Introduction

Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī (d. ca. 1048) is one of the most famous scientists and polymaths in the history of Islamic civilization. Although his works rival those of his illustrious contemporaries in their depth and sophistication, there has been little scholarly writing about him in the West relative to his importance. This trend is beginning to change with the appearance in recent years of monographs in which scholars have mostly presented all-encompassing readings of al-Bīrūnī’s writings following a pattern of interpretation established by earlier scholarship. A number of encyclopaedic entries have also been published recently in addition to the republication of most of al-Bīrūnī’s works. These monographs have either tended towards a “life and works” approach to the study of al-Bīrūnī in the search for holistic interpretations of his methodology or have focused on his substantial contributions to the scientific disciplines of astronomy, geography, mineralogy, pharmacology and mathematics.

In contrast, this book investigates al-Bīrūnī’s unique contribution to the study of comparative religion in his major work on India, Kitāb taḥqīq mā lil-Hind min maqūla maqbūla fiʾl-ʿaql aw mardhīla (henceforth referred to as the Hind), by considering what will be explained in terms of an “Islamisation” of Hinduism. Written in Arabic, the Hind may very well be the very first systematisation of “Indian” beliefs into one “Indian religion” as al-Bīrūnī calls it, preceding by almost 900 years the definitions of Hinduism by nineteenth-century European Orientalists.

Al-Bīrūnī’s explanation of Hinduism or “the Indian religion”, draws principally on his interpretation of Yoga psychology articulated in Kitāb Bātanjal, his exceptional Arabic translation which interprets the Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali. Al-Bīrūnī’s reading of Hinduism and the Yoga-Sūtra relies on common denomina-

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2 al-niḥlatu ʾl-hindiyyatu (Hind, p. 38, l. 5).

tors he identifies as fundamental, most prominently the idea of a “shibboleth”\(^4\) or banner\(^5\) that unifies belief, and the concept of a “Holy Book” that represents a principal point of reference. In the case of Hinduism al-Bīrūnī identifies metempsychosis as its banner and the *Yoga-Sūtra* of Patañjali as being its Holy Book. This comparative method was intended to make Hinduism more comprehensible to the Muslim reader:

> Just as the declaration of the Article of Faith is the emblem of Muslim belief, Trinitarianism the sign of Christianity and the institution of the Sabbath that of Judaism, so is metempsychosis the banner of the Indian religion, such that he who does not profess it does not belong to it and is not considered to be a member.\(^6\)

The book investigates al-Bīrūnī’s use of Yoga psychology, according to his Arabic translation of Patañjali’s work on the *Yoga-Sūtra*, to support his principal statement that transmigration of the souls is the banner of the Hinduism. Ultimately, we will identify the significance of al-Bīrūnī’s approach to Hinduism and the possible purpose that underlies this exceptionally early effort to define and systematize Hindu beliefs.

With these considerations in mind this book conducts a close textual analysis of the methodology that underpins al-Bīrūnī’s interpretation of Hindu beliefs and focuses on al-Bīrūnī’s contribution to comparative religion being one of the earliest Muslim scientific studies in the field of Indology. As such it fills a significant gap in scholarship on al-Bīrūnī and represents an important step forward in making one central aspect of this exceptional work on India from the Mediaeval Islamic period more accessible. The book begins by introducing al-Bīrūnī through an overview of his life and works to set the biobibliographical context for the *Hind*. Particular attention will be paid to the secondary literature analysing the period during which he travelled in India and interacted with Hindu pundits, or had indirect contact with Indian culture through its literature. The main thrust of the book will investigate al-Bīrūnī’s definition of Hindu beliefs as based on his premise that transmigration of the souls is the distinguishing sign of the “Indian religion”. Al-Bīrūnī’s posi-

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\(^4\) “Shibboleth” is Edward Sachau’s translation of *shiʿār* (*Hind*, p. 38, l. 4).

\(^5\) *ʿalam* (*Hind*, p. 38, l. 5).

\(^6\) *kamā anna ʾl-shahādata bikaliyati ʾl-ikhlāṣi shiʿāru īmāni ʾl-muslimīna waʾl-tathlītha ʿalāmatu ʾl-naṣrāniyyati waʾl-īsbāṭa ʾalāmatu ʾl-yahūdiyyati kadḥālika ʾl-ṭanāsukha ʾalamu ʾl-nihlati ʾl-hindīyyati fīman lam yantahilhu lam yakun minhā wa lam yuʿadd min jumlatihā* (*Hind*, p. 38, l. 4).