Religious studies were always highly estimated in Islam. Perhaps there is, besides the Jewish religion, no religion so concentrated on the holy book neither is there any religion, that keeps religious scholars in such a high esteem, as the islamic community. Seeking knowledge itself is a meritorious action. This knowledge, however, was usually confined to the common subjects of mysticism and ethics, law and dogmatics. A more philosophical or empirical approach in the field of religious studies was usually not stimulated before the 20th century and the interest in other religious traditions, outside the islamic, was seldom elaborated. - “The comparative history of religions is a Muslim creation” is quoted as a saying of Henry Laoust. After a glorious start with Shahrastani this creation was not always fostered and developed in the curriculum of religious studies in the Muslim world.1 This article wants to present the major results of this study by Indonesian Muslims.

1. The Prelude: Nuruddin ar-Raniri's Tibyan fi Ma'rifatu'l Adyan and some other works

In the history of Indonesian Islam only one person wrote extensive works in the historical and apologetic tradition before the 20th century. This was the Indian scholar Nuruddin Muhammad b. Ali b. Hasanji b. Muhammad Hamid ar-Raniri (died 1658). Born in the mixed Indian-Arab community of Gujarat, he had a career as a scholar in the Malay world. The culminating point of his career was the position of Shaikhul Islam in the Sultanate of Aceh, a position held between 1637-1643. Among his works is the Bustanus-Salatin, a voluminous work, in seven books. The first two of these books present a history of the world. The first book is written in the
tradition of al-Kisa’i’s Qisas u’l ‘anbiya, with many pages on the creation of the pen, the tablet, the light of Muhammad etc. The second book follows the tradition of Tabari’s Annales, starting with the history of the Persian, Greek, Arabian people before the coming of Islam; then presenting the history of Islam, year by year until the last event of this series: the execution of Al Hallaj in 309H (also the last major event, mentioned by Tabari himself!). Book two then also presents the history of the kings of India and Malaysia/Indonesia. From book three onwards this Bustanus-Salatin is written as a mirror for kings in the tradition of the Nasihatu’l-muluk by Al-Ghazali. Especially in the second book of the Bustanus-Salatin we find several passages that are of interest from the viewpoint of comparative religion. The second paragraph of the second book discusses the death of Sabaa, child of Kiyamurti or Gayomart, the first man according to the Persian tradition, who already was a son of Adam in Tabari’s historical harmonization of the Semitic-Qur’anic and the Old Persian traditions. Kiyamurti/Gayomart then buries the corpse and lights a candle beside the grave: “this is the reason why all these people of the Majus worship the fire”.

Concerning the Jewish religion, this book gives no division into sects but only the stories of the prophets and most of these in a very brief manner. The Greek translation of the Bible, the septuagint, is mentioned, with its 72 translators. But no word about Ezra and the way he found the text of the Torah again.

As an example of his simplification we might here mention his discussion of Christianity: in the Bustanus-Salatin the history of Jesus as one of the prophets is written briefly. First we hear some stories about Zahariah, who became the father of John, when he was 100 years old. About John the Baptist only the story of his execution at the request of the daughter of Herodias is told. The only anecdote, related to Jesus is the sickness of his mother Mary, after Jesus was taken away at the age of 30 years and 3 months. As Mary was so sad, God sent Jesus back again for a while to console his mother. Having told this, our author immediately changes to the sacking of Jerusalem by Titus and then switches to the last of the prophets, Muhammad.

Much more interesting for the study of comparative religion is another work by Nuruddin ar-Raniri, his Tibyan fi ma’rifatu’l adyan.