from and serve as the arbitrating foundation for the competing purposes of different interpreters.”<sup>64</sup> It follows that understanding must not be regarded as an epistemological procedure through which an objective interpretation of some state of affairs is reached. Our inability to reach an objective interpretation stems from the way we interact with the world around us, or more correctly, the world in which we live.

I submit that the critics who charge that Gadamer’s exposition of our relation to tradition gives the tradition an unquestioned authority fail to see that his account of this relationship is not a monological one. Rather, there is a reciprocal relationship between the tradition in which we live and ourselves, the makers of tradition. This does not, however, negate Gadamer’s argument that because we are always born into a pre-constructed, pre-interpreted world, our interpretation of the world and of ourselves will always be just another interpretation and thus the impossibility of an objective interpretation.

What Gadamer’s critics seem to find misleading in philosophical hermeneutics is his explanation of the function of prejudice in the event of understanding.<sup>65</sup> According to Gadamer, we approach our object (Other, text) with certain prejudices through which we can understand or

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<sup>63</sup> *TM*, 389; *WM*, 392.

<sup>64</sup> David C. Hoy, “Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson,” in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 113.

<sup>65</sup> Gadamer is not alone in his account of the function of prejudices in every interpretation. His analysis seems to be grounded on Heidegger’s exposition of the fore-structure according to which every interpretation is grounded in a fore-having (*Vorhabe*), a fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), and a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). See, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 239-144. Influenced by Heidegger’s analysis, Bultman too argues that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible. See, Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?,” in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1992), 242-248. However, while Gadamer seems to use the terms prejudgments and prejudices interchangeably, Bultman makes a clear distinction between presuppositions (*Voraussetzungslosigkeit*) and prejudices (*Vorurteil*). According to Bultman, presuppositions are the necessary conditions for any kind of understanding whereas prejudices should be rejected in order to remain within the orbit of objective knowledge. *Ibid*; Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, 106.

misunderstand. Although, "there are certain prejudices that constrain our possibilities for communication and understanding, they simultaneously enable us to communicate and to understand."<sup>66</sup> Gadamer's critics seem to misinterpret his exposition of our relation to tradition for the following reasons.

First of all, it is true that Gadamer's account of prejudice and the function of language in understanding can be read as a naïve and uncritical acceptance of the reality of existing conditions. This seems to be both Caputo's and Habermas' basic argument. However, we must realize that Gadamer is not proposing to replace "something" that somehow enables the interpreter to move beyond the contingencies of language and tradition with prejudices that deny reason its right to reflect; prejudices (pre-opinions) are simply there whether we accept them or not.<sup>67</sup> In other words, "the prejudices and the fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his [her] free disposal."<sup>68</sup> Rather, without denying the workings of ideology, forces of domination, or the existence of a non-linguistic, material domain, Gadamer is at pains to describe the inescapable linguistic dimension which the connection to the world is always embedded.<sup>69</sup> This argument certainly does not allow us to count all prejudices as justifiable. What it is telling us, however, is that, without denying them we need to be conscious of the presence of prejudices that could hinder us from understanding since "it is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition,"<sup>70</sup> that is, deaf to what the Other is trying to tell us.

Secondly, Gadamer is not proposing a framework that makes the interpreter the prisoner of tradition, denying his or her right to criticize and

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<sup>66</sup> Stephen M. Feldman, "Made for Each Other: The Interdependence of Deconstruction and Philosophical Hermeneutics," *Philosophy And Social Criticism* 26 no. 1 (2000): 56.

<sup>67</sup> While both traditions (deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics) admit the function of prejudices in every understanding, their response to the question of how to confront prejudice is different. Considering prejudices as the constitutive elements of our being, philosophical hermeneutics aims to recognize and rehabilitate them to avoid misunderstanding. Deconstruction, on the other hand, seems to rebel against prejudices without denying them, because they seem to limit the "infinite in which we live." See, Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 41-59. In this sense, deconstruction may be regarded as a protest against prejudice. Simply put, what deconstruction seems to say is this: we may be surrounded by prejudices, and therefore tradition, but I, as a free person, am not going to succumb to their power. For a fine critique of deconstruction, see Madison, *Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*, 106-122.

<sup>68</sup> *TM*, 295; *WM*, 301.

<sup>69</sup> Ingrid Scheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas*, (Lanham: Rowman, Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 86.

<sup>70</sup> *TM*, 270; *WM*; 274.

even to break with it. Gadamer states that “However much it is the nature of tradition to exist only through being appropriated, it is still part of the nature of man to be able to break with tradition, to criticize and dissolve it...”<sup>71</sup> This makes it clear that Habermas’ and Caputo’s charge that tradition has an unquestionable authority cannot be sustained. The meaning of the quotation is this: every act of understanding, critique, and/or communication takes place within the limits of tradition and in the medium of language. In other words, one still can pursue a critique of ideology (or of the authority, in the ordinary sense of the word) only from a position that is itself ultimately dependent upon and supported by the shared background sphere of social praxis (*soziales Einverständnis*).<sup>72</sup>

To be sure, Habermas agrees with Gadamer’s critique of historical objectivism in that the former also maintains that an objectivist view of history is impossible, for it conceals the interconnection of historical effects (*den wirkungsgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang*) in which historical consciousness itself is located.<sup>73</sup> Although these remarks support Gadamer’s argument, Habermas nonetheless believes that an ideal speech situation can be created as a norm to function as a method for understanding. In other words, Habermas invokes the need for a universal, normative social theory to provide a critical dimension to the otherwise uncritical genealogy.<sup>74</sup> But is it possible to create an ideal speech situation that guarantees a normative social theory in the first place? Is it not true that even the norms upon which the social theory is grounded originate within a context that is constantly being exposed to the effects of history? If this is the case how can we speak about a social theory, which is normative, but not historical/ideological? Paul Giurlanda puts it elegantly when he says “we need norms by which to judge the norms. And if we obtain *these* norms, we need still more norms to judge the judging norms, etc.”<sup>75</sup>

These reflections reveal that while trying to criticize Gadamer’s account of the human situatedness within tradition, Habermas falls prey to the very objectivism that he is trying to avoid. Therefore, Habermas’ critique of Gadamer seems to be an argument against Habermas’ own critique of an objectivist interpretation, and therefore does not do justice to philosophical hermeneutics.

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<sup>71</sup> *TM*, XXXVII.

<sup>72</sup> Scheibler, *Gadamer*, 87.

<sup>73</sup> *TM*, 300; *WM*, 306; Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” 224.

<sup>74</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56-59.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Giurlanda, “Habermas’ Critique of Gadamer: Does it Stand up?” *International Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. XVII, No.1, no. 105, (March 1987): 38.

The second critique questions the feasibility of the event of understanding as a fusion of horizons as presented by Gadamer without assimilating the otherness of the Other. There are two interrelated themes to this critique. The first one has to do with the status of the Other in the event of understanding. The second is related to the notion of overcoming the alien element in a conversation in order to reach an agreement.

In his recent book, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo attempts to analyze the ways philosophical hermeneutics and radical hermeneutics answer the question of how to be prepared for the coming of the Other. According to Caputo, both Gadamer and Derrida are willing to take the risk of welcoming the Other.<sup>76</sup> However, they differ as to how to go about taking the risk. For Gadamer, according to Caputo, "taking that risk... is the only way to make what the Other says one's own (*anzueignen*), which is what he [Gadamer] calls the 'fusion of horizons.'"<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, "for Derrida, taking that risk, putting one's own meaning and self at risk, indeed one's own home, is the only way to let the Other come."<sup>78</sup> But in the process of putting oneself and one's own meaning at risk Derrida differs, says Caputo, from Gadamer in that he (Derrida) does not say that "we make the Other our own, but would let the Other break into what is our 'own,' which means that for Derrida the Other would breach, not fuse with, our horizons."<sup>79</sup> The soundness of Gadamer's arguments can be examined by analyzing the way Gadamer presents his views on a genuine dialogue with Other.

We have established thus far that according to Gadamer, the key to understanding the Other is conversation or dialogue. However, not every conversation is genuine and therefore not every conversation leads to a genuine understanding since "there are...distortions of the I-Thou encounter that are not reciprocal."<sup>80</sup> Gadamer argues that there are three ways in which we interact with the Other as exemplified in the I-Thou structure. He starts his exposition with a caution: "the experience of the Thou must be special because the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us."<sup>81</sup> This is a moral imperative around which all the argument should evolve.

The first type of experience sees the Thou as a predictable object according to which we understand the Other not as a genuine Other, but "as any other typical event in our experiential field."<sup>82</sup> This type of experience,

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<sup>76</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> P. Christopher Smith, "The I-Thou Encounter (*Begegnung*) in Gadamer's Reception of Heidegger," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 516.

<sup>81</sup> *TM*, 358; *WM*, 364.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

says Gadamer, is not moral since it contradicts Kant's idea of the categorical imperative, which holds that we should not see the Other as a means but as an end in him/herself.<sup>83</sup> By reducing the Other to a mere object<sup>84</sup> to be studied, as in the empirical sciences, this type of encounter is monological and is far from representing a genuine conversation.

In the second case, the Other is regarded as a person but "despite this acknowledgment, the understanding of the Thou is still a form of self-relatedness."<sup>85</sup> In other words, although one acknowledges the Other as capable of presenting his or her own opinion, this opinion is undermined by the superior position of the I, who claims to know the truth of this opinion from its own position. In its extreme version "one claims to know the Other's claim from his[her] point of view and even to understand the Other better than the Other understands himself[herself]."<sup>86</sup>

According to this type of experience, then, the Other may be said to have been recognized as an Other, but he or she nonetheless is forced to comply. The opinion of the Other in this kind of conversation is accepted only if in total agreement with the position of the dominant I. What is missing in this kind of experience seems to be the lack of awareness of the situated character of both the I and the Other within a tradition in which they live. Since the dominant I is not self-critical, i.e., does not admit that he or she is exposed constantly to the effects of history, he or she does not allow the Other's opinion to challenge his or her own. In other words, "each party...seeks...to preserve self-referentiality and to avoid yielding to the interplay that exists between the two of them."<sup>87</sup> The inevitable result of this kind of encounter is the assimilation of the Other into one's own horizon.

Genuine conversation takes place when each interlocutor opens him/herself to each other, appreciating each other's existence, which is the highest type of hermeneutical experience.<sup>88</sup> Here, being open to the Other is not an option for Gadamer:

The mere presence of the Other before whom we stand helps us to break up our own bias and narrowness even before he[she] opens his mouth to make a reply. That which becomes a dialogical experience for us here is not limited to the sphere of arguments and counter-arguments, the exchange and unification of which may be the end meaning of every confrontation. Rather, as the experiences that have been described indicate, there is something else

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Smith, "I-Thou Encounter," 516.

<sup>85</sup> *TM*, 359; *WM*, 365.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, "I-Thou Encounter," 517.

<sup>88</sup> *TM*, 361; *WM*, 367.

in this experience, namely, a potentiality for being other [*Andersseins*] that lies beyond every coming to agreement [*Verständigung*] about what is common.<sup>89</sup>

In other words, even before an actual conversation begins I must be ready to accept the Other as an equal conversation partner. This readiness to be open to the Other “involves recognizing that I myself accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so.”<sup>90</sup> This kind of experience lets me accept the Other not only as any Other in its otherness, but as a *genuine Other* who might have something to tell me. Thus, one does not try to argue the other person down, but really considers the weight of the Other’s opinion. Moreover, in a genuine conversation, one does not try to discover the weaknesses of what is said, but tries to bring out the strength of what is said.<sup>91</sup> It is only through this kind of encounter with the Other that we can test, and therefore rehabilitate, our prejudices. According to Gadamer, there is no higher principle than holding oneself open to this kind of conversation through which one not only comes to accept the possibility that the Other might be right, but even recognizes the possible superiority of the Other.<sup>92</sup>

In this context, one can argue that what all Gadamer’s critics, including Caputo, Marina Vitkins, and Bernoscani, have in common is that they seem to identify Gadamer’s doctrine of the fusion of horizons with the second type of the I-Thou relationship in which one feels superior in understanding the other. As stated above, Gadamer explicitly dismisses this kind of I-Thou encounter because it “can have very varied degrees of tension, to the point of the complete domination of one person by the other.”<sup>93</sup> Instead, Gadamer considers the third type of encounter in which the other is seen as an equal partner and even potentially superior as a genuine hermeneutical experience (conversation). Moreover, following Kierkegaard, Gadamer argues, “it is the other who breaks into my ego-centeredness and gives me something to understand.”<sup>94</sup> These remarks of Gadamer make it clear that in the fusion of horizons the Other is not considered as a passive object to be understood and to be assimilated. Rather, the Other has an indispensable (equal) role to play not only in expressing him/herself as a genuine Other, but also in helping test and therefore rehabilitate unjustifiable prejudices, which results in breaking ego-centeredness. Thus the event of understanding as agreement is not

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<sup>89</sup> Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 383.

<sup>90</sup> *TM*, 361; *WM*, 367.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Gadamer, “Reflections On My Philosophical Journey,” in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 36.

<sup>93</sup> *TM*, 359; *WM*, 365.

<sup>94</sup> Gadamer, “Reflections,” 46.

achieved through assimilating the Other into my subjectivity, but letting the Other express his/her opinion with regard to the subject (*Sache*) of the conversation. This is not assimilation, but participation in the conversation as an interlocutor.

This investigation into Gadamer's thought and that of his critics reveals that their misunderstanding results from the tendency to confuse the Other as the interlocutor in dialogue with the subject-matter (*Sache*). In other words, Gadamer's critics seem to interpret the fusion of horizons to mean that in the process of understanding as agreement one interlocutor enters into the horizon of the other and understand him/her. This is not what fusion of horizons purports to show.

Gadamer argues that we always converse with an Other regarding something, which is what we call the subject--matter (*Sache*). "The goal of all communication and all understanding," argues Gadamer "is agreement in the matter at hand."<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the *Sache*, the matter at hand or the subject matter, is inherent in every understanding. Therefore, conversation or dialogue, which takes place in the medium of language, is the process through which the truth of the subject matter is uncovered. It is in this sense, I believe, that Gadamer states that fusion of horizons takes place when the alien element in a text is overcome.<sup>96</sup> Given the fact that the real concern of the hermeneutical reflection is the subject matter at hand and not the person per se, what Gadamer refers to as alien is nothing but what is unknown before the conversation, which brings two partners (i.e., person-person, interpreter-text) together in the first place because "understanding each other (*sich verstehen*) is always understanding each other with respect to something."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, as Grondin puts it "if Gadamer insists on this element of agreement, it is to underline the point that understanding is primarily related to the issue at hand and not to the author's intention as such."<sup>98</sup> That is to say, "when we understand a text (the Other), we do not place ourselves in the author's (the Other's) inner state; rather, if one wants to speak of 'placing oneself,' we place ourselves in his [her] point of view."<sup>99</sup> Therefore, when two partners in dialogue claim to have come to an agreement (understanding) their horizons fuse in terms of that particular subject matter. Thus, the fusion of horizons is a process in which what is alien or unknown before the conversation becomes known at the end of conversation.

To be sure, not every conversation is a process in which the truth of the matter is uncovered and therefore an agreement is reached. This may

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<sup>95</sup> Gadamer, "Circle of Understanding," 69.

<sup>96</sup> Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 396.

<sup>97</sup> *TM*, 180; *WM*, 183-184.

<sup>98</sup> J. Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>99</sup> Gadamer, "Circle of Understanding," 69.

be because the partners in dialogue see each other as objects to be studied, as in the case of first type of I-Thou encounter. Or they may see each other as persons to be conversed with, and yet one or each of them tries to dominate the other, as in the case of second type of I-Thou encounter. Even in the authentic conversation an agreement may not be reached because of the complexity of the subject or because of other contingencies, one of which may be the barrier of language.<sup>100</sup> However, what seems certain is that every authentic, in some cases even inauthentic, experience puts the interlocutors in a new position, and not necessarily a better one. The partners in dialogue, therefore, do not remain the same as they were before or even at earlier stages of the conversation. By exposing themselves to the Other, they change; their horizons broaden; they do not see the world the same way they did before the encounter. The fact that the end of every conversation is the beginning of a new one shows the circular character of the hermeneutic experience.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how understanding a genuine Other is possible from a philosophical point of view. The basic metaphor used in this process has been the fusion of horizons as elucidated by Gadamer.

The investigation has made it clearer that understanding the Other is possible and achievable through a genuine dialogue, and that understanding is an ever-continuing process. Our understanding is never objective; understanding the Other, i.e., the subject matter (*Sache*), is always incomplete. This is because we are always born into an already pre-interpreted world, which limits the subject's ability to have total control over the object. On the other hand, being born into a tradition makes communication possible among those who share the same tradition. This gives rise to the recognition that the knower cannot know everything nor can he or she be certain about what he or she thinks he or she knows in an absolutist sense. Hence, there is the necessity of being open to the Other and to have a willingness to let the Other speak and be heard. In light of the insights gained from this chapter, the next chapter will analyze Al-Biruni's study of other religions as an incipient paradigm to determine if theory and practice ever coincide.

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<sup>100</sup> Although Gadamer presents language as the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement takes place, he nonetheless sees the real hermeneutical problem to be not a "correct mastery of language but coming to proper understanding about the subject matter," *TM*, 385; *WM*, 388.



## CHAPTER THREE

# AI-BIRUNI'S UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER RELIGIONS

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Interest in religion has a long history. Some scholars have argued that the roots of this interest may be traced back to as early as the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia, which show a lively interest in the ceremonies connected with various centers of that ancient world.<sup>1</sup> The first comparative religionist, according to Professor Sharpe, might be the "first worshipper of a god or gods who asked himself, having first discovered the facts of the case, why his neighbor should be a worshipper of some other god or gods."<sup>2</sup> What is new, however, is the interest in the study of religion as an academic discipline, which attempts to study it as a social phenomenon; "as a special, unique area of culture and experience, alongside art, politics, and other human symbols."<sup>3</sup>

What brought about this change of emphasis is not so much discovering the existence of other religions, for the existence of the latter had been known for centuries. It is rather the discovery of the nature of the self as a knowing subject.<sup>4</sup>

The Enlightenment philosophers', notably Kant's, concentration on the conditions of the possibility for human knowing led to the conviction that knowledge depends as much on the nature of the knower as it does on the object to be known. This meant that knowing is not just a matter of passively accepting or experiencing what is out there; the knowing subject has an active part to play in the process. So, if knowledge is considered in some sense to be dependent on, or relative to, the particular knower, then

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<sup>1</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 1; A. Jeffery, "Al-Biruni's Contribution to Comparative Religion," in *Commemorative Volume* (Calcutta, 1951), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>4</sup> This argument does not deny the fact that the move toward pluralistic thinking is partly an effect of our contact with the people who have different worldviews even within the same society. What is meant by the argument, rather, is the idea that the sense of respect for others and the increasing awareness of global cultures were brought about, in part, by the consciousness of the positioned nature of our own views as a result of the Enlightenment, and its understanding of the theory of knowledge.

meaning and truth are relative to the society or historical perspective in which they are formulated.<sup>5</sup>

The fundamental shift in the theory of knowledge has had enormous influence on all the sciences in general, but on the *Geisteswissenschaften* in particular, including theology and religious studies. It was a turning point especially for religion because it had been the sole interpretive framework of the entire universe throughout known history. With the advent of the Enlightenment, however, religion itself became the subject of interpretation, even losing its privileged position as the sole interpreter.<sup>6</sup> The real issue became not so much whether religion should be a subject of investigation like a cultural element as to how to interpret and understand religion, in general, but religions other than one's own in particular.

Historically, one of the obstacles for understanding other religious traditions had been the lack of reliable information. Analyses of other religions have often been based not on the religions themselves, but on the tenets of other religions as they are described and evaluated in the scripture and the tradition of a particular religion of which the interpreter was a part. Since a considerable amount of available information came from polemical discussions, it was natural that the conclusions the student of religion would reach would be polemical also.

One can argue that the lack of reliable information does not pose a significant problem in modern times since all the sacred texts of the world's great religions have been adequately translated and are readily available. Moreover, we have access not only to the scriptures of other religions but also to their interpretations from-within. In addition to these, there are numerous institutions wherein the original languages in which these texts were written (Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Hebrew, and the rest) can be mastered.

The more difficult obstacle seems to be the issue of rendering a relatively correct interpretation of the available data (text)<sup>7</sup> for, as indicated above, there are different interpretive frames, or points of view, that are situated within different language games. Each point of view speaks from a certain place and, from that location, tries to see the whole subject matter within the categories of its limited horizon. If "the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point,"<sup>8</sup> as Gadamer argues, then each point of view can see only what is

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<sup>5</sup> For a fine description of the emergence and the evaluation of the interpretive frames in the study of religion, see William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 1-14.

<sup>6</sup> One of the better introductions to the critical study of religion is Samuel Press' *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory From Bodin to Freud* (New haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> W. C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 15.

<sup>8</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

within the range of its horizon, whereas the rest remains blurry, or in the dark, although every horizon is capable of being transformed and altered since there is no horizon that is infinitely closed.<sup>9</sup>

In studying an alien culture, therefore, it is not enough for the student of religion merely to read that tradition's sources; he or she has the ethical obligation of trying to read and understand them from that tradition's own epistemological point of view as well. For as indicated in W.C. Smith's well known maxim, no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers.<sup>10</sup> This approach presupposes a will to interpret and understand other religions in their own terms without losing allegiance to one's own.

It is argued that until recently the major motive behind the interest in other religions has been to demonstrate that the latter were simply wrong and that one's own religion was superior to all of the rest, hence exclusivism. For as Sharpe argues, this assumption leads the adherent of a particular religion to believe that the tradition in which he or she stands enshrines all that he or she needs to know; and sometimes it contains all that he or she ought to know, since whatever lies outside the authoritative revelation is at best irrelevant, and at worst dangerous.<sup>11</sup>

Although prevalent throughout history, the above approach was not the only model for studying religions other than one's own. There were a number of scholars within the Islamic tradition that showed genuine interest in studying and understanding other religions on their own terms.<sup>12</sup> The establishment of the tradition of *Al-Milal Wa al-Nihal* within the history of Islam is a living testimony to this genuine interest. Some of these scholars who, for a long time, were relegated to the status of mere historians, heresiographers, or theologians are now being studied as the forerunners of a contemporary discipline--the comparative study of religion. Thus, Sharpe, among others, would declare that Shahrastani (d.1153) could be seen as the first systematic historian of religion in world literature. In his book *Kitab*

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<sup>9</sup> *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

<sup>10</sup> W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Whereas the interest of Jahiz of Basra (d. 869), of Ibn Khazm of Cordova (d. 1064), and of An-Nawbakhti (d. 912) and of Ibn Babuya (d. 1001), in other religions was polemical, scholars such as Tabari (838-923), wrote about Persian religion; Mas'udi (d. 956) about Judaism, Christianity and the religions of India, Yaqubi (d.890), An-Nadim (c.990), Abu'l Ma'ali (d. 1092), were so objective in their interest in other religions themselves that they were accused of not being good Muslims by their fellow Muslims. For a detailed examination of the views of these and other scholars, see Gulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions* (Pakistan: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Islamic Research Institute, 1999), 30-41; A. Jeffery, "Contribution," 1; Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 11.

*al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (The Book of Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy) Shahrastani attempts to “describe and systematize all the religions of the then known world, as far as the boundaries of China.”<sup>13</sup>

Possibly the best representative of those who initiated a genuine interest in other religions, however, was Abu Raihan Muhammad Al-Biruni. His accomplishments in other disciplines, notably in natural sciences,<sup>14</sup> overshadowed his crucial contribution to the comparative study of religious traditions. Hence, Professor Schimmel would state that Al-Biruni's Book, *India*, can well be regarded as the first objective book ever written on the history of religion.<sup>15</sup>

This chapter aims to explore the possibilities of understanding other cultures through personal encounters, textual studies, and objective observations as exemplified in Al-Biruni's study of the religious traditions of India.

Al-Biruni's method of studying other cultures has the potential, I submit, to create new challenges as well as opportunities for the purpose of a dialogue among cultures that has the purpose of understanding as its primal objective. In pursuing this subject, I will first present a brief biographical background of Al-Biruni, and only then attempt to enter into a full discussion of the relevant issues.

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AL-BIRUNI**

The available literature does not agree on when and where Al-Biruni was born.<sup>16</sup> Neither is there an historical record of his burial place. We have it on the authority of some scholars, however, that he was born in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Biruni must have been a prolific writer. On the authority of different scholars such as Yaqut, Professor Nasr states that the number of works attributed to Al-Biruni comes to a total of 180. Many of Al-Biruni's books are no longer extant, however. See S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 107-115. For a detailed discussion of Al-Biruni's works in various fields of science see also, Ahmad S. Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni Abu Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad* (Cairo: Dar al-Maa'rif, 1980), 28-43. See also, Abdul R. Nowshervi, “Al-Biruni's Contribution to Natural Sciences,” in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979):582-586.

<sup>15</sup> Annemaria Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 86.

<sup>16</sup> Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni*, 17; F.A. Shamsi mentions fourteen different views on Al-Biruni's birth date and place. For a detailed discussion of the subject, see F.A. Shamsi, “Abu Al-Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Bayruti 362/973-CA.443/1051,” in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 260-288.

973 A.D. in Khawarizm, near modern Khiva in Uzbekistan, and died in 1048 A.D. probably in Ghaznah, today's Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

Little is known of Al-Biruni's background or his early life except that he must have had the privilege of belonging to a social class that had access to the best education of his time. On the personal level, Al-Biruni himself states, "in accordance with my natural disposition I was from my youth possessed with real greed to acquire knowledge."<sup>18</sup> In pursuit of this burning desire, Al-Biruni began studying languages at an early age because for him language was one of the key elements in doing comparative study. Since Khawarizmian was his mother language, he was able to communicate well in both the Arabic and Persian languages. Of Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew he attained at least sufficient knowledge to use dictionaries in his studies.<sup>19</sup> Later in his life he learned Sanskrit as the indispensable guide for penetrating Indian society. His command of Sanskrit reached a point where, with the aid of pundits, he was able to translate some Indian books into Arabic, and Arabic books into Sanskrit, as Al-Biruni himself informs us.<sup>20</sup>

The region in which Al-Biruni was born was a thriving cosmopolitan center and had gained prominence in the wake of Islamic conquests.<sup>21</sup> Although once controlled by the Abbasid caliphate, Khiva had long been under the control of the Samanids, a Persian dynasty, at the time of Al-Biruni's birth. It is well known that the Abbasid Caliphate, and later the Samanids, were great supporters of art, literature, and learning. There were, therefore, libraries and learning centers that contained Greek, Syriac, Babylonian, Manichaeic, and Zoroastrian books, as well as thinkers from different parts of the world.<sup>22</sup> Hence, as stated above, Khiva along with other Central Asian cities like Bukhara and Samarkand, which presently seem so remote from the centers of civilizations, were then in the

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<sup>17</sup> G. Allana, "Abu Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 149.

<sup>18</sup> F. Krenkow, "Ebu'r Raihan al-Beruni," *Islamic Culture* 6 (1932): 195.

<sup>19</sup> E.S. Kennedy, "Al-Biruni (or Beruni), Abu Rayhan (or Abu'l Rayhan) Muhammad Ibn Ahmad" in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, vol.2 (New York: Charles Scribners's Sons, 1989): 155.

<sup>20</sup> *India*, 8; *Tahqiq*, 7; Edward Sachau, Preface to *Tahqiq ma li-l Hind min maqula maqbula fil-'aql aw mardhula.*, ed. E. Sachau (Hayderabad, 1958). English translation, *Al-Beruni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India*, E. Sachau (London, 1910), XXXVIII; S. Hussein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," *The Islamic Quarterly* 10, nos. 3 & 4 (1966): 58; Kennedy, "Al-Biruni," 155.

<sup>21</sup> Ainslee T. Embree, Introduction to *Alberuni's India*, ed. Ainslee T. Embree, trans. Edward Sachau (New York: The Norton Library, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1971), vi.

<sup>22</sup> Gunindar Kaur, "Al-Biruni: An Early Student of Comparative Religions," *Islamic Culture*, 56 (1982): 150.

mainstream of the great international culture that had grown up as a result of Islamic influences.<sup>23</sup> As one of the centers of medieval civilizations, it was not unusual to find non-Muslim scholars in the society from whom Al-Biruni must have benefited.<sup>24</sup>

Professor Sachau reports that after distinguishing himself as one of the leading scholars of his time in science and literature, Al-Biruni assumed an active political role as counselor of the ruling prince of the Mamunid family in Khawarizm, his dwelling place until 1017.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, although related to the Mamunid family, Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah always looked for a pretext to interfere in the affairs of the then independent Khawarizm.<sup>26</sup> When Mahmud eventually invaded Khawarizm (1017), Al-Biruni was taken to the court in Ghaznah as a scholar and prisoner of war along with other scholars and princes of the defeated dynasty and with Indian scholars from other conquered regions.<sup>27</sup>

Al-Biruni's forced removal from Khawarizm to Ghaznah seems to be one of the most significant turning points in his intellectual odyssey. It seems to have played a determinative role in the direction and the tone of Al-Biruni's scholarship in that it was after this date that he had the opportunity to study and absorb Hindu culture more intensively than ever before.

Information about Al-Biruni's life and about his relationship with Sultan Mahmud in Ghaznah is scanty and ambiguous. Obviously, Al-Biruni accompanied Mahmud on raids into the lands of the Indian kings, probably as an astrologer.<sup>28</sup> Although an astrologer for the Ruler, Al-Biruni did not approve of the invasion of these lands by the Sultan. Nor did he believe that the invaders were doing a favor to the local peoples by bringing a *higher* culture to a *lower* one.<sup>29</sup> Quite the contrary; Biruni expressly criticized Mahmud for destroying the Hindu culture:

Yamin-addaula Mahmud marched into India during a period of thirty years and more. God be merciful to both

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<sup>23</sup> Embree, Introduction, v.

<sup>24</sup> F. Krenkow has citations from Al-Biruni's *Kitab al-Saydala*, informing us that a certain Roman (Greek?) lived in his neighborhood. On his visits to him, Al-Biruni would take seeds, grains, fruits, and plants with him to learn their names in the language of that foreigner, and would make note of these names in Arabic. Kaur, "Al-Biruni," 150; F. Krenkow, "Biruni and MS. Sultan Fatih NO.3386," in *Commemorative Volume* (Calcutta, 1951): 195. See also, Anton Heinen, "Al-Biruni and Al-Haytam: A Comparative Study of Scientific Method," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 501-516.

<sup>25</sup> Sachau, Preface, VIII.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni*, 23-24.

<sup>28</sup> Nasr, *Cosmological Doctrines*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> Embree, Introduction, IX.

father and son! Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people.<sup>30</sup>

Al-Biruni suggests that one of the reasons for the hatred among Indians towards Muslims is the invasion of India by Mahmud of Ghaznah. This is also, according to Al-Biruni, why the Hindu sciences were to be found only in remote places, far away from those lands that were conquered by the Muslims where “our hands cannot reach.”<sup>31</sup> It is clear that India at that time was not an ideal place for a foreigner like Al-Biruni whose intention was to study this new culture with a view to establishing friendly relations between the two cultures, Hinduism and Islam.

It was against this background and context that Al-Biruni recorded what he knew about Indian culture, which he acquired through personal encounters, textual studies, and observation.<sup>32</sup> Al-Biruni’s interest in Indian culture reached its zenith with *Fi tahqiq ma li’l-Hind min maqbulatin fi’l-’aql aw mardulatin* (Al-Beruni’s India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India).

We shall now venture into the world of Al-Biruni to see if, and how, the ideas and method of an eleventh-century scholar can contribute to the current discourse on interreligious understanding.

#### AL-BIRUNI’S METHOD OF STUDYING OTHER RELIGIONS

Professor Jeffery’s article “Al-Biruni’s Contribution to Comparative Religion” remains one of the best introductions to Al-Biruni’s thought. The study is informative, i.e. it gives the reader valuable information about Al-Biruni’s views on the religious traditions he examined; namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Greek religion, Judaism, Christianity, Sabaeans, Khawarizmians, Arabian

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<sup>30</sup> *India*, 22; *Tahqiq*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> *India*, 22; *Tahqiq*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> As will be made clear in the following pages, Al-Biruni’s method overlaps the method of modern anthropology. One of Malinowski’s best students, Evans-Pritchard, mentions four conditions for doing good fieldwork: (1) the anthropologist should spend sufficient time in the field: one to three years; (2) the anthropologist should be in close contact with the people he is studying; (3) comprehending the native language and concepts is of central importance for the field experience; (4) the anthropologist should study the “entire culture and social life.” E.E. Evans-Pritchard, “Fieldwork and the Empirical Tradition” in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962): 64-86.

paganism, and Islam.<sup>33</sup> However, it fails to present a comprehensive treatment that would allow the reader to evaluate Al-Biruni's contribution to a wider interdisciplinary study of religion. I concur with Gunindar Kaur's assessment that by discussing one theme after another, one religion after another, the study seems to lose the overall import of Al-Biruni's contribution.<sup>34</sup>

A more fruitful approach would be to explore what questions Al-Biruni was trying to answer. What spurred Al-Biruni into the study of other religions that were believed to have no common ground with his own religion? What were the underpinnings of his method that we call comparative? The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to the investigation of these questions. However, precisely because Al-Biruni does not offer a comprehensive account of his method of investigation of other cultures, it is left to the interpreter to construct one that will be loyal to Al-Biruni.

Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions presupposes, first of all, a genuine willingness to see truth and value in other cultures, without being forced to insist that there are universal truths in all religious traditions or, like a radical pluralist, that all cultures are equally valid in their religious and social expressions. Rather, what Al-Biruni seems to be arguing is that there is a common human element in every culture that makes all cultures distant relatives, however foreign they might seem one to another.<sup>35</sup> Hence, Bruce Lawrence comments that Al-Biruni must have "postulated a pattern of human conduct, belief and relationship to the natural environment that was the same among Indians as among other civilized peoples."<sup>36</sup> This is the main argument that underlies Al-Biruni's whole project. This theme is discernible in the passages on *India* where Al-Biruni compares and contrasts the views and customs of different cultures.

In order to argue his point that there is a common human element that makes all cultures distant relatives, Al-Biruni starts with a critique of the available literature on Hindu culture in his own society. According to

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<sup>33</sup> Professor Tümer's book *Biruniye Göre Dinler ve İslam Dini* remains one of the best analysis of Al-Biruni's life, works, the method he employed in his study of comparative religions, and the way in which Al-Biruni gave information about the religions with which he was familiar. For a detailed discussion of these and some other similar issues, see Günay Tümer, *Biruniye Göre Dinler ve İslam Dini* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> Kaur, "Al-Biruni," 152.

<sup>35</sup> Franz Rosenthal, "Al-Biruni Between Greece and India," in *Biruni Symposium*. Ed, Ehsan Yarshter (New York: Iran Center, Columbia University, 1976): 10.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, "Al-Biruni's Approach to the Comparative Study of Indian Culture," in *Biruni Symposium*. Ed, Ehsan Yarshter (New York: Iran Center, Columbia University, 1976), 31.



Al-Biruni, not only was the available literature on Hinduism insufficient, it was also misleading, which was a more serious violation of being truthful to truth (al-haqq). He complains, "Everything which exists on this subject in our literature is second hand information which one copied from the other, a farrago of materials never sifted by the sieve of critical examination."<sup>37</sup> This, according to Al-Biruni, was inconsistent with the ethical framework provided by the Scriptures of both Christianity and Islam. He illustrates his argument by referring to the Qur'an and the Bible respectively. The Qur'an reads, "Speak the truth, even if it were against yourselves." (Qur'an: 4, 134); in a similar vein it is stated in the Bible that "Do not mind the fury of kings in speaking the truth before them. They only possess your body, but they have no power over your soul" (Cf. Matt.x.18, 19, 28; Luke xii. 4).<sup>38</sup> It is therefore safe to argue that it was religious and ethical concerns, more than anything else that led Al-Biruni to study other cultures from a comparative perspective.

The method we are hoping to construct can be said to have three distinctive characteristics, which have secured Al-Biruni a privileged place in the history of what is known as the human sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*.

#### *A Phenomenological Method*

Al-Biruni's method is phenomenological. This position is stated in the very beginning of Al-Biruni's book, *India*, where he states clearly that his book was not polemical, and that he was interested in stating the facts as they are presented by the Hindus themselves. Says Al-Biruni:

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<sup>37</sup> Al-Biruni, *India*, 4-6; *Tahqiq*, 4; In this context, one has to note that Al-Biruni's critique concerning the lack of reliable information about other cultures was oriented specifically towards the literature on Hindu culture. There were, as stated earlier, studies that investigated the Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, etc., religions in an objective way. Although there may be various reasons for the mistreatment of the Hindu religion in Al-Biruni's society, lack of any explicit reference to this *alien* religion in the Qur'an and the Hadith literature may be the most significant one. Whatever the Muslims knew about these religions depended on hearsay and on secondary sources until the time of Al-Biruni. Says Al-Biruni with regard to this observation, "Abu-al'abbas Aleranshahri...has given a very good account of the doctrines of the Jews and Christians....Besides, he furnishes us with a most excellent account of the Manicheans....But when he came in his book to speak of the Hindus and the Buddhists, his arrow missed the mark..." Al-Biruni, *India*, 6-7; *Tahqiq*, 4-5. In a similar vein, Al-Biruni criticizes Al-Eranshahri for his reliance on the information obtained from the common people among Hindus and Buddhists, and not from the reliable sources.

<sup>38</sup> *India*, 4-5; *Tahqiq*; 2-3.

I shall *not* produce the arguments of our antagonists *in order to refute such of them, as I believe to be in the wrong*. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus *exactly as they are*, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, Al-Biruni attempts to understand the Hindu culture in its own terms, letting the subject matter (*Sache*) speak for itself. The concern to record facts as they are, without any prejudgments, is one of the most significant aspects of Al-Biruni's methodology.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, one can argue that Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions comes close to the contemporary phenomenological method in the study of religion although Al-Biruni never used the term phenomenology.

It is not the aim of this chapter, of course, to trace the history of phenomenology of religion; nor is it to discuss all the issues pertaining to

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<sup>39</sup> *India*, 7; *Tahqiq*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Biruni's method was not polemical in itself, but it certainly was controversial given the conditions in which he lived. He must have been aware of the fact that by letting the Hindus speak for themselves, as one of the aspects of his method, he would be accused by his fellow Muslims of spreading the heathenish opinions of Hindus without refuting them. Instead of simply compromising his scientific outlook, Al-Biruni seems to have justified his method, at least in his mind, in the following way. "If Muslims find them objectionable," Al-Biruni says, "we can only say that such is the belief of Hindus, and they themselves are best qualified to defend it." *India*, 7, *Tahqiq*, 5. In other words, Al-Biruni neither defended nor attempted to refute the worldview of the Hindus, which he believed to be in conflict with his own religion.

Some scholars have argued that this (stating the facts as they are) may have been the reason why Al-Biruni's book made so little impression on succeeding generations of scholars in his culture. See Ainslee T. Embree, "Foreign Interpreters of India: The Case of Al-Biruni," in *The Scholar and the Saint*. Ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 7. Rosenthal also argues that while Al-Biruni's loyalty to what he adjudged to be the Truth, namely "the original oneness of all higher civilizations" led him to investigate and appreciate the Indian thought, other Muslims after him ignored and/or belittled his work as being controversial.

Against this argument, there are scholars who argue that Al-Biruni's work must have had pivotal effect on the tolerant attitudes of succeeding Muslim rulers towards Hindus. Although interrupted at times, it also commenced a tradition of contact with Hindus, as a result of which the latter were given the *dhimmi* status in the legal language, if not in the theological language as well. Nasr, "Encounter of Religions," 58.

it.<sup>41</sup> Yet it is necessary and fitting to examine one of the more significant foundational concepts of phenomenology with a view to getting a better insight into what Al-Biruni attempted to accomplish. It is the phenomenological concept of *epoche*-abstention.

*Epoche* was the term used by the Greek skeptics to designate the attitude that they recommended one should adopt in the face of a world of doubt and uncertainty, an attitude of non-commitment and suspension of judgment.<sup>42</sup> However, as a phenomenological term, it has been widely identified with the name Husserl and his phenomenological project whose influence has been pivotal in the history of Western thought in the latter half of the twentieth century.

*Epoche* is one of the key concepts Husserl used in his phenomenological method through which he hoped to answer the questions of how to begin to philosophize<sup>43</sup> and of how to get access to the transcendental sphere of absolute subjectivity, which is the absolute foundation of all knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

In pursuit of his project, Husserl proposes a twofold procedure. In the first place, he tries to determine the way I, the thinking and acting

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<sup>41</sup> For the history and development of phenomenology and the issues it deals with see Hans Penner, *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988); H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: An Historical Introduction* (The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984) and a more recent book by Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999). Of course, one of the classics of this field is Van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (Harper Touchbooks, 1973).

<sup>42</sup> W.T.Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: The Twentieth Century to Wittgenstein and Sartre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., vol. V. (Washington, D.C.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 265.

Although Al-Biruni never used the concept *epoche* in his studies that are available to us, given his deep involvement and versatility in Greek science and philosophy, one is tempted to speculate about whether he was familiar with this term, and whether he applied it in his studies without necessarily using the concept *epoche* explicitly as a technical term in his terminology. For Al-Biruni's relation to Greek philosophy, see Majid Fakhry, "Al-Biruni and Greek Philosophy--An Essay in Philosophical Erudition," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 344-350; Seyyed H. Nasr, "Al-Biruni as Philosopher" in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 400-406.

<sup>43</sup> William J. Lenkowsk, "What is Husserl's *Epoche*?: The Problem of the Beginning of Philosophy in A Husserlian Context," *Man and World*, 11 (1978), 299.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Ströker, "Phenomenology as First Philosophy: Reflections on Husserl," in *Edmund Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition*, ed. Robert Sokolowski (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 253.

subject, find myself in relation to the world; the attitude I hold towards things that I am surrounded by--things with which I may or may not have any conscious relationship. This attitude Husserl calls the *non-reflective attitude* or *natural standpoint* that involves judging, valuing, deciding, and position taking.<sup>45</sup> Simply put, I see the world simply there for me, whether I pay any special attention to it or not.<sup>46</sup> All my judgments, position-takings, deciding and so on, take place according to preconceived notions. This attitude or stand Husserl contrasts with what may be called the phenomenological stance, transcendental-phenomenological reduction or phenomenological *epoche*.<sup>47</sup>

According to Husserl, the natural standpoint inhibits the way to philosophizing, that is, to having access to the transcendental sphere.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, "instead of remaining at this point," he says, "we propose to alter it radically,"<sup>49</sup> which is the second step that leads us to another unavoidable question of the plausibility of performing this alteration. For Husserl, it is possible only through the performance of an initiating act which he called the "transcendental-phenomenological *epoche*" that presupposes a suspension of natural attitude--a certain refraining from judgment...<sup>50</sup> Only through this suspension, according to Husserl, does the vast richness of the transcendental sphere becomes accessible. Only in this way is a return to the things themselves (*Zu den Sachen*) possible--a return to the given, objective world,<sup>51</sup> to the data directly given in our experience or consciousness.

The influence of the phenomenological movement can be observed not only in various branches of philosophy, but in the field of religious studies as well. Soon the phenomenological concept of *epoche* was incorporated into the study of religion.

One of the leading figures responsible for introducing phenomenology into the study of religion was Van der Leeuw, according to whom phenomenology is the systematic study of what appears (*phenomena*).<sup>52</sup> Like Husserl, he argues that *epoche* is concerned with

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<sup>45</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 20.

<sup>46</sup> Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1967), 91, 95.

<sup>47</sup> *Meditations*, 20, 21

<sup>48</sup> Note that when Husserl expands this idea into the idea of transcendental ego, it always has a kind of quasi-spatial metaphor at the basis of it, something that is very hard to avoid in a discursive language. In philosophy, however, it should be questionable whether this common sense metaphor should be applied as well.

<sup>49</sup> *Ideas*, 96.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 98; Husserl, *Meditations*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Leeuw, *Religion*, 683.

bracketing of what lies behind appearances, not with the bracketing of subjectivity. In other words, the phenomenologist purports to see the objectified world, the given, as it gives itself to our consciousness, to our experience. In this interpretation of *epoche* Van der Leeuw seems to be in complete agreement with Husserl.

In Professor Smart's project, *epoche* has come to mean methodological agnosticism or the suspension of truth questions concerning the focus of a religion.<sup>53</sup> This interpretation of *epoche* presupposes an approach that takes its main objective as simply to describe or to explain the religious phenomena without the affirmation or denial of existence. It is in this context that Smart makes a crucial distinction between the expression of religion and its description.<sup>54</sup> Phenomenology of religion in this sense has come to be described as a new science which seeks to describe religious phenomena while suspending truth judgments through bracketing, hoping to let the subjective religious facts speak for themselves.<sup>55</sup>

Although the value-free methodology in human sciences in general, and in religious studies in particular, is considered to be the fruit of the Enlightenment spirit, Al-Biruni echoed similar themes in his study of alien cultures in terms of objectivity, neutrality and letting the subject speak for itself as stated in a previously quoted passage. The present writer argues that, while in a sense Al-Biruni comes close to the modern phenomenologist, he differs from them significantly.

First of all, by presupposing the possibility of a value-free method in human sciences, the modern phenomenologist seems to be ignoring the affective (*Gefühl*) dimension of human existence. This non-committed attitude gives the thinking, acting subject a false sense of superiority over the subject to be studied, allowing the unacknowledged presuppositions and norms, which have not been adequately reflected upon, to control the process of understanding.<sup>56</sup> True, Al-Biruni too aims to provide a method that would provide a relatively objective interpretation of the subject (*Sache*) to be studied, but he is also conscious of the fact that this ideal would never be reached. He is aware of his limitations as a human being. Thus, towards the end of *India*, he says, "We ask God to pardon us for every statement of ours which is not true,"<sup>57</sup> acknowledging the fact that as

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<sup>53</sup> Ninian Smart, *Science of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 54; Eric J. Lott, *Vision, Tradition, Interpretation* (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), 284.

<sup>54</sup> Ninian Smart, *Reason and Faiths* (London: SPCK, 1958), pp. 4-6. In his study, *Reason and Faiths*, Smart argues that there is a crucial difference between the statements "Jesus died for our sins," and "Christians say 'Jesus died for our sins.'" Whereas the first statement is regarded as expression of faith, the second one is just a descriptive, phenomenological statement.

<sup>55</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 91.

<sup>56</sup> Lott, *Vision*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> *India*, II, 246; *Tahqiq*, 547-548.

human beings we see the world through the lenses provided to us by the society and culture in which we find ourselves.

Secondly, the modern phenomenologist is interested in the phenomenon as it gives itself to our consciousness, ignoring the diachronic dimension. Moreover, he or she presupposes an ideal context divorced from the historical process and does not aim to investigate the complex causal relations.<sup>58</sup> Al-Biruni too concerns himself with the phenomena, but he is also interested in finding out what lies behind appearances by paying special attention to the historical-cultural context, the unique conditions that surround the particular event at hand. The best example that would support this argument is his evaluation of Hindu hatred towards Muslims in Al-Biruni's time.

Al-Biruni argues that hatred among Hindus towards Muslims is commonplace. This is a phenomenological observation, seeing the object as it gives itself to the consciousness of the interpreter without paying any special attention to the causal relations. In other words, when I, the phenomenologist, observe Hindu society, what becomes evident is that there is a sense in which I can observe the existence of hatred, quite regardless of what is causing it. This is phenomenology. But, Al-Biruni, like a modern anthropologist or an interpretive sociologist, wants to understand what is causing this hatred. Al-Biruni, moreover, argues that without considering the context in which a particular event takes place, our interpretation would be incomplete and the conclusions we reach would be polemical, and hence a misrepresentation. Finding out the fact that there is hatred among Hindus is only one stage of the problem-solving process. The second stage is answering the unavoidable question of what is causing this hatred, in order to be able to rehabilitate the prejudices, and to improve relations among cultures. While Al-Biruni mentions different reasons, two are directly related to the current subject.

The first one is the religious factor. According to Al-Biruni, the Hindus "differ from us in religion as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa."<sup>59</sup> He describes their attitude as fanatical, which is directed not only to Muslims, but also to those who do not belong to them--against all foreigners. They call them, that is, *mleecha*, i.e., impure, and forbid having any connection with them. He further observes that: "they are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them, even if he was inclined to their religion."<sup>60</sup> This is also one reason, argues Al-Biruni that makes any relationship with the Hindus quite difficult.

A more serious and obvious reason for the hatred, according to Al-Biruni, was the resentment felt by the Indians against foreign invaders in general, and Muslims in particular. When Muslims entered into India, the country was already bleeding from the depredations of the Sakas and

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<sup>58</sup> Lott, *Vision*, 183.

<sup>59</sup> *India*, 17; *Tahqiq*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> *India*, 19-20; *Tahqiq*, 15.

Hunas. Then came the Muslims: The repugnance of the Hindus against foreigners increased more and more when the Muslims began to make their inroads into their country. "Succeeding events planted a deeply rooted hatred in their hearts," observes Al-Biruni.<sup>61</sup> The following passage, which was quoted earlier, seems to explain the real reason behind this hatred: "Mahmut utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, by which the Hindus like atoms of dust scattered in all directions.... Their scattered remains cherish, of course, the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims."<sup>62</sup>

From these passages it is safe to conclude, first, that while Al-Biruni opts for a method that would help the interpreter understand facts as they are, he has no pretense of presenting a presuppositionless method of understanding, which is only an ideal.

Second, according to Al-Biruni no genuine understanding is possible without considering the context in which a particular event takes place or a concept assumes a new meaning. If one seeks to understand the hatred between Hindus and Muslims in the eleventh-century India, one cannot afford to ignore the background (historical context) of the problem. In other words, in Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions, the co-existence of phenomenological and historical strands is a necessary element for a genuine analysis.

#### *A Dialogical Method*

Al-Biruni's method is dialogical. This premise can be understood in a number of ways. In the first sense it is used to explicate Al-Biruni's intention of studying the Indian culture and writing his major book, *India*; in the second sense it refers to the ways in which Al-Biruni went about collecting his material in pursuing his project.

As stated above, Al-Biruni wrote *India* with a view to helping those who wished to enter into dialogue with Hindus. According to Al-Biruni, dialogue with Hindus was necessary since there were many subjects that were intricate and obscure, which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between Muslims and Hindus.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the purpose of studying other religions is to "promote better acquaintances between adherents of different religious traditions, to emphasize 'the universal elements in all religions,'"<sup>64</sup> as described by modern students of religion.

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<sup>61</sup> *India*, 21; *Tahqiq*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> *India*, 22; *Tahqiq*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> *India*, 17; *Tahqiq*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 253; Smith, *Faith of Other Men*, 13.

Since Abu Sahl shared Al-Biruni's conviction on this matter, as stated in the preface of *India*,<sup>65</sup> he asked Al-Biruni to write what he knew about the Hindus "as a help to those who wanted to discuss religious questions with them (Hindus), and as a repertory of information to those who want to associate with them."<sup>66</sup> This can be interpreted to mean that there were people in Muslim society who sought to enter into discourse with Hindus in matters of religion, science, philosophy, and so on. Hence, Al-Biruni must have had a certain audience in mind to address when he was writing *India*. In this sense, it can be argued that Al-Biruni is the first scholar, at least in the Muslim world, whose interest in other religious traditions went beyond the then common tendency of treating the Hindus as heretics or polytheists, despite their apparently idolatrous practices.

As previously argued, for Al-Biruni, the best way to enter into the world of another culture was through personal encounters, textual studies, and observation. He must have been aware, however, of the fact that there would be no entrance into the life of another civilization without awareness of the veils that inhibited clear understanding by the very nature of language. As a result, as noted previously, not only was Al-Biruni able to overcome the language barrier by learning Sanskrit, but his proficiency in Sanskrit eventually led him to translate books from Arabic into Sanskrit, and from Sanskrit into Arabic.<sup>67</sup> In this endeavor Al-Biruni did not hesitate

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<sup>65</sup> Abu Sahl must have been one of Al-Biruni's teachers. Al-Biruni tells us that he (Abu Sahl) too studied the current literature on Hinduism and found that the scholars were biased when it came to describing the religion of the Hindus. He then asked Al-Biruni to write what he knew about the Hindu culture, religion, and science as he was the best qualified to do so.

<sup>66</sup> *India*, 7, II, 246; *Tahqiq*, 547-548.

<sup>67</sup> One of these books is entitled *Samkhya*, which is about the origins and description of all created things, and is assumed lost. The other one is *Patanjali*, which, according to Al-Biruni, is about the emancipation of the soul from the fetters of the body. *Ibid.*, 8. Al-Biruni's translation of *Patanjali* was edited by Hellmut Ritter and was published in *Oriens* under the title of *Kitab batanjali ahl-hindi fi'l-khilas min al-amthal* in 1956. For the Arabic translation with a German introduction, see Hellmut Ritter, "Al-Biruni's Übersetzung des Yoga-Sutra des Patanjali," *Oriens*, 9 (1956): 165-200. Shlomo Pines and Tuvia Gelbum published an English translation of Al-Biruni's rendering into Arabic of all four chapters of *Patanjali* and its comparison with related texts in a series of articles. See Shlomo Pines and Tuvia Gelbum, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's "Yogasutra," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2 (1966):302-325; *idem*, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's "Yogasutra": A Translation of the Second Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1977): 522-549. *idem*, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's "Yogasutra": A Translation of the Third Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1983):258-304. *idem*, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of of



to study with, and learn from, the Hindu scholars, especially when dealing with complicated philosophical and religious issues. He says in a passage in *India* that:

I have found it very hard to work my way into the subject, although I have a great liking for it, in which respect I stand quite alone in my time, and although I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I supposed they were likely to be found, in procuring [them] for myself even from very remote places, and from Hindu scholars who understand them and are able to teach me.<sup>68</sup>

Obviously, Al-Biruni could make intelligent use of the Pundits and Sastris whom he engaged extensively at a time when the prevalent attitude towards other cultures was one of hostility. Mohammad Yasin puts this dramatically when he says, *The Indica*<sup>69</sup> is like a magic island of quiet, impartial research in the midst of a world of clashing swords, burning towns, and burned temples.<sup>70</sup>

Al-Biruni's attempt to learn the Hindu religion, science and philosophy was not confined to personal encounters alone; he engaged in textual studies as well. As he states, he did not hesitate to spend money and time to collect the Hindu books wherever they were to be found, some of which Al-Biruni translated into Arabic.

What is remarkable about Al-Biruni, according to Franz Rosenthal, is that ideas to be found in the literature of other cultures he studies, *Yogasutras* for instance, entered Al-Biruni's own epistemological thinking.<sup>71</sup> One example of such cases is the following statement in which Al-Biruni discusses the relationship between the desire for knowledge and what happens when the unknown becomes known. From the translation of the *Yogasutras of Patanjali* Al-Biruni reads: "When a potential object of

Patanjali's "Yogasutra": A Translation of the Fourth Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 52, No.2 (1989):265-305. See also, Louis Massignon, "Al-Biruni et la valeur internationale de la science Arabe," in *Commemoration Volume* (Calcuta, 1951), 218.

<sup>68</sup> *India*, 24; *Tahqiq*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Al-Biruni's *India* is sometimes referred to as *Indica*.

<sup>70</sup> Mohammad Yasin, "Al-Biruni in India," *Islamic Culture*, 49 (1975): 212.

<sup>71</sup> Franz, Rosenthal, "On Some Epistemological and Methodological Presuppositions of Al-Biruni," *The Commemoration Volume of Biruni International Congress* (Tehran: High Council for Culture and Art, 1973), 546.

Knowledge is unknown, the desire to know it increases until it is known. Then the desire quiets down.”<sup>72</sup>

This statement, like many others in Al-Biruni's books, is not a mere report or a quote from *Patanjali*; Al-Biruni seems to have internalized the meaning and incorporated the foreign ideas into his own thought patterns when he found them admissible. Therefore, it can be argued that by entering into dialogue with Hindus, Al-Biruni seems to have regarded the notion of dialogue both as a means and as an end in the study and understanding of alien cultures.

#### *A Comparative Method*

Al-Biruni's method is comparative. According to some prominent scholars, the only ultimately justifiable reason for engaging in the study of other religions is to improve relations among the adherents of different religious traditions.<sup>73</sup> What else can be the meaning and end of all the effort the student of religion puts into his or her studies? As has been indicated repeatedly, this issue was the essential motive behind Al-Biruni's cross-cultural interest also: to eradicate the common misconceptions about Hinduism and to promote a better acquaintanceship between the two religious traditions, Islam and Hinduism.

Al-Biruni must have postulated, as Bruce Lawrence states, that there was a pattern of human conduct, belief and relationship to the natural environment that was the same among Indians as among other civilized peoples.<sup>74</sup> However, this assessment should not lead the reader to conclude that Al-Biruni was proposing a sort of perennial philosophical view that presupposes the transcendental unity of all religions. Rather, as a believing Muslim, he simply welcomed certain differences among different peoples. In other words, he believed that “God has created the world as containing many differences in itself,”<sup>75</sup> and these differences should be welcomed. In order to prove his argument, he attempted to explore some of the most disputed issues, such as God, polytheism, creation, caste system and so on, in different cultures. For the purpose of this chapter, however, we will discuss only the notion of God, which is the most common theme in every culture, around which all the other issues evolve.

Before we begin to investigate how Al-Biruni examined the problem of God in comparative perspective, it is necessary to mention the fact that his thoroughly tolerant and objective outlook throughout does not prevent him, at times, from dismissing some of the ideas of the Hindus as

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 251.

<sup>74</sup> Lawrence, “Al-Biruni's Approach,” 32.

<sup>75</sup> G. Morgenstierne, “Al-Biruni, The Founder of Comparative Studies in Human Culture,” in *The Commemoration Volume of Biruni International Congress* (Tehran: High Council for Culture and Art, 1973), 6.

abominable<sup>76</sup> if these ideas were in contradiction with the facts and common sense. This, in fact, is one of the most significant aspects of Al-Biruni's comparative approach, for his criticism includes any view that he considers to be unscientific, baseless, and foolish whether it be Hindu, Muslim or Greek.<sup>77</sup> This is based on the conviction that in every society there are educated and uneducated classes whose understanding differs significantly, especially when it comes to comprehending abstract concepts.<sup>78</sup> Whereas the educated class "strives to conceive abstract ideas and to define general principles," says Al-Biruni, the uneducated classes "do not pass beyond the apprehension of the senses, and are content with derived rules..."<sup>79</sup>

One such abstract idea is the concept of God. Al-Biruni begins his treatment of Hindu religion and philosophy by a definition of their concept of God as understood by the educated people.

The Hindus believe with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free-will, all-wise, almighty, living, giving life, ruling, preserving; one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything nor does anything resemble him...<sup>80</sup>

This, according to Al-Biruni is what the educated Hindus believe about God.<sup>81</sup> As for the uneducated class, Al-Biruni finds most of their

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<sup>76</sup> *India*, 31; *Tahqiq*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Biruni's tolerant outlook is well known. However, his tolerance did not extend to the fool, bigot, or dilettante, as illustrated in the following account. "Upon his showing an instrument for setting the times of prayer to a certain religious legalist, the latter objected that it had engraved upon it the names of the Byzantine months, and this constituted an imitation of the infidels. 'The Byzantines also eat food' stated Al-Biruni, 'then do not imitate them in this' and rejected the fellow forthwith. Kennedy, "Al-Biruni", 156.

<sup>78</sup> *India*, 27; *Tahqiq*, 20.

<sup>79</sup> *India*, 27; *Tahqiq*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* Note the similarities between the Hindu definition of God and the chapter entitled *The Unity* in the Qur'an which reads:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

1. Say: He is Allah, the One!

2. Allah, the eternally besought of all!

3. He begetteth not nor was begotten.

4. And there is none comparable unto Him. (Qur'an, CXII)

<sup>81</sup> Instead of commenting on the possible differences between the Islamic concept of God and the Supreme Being of the Hindus, Al-Biruni quotes extensively from the Hindu literature, notably from *Patanjali*, *Gita* and *Samkhya* to give a correct definition of the Hindu concept of God as it is described in their own literature. However, even a superficial analysis will

views on the concept of God are simply abominable. But he goes on to argue, as part of his general thesis that similar errors occur in other religious traditions. He specifically refers to Islam, criticizing what he calls the anthropomorphic doctrines and teachings of the *Jabriyya* sect, for instance.<sup>82</sup>

The discussion of the concept of God is closely related to the much-discussed issue of the Indian idol worshipping or rather associationism (*Shirk*). As is well known, idol worshipping is considered to be the greatest sin in Islam<sup>83</sup>; and Muslims had regarded Hindus as idol worshippers, at least in the theological language, although there was no explicit reference to the Hindu religion in the Qur'an. Therefore, Al-Biruni's criticism oriented specifically towards the label of *mushrikun* attached to Hindus.

Many Muslim scholars consider al-Biruni's treatment of idol worshipping among Hindus to be polemical even today. He is aware of the fact that idol worshipping is abominable, and is the greatest sin in Islam. And yet, he argues that not all the Hindus are idol-worshippers. With this argument Al-Biruni has the educated class in mind. With regard to this class he writes "those who march on the path to liberation or those who study philosophy and theology and who desire abstract truth, which they call *sara*, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and never would dream of worshipping an image to represent him."<sup>84</sup> Al-Biruni goes even further in this regard and argues that Hindu scholars *do* in fact enjoy the help of God in their endeavor.<sup>85</sup>

As for the uneducated class, Al-Biruni admits that the majority of the Hindu people, who are uneducated, may be regarded as idol-worshippers although he is hesitant to label them with that derogatory term. However, he attempts to justify the beliefs and actions of uneducated people, who have an "aversion to the world of abstract thought which is only understood by the highly educated."<sup>86</sup> In pursuit of his argument Al-Biruni creates an imaginary scenario that illustrates the innately human disposition to idolatry, regardless of one's religious beliefs.<sup>87</sup>

Al-Biruni argues that certain cultures create idols initially not to worship them, but to honor certain venerated persons or places to keep their

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reveal the fact that Al-Biruni seems to avoid deliberately the subtler theological discussions-discussions about the nature of personal versus impersonal God in Hindu and Islamic theologies. See *India*, 27-30; *Tahqiq*, 20-22.

<sup>82</sup> *India*, 31-32; *Tahqiq*, 22-24.

<sup>83</sup> The Qur'an reads explicitly that shirk is the one sin that God will not forgive (Qur'an, 4:48, 116); paradise will be absolutely denied to a person who is guilty of this sin (Qur'an, 5:72).

<sup>84</sup> *India*, I, 113; *Tahqiq*, 85.

<sup>85</sup> *India*, II, 108; *Tahqiq*, 433.

<sup>86</sup> *India*, I, 111; *Tahqiq*, 84.

<sup>87</sup> Lawrence, "Al-Biruni's Approach," 34.

memory alive when they are absent or dead, or, more importantly, to meditate on an invisible, imperceptible God.<sup>88</sup> With the passage of time, however, the origin of, and the reason for, setting up these idols are forgotten, becoming a matter of custom, and the veneration of the idols becomes a rule for general practice. This disposition is deeply rooted, according to Al-Biruni, not only in the nature of the common people of India, but also in the nature of all uneducated human beings in every culture including Islam.<sup>89</sup>

To illustrate his argument, Al-Biruni develops an imaginary scenario according to which if a picture of the Prophet of Islam or of the Ka'ba were made and were shown to an uneducated man or woman, he or

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<sup>88</sup> W.C. Smith's interpretation of the concept of God in Hinduism comes close to that of Al-Biruni when he says "...sophisticated Hindus have tended to hold that the great mass of customs and beliefs, gods and temples, and all, that make up the so-called Hindu religion (*dharma*) are but one stage on an ultimate human journey that leads beyond these things." Smith, *Faith of Other Men*, 26.

This passage can be interpreted in a number of ways. In the first place, it accepts the Al-Birunian notion that there is a sophisticated class, which Al-Biruni calls the educated class on the one hand, and then there is an uneducated or common class, which is not mentioned explicitly but is implied as the opposite of sophisticated Hindus. Secondly, it tells us that the main purpose of erecting idols, constructing temples and so on is only a means to attempt to attain the highest goal, that is, knowing the unknowable, unperceivable, and invisible God.

Although there are several stories narrated by Al-Biruni from Hindu literature that explain the origin and intention of erecting idols, temples and so on, two of them are worth quoting in support of the above interpretation. The first one is about the quest for God by a son of Abrahman. "Abrahman had a son called Narada, who had no other desire but that of seeing the Lord. It was his custom, when he walked about, to hold a stick. If he threw it down, it became a serpent, and he was able to do miracles with it. He never went without it. One day being engrossed in meditation on the object of his hopes, he saw a fire from afar. He went towards it, and then a voice spoke to him out of fire: 'what you demand and wish is impossible. You cannot see me save thus.' When he looked in that direction, he saw a fiery appearance in something like human shape. Henceforward it has been the custom to erect idols of certain shapes. The other story is about a King who sought to see God. Having convinced the King that he would never see Him, God recommended that the King 'occupy himself with his empire in as straightforward and prudent a way as possible: turn your thoughts upon me when you are engaged in civilizing the world and protecting its inhabitants, in giving alms, and in everything you do. And if you are overpowered by human forgetfulness, make to yourself an image like that in which you see me... From that time, the Hindus say, people make idols in different shapes. *India*, 115-116; *Tahqiq*, 86-87. (My emphasis).

<sup>89</sup> *India*, 112; *Tahqiq*, 84.

she would kiss the picture, throw himself or herself before it, as if he or she were not seeing the picture but what the picture represented.<sup>90</sup> In other words, although the actions and attitudes of these imaginary actors may outwardly look like idol worshipping, in reality these people would never dream of worshipping any but God alone. The same can be said, Al-Biruni seems to suggest, for the practices of the uneducated people in Hindu society.

In this context, Al-Biruni likens the custom of idol worshipping among Hindus to the old Hellenistic belief that the images or representations of divine beings have no magical power. Since, the ancient Greeks, “considered the idols as mediators between themselves and the First Cause, and worshipped them under the names of different stars and the highest substances.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, people do not worship these images as deities; they rather function only as reminders for the non-philosophical pious man and woman of existence of the divine.<sup>92</sup> In a similar vein, Al-Biruni mentions the “heathen Arabs” in this context to argue that they too worshipped idols hoping that they (idols) would intercede for them with God.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *India*, 111; *Tahqiq*, 84. With these remarks Al-Biruni predicted with great precision what would be a common practice within a segment of Muslim community in subsequent generations. As is well known, the worship of images is prohibited in ancient and medieval Jewish tradition as well as in Islam from the very outset. The rejection of representing the transcendent Divine Being or the Prophet of Islam and his immediate companions has never been really challenged or attacked in the lands of Islam. And yet, it is very common to see the pictures of Ali, the fourth caliph and the son-in-law of the Prophet, hanging on the walls of the houses of many Shi’te Muslims in Iran and elsewhere to keep his memory alive. Although this is not the place to compare and contrast the issues of idol-worshipping in Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, Al-Biruni seems to draw parallels between Hindu and Greek practices in real life, and the Muslim practices in his scenario as part of his comparative method.

<sup>91</sup> *India*, 123; *Tahqiq*, 94.

<sup>92</sup> Since this idea seems to be akin to the idea held by the early Christian vis-à-vis the issue of icons, Richard Walzer maintains that it may have reached the Muslim world through John of Damascus by the middle of the eighth century in the Capital of the Umayyad Kingdom. Richard Walzer, “Al-Biruni and Idolatry,” in *The Commemoration Volume of Biruni International Congress*, (Tehran: High Council for Culture and Art, 1973), 318.

<sup>93</sup> *India*, 123; *Tahqiq*, 94. As has been made clear throughout, Al-Biruni has a critical mind and attitude. His fairness and objectivity in his critiques, from which no absurd or foolish view is immune irrespective of its origin, led Professor Sachau to question Al-Biruni’s commitment to Islam. Sachau comments “...his [Al-Biruni] recognition of Islam is not without reserve. He dares not to attack Islam, but he attacks the Arabs.” Sachau, Introduction, XIV. Obviously, Sachau’s reading of Al-Biruni regarding this matter is not correct, for nowhere does Al-Biruni even implicitly attack Islam

Al-Biruni's tolerant treatment of the concept of God and how it relates to the issue of idol worshipping in the Indian context does not mean that he is justifying the practices of the uneducated class. Quite the contrary, he finds them abominable, but not unique to the Indian religion. What Al-Biruni emphasizes, however, is that similar practices can be observed in even higher cultures where the division between educated and uneducated class is inevitable also.

## CONCLUSION

Our reflections on Al-Biruni's study of other religions in this chapter have displayed a great conformity with the insights we gained from the previous chapter where it was emphasized that understanding other people, and therefore other cultures, is possible and necessary, and can be achieved only through dialogue. In light of this and the previous chapter, then, the following chapter will examine the issue of the possibility of moving beyond the categories examined earlier.

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as a belief system for any reason. He *does* attack, however, Muslims and their heathenish practices when he compares them with the abominable practices of the other cultures, Hinduism in particular. This attitude comes from his firm belief in telling the truth (*al-haqq*), which is the basic tenet of his whole project.