
Approaches to Religion: An Overview

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Religion is a Latin term, which can hardly be defined precisely because it admits of the widest diversity of interpretation, because of the entirely personal nature of the experience which it means. It has to deal with what is most vital in the feeling, belief, and performance of multiple actions of every human being. Religion seems to be a phenomenon which controls the attitude towards life in each individual, "primitive" as well as highly developed modern man. Even in one man's life time this conception of what is religion may change from one period to another.¹

Thus the term "religion", whatever its best definition, clearly refers to certain characteristic types of data, as beliefs, practice, feelings, moods and attitudes etc. etc.²

However, religion in the words of E.B. Tylor can be described as "the belief in spiritual beings." sometimes.³

Every reader tends to approach the subject with certain more or less definite preconceptions touching some of the most essential terms or elements of religion.

Hence, although religion concerns the most vital truths of man and the universe, there

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can be a critical, objective, or scientific treatment which considers, not the goal or destiny of things, but man's beliefs and theories on the subject, not the ultimate facts, but man's convictions of them; not the final objective reality, but religious and related concepts of this reality.⁴

Preliminary questions of method and approaches thus become indispensable, for no one can approach the subject with an entirely blank mind.⁵

There are various methods and approaches suggested for the study of religion.

Psychological and sociological or anthropological methods are commonly prevalent in the field of sociology of religion. However, there are other Theories, such as "Unity of Religions", Comparative Study of Religions, "All Religions are True" and the Evolution Theory of Religion or Islamic view point to study the phenomenon of religious diversity and continuity. Although psychological sociological, and comparative study of religion methods have been explained by various scholars in detail, but the evolution theory of religion especially in Islamic framework has not been delineated to the required extent. Moreover, Gandhian Theory i.e. "all religions are true" also requires a thorough scrutiny. Therefore, in this presentation we will try to briefly discuss these approaches and methods critically to pave the way for a systematic and analytical Islamic approach to this intricate field of human experience and guidance i.e. religion.

To start with, to Freud the religious rituals and beliefs are homologous with neurotic symptoms—from the chimerical ethnology and absolute biology within which he insisted upon setting it.⁶ But it should be noted here that all psychological approaches to religion were not Freudian. Jungian influences have had a certain impact, especially on studies of myth. Campbell (1949), for example, has stressed the continuity of certain themes both cross-cultural and temporally. These themes have been interpreted as expression of transpersonal constituencies in unconscious mental functioning which are at the same time

expression of fundamental realities.⁷ In the same way Kluckhohn's pioneering *Navaho Witchcraft* (1944) has attempted to systematically relate psychological factors to social and cultural aspects of primitive religion.⁸

Here it should also be noted that men have experiences which compel them to distinguish what they call the 'divine' from the 'human'. But the psychological method can deal only with the human side of the great questions, as apart from the problem of the actual underlying realities.⁹

Durkheim believed that the integrity of the social order was the primary requisite for human survival, and the means by which that integrity superseded individual egocentricity was the primary problem of sociological analysis.¹⁰

The application of the comparative method—the essence of anthropological thought—to religion permitted the growth of a resolutely scientific approach to the spiritual dimensions of human life.

Through the thin disguise of comparative method the revolutionary implications of the work of such men as Tylor, Durkheim, Robertson Smith, Freud, Malinowski and Redcliffe-Brown became apparent, at first mainly to philosophers, theologians, and literary figures, but eventually to the educated public in general.¹¹

The comparative method is the unbiased coordination of all comparable data irrespective of context or age. It illustrates popular beliefs and practices, and reveals a remarkable resemblance among peoples all the world over. But, while it supports or suggests various theories and explanations, it does not prove that others are excluded. Moreover, similar practices can have different meanings or motives, and similar ideas and beliefs can be differently expressed. However, the range of feelings, meaning or application, cannot be proved to be analogical to others elsewhere. Comparative method indicates resemblances between different religions and people, as well as significant differences,

whether in single environments, at some given time, or in the course of their historical development.

Comparison reveals innumerable subtle differences; and these indicate that there has been no artificial or mechanical borrowing or imposition, but a process of re-adjusting uniforms and reshaping for which the individuals concerned have a certain responsibility. In fact, whenever beliefs and practices can be compared, a distinction can invariably be made between what it is that recurs and the form in which it recurs. The beliefs everywhere contain similar elements. Some times the superstitious data resembles the religious data; but while the former will generally be sporadic, isolated and out of harmony with current thought, the latter will be more or less organised socially and intellectually and at least in accordance with the best thought. Apparently rudimentary or irrational data need not to be older than one more advanced or elevated. Moreover, religions can be studied in their relation to the political, economic, social, geographical and other features of the people or areas where important parallels and paradigms are sought, which aim at identifying common characteristics at the geographical level, the plains, deserts, swamps and slums are studied and difference is made between higher and lower cultures. But every treatment of the development of religion follows some recognition of 'Lower' and 'Higher' stages.¹

In this way the similarities and dissimilarities are studied in comparative method without being prejudiced or pre-occupied with the moorings towards any particular religious denomination, secondly, the geographical implications and temporal-spatial considerations for the emergence of religions are of special interest there.

There are some less renowned theories of religious studies as "unity of religions" and "all religions are true" theories.

There have been several attempts at unifying various elements of different religions and denominations consciously or otherwise. Hinduism seems to be a good example of this:

phenomenon, as it is more a league of religions than a single religion with one creed.¹³ It is rather a federation of different kinds of approaches to the reality.¹⁴ This attitude of Hinduism is signified by the Rigvedic hymn:

"That which is one, sages name it in various ways."

(Ekam Sad, Vipra, Vathudha Vadanti)

Radha Krishnan Says:

"When the Hindu found that different people aimed at and achieved God-realization in different ways, he generally recognised them all and justified their place in the course of history."¹⁵

After Hinduism, Buddhism has also unified various aspects of Hinduism with its new creed. During his disquisitions with the learned, Hindu priests of Maghada, the Budha seems to have arrived at a synthesis of the more plausible elements of Hindu metaphysics, with his own need for simplification of the already highly intricate ritual ordered by the priestly order. He accepted the fundamental truths, transmigration or renewed birth, earned as a kind of remuneration as consequence of Karma, the fruits of deeds.¹⁶

The Budha accepted this concept, but the difference between his and that of the Brahmans lies in the emphasis on the moral nature of his approach to deeds rather than the psychological interpretations given by the Brahmans.¹⁷

On political level, we find that attempts were made by the emperors like Akbar, the great, to unify various elements of Islam and Hindu-ism together, and named the new creed as Din-i-Ilahi. But a glaring example of this approach to religion can be seen in the efforts of the Bhakti movement.

Bhakti Movement, "which was a new development in India's religious life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries". This movement swept over practically the whole of India, and it derived inspiration and vigour from the perennial spring of India's spiritual traditions,

both Islamic and Hinduistic.¹⁸ The ideas of Ramaanda and his disciples including Kabir (c. 1440-1518), Dhanna, Pipa, Sain and Raidas or Ravidas are very important dimensions of this approach. Bhakti movement influenced the founder of Sikhism, yet another Aryan religion profoundly as "in its origin it is closely connected with the Bhakri movement." Among the first precepts of Guru Nanak is, "Neither is one Hindu nor is one Muslim"

It is undoubtedly true that Nanak did not come alone but that he was the member of a family, the great family of religious teachers who arose in the 15th and 16th centuries. Of the members of this "family", Guru Nanak seems to have come into personal contact with Chaicanya, the founder of Bengal Vaishnavism, at Puri. Moreover, there is some indication of Kabirs' influence on Guru Nanak also. Kabir's teaching seems to have reached the Punjab and gained wide currency there. Macauliffe has indicated the unifying element of Kabir's teaching as following:-

"Kabir has written works which all religious denominations can accept and which, if pursued without bigotry, are advantageous for the salvation of all persons."¹⁹

Despite the special characteristics of Sikhism, it was not exotic in India's' religious life, but it was a peculiar expression of the Bhakti movement. In this way since Bhakti movement was influenced both by Hinduism and Islam, "Sikhism was born out of a wedlock between Hinduism and Islam" as observed by a well known Sikh scholars, Khushwant Singh because it was routed in the philosophy of devotion of the Bhakti movement.²⁰

Because many of the ideas preached by Nanak were propounded by Ramananda and his disciples, Kabir, Dhanna, Pipa, Sain, and Ravidas.

Guru Nanak thus, started preaching the so-called "new religion", which was actually the fusion of the essential truths contained in both Hinduism and Islam. He accepted the Hindu doctrine of rebirth, the idea of transmigration and the concept of Maya! He also incorporated into his teaching the typically Islamic doctrines of strict and austere divine

unity and the superiority of the will of God over the phenomena of Karma. He rejected idolatry in strong terms, but the whole Hindu pantheon has been accommodated by him in his unknowable, formless Nirankar who "is but one God whose name is true, the creator".²¹

Granth Sahib gives us some hymns composed by two Muslim Bhaktas, Sheikh Farid and Bhikan. According to Macauliffe, the verses attributed to Sheikh Farid, born in the twelfth century, were really composed by Sheikh Brahm (Ibrahim). It is said that Guru Nanak had met Sheikh Brahm.²²

It has been said that the founder of Sikhism took the Prophet of Islam as his model, and in this connection our attention has been drawn to his insistence on one God and no other. His debt to the Sufis has been traced in his teaching on four stages of the spiritual path i.e. Saran Khand, Jnan Khand, Karan Khand and Sach Khand, which, it is said, correspond to the sufi Shariat, Marifat, Ufwa and Lahut.²³

Moreover he seems influenced by Alaui-Haq, Jalal-ud-din Bhukari, Makhdum Jahaniyan and Sheikh Ismail Bukhari on the one hand, and San Karacharya regarding monotheism on the other.²⁴

However, this approach and trend of unification of religions has not ended with the emergence of Sikhism as a new religion, but continued uninterrupted in our times also.

Bahaiism is a very important example of this unification approach to religion, which has attracted people from very early ages till date. According to the Bhai claims, they uphold the 'Unity of God' the unity of his Prophets and inculcate "the principle of oneness and the wholeness of the entire human race. The three central figures of Bahai faith are: the Bab (1819-1850), Bahu-ullah (1817-1892), Abdul-Baba (1844-1921). The following statement is attributed to Bahauallah, which also indicates their approach to religion:-

"God grant that the light of unity may envelop the whole earth, and that the seal of the kingdom of God may be stamped upon the brow of all its peoples." and

"It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens".²⁵

The Bahai take special care of the local religious and cultural sensibilities of people in their zeal for unification of various religious teachings into a new religious form. For example, they have devised seven edifices in different parts of the world, each with its distinctive design, each inviting peoples of all religions and races to worship the "Creator of the Universe" and to express "the love between God and man". For example the design of the Bahai, House of worship in New Delhi, is inspired by the Lotus the exquisitely beautiful flower and a symbol of purity that is "inseparably associated with worship and religion in India." Moreover, to strengthen their religion they recommend and allow reading and recitation of the scriptures of Bahai Faith and other religions within the portals of the house of worship.²⁶

Some Sufi schools of thought also aim at a similar unification of various elements of different religions into a "universal religion". A recent example of this kind is the Masaeelum of the Hazrat Anayat Khan at new Delhis' Nizamuddin area, where two retired Professors from Canada Prof. Wali and Prof. Walia, had started regular prayers and recitation from various religious scriptures.

Occasionally, they oraganise meetings where people representing different faiths are invited to highlight the common elements in the vast phenomena of the religions. They also arrange prayers, which is known as "universal worship" by litting the candles and reciting verses from religious scriptures.

A very attractive, but not well known, approach to religion has been propounded by M.K. Ghandhi, which can be called "All Religions are true" theory. Ghandhi claims that different religions are just the various approaches to the universal and cosmic reality, which in simple terms can be called "truth". Though all religions reveal some aspect of this truth,

therefore, are true, yet each religion is incomplete. Therefore, one religion is complementary to other religion, rather than being its opposite. In other words, each religion can claim that it is true, however, no religion can claim to be complete.

After mentioning these various methods and approaches to religion, it seems necessary to present the Islamic view of religion. It should be noted that all the aforementioned methods and approaches cannot be entertained in the framework of Islam. It is never possible to think about the origin of religion in the terms of "neurotic symptoms" as held by Freud, nor can "social order" solely warrant existence of a religion as held by people like Durkhiem. Comparative method is invalid in case of Islam, because it does not pass value judgement on the essential basis of evolution of religion, but mostly concerns itself delineating various similarities and dissimilarities among religions of the world. So far as the unification theory is concerned it is tantamount to "Shirk" and in some cases "heresy" from Islamic angle, as contradictory elements, for example, Tawhid and Saint worship, can't be conjoined together. Moreover, this approach makes the religious teachings subject of all prevailing material for erroneous interpretations and distortions. All religions can't be true at one and the same time. Truth must be one, and continuous, universal and preserved, complete and authentic. While as we find that various religions have lost sight of truth because of the loss of the original religious scriptures or owing to the mischievous role of the clergy. Moreover, it is also true that religion needed reassertion with each passing phase of human history. Therefore, the civilizational, cultural and material advancement was the reflection of the evolution of the religion by gradual processes. Therefore, we fall back on the evolution theory of religion, which in a sense in itself is an Islamic Theory of Studying a religion.

To start with from biological, anthropological, and evolutionary points of view, the development of man is that of increasing knowledge, function, and ability, though what is most significant is the individuals increasing consciousness of his own self and

environment, while as his consciousness about the universe is one of quite another type.²⁷

The method is commonly bound up with certain persistent and prevalent notions of the evolution of thought and the survival of pure, rational and enlightening beliefs and several practices though in incomplete form from an earlier and back ward stage in the history of culture.²⁸

The study of "primitive religions" could pass as the study of superstition, supposedly unrelated to the serious religious and moral concerns of advanced civilization, at best either a sort of vague fore-shadowing of them or a grotesque parody upon them.²⁹

Vico in the eighteenth century has made an extreme effort in the direction of religious evolution, while as copious empirical illustration was developed in the nineteenth century by Hegel, Comte, and Spencer in more modern and judicious form, evolutionary ideas provided the basis of sociology of religion of Durkheim (1912) and Weber (1922).

Though long neglected and in some quarters excoriated, the idea of religious evolution, has recently been revived by Bellah (1964), which provides a natural link between the kind of theory of religion and the comparative study of religion.

Sometimes evolution is expressed in religious symbolism as well. In this field the main line of development is from compact to differentiated symbolism, that is from a situation in which world, self and society are seen to involve the immediate expression of occult powers to one in which the exercise of religious influence is seen to be more indirect and "rational". This is the process of the "disenchantment of the world" that was described by Weber part of this process in the gradual differentiation of art, science, and other cultural systems as separate from religious symbolism.

An adequate theory of religious evolution would have to go hand in hand with a general theory of social evolution.³⁰

In this approach, we find that the complex, heterogeneous present has arisen, more

or less gradually, out of simpler, more uniform past. The relics of the past are still to be found scattered like Gatapagos turtles, in out -of the way places around us.³¹

According to Islam, there had been really only one true religion, i.e. the message of Allah, submission to the will of Allah. This is called Islam. It was the religion preached by Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus and all the prophets, by whatever name it may be called. People, however have corrupted that pure light and called their religions by different names.

Although Islam teaches Muslims to bear with them all, and allow the names for convenience, but it also insists equally on prevailing of truth over all distorted forms of religion. The Quran says:-

"It is He who has sent His messenger with Guidance and the Religion of Truth: That he made it prevail over all religion, even though the pagans may detest (it)".³¹

In corrolary to it the continuity of this message of truth has been also shown:-

"He has chosen you, and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion, it is the religion of your father Abraham. It is he, who has named you Muslims, both before and this (Revelation), witness for you, and you be witness for mankind. So establish regular prayer, give Zakat, hold fast to Allah. He is your protector the best to protect and the best to help! In this way Islam has existed before the preaching of Muhammad on the earth, as the Quran expressly calls Abraham a Muslim.³² Its teaching (submissin to Allahs' Will) has been and will be the teaching of religion for all time and for all peoples.

There had been a continuous chain of the prophets througout the annals of history of mankind and the Quran calls the Prophets in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim dispensation frame one family literally, and even claims further that all men of faith form one family.

"Allah did choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of "Imran above all people" offspring one of the other."³³

In this way Islam is universal and claims to date from Adam. Moreover, father

Abraham is mentioned as the great Ancestor of those among whom Islam was first preached i.e. Jews, Christians and Arabs.

The Quran mentions that the children of Israel were granted the book, the power of command, and Prophet hood. They were also favoured above all nations as they were the custodians of the message brought by the prophets. Clear signs were granted to them in the affairs of religion.

"It was only after knowledge had been granted to them that they fell into schisms; through insolent envy among themselves, verily Thy Lord will judge between them on the day of judgement as to those matters in which they set up differences."³⁴

Since the prophets came with a divinely ordained knowledge and guidance it was containing the message of unity. We know that the message brought by Moses was presenting integrity. It was one book. But the present old testament is a collection of odd books (sheets) of various kinds? Why, because its integrity was lost or concealed by the Jews themselves. The same applies to the New testament. It shows that all the prophets mentioned above had one mission and explained their teachings with conformity with each other. But this mission was damaged by the Schisms prevalent in their rank and file.

"Who then sent down the book which Moses brought? A light and guidance to man. But ye make it into (separate) sheets for show."³⁵

In this the Quran exposes the excesses and distortions made by the Israelites in the message of Allah. They have even concealed several portions of it or added some spurious elements to it.

"While you conceal much (of its contents): there in were you taught that you know not—neither you nor your fathers " Say: "Allah (sent it down)"³⁶

The Quran elaborates upon the same point and says that the purpose of new revelation was two fold; to bring blessings of God in form of the universal and unadulterated message,

and to confirm the earlier revelations. The Quran says:-

"And this is a book which we have sent down, bringing blessings and confirming (the revelations) which came before it, that thou mayst warn the mother of cities and all round her."³⁷

Makkah being traditionally associated with Abraham, was nonetheless the mother of cities. Therefore, this also indicated the universality and continuity of the religion, i.e. Islam.

Moses was also followed by a succession of messengers. Jesus was also sent with clear signs to the people to continue the same message of Islam.

"We gave Moses, the book and followed him up with a succession of messengers. We gave Jesus the son of Mary, clear (signs) and strengthened him with the holy spirit."³⁸

But as has been mentioned this book, Torah was distorted and rendered into various fragmented portions.

The books like Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are traditionally ascribed to Moses. They were in their present form probably compiled some time after the return of the Jews from the baby-lonioan captivity. The decree of Cyrus permitting such return was in 536 B.C.

Renan has doubted even the existence of Moses, owing to the meshy condition of the present Torah. He is doubtful "whether Moses was not a myth."

But as Muslims we believe that Moses existed, that he was an inspired man of God; that he gave a message which was afterwards distorted or lost, that attempts were made by Israel at various times to reconstruct that message; and that the Torah as we have it is not earlier than the middle of the fifth century.

The primitive Torah must have been in old Hebrew, but there is no Hebrew manuscript of the old Testament which can be dated with certainty earlier than 916 A.D., at the time of

Jesus must have been cultivated. Hebrews used the Greek language, and others used Aramaic, including Syriac and Chaldean, Latin or local dialects. There were also some Arabic versions. No standard text of the old Testament is found in its Hebrew form. The versions differ from each other frequently in minor particulars and sometimes in important particulars.

It was the merit of Islam that it pointed out that as a Scripture Torah was of no value, although it recognised Moses as an inspired messenger all his original law as having validity in his period until it was superseded. In its criticism of the Jewish position it said in effect:-

"You have lost your original law, even what you have now as its substitute, you do not honestly follow; is it not better, now that an inspired teacher is living among you, that you should follow him rather than quibble over uncertain texts."

After Moses came Jesus, whose mission was to his own people, the Jews, "I am not sent but to the lost sheep of Israel."³⁹ and

"It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs."

The Quran says:

"And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary; said: "O Children of Israel, I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Taurat (which came, before me) and giving glad Tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name should be Ahmad. But when he came to them with clear signs, they said, "this is evident Soecry."⁴⁰ and

"And Allah will teach him the book and wisdom, the Torah and the Gospal." and (appoint him) a messenger to the children of Israel, (with this message)."⁴¹

After the corruption of the older revelations, the Quran comes with two fold purposes i.e. to confirm the true and original message, and (2) to guard it, or act as a check to its interpretation. The Arabic word is used for this purpose is "Muhaiman", which is very

comprehensive in meaning. It means one who safeguards, watches over, stands witness, preserves, and upholds. The Quran safeguards "the book" for it has preserved within it the teachings of all the former books. It watches over these books in the sense that it will not let their true teachings to be lost. It supports and upholds these books in the sense that it corroborates the Word of Allah which has remained intact in them. It stands a witness, because it bears testimony to the work of Allah contained in these books and helps to sort it out from the interpretations and commentaries of the people which were mixed with it; what is confirmed by the Quran in the Word of Allah and what is against it in that of the people.⁴²

The Quran says:

"To thee we sent the scripture of truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the truth that hath come to these. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, he would have made you a single people. But (his plan is to test you in what he hath given you), so strive as in a race in all virtues."⁴³

The Prophets before Prophet Muhammad were sent to particular regions and nations, but Allah's Revelation, through the Holy Prophet, was not meant for one family or tribe, one race or set of people, as it used to be in the case of the predecessors of Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). It was, rather meant for all mankind, to whom if they turn to Allah, it is a message of the glad tidings of His mercy, and if they do not turn to him it is warning against sin and the inevitable punishment.⁴⁴

"We have not sent thee but as a (messenger) to all mankind, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men know not."⁴⁵

Moreover, the holy prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) closed the long line of

Holy Spirit has brought the revelation from thy in Truth, in order to strengthen those who believe, and as a guide and glad tidings to Muslims."⁵⁰

A part from Universality, completion and finality of the prophethood, the evolution in the psyche and social setup of the people have also been highlighted by the Quran. For example Moses acted on the subjective mind of the Egyptians and by methods which by Allahs' miracle show that Egyptian magic was nothing before the true power of Allah as magic happen to be part of the Egyptian religion. They needed, therefore, an instruction aided by the similar and superior activity.

"Then (Moses) threw his rod, and behold. It was a serpent, plain (for all to see)."¹⁸

In the same way since the people at the time of Jesus were very fond of medical sciences and healing, he was given the added support of healing the people suffering from leprosy and other ailments.

"I have to come to you, with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird, by Allahs' Leave, and I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and bring the dead into life by Allahs' Leave, and I declare to you what you eat, and what you store in your houses. Surely there is in a sign for you if you did believe."⁵¹

In this way after the stage of magic and excellence in medical sciences the human beings had reached to a stage where they needed epistemological rational arguments, which were provided to them in the form of the Quran. The Quran for that reason is the highest miracle of the prophet.

Islam has not only completed the chain of the prophets, but also has paved the way for the highest revolution in the fields of epistemology, social order and science as Quranic teachings are based on very sound rational and scientific outlines, which can cater the needs of all the people till the day of judgement.

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