Islam and the Problem of Concept Formation in the Study of Religion: The Case of Al-Bīrūnī on "Hinduism"

Dr. Syed Farid Alatas (Singapur)

Introduction

The critique of Eurocentrism and Orientalism in the social sciences and humanities has been directed at the complicity of knowledge in colonialism, academic or intellectual imperialism, and the dominance of American and, to some extent, European academic institutions in most disciplines and fields of study. A specific area illustrating all of these problems is that of the currency and dominance of concepts originating in Western European and American historical and social contexts being applied to other historical and cultural settings. This translation of cultural terms into scientific concepts results in a number of problems in the social sciences. Social scientific concepts originate from cultural terms in everyday language. As such they present problems when brought into scientific discourse and used to talk about areas and periods outside of those of their origins. The result is a distortion of the phenomena that they are applied to. The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first purpose is to explain the process by which cultural terms become social scientific concepts and result in a "loss of meaning" or elision of reality when applied to times and places outside of those of their origin. This is done for the

concept of religion as it is applied to Hinduism. The second is to present an alternative construction of Hinduism based on the work of the Muslim scholar, Al-Bīrūnī.

In the first section I discuss the concept of religion as it emerged and developed in the Roman times, charting the changes in meaning over time and its final entry into the conceptual vocabulary of the social sciences. This is followed by a discussion of problems surrounding the definition of religion, with particular focus on the issue of inclusive and exclusive definitions. The next sections focus on problematic constructions arising from the exclusive definition of religion, with illustrations drawn from Islam and Hinduism. I then turn to the question of alternative constructions of Hinduism, attempting here a reconstruction of Al-Bīrūnī's construction of "Hinduism". The concluding section raises the issue of a universal concept of religion.

The Development of the Concept of Religion

The emergence and development of the concept of religion can be seen in a number of historical stages, that is, those of pre-Christian Rome, early Christianity (the Catholic Church), the modern period (Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment) and the nineteenth century.

The etymological approach is the least fruitful for our purposes but is, nevertheless, necessary in order to begin to think of the connotations of "religion". "Religion" originates from the Latin *religio*. The three verbs *relegere* (to conscientiously observe), *religari* (binding oneself to one's origin and goal) and *reeligere* (goal) are possible derivations of *religion* and refer to different but converging religious attitudes (Rahner, 1989: 1359).

In pre-Christian Rome, *religio* was a collective term referring to the cultic patterns and ceremonies at the shrine of a god (Smith, 1962: 21). When Rome became

Christian, Christianity became the dominant belief system and all other cults were either absorbed or eliminated. *Religio* in early Christianity was frequently used during the first four centuries but appeared less often from the fifth century on. Prior to that, when Christianity as a religion existed alongside many rivals, the term was applied. However, by the fifth century these rivals were largely eliminated and the term came to be less frequently used (Smith, 1989: 24-25). In fact, there was no need to continue to apply *religio* to Christianity as Christianity was the only legitimate belief, so it was just known as the Church (Matthes, 2000: 56). To the extent that it was used during this period, it had as varied meanings as ritual practices, worship (of God), piety, the bond between God and man, and the structural organization of the Church and its various ecclesiastical levels (Smith, 1962: 25, 26, 29).

In the early modern period, the phrase "Christian religion" came to be used more frequently to refer to Christianity with the appearance of the Christian Platonist, Marsilio Ficino's *De Christiana Religione* in 1474 (Smith, 1962: 33, 36). Greek words in the New Testament were translated into English as "religion" and referred to (i) correct religious observances or worship; (ii) a recognized structure of ethical behaviour; and (iii) obedience to the Christian faith (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: vol. 4: 32), as opposed to non-Christian worship and behaviour.

But with Luther and the Protestant Reformation *religio* took on an oppositional meaning. *Christiana religio* came to refer to Christian beliefs and a way of life separate from the institution of the Catholic Church. It was oppositional to the clergy, that is, it was the laymans' religion. It was also during this period that *religio* begins to take on a broader meaning closer to the way it is understood today, that is, a system of ideas, beliefs, or doctrine (Smith, 1962: 40), and not just piety, the bond between God and man, or worship. A work that marks this change is Hugo

de Groot's *De Veritate Religionis Christianae* (Smith, 1962: 39, n. 107). In addition to this radical shift, there were two other important transformations that *religio* went through. One is its generalization to include non-Christian beliefs and practices and the other is its entry into the social sciences.

In the early days of the history of *religio* the term was applied mainly to Christianity. However, early English translations of the Bible do use *religio* to refer to Judaism as well, although this is held to refer to the outer expressions rather than the inner spirit. This is the sense in which the term is used for Judaism in English translations of the Bible from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries (Hastings, vol. IV: 225). But *religio* was still far from the more universal notion of religion of which Christianity was just one example.

Matthes (2000: 56) notes that an early proof of the generalization of the concept of religion to belief systems other than Christianity is to be found in Jean Bodin's 1593 work, the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres* (*Colloquium of the Seven about the Secrets of the Sublime*) (Bodin, 1593/1857/1976). This colloquium contains a fictitious discussion between six representatives of various belief systems and is an early instance of inter-religious dialogue in Europe. Three of the representatives, a Catholic, a Lutheran and a Calvinist, by then were traditionally regarded as having *religio*. Bodin also includes a Muslim, a proponent of a "religion of reason" and a "religious universalist" (Matthes, 2000: 56). As Matthes notes, it is very significant that Bodin brought in a Muslim into this debate, even though Islam was widely regarded as wrong belief at best. Matthes makes the very interesting point that the way that this fictitious colloquium was structured clearly demonstrates that Bodin regarded all six belief systems as "religion".

Due to its rather radical position on religion, the work only appeared in published form in 1857.

By the nineteenth century, "religion" in the sense of a community of adherents with institutionalized beliefs and practices and also referring to belief systems other than Christianity was becoming widespread.

Problems in the Definition of Religion

The trajectory of *religio* was such that it began as an inclusive term when it referred to the cults in and around Rome, but remained exclusive when applied solely to Christianity for centuries, and then returns as a more inclusive definition during the nineteenth century. Still, the problem of definition continues to be debated. One of the points of debate concerns the question of inclusive versus exclusive definitions of religion. The debate surrounds the issue of the relative merits and demerits of inclusive and exclusive definitions of religion.

The Inclusive Definition of Religion

Syed Hussein Alatas discusses various problems of the definition of religion, including that of conceptual inflation. This refers to the tendency to generalize or dilute the meaning of a term such that precision and clarity are sacrificed (Alatas, S. H., 1977: 226). Conceptual inflation involves increasing the range of empirical reality to which a particular concept refers but which are not included in people's religious experience. Alatas' argument is as follows. He develops a definition of religion on the basis of enumerative induction. Enumerative induction refers to the exhaustive enumeration of the traits of religion derived from the various dimensions of religious life, that is, the psychological, the social and the philosophical (Alatas, S.H., 1977: 215). He lists the following traits of religion as identified by scholars of religion by way of enumerative induction (215-216):

1. belief in a supernatural being or beings

2. a corresponding invisible order or dimension

3. a personal relationship between humans and the supernatural being or beings

4. specific rites and beliefs sanctioned or required by the supernatural being or beings, such as belief in an afterlife, prayer, etc.

5. the distinction between the sacred and profane in life with corresponding division of activities and objects such as rituals or places of worship

6. belief that the supernatural communicates with humans through human messengers

7. ordering life in harmony with the conception of truth as established by the supernatural being or beings

8. belief that revealed truth supersedes that resulting from human efforts

9. the establishment of a community of believers such that religion informs both individual as well as collective life.

These are what Alatas calls the permanent characteristics of religion which must be distinguished from the variable traits, that is, those traits that are not essential and universal characteristics of religious life and experience (216). Examples of variable traits that he cites are the presence of magic or religions representing a particular nation or group. Apart from enumerating the traits of religion, religion can also be defined in terms of its function such as the integration of group and individual life or the differentiation of action according to notions of right and wrong, good and bad (217). Alatas then points out that the traits and function of religion could be condensed into a single concept, that of meaning.

Were one to condense the traits and function of religion into a single sentence containing a minimum number