A comparative study of religions has been "rightly acclaimed as one of the great contributions of Muslim civilization to mankind's intellectual progress". And there were good reasons for it. Without doubt, the two most important reasons were the deep attachment of the Muslims to their own religion and their direct contact with the major religions of the world at the beginning of their history. Their interest in philosophy, which also included religion, as in modern times, may be considered as another reason. Among them, religious discussions and disputes both oral and written were held at Baghdad reports of some of which are available now.

Arab Writers on the Indian Religions

It is recorded that Malik bin Dinār, a companion of the Prophet, first arrived in South India leading to the earliest direct contact between Islam and Hinduism. The Muslims must have come in contact with the Buddhists at Samarqand (conquered in 92/711) and other parts of Central Asia. Close relations between Hindus and Muslims developed after the conquest of Sind and the Punjab in 712 A.D. As a result, a Hindu scientist most probably from Sindh visited the Court of the 'Abbasid Caliph Abū J'afar al-Mansūr (754-775 A.D.) at Baghdad in 771. The cultured Barmakid family, which provided several viziers for the Abbasids were of Indian origin and their forefathers were Buddhists. One of them Yahyā bin Khālid (786-803 A.D.) sent an envoy to India in order to collect information about Indian religions.

The report submitted by the said envoy is not altogether lost. Its summary is preserved in the Kitāb al-Fihrist of Ibn an-Nadīm which contains a chapter on the Indian religions under the caption Madhāhib al-Hind (Religions of India) covering 4 pages of Book IX, Chapter 2 i.e. pp. 345-349. Several Arab writers also provided information on the

This is a revised and augmented version of my Review Article concerning the book Shahrastānī on Indian Religions by Bruce B. Lawrence (The Hague, 1976) pp. 297 published in Islam and Modern Age, New Delhi for May, 1980, pp. 204-229.

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2 See pp. 75 and 76 of Bruce B. Lawrence's Book.
4 G. Flügel's edition (Leipzig, 1872) 2 Vols. As it was published more than a century ago, it needs revision and correction.

Arabica, Tome xxx, Fascicule 2
subject, such as the Arab geographers from Ibn Khurradadhbih to Sharif al-Idrisi. Arab merchants, travellers and historians, who visited India, also recorded information about Indian religious practices. A substantial chapter on Indian religions is found in the Kitāb al-Bad’ wa-Tarīkh of Mutahhar bin Tāhir al-Maqdisi (d. 335/946) and others. Al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048 A.D.) claims to have preserved information contained in the lost work entitled Kitāb ad-Diyānāt of Abu ’l-Abbas Ṭrānhahri. Statements about Indian religions are contained in the Kitāb al-Mu’azzila of Muraḍa Ṣayīd and the Kitāb al-Farq bayn al-Firaq of Abdu’l-Qāhir al-Baghdādi. What al-Bīrūnī has written on Indian religions and philosophy in his book is not only authentic but also critical based mainly on original Sanskrit texts and personal observations. These are some of the brilliant pages written on the subject in Arabic. In 460/1068, eighteen years before the birth of al-Shahrastānī in 479/1086, Abu’l-Qasim Qādī Ṣa’īd al-Andalusi wrote the Tabaqāt al-Umam at Toledo, of which the first chapter deals with ancient sciences and culture which also briefly discusses the religions of India. But a substantial chapter on this subject is found in the Kitāb al-Milal wa-Nihāl of Abu’l-Fath Muhammad bin Abdu’l Karim al-Shahrastānī, (d. 549/1153) entitled Ārā’ah al-Hind, of which a thorough study is presented in this paper. Among others Gardizi and al-Marwazi also wrote on Indian religions in Persian.

Summary of the Content

The chapter opens with a statement that the people of India are divided into three communities, viz.: The Brahmins, The Naturalists and the Dualists. It is stated that the majority of the Indians are Sabeans, and all of them can be divided into five groups.

The Brahmins — the followers of spiritual beings, the proponents of heavenly bodies, the idol-worshippers and the philosophers.

The Brahmins are named after a Man called Brahma. They deny prophecy altogether and attempt to prove the irrationality of prophecy. Four arguments are recorded against prophecy and al-Shahrastānī puts forward his own arguments in its favour. The author mentions four sub-sects of the Brahmins: those who belong to the followers of the Buddha; the proponents of meditation and the adherents to metempsychosis. The teachings of the Buddha are then explained and the proponents of meditation and imagination are considered to be experts in astrology and astronomy adding: «Sometimes meditation unlocks supernatural circumstances; sometimes it is able to hold back rains and sometimes it directs the imagination on a living man and kills him instantly»9. One of the sub-sects mentioned is BAKRANTIYA. It is stated that the proponents of metempsychosis differ as to the length of the largest revolution. Most of them maintain that

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5 Ed. by Cl. Huart, Arabic text vol. IV, (Paris, 1907); Tehran repr. of 1962 pp. 9-19.
6 See the Arabic ed. of his Fi Taḥqīq mā l-l-Hind (Hyderabad, 1377/1958) pp. 548 at pp. 20-71.
9 Bruce B. Lawrence has presented a thorough study of this chapter in his book mentioned in note 1 above. See p. 44.