

The Muslim Approach to the Study of Religions

Amjad Mahmud Hussain
amjad.hussain@marmara.edu.tr
Marmara University

Mohd Aderi Che Noh
aderi@fsk.upsi.edu.my
Sultan Idris Education University

Abstract

This article highlights the need for Muslims to study other religions and philosophies for a number of reasons. This article describes the study of religions by Muslims in the past, and it attempts to explain how Muslims in the past were so successful at studying other faiths. The main aim of the article is to provide a methodology for contemporary Muslims to study the 'other'. With that in mind the article provides an insight into the contemporary approach towards phenomenology of religion and offers an alternative route to approach the study of religions.

Keywords: *study of religions, phenomenology of religions, methodology, epoche, khushū‘, tawāḍu‘*

Nowadays, our world is fast becoming smaller by an ever-growing globalization of industry, media, internet, on-line global social networks, migration and tourism. In this new world, where the east and the west meet, a need to comprehend human beings' religious diversity is becoming paramount. In a world where religion is a part parcel of the human culture, some may even say a very important or most important aspect, it is important to recognize that this diversity that exists within the wider human beings' society must be better understood in order to be navigated for a peaceful co-existence. In this article I am not putting forward an argument for whether or not all of these diversities are subjectively good or bad for humanity, but I am simply presenting these religions and diversity within our societies as a reality on the ground. Moreover, in our contemporary world religious views of various people seem to be playing a large role. It is interesting to note that it was only a few decades earlier that countless thinkers had begun claiming that religion was a thing of yesterday.

For more than two centuries the western world and, to an extent, the wider world felt the major changes brought about by an ever growing secular society, where it experienced the demise of empires, the establishment of nation states, the making of a new global financial system and the supposed slow steady decline of faith or even disinterest in the 'sacred'. One academic went as far as to describe this period as a time where "religion seems to have lost much of the enormous advantage it once possessed as virtually the universal source of consolation, explanation and hope to women and men trapped in an unchanging order." Still, only two decades afterwards various thinkers have had to acknowledge that religion is very much alive, and that amongst the majority of population in the world, religion still seems to play a major role. Therefore, at this juncture it is becoming evident that it is not only in the west but also in the east that there is a need to understand the various religions, their histories, their adherents, and the recent developments that have taken place within their faiths so as to understand this diversity, and to develop some kind of aptitude in order to co-exists within the present world. Ninian Smart, mostly thinking at that time of western societies, touched upon this same need three decades ago when he wrote,

The voyage into other folks' beliefs and practices may turn out to be a journey into your neighbourhood. It is common today for varieties of people to live together in the great cities. In London, New York, Los Angeles, Sydney, Singapore, Frankfurt, and Paris, most of the great religions and ideologies are present. This pluralism is richer because each of the traditions includes many forms: Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Baptists; Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, and Muslims from Morocco, Indonesia, and Egypt; Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and

Korea, as well as Anglo converts; and so on. It often happens, then, that cities are microcosms of the whole world. This is an added reason why it is important to know something of others, so that mutual understanding, though maybe not agreement, may animate community relations.

How is this reality applicable to the Muslims today? Are the cities found in Muslim nations that are microcosms of the world? From Kuala Lumpur to Riyadh, and Istanbul to New Delhi, do Muslims come in contact with other folk's beliefs and practices? Do they understand what they are witnessing and observing? How do they react to these? Is there a mutual understanding? The fact is that to truly know each other and to create mutual understanding we need to comprehend the social concept of religion, which we find embedded across the various human cultures. Moreover, we first of all need to define the subject we intend to study, but from which perspective? Is there such a thing as an objective view of the 'other'? Let us for instance ask what religion is, and how we may define it. From the general Muslim perspective it is very much straight forward. God has only revealed one faith but with different laws and paths throughout history, and this meant that religions such as Christianity Judaism and Zoroastrians together with Hinduism and Buddhism, not to mention other religious groups—were regarded generally in Muslim history as possible followers of an earlier authentic religion, which was later on altered by people who introduced varied beliefs and practices. A further understanding of faith from the Muslim theological thinking is that some religions, especially, after the Prophet Muhammad, were generated and developed by people due to various possible social, psychological and political factors.

Still, this view of the Muslims based upon revelation and Prophetic traditions, however true for the adherent of Islam, is not recognised as such by the believers of other faiths. Moreover, how can Muslims learn and understand the 'other' as it is understood by itself? This aspect of understanding religions is known as the scholarly activity of the phenomenology or religion, the study of religions, and the history of religions.

Once we begin to look deeper into the various religious traditions we discover that the term 'religion' is understood very differently across the spectrum. Hence, it may be incorrect to understand the Latin derived term 'religion' to be equivalent to such terms as *dharma* and *dīn*. *Dīn* in Arabic and in Hebrew means 'judgement' as in the 'Day of Judgement' as well as 'a way of life'. On the other hand, *dharma*, means for the Hindus the cosmic truth as well as 'eternal law' and 'duty', whereas in Buddhism it refers to the teachings of Buddha. To complicate this issue even further, we discover that it is ambivalent whether the root word of the Latin derived word 'religion' is *legere* or *ligare*. According to the 1st century philosopher Cicero the term religion derives from the Latin term '*legere*' meaning 'to read' something, whereas the 5th century Christian Theologian Augustine traces the word 'religion' to '*ligare*' meaning 'to bind', meaning that which binds a community together. Hence, the term 'religion' can be understood very differently from all of these diverse traditions, which is why there is such a difficulty defining it.

What is interesting and surprising is that even with the wide difference between the Muslim faith's view of the 'other' and the other's own definition, early Muslims were successful in learning much about the 'other'. In fact, Muslims studied and wrote about the other faiths that they encountered them during the Middle Ages. For instance during the early conquests in Afghanistan, India, and Turkic Central Asia, the Muslims came across Jains, Hindus and Buddhists. In this scenario they had to discuss the theological and legal status of these new religions they encountered. For example, the request in 711 by Hindus, Jains and Buddhists for the safety of their houses of worship in the Brahmanabad settlement and the acceptance of this request by the Umayyad general Imād ad-Dīn Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Thaqafi (d. 725) in Sindh India, (modern day Pakistan) is very much an evidence of this. It is recorded in historical documents that General Muhammad Ibn Qasim after consultation with his scholars replied to their request with the following words,

The request of the chiefs of Brahmanabad about the buildings of Budh and other temples, and toleration in religious matters, is just and reasonable. I do not see what further rights we can have over them beyond the usual tax. They have paid homage to us and have undertaken to pay the fixed tribute [*jizya*] to the Caliph. Because they have become *dhimmi*s we have no right whatsoever to interfere in their lives and property. Do permit them to follow their own religion. No one should prevent

them.’...The temples [lit. al-Budd, but referring to the temples of the Buddhists and the Hindus, as well as the Jains] shall be treated by us as if they were the churches of the Christians, the synagogues of the Jews, and the fire temples of the Magians.

It is evident that the primary aim of the early Muslim scholars’ research of the other faiths was primarily for legalistic reasons, and for theological inquiry like whether any of the figures venerated in these faiths could possibly have been a prophet of God. Still, by the eighth century, Muslim historians, geographers and travellers focused on seven great ancient civilizations: the Persians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Egyptians, Turks, Indians and Chinese. Franz Rosenthal justly gives the honour of providing a great contribution on this subject to the Muslim civilisation by stating “The comparative study of world religions have been rightly acclaimed as one of the great contributions of Muslim civilization to mankind’s intellectual progress”. It is well known that for at least one to two centuries Buddhism and the other faiths continued to stay the main religion of the populace in many of the lands the Muslims conquered and ruled. In India and Bactria, Hinduism and Buddhism were the faiths that were followed by the largest numbers. During the Muslim conquests there is even a report of the Chinese pilgrim Wu-k’ung in 753 CE accounts of both Hindu and Buddhist temples present and thriving in the Muslim lands. Alexander Berzin describes this period as “The Arabs allowed followers of non-Muslim religions in the lands they conquered to keep their faiths if they submitted peacefully and paid a poll tax (Ar. *jizya*). In the famous *Kitāb al-Fihrist* by Abu al-Faraj Muhammad bin Ishaq al-Nadim (d. 998) a list of Buddhist works were included; many of them medical but among them was an Arabic version of the account of Buddha’s previous lives known as the *Kitāb al-Budd* (Book of Buddha). In addition, an anonymous treatise on the ‘Religious Beliefs of the Indians’ was in circulation by the end of the eighth century and Ibn Nadim reported that he saw this copy in the handwriting of al-Kindi, the great Arab Philosopher and another copy which was written by an Indian Scholar, who was a minister of Yahya ibn Barmak in 863. In the following years many travellers and geographers wrote brief accounts of the various religious denominations found within that region. Al-Masudi (d. 957) in his book ‘Historical Encyclopaedia’ described the *Hind* nations to extend from the mountains of Khurasan and from al-Sind to al-Tubbet and the Persian geographer Abu al-Qasim Ubaydallah ibn Khordadbeh (d. 912) in his book *kitāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms) briefly reported about the various types of Indian casts and their forty-two religious denominations. Another account was written in the book *Zayn al-Akhhār* (The Ornament of Histories) by the Persian Geographer Abu Sa’id Gardīzī (d. 1061). He praised the inhabitant of India for their sciences by writing, “Among [their] wonders [are their] mathematics, geodesy, geometry and astronomy, in which their science and authority have reached a degree impossible to explain...” In this book Gardīzī continues to classify the various beliefs and philosophies into ninety-nine divisions that were simplified into forty-two denominations. He describes these groups in details and mentions some of their names as *Shamani* or *Budi* (Buddhist), *Bashdiv* or *Vasudeva* (Brahmans), *Kali* (Followers of Shiva) and *Ramani* (Followers of Rama).

An earlier account by Sulayman al-Tajir (9th century) called *Khabar al-Sīn wa al-Hind* (An Account of China and India) was compiled approximately around 851 but became more known after being absorbed into Abu Zayd al-Sirafi’s (d. 950) collection of Arab travel accounts known as *Silsilat al-Tawarikh* (The Chain of Histories) in 916. In it, Sulayman al-Tajir briefly informs the reader of the cultural connections between the two lands, specifically highlighting how Buddhism (which at that time had become native to China) and other Chinese religious traditions had originated in India. He compared the belief systems in India and China and asserted that both affirm their belief in communications with their idols, both have similarities in their mystical dimensions and people in both lands believed in reincarnation and metempsychosis (transmigration of the soul). It is interesting to note that it was during this period that the Muslim theologians and philosophers came across and contended against the Hellenistic and Indian exponents of the notion that revelation was unnecessary and prophecy was therefore redundant. It was in this context that the philosopher al-Kindi wrote a treatise justifying the prophets’ assertions and directed the writing against those who denied prophecy through his work entitled ‘*Refutations of the Arguments of the Atheists*’.

Perhaps, the most detailed study of another faith by a Muslim was left behind by the polymath scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni who spent thirteen years in India during the 11th century and has been

acclaimed as the founder of the 'Comparative Study of Religion'. He travelled to India with Sultan Mahmud al-Ghaznavi and his invading army from central Asia. Al-Biruni was a versatile scientist, writer, well versed in several languages and an enthusiastic traveler. His duties for Sultan Mahmud Al-Ghaznavi included the exploration of India's sciences, geography, people's customs, literature, philosophical thought and their religious traditions. While he stayed in India for thirteen years he explored this wide land, studying the peoples' faiths and their ancient texts. Around approximately 1030 al-Biruni completed his famous book '*Kitāb al-Bīrūnī fī taḥqīq mā li-al-Hind min maqūlah maqbūlah fī al-ʿaql aw mardhūlah*' (Indica - a compendium of India's religion and philosophy), which details his travels in India and his research on not only religion and traditions of India but also their scientific contribution. Arthur Jeffery described his contribution to the study of religion as reliable, scrupulous, focused on scientific principles of completeness, accuracy and unbiased treatment. Al-Biruni praised the Hindus as being "excellent philosophers, good mathematicians and astronomers". Al-Biruni analysed al-Hind's religious tradition in detail, especially Hinduism, while less was written on Buddhism. This may be because Buddhism had largely disappeared from Northern India where al-Biruni did most of his research. In his book *Kitāb al Hind* he wrote "This book is not a polemical one...My book is nothing but a simple historic record of fact." He continues to state,

I have done and written this book on the doctrines of the Hindus, never making any unfounded imputations against those, our religious antagonists, and at the same time not considering it inconsistent with my duties as a Muslim to quote their own word at full length when I thought they would contribute to elucidate a subject. If the content of these quotations happen to be utterly heathenish, and the followers of truth, [i.e. the Muslims] find them objectionable, we can only say that that such is the belief of the Hindus and that they themselves are the best qualified to defend it.

The second main Muslim scholar to look in depth at eastern religions was the theologian Muhammad Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 1153). Eric J. Sharpe wrote of Shahrastani, "The honor of writing the first history of religion in world literature seems in fact to go to the Muslim Shahrastani, whose *Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy* describes and systematizes all religions of the then known world, as far as the boundaries of China." Shahrastani's major contribution to comparative religion is contained in his book '*al-Milal wa al-Nihāl*' (Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy). The book first of all sets forth a detailed discussion of the sectarian divisions within Islam and then deals with the various Greek philosophical schools. He then continues with the beliefs and ritual observances of several religious groups, including Jews, Christians, Magians, Buddhists and Hindus. The third main Muslim scholar that should be mentioned here for producing some highly sophisticated study of world religions is Ibn Hazm (d 1064), A Spaniard Arab Scholar, who wrote an extensive book entitled '*Kitāb al fasl fī al-milāl wa al-ahwā' wa al-nihāl*', where he tries to categorize and analyze his period's contemporary world religions and ideological philosophies from his theological perspective.

It is important at this juncture to ask why it is that the Muslim society was able to accumulate such a wide range of literature on the world religions. Erik Sharpe poses an interesting theory for this; he argues that any successful study of faiths is based upon three elementary conditions. First of all, there must be a motive for comparative study, secondly, the material of study must be obtainable i.e. first or second hand information from outside one's own tradition and thirdly, an acceptable method to be used to study other religions. All three elementary conditions seem to have been available during the middle ages for the Muslim scholars. With the rise of Islam the need to live with subjects of other faiths and co-exist with them necessitated the study of other religions and a further motive was provided by Islam's own theology to study other faiths. The availability of the material lent itself easily to a caliphate that spread from Baghdad to India to Spain. Lastly, due to the talent of the scholars mentioned earlier a number of acceptable methods, such as al-Biruni's approach, were used to learn the knowledge needed through observation, recording, experience and comparison.

Even though there were some works in the Middle Ages by Christian scholars on religion during the same period, they simply did not have the three elementary conditions to be able study other religions accurately. That was until the Europeans began to explore the wider world during the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, it seems that these earliest works were either jeopardized by European rationalism or by Christian evangelism. Erik Sharpe writes,

...the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the publication of an increasing streams of books dealing with some of the other newly discovered religions of the world....it was, however, characteristic of European rationalism, from Leibniz to Lessing to Voltaire, that it was interested in other religions less for their own sake than for the support which it found, or claimed to find, in them for its own theories. The rationalist were concerned only with what could be demonstrated by reason, explaining away other elements in religions best they might; their interest in history was less genuine that it was claimed to be, and they had very little capacity for placing religious traditions in their proper cultural contexts.

So, this brings us back to the pertinent question of how to best study the ‘other’, especially from a Muslim perspective? With the existence of so many religions and philosophies, how do we proceed to study this world ‘phenomena’? We need a ‘context’ for framing our studies. We need to also recognize that we do not have a simple definition of ‘religion’. Moreover, there is a need to acknowledge that there is sensitivity in the study of any one religion due to what is considered ‘sacred’ and ‘taboo’.

In addition, we have the issue of the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in the subject matter. For instance, can an ‘insider’ ever be truly ‘academic’ about his or her faith? We can pose a second question in relation to the first by asking if an ‘outsider’ can ever truly understand somebody else’s religion. It could be argued that an ‘insider’ or a ‘religionist’ can indeed offer a privileged narrative of faith more than an ‘outsider’. This is known as an *emic* standpoint, i.e. the ability to view behaviour from within a particular religious system. There are numerous advantages to this way of looking at religion, such as the religious language can be understood within a context. The *emic* standpoint also allows easier access to the religious communities and an emotional aspect of religion may be expressed more fully due to the insiders’ own experience. However, the disadvantages of an *emic* viewpoint may be that such an approach is open to accusations of bias towards a specific tradition. Furthermore, the researcher may be ‘blind’ to findings that contradict their own world-view, and may project bias towards specific denominations within a faith.

The outsider’s or the reductionist’s view is known as an *etic* standpoint. *Etic* means to view behaviour from outside a particular religious system and it has many advantages as well. Academic distance may be claimed, especially, when methodological agnosticism is highlighted. Due to having a diversity of views, the observer may have a better ability to examine a given subject’s understanding and a pro-tradition or pro-denomination bias accusation may be avoided. However, the disadvantages are that emotional and linguistic elements of religions may be easily misunderstood and the researcher may not have easy access to communities and a possible ‘unconscious’ outsider bias may take place. One of these main biases of such *etic* thinking may be reductionism, for example many who study ‘the sacred’ is unaware from the start that they commence their research with an assumption that it is a product of human imagination or a number of combined social factors.

Thus, many academics based upon the issue of bias have begun to contend that the *observer-neutrality* viewpoint is unfeasible in the human sciences. It is argued that this is due to human beings’ limitation of their location and point of view, and so they inadvertently ‘filter’ information accordingly. In that case the observer may be wholly unaware of the significance of what is being observed and therefore ‘miss the point’ or ‘misunderstand due to pre-conceived notions based upon their own identity. Furthermore, in the case of an observer, an effect by the observer herself may occur whereby the very presence of an observer may alter what is happening and thus negate the value of the exercise. Moreover, it could be argued that while the study of religion may be ideally speaking a strictly scholarly pursuit, the individuals engaged in such research are not only scholars and academics, they are in fact also members of races, communities and families; they marry, educate their children, they attend or stay away from places of worship, observe or ignore festivals, support or oppose causes and bury or cremate their dead. In all such activities of everyday life, professional scholars are inevitably aligning themselves, one way or another, in relation to socio-political ideas,

religious issues and institutions. It is for this reason that it is very important to take into account both the *emic* and the *etic* standpoints of oneself when studying the 'other'.

There are other concerns as well with regard to studying religions and their adherents. Even which one of the religions should be studied may relate in some way to the observer's identity? There are various criteria upon which we may decide which religion should be studied; for instance it may depend upon the number of adherents in a specific faith, it may be the chronological span of a specific history that may give it its value for the observer, it may also be based upon a specific religion's influence both socially and politically over a certain amount of time or it may be its geographical spread, geographical origins and distinction from another tradition that makes it significant for the observer. Moreover, it may be asked whether ancient traditions should be prioritized for study before the new. Furthermore, while studying the 'other' we may unconsciously endorse one aspect of the religion, or we may assist adherents of a specific tradition who seek to substantiate their own tradition.

This brings us to recognising the variations that exist within the religions that are being studied. Are there differences between the religious founder's experiences and the follower's actions? Who can claim authenticity within a religion? All religions suffer in some way from sectarianism and denominations. From these derive some major divergences in belief and ritual. There may also be disagreement over social issues. Many religions have had divergent thoughts about enlightenment, revelation or inspiration. Many religious texts often 'lag behind' the founders or the pivotal figures' lifetimes, i.e. they may have been written down at a much later time (e.g. New Testament, the Buddhist Canon). There may also be texts that present diversity of traditions within a religion (e.g. *Puranas*, Biblical *Apocrypha*). Eliade famously stated that when studying religion 'the believer is always right' and Smart said we must 'walk a mile in their moccasins'. However, this still raises the question as to who is the representative 'expert' of a specific tradition. It is therefore important to recognise that all of these aspects affect how we may study the 'other'.

In the western academia over a period of time the science of phenomenology of religion developed, and in it the idea of using a methodology based upon '*epoche*' in order to obtain a level of neutrality was adopted. The Greek term '*epoche*' literally means 'abstention' or 'suspension of judgment'. Hence, this has meant that within the field of the study of religion the suspension of judgment occurred in relation to the ontological status of the metaphysical realities to which believers see the data as testifying. In other words, a serious examination of religious traditions entailed a study of data without overlaying upon it any kind of explanatory theory. Hence, a suspension of judgment of theological or normative commitments, an uncritical acceptance of the 'natural' world, and finally, refusal towards accepting explanatory theories which reduce the claims of believers wholly to empirically observable projections. This picture appears to place the performance of *epoche* in a privileged position, implying that the social scientific scholars arrive at a greater measure of objectivity than their counterparts.

Edward Said's (1953-2003) well known work *Orientalism*, as well as post-modern insights by Derrida, Foucault and others highly criticized this kind of theory. The criticism levelled at it has been that it offers just an identity-making exercise, which merely proves that motives are involved in the establishment of any meta-theory, especially one which purports to examine data objectively. The ambiguity over *epoche* has dogged religious typological work through the twentieth century. Whilst phenomenologists could claim that through their lack of overt theological commitment an enormous range of religious data was presented, still much of their work is subject to the charge that Christianity remained in the privileged position. Although, there has in recent years been some critical self-awareness, none of them have raised the issue of the emergence of a new 'brand' of agnosticism becoming the privileged position, rather than Christianity's colonialism of the previous centuries.

It is true that Ninian Smart's work has been recognized as a milestone in the effort to bring religious phenomenology to a greater distance from explanatory commitments. His 'methodological agnosticism' leads him not only to a critique of a social science trajectory, such as the one set by Durkheim-Marx-Weber and Berger but also to a critique of a Christian centred weak *epoche* trajectory set by scholars such as Otto-Heiler-Wach-Eliade and Wilfred C. Smith. However, Ninian Smart's own *strong-epoche* approach free from both Christian theology and social scientific reductionism is perhaps best example of a certain leaning towards *post-modernism* and relativism. For instance he is

well known to have written that phenomenology is a “way of establishing the power of God, whether or not God exists.” This statement unfortunately seems to support the notion that agnosticism and post-modernist relativity has now become the privileged position.

Subsequently, what is evident in our times is that there is now a pressing need for Muslims to study not only the various religions, but also the various modern philosophies of life such as modernity and post-modernity that consists of such ideas as secularism, agnosticism, and atheism. But perhaps even more pressing issue is the question as to how to carry out this task. The methodology of suspension of judgment (*epoche*) seems to be highly irreconcilable with the Muslim mind set since it is unreasonable to ask a Muslim to successfully ‘detach’ from one’s identity that is multifaceted as a Muslim whilst studying the ‘other’. In addition, many social scientists have rejected this concept of ‘objectivity’, arguing that since even though human beings are rational separate entities, they are a part of the much wider matrix, and are affected, consciously or unconsciously, by their context. Therefore, it could be argued that Muslims like all others are affected, consciously or unconsciously, by their religion, philosophy, history, social norms, and any other context they find themselves within. So, what is the way forward concerning studying the ‘other’ in a fair manner?

I contend that a hypothetical Muslim theology student, be he or she situated in Istanbul or Kuala Lumpur, ought to be able to study other faiths and other philosophies of life without feeling that her or his own faith is vulnerable, and at the same time be able to study the ‘other’ without any bias, however contradicting it seems to Islam. Therefore, what is the best method to follow in order to achieve the above capability? I would like to suggest developing such a method from writings of Muslim scholars on the virtues found under the title of ‘*ilm al-nafs*’. In this science the Muslim scholars argued for many important aspect of the self with regards to spiritual, psychological, and physical health. However, concerning our subject matter the most important aspect is the capability to use the powers of the self (*quwwat al-nafs*) in accordance with our temperance and coherent virtues. Therefore, what could help us develop an ability to study the ‘other’ fairly may be located in the Muslim writings of *faḍīlah* (virtues) and its opposite *radhīlah* (vices).

Based upon writings on the topic of *tadhīb al-akhlāq* (The Refinement of Personal Ethics) such as al-Muhasibi’s *al-ri’āyah*, Abd al-Karim al-Kusheyri’s *al-risālah*, Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi’s *awārif al-ma’ārif*, Farid al-Din Attar’s *tazkirah al-awliyah*, Hamid al-Ghazali’s *iḥya ulūm al-dīn* and Jalaleddin al-Rumi’s *Mathnawīs* the notion of in-calculating the individual with virtues and developing an ability to be withdraw from vices was developed. In fact, verses in the Qur’an and in the *aḥādīth* promote such virtues such as treating parents kindly (Qur’an 17:23; 29:8; 31:14; 46:15), and forbearance and repaying good for evil (Qur’an 23:96; 28:54; 41:34; 42:37, 40; 7:199). Moreover, many philosophers from the western civilization, such as Aristotle, Spinoza and Kierkegaard also approached these virtues as the building blocks of social and spiritual life. For instance, Aristotle in his famous work entitled ‘*The Nicomachean Ethics*’ spoke about it and defined it as finding a balance between the spectrum of two extremes. The Muslim scholars agreed with the view of Aristotle and his school concerning virtues being a factor to balance life. In the Muslim civilization, virtues were accepted as a very important part of social life, personal growth and health. Therefore, various scholars wrote books concerning the definition, conceptualization, classification and their inter-relations. For example, Ibn Miskawayh wrote a book entitled ‘*tadhīb al-akhlāq*’, and Tusi wrote his work entitled ‘*akhlāq nāsirī*’.

In addition to virtues such as truthfulness and fairness, the main virtue that I believe would assist us in seeing the ‘other’ through the prism of fairness is *khushū’* (humility) and *tawāḍu’* (modesty). This is because they promote within ourselves the willingness to perceive the self accurately, and the ability to know and appreciate the ‘other’ without judgement. In contemporary psychology, academics such as John Tangney define humility as the virtue that allows us to evaluate one’s own characteristics appropriately, accepting one’s own deficiencies, eradicating self-centeredness and foster a positive awareness of the ‘other’. Harith al Muhasibi evaluated this topic very widely in his celebrated book entitled *al-riayah*, and in it he advises his readers to acquire humility and modesty and frowned upon their counterpart, arrogance. According to him, arrogance is the reason that a person may lose their self-awareness, and not evaluate himself or the ‘other’ accurately. However, that does not mean that humility and modesty are self-effacing, in fact they

provide a healthy sense of pride (*fakhr*) i.e. a mechanism is developed in the person that at the same time deflates and inflates the self so that it is neither self-promoting nor self-effacing.

Perhaps an analogy may be illustrative at this point. The academic Coulehan has recently argued that the medical profession and health care professionals need a healthy dose of humility to understand and to care for their clients in order for the profession to provide a client-centered approach. This is because at certain times the medical profession and the health care profession become entangled in an unfortunate entitlement mentality, self-importance, or even minimum effort that leads them to approach the 'other', i.e. the client, inaccurately. In this situation humility and modesty would help the the medical profession and the health care profession to approach the client (the 'other') as a real human being and develop a genuine client centered mentality.

To sum up I propose a systematic way of studying the 'other' with a primary insistence for a certain amount of self-awareness and self-criticism through the two virtues of *khushū'* and *tawāḍu'*. This does not require *epoche* i.e. a suspension of one's own views, but instead it requires a critical awareness arising from humility and modesty that studying another faith or thought must necessarily mean the recognition of one's own society's opinions of the other, both conscious and unconscious, and not only those issues related to the sacred, but one's own comprehensive world view. By this route the hypothetical Muslim theology student ought to be able to study the 'other' more fairly without devaluing it or misunderstanding it. Moreover, there would be a clear recognition that the only way to truly know the 'other' is to learn about them without criticism from ones' own traditions' view. This methodology fully recognizes the impossibility of suspension of judgment or detachment; instead, this method asks the student to see the 'phenomenon' studied from the *other's* point of view without losing the awareness of the self. This methodology both assists in supporting the student's confidence with regard to their own faith and identity, as well as promoting fairness and moderation in the study of the 'other' through *khushū'* and *tawāḍu'*. In fact, it could be contended that in this methodology it is imperative to recognize one's own views because a bias, subtle or not, of the 'other' is only overcome through self-criticism and recognition of one's own and one's society's, conscious and unconscious, predispositions.

REFERENCES

1. Ayten, Ali and Hussain, Amjad M., (2020), *Islam and Psychology*, Istanbul: Ifav.
2. Ayten, Ali, and Hussain, Amjad M. (2019), 'Humility and Its Importance on the Process of Spiritual/Religious Counseling And Care', in *Theologie des Zusammenlebens: Christen und Muslime beginnen einen Weg*, Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, pp. 241-253.
3. Berzin, Alexander, *Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan*, (November 2001, revised December 2006), http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/history_buddhism/buddhism_central_asia/history_afghanistan_buddhism.html
4. Donovan, Peter, (1999), 'Neutrality in Religious Studies' in McCutcheon (ed.) *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, Herndon, Vancouver: Cassel Academic.
5. Fakhry, Majid, (2004), *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 3rd Edition, New York: Colombia Press.
6. Hussain, Amjad M. (2015), *The Study of Religions: An Introduction*, Istanbul: Ifav.
7. Hussain, Amjad M. (2016), *The Muslim Creed: A Contemporary Theological Study*, Cambridge: Islamic Text Society.

8. Khan, M. S., 'A Twelfth Century Arab Account of Indian Religions and Sects', *Arabica*, T. 30, Fasc. 2, Jun., 1983, pp. 199-208.
9. Krause, Neal, (2010), Religious Involvement, Humility and Self-rated Health, *Social Indicators Research*, 98, pp. 23-39.
10. Latief, Hilman, Comparative Religion in Medieval Literature, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 23:4, pp. 28-62.
11. Lawrence, Bruce B., (1976), *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, Moulton: Moulton & Co.
12. McCutcheon, Russell T., (1997), *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press
13. Minorsky, V., Gardīzī on India, (1948), *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3/4, pp. 625-640.
14. Morreall, John and Sonn, Tamara, (2012), *The Religion Toolkit: A Complete Guide to Religious Studies*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
15. Pike, K. L. (1999), *Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behaviour, in the Insider / Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, (ed.) R. T. McCutcheon, Herndon, Vancouver: Cassel Academic.
16. Roberts, J. M., (1999), A History of the World, *Twentieth Century: A History of the World, 1901 to the Present*, London: Penguin Books
17. Said, Edward, (1978), *Orientalism*, London: Penguin
18. Shah-Kazemi, Reza, (2010), *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism*, Louisville: Fons Vitae.
19. Sharpe, Erik, (1973), *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd Edition, London: Duckworth
20. Sharpe, Erik, (1983), *Understanding Religion*, London: Duckworth Press.
21. Smart, Ninian (ed.), (1999), *Atlas of the World's Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
22. Smart, Ninian, (1973), *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
23. Smart, Ninian, (1989), *The World's Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
24. Smith, Jonathan Z., (1979), *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Leiden: E.J. Brill.
25. Urubshurow, Victoria Kennick, (2008), *Introducing World Religions*, London: Routledge.