



THE NEED AND SCOPE OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION: THE SURVIVAL OF HUMANITY IN MODERN ERA

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**THE NEED AND SCOPE OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION:
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ABSTRACT:

Religion is one of the essential characteristics of humanity from the beginning of time. As time progressed, new or modified religions came into existence. This happened for a variety of reasons including divine interventions, human thought, experiences, superstitions, and other factors. The world that we live in today has thousands of religions practiced throughout it which have got many similarities and differences with each other. Are there any classifications among these religions based on common attributes? Is there one true religion of God, or are their multiple true religions of God for our day and age? Does it really matter which religion one follows as long as one follows it sincerely? Can various religions be compared? What should be the correct approach for conducting the comparative study of religions? These are some of the questions that have been answered in this article. The article is categorized in two sections. The first section deals with the classification of religions and why the comparative studies in religion should be considered. The second section explains the methodological aspects of conducting such studies, as it is the lack of methodological correctness which is one of the major factors that hinders the meaningful and value-adding outcomes from the comparative studies in religion.

KEYWORDS: Comparative religion, Research methodology, Anthropology, God, Scripture

INTRODUCTION

Humans, throughout history, have always believed in a higher being ¹. Science proves that there are certain spots in our brain that guide us towards religious beliefs ². Certain experiences enhance this process ³; such experiences, in Arabic, can be termed as ‘Ahwal’ (states and situations) and ‘Mushahidat’ (special observations or visions) and are no mystery to mystics⁴. Researchers and neuroscientist have found various positive physiological impacts of such activities and states, such as meditation ⁵. In other words, we are neurologically programmed to believe in God. It is rather interesting that science tells us that this tendency to believe in God is not just a matter restricted to the human brain, there is

¹ Israr Ahmed, *Haqeeqat-e-Insaan* (Lahore: Quran Academy, 2001), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnF6zMQTAaY>.

² Stav Dimitropoulos, ‘Your Mystical Brain’, *Medium*, 2017, <https://medium.com/s/spirits-in-your-brain/your-mystical-brain-841e128d1f15>; Steve Connor, ‘Belief and the Brain’s “God Spot”’, *The Independent*, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/belief-and-the-brains-god-spot-1641022.html>; Kenneth Rose, ‘Can a Religious Pluralist Do Comparative Religion or Comparative Theology?’ (University of Muenster, Germany, 2015), https://www.academia.edu/13947594/Can_a_Religious_Pluralist_do_Comparative_Religion_or_Comparative_Theology.

³ Rose, ‘Can a Religious Pluralist Do Comparative Religion or Comparative Theology?’

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (SUNY Press, 1990).

⁵ Rose, ‘Can a Religious Pluralist Do Comparative Religion or Comparative Theology?’; B. Rael Cahn et al., ‘Yoga, Meditation and Mind-Body Health: Increased BDNF, Cortisol Awakening Response, and Altered Inflammatory Marker Expression after a 3-Month Yoga and Meditation Retreat’, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 11 (26 June 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2017.00315>.

also a gene in us that inclines us towards belief in God, known as vesicular monoamine transporter 2, as hypothesized by Hamer ⁶. This is exactly what is told to us in the Quran and sunnah; a light is lit in inside our hearts that prompts us to believe in God and do the righteous things ⁷. It is because of this inner light that the history of religion is as old as the history of man; human beings have always believed in a supreme omnipotent being. However, not all religions are the same. Similarly, not all religions existed concurrently all the time. There are some religions that are of divine origin; whereas there are others that have come into being because of thoughts and experiences of certain individuals or collective ideas and practices of communities or groups of people⁸.

People are exposed to several different religions and faith systems, or a lack thereof, in their surroundings. Many of them do not consider the comparative study of religions to be necessary as they believe their own religion to be the truth and the religion of others to be a complete falsehood. The problem with this approach is that if their religion is not the truth and the other religion(s) are not the falsehood, they are setting themselves up for the biggest loss. So, it is important for everyone to engage in the comparative study of religions. If their religion is the truth, it

⁶ *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes* (Anchor, 2005).

⁷ Ahmed, *Haqeeqat-e-Insaan*; Muhammad Nabeel Musharraf, *Reviving the Hearts: Based on Lectures by Some of the Most Prolific Scholars of Our Time* (Perth: Islamic Circle of Australia and New Zealand, 2019), <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-981488260>.

⁸ William E. Paden, 'Comparative Religion', in *Encyclopedia.Com*, 2005, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/comparative-religion>.

would further enhance their confidence in that, and they will strive harder to reach the success that their religion sets for them as the target. If the contrary is the case and they find that their religion is not the truth, then they can mend their ways and adopt the right religion. In either case, the comparative study of religions is a beneficial endeavour. Müller, one of the pioneers of the academic study of comparative religions in recent times, highlights this aspect through the statement, "he who knows one [religion], knows none" ⁹.

However, for the comparative study of religions, there is a proper protocol and methodology that one needs to follow as there are people out there who are hunting for people who are less knowledgeable and more vulnerable to accept their ideologies. It is therefore very important to equip one's self with the right tools and techniques in order to correctly pursue the comparative study of religions or to understand such works by other scholars. In the absence of correct methodology, one can easily end up in misguidance and falsehood. For the Muslims, the scholars recommend, based on certain prophetic traditions, that one must be well-versed in his own religion before moving on to the scriptures of other religions.

⁹ Gregory D. Alles, 'Max Müller | German Scholar', in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Max-Muller>; K.E. Brashier, 'To Hell with Comparative Religions' (Reed College, 2012), <http://people.reed.edu/~brashiek/syllabi/Rel399.htm>; Anis Malik Thoha, 'Objectivity and the Scientific Study of Religion', *Intellectual Discourse* 17, no. 1 (2009).

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Studying the scriptures of other religions is permissible for the knowledgeable people for the purpose of dawah¹⁰.

Considering the above, this article provides an essential guideline regarding the comparative study of religions in the following two ways:

- Section 1: Explanation of what is the comparative study of religions and why is it important
- Section 2: What is the correct methodology of doing such a study (from an Islamic perspective)

SECTION 1: EXPLANATION OF WHAT IS THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

In this section, we will explain the concept of comparative religion through a step-by-step approach. In the process, we will explain the scope of the field of comparative religion, overview of what the religion entails (i.e. the aspects that are compared), the categories of religions (i.e. the categories which can be compared with each other), and the perceptions of followers of religions regarding the comparative study of religions.

1.1 Scope of the subject ‘comparative religions’

There are three types of people in this world:

¹⁰ Saleh Al-Munajjid, “Ruling on Studying the Books of the People of the Book for the Purpose of Da‘wah (Calling Them to Islam), and the Ruling on Studying Comparative Religion.” - Islam Question & Answer.” (2014)

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1. Those who believe religions to be true and follow them and consider it right to follow them.
2. Those who do not believe in any religion. These people are called atheists; they claim to base their belief on 'rational' thinking but various research studies have found that their belief system is often based on irrational thoughts, personal life experiences, personality worship and abrupt decisions¹¹.
3. Those who are in between the two states and are doubtful about either. These people are called agnostics; they lack conviction in the religious (or non-religious) beliefs¹².

Though it is highly important to address the second and third type of people too, the main topic and **scope of the subject of comparative religion** is to deal with the beliefs and religions of the people mentioned above in type 1. However, it is to be noted that atheism is also considered to be a belief system by many and accordingly classified under the

¹¹ Lois Lee, 'Why Atheists Are Not as Rational as some like to Think', *The Conversation*, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/why-atheists-are-not-as-rational-as-some-like-to-think-103563>; Gref Sheridan, 'Idea of God Is Perfectly Logical', *The Australian*, 2017, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/the-god-question-listen-to-your-inner-voice/news-story/2fe03ae045e5540e04e85bb44e665151>.

¹² Paul Draper, 'Atheism and Agnosticism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/atheism-agnosticism/>.

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religions¹³. From that perspective, it does become a part of comparative religion study and discussions at times.

1.2 What does religion entail?

After understanding the scope of the subject of ‘comparative religion’, let us now understand what ‘religion’ really means. Encyclopaedia Britannica explains the following characteristics of the religion ¹⁴:

- It defines the relationship between human beings and what they consider to be the supreme being, spirits, gods or God and the attitude one should have towards his or her deity
- Religion sets the manner in which people develop their understanding of life, death, fate, afterlife and so on
- The religion also governs one’s attitudes towards the other human beings and objects (living as well as non-living)
- Many religions often have got their sacred texts, sacred places, sacred objects, practices, symbols, histories and so on

The famous Quranic scholar from Pakistan, Dr. Israr Ahmed, explains ‘religion’ as comprising of three aspects ¹⁵:

¹³ Durin J. H. Ward, ‘THE CLASSIFICATION OF RELIGIONS’, *The Monist* 18, no. 4 (1908): 551; BBC, ‘Atheism’, 2003, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/atheism/>.

¹⁴ ‘Religion’, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion>.

¹⁵ *Ahem Deeni Mauzuat* (Pakistan: Anjuman Khuddam ul Quran, Sindh, 2003), 7, <https://archive.org/stream/BO28IdeologyOfTheFutureDr.RafiUdDin/BO-33-Aham%20Deeni%20Mauzuat%20%28Mazhab%20aur%20deen%20ka%20faraq%29#mo>

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- A set of beliefs
- A set of acts of worship
- A set of rituals (including social events and so on).

At this point, it is also important to understand that Islam is not just a religion (i.e. a set of beliefs, acts of worship, and rituals), but it is also a code of life and law which is called as 'deen'. Dr. Israr Ahmed explains that at a particular place, there can be thousands of religions, but there can only be one deen or the system of life or law; it is because of the very definition of these terms and their applicability on the public law ¹⁶.

From the two aspects discussed above, we can say that the study of comparative religion can be defined as follows:

- The study that deals with the comparison of beliefs, conception of God, relationship between human being and the deity, sacred texts, the history of the development of religion, religious practices and the acts of worship, concept of prophethood, moral codes, organizational patterns and so on ¹⁷. (The key aspect to consider in this regard is the 'comparative' nature of the study and not just focussing on one religion ¹⁸.)

de/2up; Israr Ahmed, *Deen Aur Mazhab Mein Farq?* (Quran Academy, Karachi, 2004), <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3tkxlo>.

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Deen Aur Mazhab Mein Farq?*

¹⁷ Antonio R. Gualtieri, 'What Is Comparative Religion Comparing? The Subject Matter of "Religious" Studies', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1967): 31–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1384192>; Paden, 'Comparative Religion'.

¹⁸ Paden, 'Comparative Religion'.

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- The comparative study of beliefs, religious practices or acts of worships, rituals (as per the simplified definition of Dr. Israr Ahmed)

1.3 Ways of classifying the religions

From the above, we have come to know that the religions comprise of certain features; in those features, they are either different or similar to other religions in some way. Considering the large diversity and variety of religions around the globe, it is virtually impossible for the students of comparative religion to be able to cover all of them. They accordingly classify them in certain categories and types in order to organize and structure their studies. Researchers, academics, and followers of various religions have used various basis and techniques for that purpose. According to Adams ¹⁹, the basis and techniques for the classification of religions are:

- Normative (i.e. distinguishing between the ‘right’ religions and the opposite from the perspective of the one making the classification)
- Geographical (i.e. grouping the religions that have the same geographical origin)
- Ethnographic-linguistic (i.e. grouping the religions that originated from the people of the same ethnicity)

¹⁹ ‘Classification of Religions | Principles & Significance’, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 1998), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/classification-of-religions>.

- Philosophical (i.e. grouping of the religions based on the philosophies they advocate)
- Morphological (i.e. believing that the religions have and are evolving over time and different religions are in different stages of evolution, and hence, to be clustered accordingly)
- Phenomenological (i.e. rather the classifying the religions as a whole, classifying the phenomena within them e.g. soul, cosmological aspects, and so on)

Ward (1908) offers another perspective and explains that all classifications of religions fall under one of the four approaches below:

- Classification according to pre-conceived ideas of superiority or authority based on some theological or philosophical aspects (e.g. the Jews used to call all the non-Jews with the derogatory term, ‘gentiles’; Christians used to refer to non-Christian as Heathenism, the Greek used to call the rest of the world with similar perspective)
- Classification according to external characteristics (e.g. outlook, names, and characteristics of the followers, objectives beliefs and so on; or the characteristics of their deities)
- Classification according to the internal aspects (e.g. psychological characteristics of the followers and so on)
- Classification according to the racial aspects (including the linguistic aspects as well)

None of the above, however, can be considered to be the perfect classification; each of them comes with certain pros and cons and serves certain purposes ²⁰.

1.4 Outcome of the various approaches to classification:

Depending on the way with which the classification is done, the academics and researchers have come up with various classifications of religions. The following is a brief overview of some of the common classifications.

Harvey ²¹ highlights three main types of religions:

- World religions (i.e. the religions that are well-spread out throughout the world and are not confined to a culture or nation, e.g. Islam)
- Indigenous religions (i.e. the smaller religions that are confined to particular nations, communities, or cultures)
- New religious movements or NRM (i.e. the religions that have started in the past three centuries or so, e.g. Rastafari, Bahai faith, Qadyani faith and so on)

According to the geographical classification, which is the most commonly found classification method in the comparative religion textbooks, the following are the major categories of world religions ²²:

²⁰ Ward, 'THE CLASSIFICATION OF RELIGIONS'.

²¹ *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (Cassell, 2000).

²² Adams, 'Classification of Religions | Principles & Significance'.

- Middle Eastern religions (which include Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and so on)
- East Asian religions (which include Confucianism, Daoism, Mahayana Buddhism, Shinto and so on)
- Indian religions (which include Hinduism, Sikhism, early Buddhism, Jainism, and so on)
- African religions (which include the tribal religions of the sub-Saharan areas)
- American religions (which includes the religions of the indigenous Indian people from the Americas)
- Oceanic religions (which includes the indigenous religions of the people of the Pacific islands, Australia, and New Zealand)
- Classical religions of ancient Greece and Rome and their Hellenistic descendants.

Religions are also classified as Abrahamic or non-Abrahamic based on whether they were initiated by the Prophets from the progeny of Abraham (Ibrahim A.S.) or not. Commonly known Abrahamic religions include Islam, Judaism, and Christianity²³.

²³ Peter L. Berger, 'Do The Three Abrahamic Faiths Worship The Same God?', *The American Interest*, 2011, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/12/14/do-the-three-abrahamic-faiths-worship-the-same-god/>.

Another way of classification is based on whether a religion is of divine origin or not²⁴. According to Muslims, the religion can be categorized in the following three categories:

- The religion of divine origin that is preserved in its original form (i.e. Islam)
- The religions of divine origin that have are not present in their original form (i.e. other religions that Muslims consider to be of divine origin but believe that foreign elements have crept in them, e.g. Christianity, Judaism and so on). There is a lot of grey areas in this category as there is a probability that some of the other religions (e.g. Hinduism etc.) were also of divine origin²⁵ but with the passage of time, they have changed so significantly that even the most fundamental concepts of religions of divine origin, such as monotheism, are extinct from them. Dr. Israr Ahmed, the famous Quranic scholar from Pakistan, presented the idea the Upanishads are probably a distorted form of the revelations to Abraham PBUH (known by Muslims as ‘*Suhuf Ibrahim*’). He also suspects that *Brahma* is a modified form of the word *Ibrahim*²⁶. Many scholars of comparative religion have also claimed about the

²⁴ Ward, ‘THE CLASSIFICATION OF RELIGIONS’; Adams, ‘Classification of Religions | Principles & Significance’.

²⁵ Javed Jamil, ‘Is Ram of Valmiki Ramayana Same as Abraham of Bible?’, *Muslim Mirror*, 2018, <http://muslimmirror.com/eng/ram-and-abraham-ibrahim-saw-one-person-two-names/>.

²⁶ Israr Ahmed, *Upanishads Are Prophet Ibrahim’s Scrolls in Distorted Form* (Lahore: Quran Academy, 2008), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TP9l1tL6Nyg>.

discovery of certain prophecies about Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in Hindu scriptures²⁷ which support the above claim.

- The religions that do not have a divine origin are considered to be of human origin

1.5 Why should one engage in the study of comparative religion?

Regarding these religions, there are two types of thinking among their followers:

- The first group of people believes that their religion is the right religion and all other religions are a deviation from the right path. This sort of thinking relates to what we have discussed in section 1.3 with regards to normative approach to classification, or the classification with the pre-conceived authority of a religion.
- Second group believes that it is important to follow a religion, but it doesn't matter which one. They believe that salvation is not an outcome of just their religion alone; other paths are leading to the same destiny too. Many of these people often advocate that all religions worship the same God (a thought that aligns with the earlier Greek concept of God, as explained by Paden 2005), but they call Him with different names. So, it doesn't matter whichever

²⁷ Ved Prakash Upaddhay, *Muhammad In The Hindu Scriptures* By Dr. Ved Prakash Upaddhay (Malaysia: A.S Noordeen (ASN), 2006); Shahnawaz Ahmad, 'Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Hindu Scriptures', *Muslim Mirror*, 2015, <http://muslimmirror.com/eng/prophet-muhammad-pbuh-in-hindu-scriptures/>; Zakir Naik, 'MUHAMMAD (PBUH) IN THE HINDU SCRIPTURE' (India: Peace TV, 2005), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTu7YLSustw>.

way you call him and with whichever name. In their opinion, just like how water remains water irrespective of the state and form it is in, God remains God whatever belief you associate with Him or whatever way you worship Him. This concept is called universalism²⁸.

The second approach; though it sounds very appealing at the first glance from the perspective of inclusion, diversity, co-existence, and pluralism²⁹; it has certain inherent flaws and weakness, for example:

- It is easily observable how the human being is degraded in certain religions and made to worship stone, wood, other material objects³⁰ and even private parts of other human beings!³¹ This cannot be the characteristic of the true religion of God. Worshiping these objects as God is certainly not the same as worshiping the God which is free from all shortcomings, all defects, and all ordinary attributes. So, it must be said that there are some religions which are upon guidance and there are others which are not.
- We also see different criteria for morality in different religions. In some religions, certain people are considered to be better than

²⁸ Paden, 'Comparative Religion'.

²⁹ Rose, 'Can a Religious Pluralist Do Comparative Religion or Comparative Theology?'

³⁰ Katherine Swancutt, 'Animism', *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/animism>.

³¹ Hodder M. Westropp, *Phallic Worship*, vol. 1 (Library of Alexandria, 1870); Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals* (Routledge, 2009).

others based on the family or the caste that they were born in, e.g. Hinduism; while others are considered to be the most worth-less people because of their caste or lineage ³². Adhering to such religions is not the same as adhering to the religions which proclaim that all human beings are equal irrespective of their race, colour, ethnicity, and other human attributes; the criteria that give people superiority is one's piety and closeness to God. Any sane person can see that with such variation in ideas and characteristics of morality, it is impossible to say that it does not make a difference whichever religion one follows. The difference in the ideas of morality in various religions is too big to be ignored.

- Similarly, the conception of God in various religions is very different. In some religions, the deity has human characteristics; for example, reproducing and having offspring - sons or daughters. This deity is very different from the God that is omnipotent, who neither begets nor he is begotten, the one who has no partner and no-one equal to Him. These two types of deities are poles apart; it DOES make a difference what God you believe in and which religion you adhere to.

³² Timothy Jones, 'India's Caste System: Weakened, but Still Influential', *DW*, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/indias-caste-system-weakened-but-still-influential/a-39718124>; Hilman Latief, *Comparative Religion in Medieval Muslim Literature_Published by The Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Republic of Indonesia* (Indonesia: The Ministry of Religious Affairs-The Republic of Indonesia, 2012), https://www.academia.edu/2630203/Comparative_Religion_in_Medieval_Muslim_Literature_Published_by_The_Ministry_of_Religious_Affairs_the_Republic_of_Indonesia.

So, with the second type of thinking proven incorrect (i.e. it does not matter which religion one follows), we are left with the first one, i.e. there is a correct religion that must be found out. **The pursuit of finding the right religion can only happen through the comparative study of religions.** There can be three outcomes from the study of comparative religion, which are as follows. However, they can only be realized if the comparative study is done with the right protocol and right method and the person has adequate pre-requisite knowledge to undertake such study. The three outcomes of the correct approach are as follows:

1. The person who is not on the right path will find the right path and right religion
2. The person who does not believe in religion would start to believe in a religion
3. The person would get a further conviction and his or her religion is, in fact, the right religion.

All the above three are desirable and positive outcomes.

In the absence of the right criteria and right pre-requisite knowledge, there can be a fourth result too: misguidance.

SECTION 2: THE CORRECT METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Researchers point out that in the comparative study of religion, the problem that frequently impacts the results is a lack of appropriate

methodology³³. Though a huge number of comparative studies of religion have been conducted in recent times, very little is explained with regards to the correct methodology of doing so³⁴. It is therefore very important to establish a proper methodology for the comparative study of religions. This would be our objective in this section of the article. In doing so, we will structure our discussion into three parts.

- An overview of essential methodological aspects for the comparative studies
- A series of questions that need to be answered through the comparative analysis
- A case study: a review of the book 'The True Religion of God' by Dr. Bilal Philips

2.1 Essential Methodological aspects

At this point, it is important to clarify that the approach outlined below does not adhere to the principles of comparative studies outlined by some Western scholars who insist on the value-free studies void of any discussion on the 'truth-question'³⁵. According to their opinion, the researcher should keep himself completely free and separate from what he is studying and should not be concerned with whether the religions he or

³³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 21; Brashier, 'To Hell with Comparative Religions'.

³⁴ Oliver Freiberger, 'Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion', *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018): 38.

³⁵ Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics* (Routledge, 2008).

she is studying point out towards the truth or not. Though it sounds diplomatically right, the researchers have proven it practically impossible to apply ³⁶. Our approach, therefore, revolves around finding the truth. Our objective is to provide direction through which people can find the ultimate truth of their existence and their destination.

Using the 5-step methodology for conducting the comparative study of religions proposed by Freiburger ³⁷ as the base, we propose the following structure for the comparative studies while keeping in mind the objective stated above.

- a. Selection: Selecting the religions, the texts, or other things that need to be compared along with a question that the comparison is required to answer. With regards to selection, the following important aspects should be kept in consideration:
 - Analyse all the *major* religions of the world; do not exclude a religion based on a pre-conceived idea or feeling about it
 - If one starts to analyse all the 6000 or more religions in the world, one's whole life would get spent on this and the quest to find the truth would remain unfulfilled; so, there is some criteria required to define exclusions. One of the aspects that can be considered in this regard is to identify the religions:

³⁶ Thoha, 'Objectivity and the Scientific Study of Religion'.

³⁷ 'Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion'.

- That are spread throughout the globe (i.e. major world religions) which advocate global followership and
- Those that are confined to certain tribes and communities and do not look forward to expansion beyond their current limits.

The latter can be excluded from the study in the opinion of writer of this article. Regarding the universal applicability of the religion of truth, Dr. Bilal Philips explains: “Since the consequences of following a false religion are so grave, the true religion of God must have been universally understandable and universally attainable in the past and it must continue eternally to be understandable and attainable throughout the entire world. In other words, the true religion of God cannot be confined to any one people, place, or period of time.”³⁸

- When selecting the religions, figures, texts, religious acts, or other aspects to compare, keep in mind the principle of ‘first things first’ – i.e. establish the major aspects first (such as the concept of God, or the Prophethood, or salvation, or authenticity of text and so on) before you get bogged down into petty and minor matters
- Another aspect that needs to be considered is that we should not look at the individual members or adherents of a

³⁸ Bilal Philips, *The True Religion of God* (The Islamic Propagation Office, Rabwah, 2005), 19, <https://islamhouse.com/en/books/62884/>.

particular faith (Smith 2004, 22; Paden 2005) but what the religion actually says. One cannot generalize about religion on the basis of a single case

b. *Description*: Describe the items beings compared in their historical, social, and empirical contexts. In doing so (and in the subsequent steps), the following important considerations are recommended:

- One should ensure that one is completely unbiased. Also, the sources one is using should be unbiased too and not the ones that hide certain aspects based on pre-defined agendas. Avoid polemical works.
- Use of a variety of perspectives and multidisciplinary fields of study for describing the item or entity being compared; this can includes branches of knowledge such as anthropology, archaeology, sociology, history, psychology, geography, and philosophy and so on.
- Do not mix culture with the religion – for example, Christianity in America is different from Christianity in Mexico; there are certain cultural aspects that get attached to the practice of faith in various areas and one has to look at the religion after removing any cultural attachments to it
- In preparing the description, acquire a deep understanding of the faith and do not rely on superficial knowledge
- When studying the scriptures, do not look at them in isolation. Malory Nye writes: “A study of religion, however, that concentrates solely on the texts themselves and how the text should be understood in terms of its

authors and its intended meaning is seriously in danger of missing the point.”³⁹

- c. *Juxtaposition*: This step involves identifying the similarities and differences between the items or aspects being compared. Do not commit the mistake of juxtaposing without fully understanding the point of view and perspective of both sides.
- d. *Re-description*: In certain studies, e.g. illuminative studies, the re-description is written to explain the new findings from the first three steps and any contributing factors that govern certain attributes or aspects of the cases under comparison
- e. *Rectification and theory formation*: In the rectification phase, usually in the taxonomically conducted studies, the categories to which the comparands belong are revised after the acquisition of knowledge in the first four phases. This act is called theory-formation.

2.2 The questions that need to be answered through the comparative analysis

As we mentioned earlier, our objective for the explanation of this methodology for the comparative study of religions and other associated details is not just to further the academic works in this regard. Our objective is to assist the seekers of truth in reaching what they are looking for. In this regard, there is a series of questions that they must go through in order to reach their goal. Taking inspiration from the ladder proposed

³⁹ Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics* (Routledge, 2012), 95.

by Shaykh Kamal El-Mekki ⁴⁰, we invite the seekers to the truth to explore the following questions as a minimum:

1. Is there a God? What are His attributes? What do different religions say about this?⁴¹
2. If He exists, how does He send guidance to mankind? Which religion possesses the most reliably records of that guidance?
3. How do the books of various religions compare in terms of their preservation, internal coherence, message, and other aspects? Which of them is really the word of God in a preserved form?
4. How do the prophets or founders of various religions compare in terms of their overall influence and service to mankind? What were

⁴⁰ Kamal El-Mekki, *Dawah Training - Kamal El Makki* (Malaysia: iMuslim, 2013), <https://www.icandawah.org/dawah-training.html>.

⁴¹ The author's perspective in this regard is that God shows His manifestation through the things that we see around us. They cannot come into being by themselves. Science and experimentation prove that things do not improve by themselves without an intervention. Not even the simple things happen this way, let alone the complex system within our bodies and outside us. Secondly, when we think about God, we often try to implement the ideas of existence that we see in our limited view. Our capabilities have limits. Our eyes can see certain things and can't see many. We can hear certain things and there are many which are beyond the capability of our ears. Similarly, our brain has certain capacity and it cannot fully comprehend God. However, His signs are everywhere. Even things as simple as dreams make us realize His presence. Many people see things of future in their dreams. Despite the cry some scientists make to nullify even this clear aspect, they cannot come from anything or anyone other than God. A lot of evidences can be given in this regard, but it would be beyond the scope of the current paper. However, it would suffice to say that an unbiased person would be able to find conviction about the presence of God from inside him as well from the outside world; these signs and evidences are in abundance if our eyes are open.

their missions? Did they accomplish them? What were their personal attributes?

5. What are the core beliefs of the religion? What are their implications for humanity?
6. What is the concept of life and death or the afterlife in the religion?
7. How can salvation be achieved through religions under the study?
(In this regard, many people do the mistake of finding the easiest way as claimed by the followers of some religions; rather than finding the 'right' way or the way that does not go against reasoning and logic)
8. What are the ways of worship prescribed in the religions under comparison? What are its objectives? Do they aim at developing certain attributes within their followers?
9. What are the characteristics of the overall society that the religion under study wishes to establish?

You can see that by starting with these questions, you would naturally be led to other important questions. This journey, if taken with an unbiased approach, would lead the traveller to the truth, by the will of God.

2.3 Case study: An overview of the book 'The true religion of God' by Dr. Bilal Philips

After explaining the methodological aspects as well as the essential questions that need to be answered, we will now briefly present the

overview of the book ‘The True Religion of God’⁴² by Dr. Bilal Philips and explain some of the methodological aspects followed in that.

Dr. Bilal opens the discussion by explaining that the adherents of every religion believe their way to be the right way. Who should one believe then? He also throws into perspective the argument proposed by the proponents of universalism and the pitfalls of their views⁴³. This is the aspect that we have highlighted at length in section 1.5. We all have been given intellect which we should deploy to find the answer to the question the author poses, ‘what is the true religion of God?’.

This study conforms to the criteria of the illuminative mode⁴⁴ of comparative study in which one case is studied in more details and other cases are used for comparative purposes as required. His main focus is Islam; he brings other religions in discussion for highlighting certain comparative aspects. These religions include pagan religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism.

The three questions (and the associated arguments) that the author has used to build the ‘description’ of the study are⁴⁵:

⁴² Philips, *The True Religion of God*.

⁴³ Philips, 16.

⁴⁴ Freiburger, ‘Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion’.

⁴⁵ Philips, *The True Religion of God*, 7.

- “The divine origin of the names of the religion and the comprehensiveness of its meaning.”
- “The unique and uncomplicated teachings concerning [the reality of and] the relationship between God, man, and creation.”
- “Islam is universally attainable by all men at all times.”

The author provides an explanation to all these aspects. The stages of description and re-descriptions are evidently applied in the book. The author builds his explanation using the quotes from the Quran as well as the Old and New Testament. In the process, he is also implementing the juxtaposition and highlighting the similarities and differences between the religions under discussion. He also highlights various phenomena within the comparison, e.g. worship, the concept of creation and other aspects. Through the juxtaposition and analytical reasoning, he proposed certain arguments and theories regarding the subjects under discussion.

CONCLUSION:

In this article, we have explained some of the benefits that the comparative study of religion can bring forth if the right methodology is adopted. Regarding the methodology, we first set the context and explained the various classifications of religions and their distinguishing factors. Based on that, we proposed a methodological model for conducting such studies. The objective of the model was to ensure that the seekers of truth have got a formalized structure for attaining their objective. While explaining this, we also elaborated on how our approach is different from the typical academic approach which does not take into consideration the ‘truth’ question. For us, however, this is the real question that needs to be

answered. If we attain the truth, we have found the greatest of treasures and if we are deprived of it, we are the most bankrupt of the people.



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