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Everlasting Doubt: Uncertainty in Islamic Representations of the Past

Abstract: Utilizing treatments of uncertainty regarding history in four major Arabic and Persian works (Ṭabarī, Bīrūnī, Badāʾūnī, and Abū l-Fażl), this article treats Islam as an ever-changing set of arguments rather than a panoply of beliefs and practices. ‘Islamic history’ is internally varied, without necessary universality or internal cohesion. The Islamic case underscores the methodological point that the interrelationship between religion and history is a multichannel and multidirectional affair whose valences differ in treatments of history of Islam versus that of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on. Each of these histories has its distinctive history as a subject, with attendant fields of possibility and impossibility. An overarching history of religions must then be a vast, ever-expanding matrix not reducible to generalizations except in thematic treatments conceptualized with self-conscious attention to categories of analysis.

1 Religion conjoined to history

In the study of religion over the past decades, it has become ordinary to question the category that is the focus of our attention. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1970s, scholars proposed numerous substantive definitions of religion that attempted to provide the contours of what fell within the category ‘religious’ in a commonsensical way. In contrast, instead of identifying universals, general Anglophone discussions of religion produced since the 1980s describe religion through defusing concepts such as ‘family resemblance’, ‘crossing and dwelling’, ‘processes of making meaning and generating experience’, and so on (e. g. Hick 2005, Tweed 2008, Vásquez 2010). While classical theories that define religion out of observed data continue to be significant in teaching (e. g. Pals 2014), we have become ever more sensitive to the notion that religion is our category, which we impose on diverse information. In much current theorization, religion is a modern heuristic concept that forms the horizon against which we create our analyses of certain types of human data (e. g. Nongbri 2013, Smith 2004).

How we characterize religion becomes a matter even more involved when we bring in the issue of history. If ‘religion’ is our category, which we correlate with various types of human records for purposes of our analyses, then ‘history of religion’ is

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a story that is two steps removed from what we consider religious data. That is, when we cite evidence for the history of religion, we have, first, identified something as religious in our terms, and second, associated it with a modern way of thinking about the past that may not be registered within the material itself. This double displacement makes it difficult to imagine a history of religion that is internally consistent with respect to materials of differing provenances. Given that the contents of the category religion vary according to the context we are examining, a unified history of religion would seem to be either impossible or so abstracted as to be devoid of value for reflecting on human circumstances.

The point I am making is easiest to explain through concrete examples. In academic as well as everyday usage, we identify Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam as religions. But we know that the entities we denote using these names cannot be distributed into the same set of categories in a uniform way. For instance, we can find 'theology' in all of them, but the flavor and magnitude of what comes under Christian, Hindu, and Islamic theology is different. When we say that a Christian, Hindu, or Islamic text is theological (as a subcategory under religious), we are working through approximations, leading to an abstraction that may have appeared alien to the producers of the text.

This issue becomes especially interesting when we attach the adjectives 'Christian', 'Hindu', and 'Islamic' to history. The phrases Christian history, Hindu history, and Islamic history refer to altogether different ideas within modern academic discourse. To summarize very reductively, Christian history can mean either the sense of the past attributed to those who consider themselves Christian, or, possibly, the development of Christian ideas and practices in the sense of 'history of Christianity'. It does not mean all aspects of societies in which Christianity has been a dominant or influential religion (for instance, European history is not reducible to Christian history). In contrast, academic authors generally avoid using the phrase 'Hindu history', seeing it as the marker of modern religious irredentism that has been a prominent force in Indian politics since the twentieth century.[1] Chronological treatments of ideas and practices put under the umbrella term 'Hinduism' are presented as 'history of the Hindus' (e. g. Doniger 2010), and historical thought within the Indian sphere is covered through reference to geography rather than religious tradition (e. g. Thapar 2013). In sharp distinction from these two examples, the phrases Islamic history or history of Islam are used widely to designate an academic field that encompasses all aspects of the past pertaining to premodern societies that today fall in parts of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.[2]

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[1] For the flavor of this perspective in popular political representation that has pronounced militaristic overtones see the website http://www.hinduhistory.info/.

[2] For the purposes of this article, I take 'Islamic history' to be synonymous with 'history of Islam'. It is possible to argue for a shade of difference between the way the two phrases are used but that is a level of parsing finer than the thrust of the point I wish to make.

1.1 The problem of Islamic history

The use of the adjective ‘Islamic’ in conjunction with history has a totalizing scope that would appear quite out of place when replaced by Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and so on. This kind of overarching application of the term Islamic extends beyond the issue of history as well. For example, ‘Islamic art’ covers a vast field of material artifacts that are acknowledged to have little or no connection to religious matters (Shalem 2012). When this hegemonic and homogenizing use of Islam has troubled scholars, the proposed terminological reform has introduced new issues without solving the original problem. For example, Marshall Hodgson advocated that we distinguish between the terms Muslim, Islamic, Islamicate, and Islamdom (Hodgson 1974, 56 – 60). Here too, Islam remained the central defining issue, and Hodgson’s division between religious and non-religious issues was often inconsistent and stemmed from his own Protestant Christian presumptions (Bashir 2014, 526 – 528). Even in its more nuanced versions, then, Islamic history retains a generalized flavor and signifies something quite different from Christian history, Hindu history, Buddhist history, and so on.

When it comes to history, then, it is not a simple matter to transition between discussing Islam (or Christianity, Hinduism, etc.) as belonging to a unitary category called religion. Paired with different qualifiers, each ‘religious’ history is unique with respect to its ideological and sociohistorical underpinnings, having a history of its own in how it has become part of our discourse. In the usual modern academic understanding of Islamic history, Islam acts as a reified entity whose presence in various sociohistorical locations is described as its historical trajectory. Scholars have tended to think of certain modes of thought and practice as Islamic religious essentials, seeing them as constants that have propelled Muslims’ historically observable behavior. In my view, this pervasive and largely uninterrogated conceptualization is an instance of intermixing theology and history. Defining Islam as a coherent discourse is a normative concern that is the province of ideologues, to whom the term denotes a consequential system of thought and practice. When historians get into this business, they must, by necessity, determine inclusions and exclusions, leading eventually to notions of right and wrong and propriety and impropriety with respect to Islamic ideas and practices. Doing this, historians create narratives that follow the contours of ideological commitments embedded in the data under analysis. The imprecision that has characterized the use of the terms orthodoxy and heterodoxy in historical descriptions of Islamic perspectives can be traced to this issue (Wilson 2007).

A more consequential problem with the existing dominant perspective is that materials available for study provide overwhelming proof that Islam can be understood in an extreme diversity of ways. The ‘Islam’ that may have been said to have conditioned Muslim understandings can thus turn out to be utterly different between one context and another. I suggest that, when analyzing Muslim perspectives, it is more analytically efficacious to presume Islam to be a discursive field that is fundamentally incoherent across different times and places. It would be counterproductive to dismiss the category 'Islamic history' in its entirety to address the problem of overgeneralization. The field is too well established to be wished away and, more significantly, literary and other materials that contain references to Islam do very often appeal to universals and evince dense interconnections in the form of discussions about Islamic imperatives. To bracket this commonality from our analyses would lead to incomplete assessments of the narratives. However, crucially, the commonality surrounding 'Islam' is nominal rather than substantive. Instead of thinking that Islam signifies a set of pre-given items, it is a matter forever in the process of being made and unmade through the agency of the authors who invoke it in specific sociohistorical circumstances. Islamic history, then, is not the temporal progress of a set of religious roles and behaviors. It is to be reconceptualized as the evolving story of discussions about the abstraction 'Islam', which is endowed with ideological and sociological potency but acquires shape only in the context of localized human circumstances. We can regard Islamic history as a meaningful rubric without requiring that Islam be defined in a universal frame.[3]

My argument in this paper is part of a larger project that appraises Islamic materials pertaining to the past. My perspective presupposes the critique of Western academic and popular views of Islam that has been underway now for nearly half a century. Emblematized by Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism*, this critique has focused primarily on the historical trajectories of biases that are embedded within Western discourses.[4] My work falls in the effort to respond to this situation, and I propose a reassessment of the part of the literary and material archive that contains thematizations of the past as an object of knowledge and reflection. I believe that issues pertaining to understandings of time, history, and historiography have not received adequate attention in the context of understanding Islam beyond orientalist frameworks.[5]

Within revisionist perspectives, my view stands apart from others through the insistence that materials pertaining to the past force the idea that 'Islam' is an unsystemizable and undefinable entity. This position is diametrically opposite to other work such as Shahab Ahmed's recent book *What is Islam?* Ahmed takes the position that studying Islam requires beginning with a definition because, for him, "to conceptualize any theoretical object is necessarily an attempt at identifying a general rule to which all phenomena that affiliate themselves with that object somehow cohere (Ahmed 2016, 103 – 104).” I believe this view is ahistorical and unnecessarily constrictive; it creates a set of preconditions that force interpreters to discover, identify, or manufacture interrelationships between vastly variant invocations of Islam. A rather different picture emerges if we begin with the presumption that ‘Islam’ is a fundamentally untethered signifier that can attach to any number of unrelated signified entities. As historians of this Islam, our job is to observe nominal invocation of Islam (and its parts) and see where this leads, without presuming a definition or necessary universality or relatability. Materials pertaining to radically different views on uncertainty pertaining to the past that I survey in this paper reinforce this analytical position.

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[3] My perspective with respect to Islam concords with what Lucian Hölscher has recently argued regarding the modern academic usage of general concepts such as God and religion. Assessing materials pertaining to German history, he suggests that the utilization of these concepts rests on an inherent contradiction. We tend to discuss God and religion as entities while simultaneously indicating a lack of belief in the reality of what the terms denote. Identifying the contradiction is not to suggest dismissal of the terms. Rather, the observation points to the ambiguities that make the concepts do multiple types of work for us (Hölscher 2015).

[4] For a comprehensive treatment of the content and aftermath of Said's critique see Varisco 2007.

[5] Among existing academic work, Aziz al-Azmeh and Abdullah Laroui are exceptions as scholars who have addressed some issues pertaining to understanding Islamic history in a post-orientalist vein. For details see al-Azmeh 2007, al-ʿArawī 1997, and Riecken 2015.

1.2 Plan of the paper

The approach to Islamic history I advocate can be put into action only through consideration of specific data. Given the limits of space, I can address the overall concern only in part, focusing on a single issue that I regard as emblematic of the larger issues I have outlined above. My general topic in this paper is temporality and I zero in on understandings of uncertainty regarding the nature and purposes of human knowledge about the past. Doubt about attributes and meanings of events pertains to narrators’ epistemological and moral authority and the way they manage the question of indeterminacy when seeking the import of events. Examining how the theme is played out in a range of works shows a variety of Islamic views on time and history in motion. Whether explicitly or implicitly, all reconstructions of the past account for issues of doubt. My review of materials illuminates this topic, with repercussions for the general discussion of the interrelationship between religion and history. If Islamic views alone differ so widely on a matter central to historiography, we would wish to tread lightly when making claims about religion as an overarching abstraction.

The paper has two main sections, each juxtaposing two major authors whose perspectives on understandings of the past represent wider intellectual patterns. The first section focuses on how the authors define time and adjudicate human beings’ ability to know about events placed in the past. I present the views of one author committed to the primacy of received tradition and another to that of rationality. Both affirm uncertainty as a core concern, although on different grounds and with varying effects on the narrative that results from their perspectives. In the second section, I move to the problem of attributing meaning to events of the past. The authors I have chosen acknowledge that, taken as a whole, the past consists of reports about a bewildering array of occurrences. For one author, the chronicler’s job is to present this diverse information to readers as a field from which to construct ethical lessons for their own conduct. The second author takes a radically different view. For him, the apparent confusion reflected in the past is resolved through a teleology in which the world has been moving toward the birth and worldly career of the king who is his patron. Between the four authors, we get a sense for varying dimensions of the treatment of uncertainty in Islamic historiographical contexts.

All works I discuss are lengthy and multifaceted narratives and my analysis here is limited to brief soundings focused on a single point. Although the works abound in proclamations of affiliation with Islamic ideas, I suggest that we *not* see them as speaking from a shared religious perspective. Rather, their views are rhetoric that is interwoven with what they varyingly consider Islam. I wish to avoid presupposing that Islam exists outside of the historical relations reflected in the works' pronouncements. While a concern for uncertainty about the past is shared between the works, the issue is consequential in divergent ways. To underscore the point about difference, I have chosen works produced in different linguistic (Arabic and Persian), temporal (tenth-eleventh centuries versus sixteenth century CE), and geographical (greater Iran versus India) contexts. Showing sociohistorical diversity is a relatively easy matter. My greater priority is to provide a sense for the authors' agency and the intellectual and conceptual variety that comes into relief by adopting the method I pursue. Differences between perspectives on doubt pertaining to past events that I highlight index the indefinability of 'Islam' and 'religion', providing symptomatic evidence for the theoretical perspective I have outlined above.

The examples connected to Islam that I consider also reinforce the methodological point that the conjunction between religion and history need not be seen as dogma driving historiographical representation. If historical reflection goes into formations of religions, then the interrelationship between the two would seem to be a multichannel and multidirectional affair. Furthermore, the conjunction is articulated and valorized differently in what comes to mind when we say history of Islam versus that of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on. Each of these histories has its distinctive fields of possibility and impossibility and each requires a discrete discussion. Envisioned in this way, history of religions must be imagined as a vast, ever-expanding matrix not reducible to generalizations except in thematic treatments conceptualized with self-conscious attention to categories of analysis.

2 Tradition, observation, and doubt

In this section I discuss the work of two authors from the region of greater Iran who lived circa 850 – 1050 CE and wrote in Arabic. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī (d. 1050) were both influential scholars in their own day. Their prolific intellectual production has cast long shadows over various disciplines for centuries. Both wrote extensively about the past, although with investments in quite different ways of constructing intellectual authority. Their views regarding uncertainty of knowledge about the past reflect the spectrum of understandings current in the intellectual milieu that is seen as the first efflorescence of Islamic scholasticism.

2.1 Ṭabarī on time and knowledge

For iconic value, Ṭabarī's name occupies a place all its own in the discussion of Islamic views of the past. Ṭabarī's work *The History of Messengers and Kings* (*Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*), which covers the period between creation and the year 915 CE, has been regarded as a critical source for more than a millennium. Ṭabarī's influence, documentable through citations in many languages, consists mainly of his presentation of reports about past events that became the field from which later authors would often select their evidence. Ṭabarī championed a tradition-based approach: the past was recovered from statements made by trustworthy predecessors rather than through logical deduction that led to a coherent narrative.[6]

I would like to concentrate on the cosmological discussion contained in the preface to Ṭabarī's monumental work that undergirds his practice as a chronicler. Echoing the work's title, Ṭabarī is concerned to tell human stories indexed to lives of individuals identified as kings and divinely appointed religious guides. He sets the stage for such stories by presenting an account of the world's creation. I am struck by three issues in Ṭabarī's perspective: his definition of time and its relationship to the myth of creation; the understanding that God has guaranteed the regularity of time during the interval between the creation of the sun and the moon and the final apocalypse; and the idea that human knowledge about the past is perpetually subject to the problem of authentication. Taken together, these three issues, laid out at the very outset of Ṭabarī's work, constitute a distinctive perspective on history, both as the reality of past events and as human beings' narratives about such events.

When defining time, Ṭabarī's first recourse is to the idea of duration, which he clarifies by pointing out the multiple ways in which time is invoked in language. He cites the following examples: when one says that something occurred at the time of a ruler, time's duration varies depending on the length of the ruler's reign. Contrastingly, if one says that something occurred at the time of harvesting ripe fruit, the reference is to a short duration, possibly even an instant. And duration can be tied to the very matter that one wants to describe, such as a portion of the life of a person that is itself the definition of time (childhood, youth, etc.). These linguistic usages reflect various types of subjective measures of time. To be meaningful, these expressions regarding time require the backdrop of an abstract, objective scale. The base unit of objective time is the day-and-night cycle, which is divided into smaller units such as minutes and hours, and aggregated into longer units of weeks, months, and years. The linguistic references with which Ṭabarī begins always work against the backdrop of the sun and the moon, the ultimate 'clocks' that govern the day-and-night and yearly cycles and define impersonal durations according to a regular pattern (Ṭabarī 1960, 9; Ṭabarī 1989, 171–72).

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[6] Although utilized heavily for historiographical reconstruction by modern scholars, Ṭabarī's work has received relatively little attention as an object unto itself. For a general overview of the author's life and the method and content of the work see Rosenthal's introduction to the forty-volume English translation (Ṭabarī 1989, 5–147). Some elements of the work's literary quality are treated by Shoshan 2004, while a comprehensive account of the work's reception over the centuries remains a desideratum. For a sense for the work's place in the development of historiographical thought see Khalidi 1994, 73–81.

In human knowledge, time is ineluctably anchored in the movement of celestial bodies. Ṭabarī's views here are based on observation of the world and of linguistic practices. But when he correlates these with elements of tradition, he discovers a problem. He cites the Quran and prophetic statements to the effect that God created the world over a period of six days, and that the sun and the moon were created on the sixth day. Now if the objective measure of time (the day-and-night cycle) is predicated on the sun and the moon, how are we to understand the five days of creation that precede the creation of these entities? Ṭabarī's answer is to point to other instances in the Quran where durations are mentioned in contexts where they are impossible. For example, the Quran refers to morning and evening in paradise, which cannot be the direct equivalents of these time signatures known to us from terrestrial experience, tied to the sun and the moon, since paradise does not undergo transformation with the lapse of time. The conclusion is that mentions of time before the creation of the sun and the moon, and after the apocalyptic uprooting of their regular patterns, must be understood figuratively. The apparent logical chasm between received divine wisdom and observed necessity points to the fact that human language and knowledge are adequate only for purposes of describing matters between the period creation to apocalypse (Ṭabarī 1960, 22–26, 56–60; Ṭabarī 1989, 187–193, 224–228).

Ṭabarī's preface also contains a discussion of the overall age of the cosmos, the interval between creation and apocalypse. He reviews various traditions, including those attributed to Muḥammad and to non-Muslim groups such as various types of Jews and Christians, without declaring an unequivocal opinion. This discussion implicates the issue of the final apocalypse and dissolution of the created world, signified most clearly in traditions that cite disruption in regular celestial patterns, such as the sun rising from the west rather than the east. For Ṭabarī, creation and apocalypse are the exceptions that prove the rule of time's regularity under current human circumstances. The notion of dating is irrelevant both before the creation of the sun and the moon, and after they stop their regular pattern as an indication of the apocalypse. Between these events that, respectively, create and destroy time, is the terrestrial interregnum in which "the sun and the moon are (the entities) from which dates are correctly established and moments and hours become known. From one is apprehended the knowledge of the moments and hours of the night, and from the other that of the day" (Ṭabarī 1960, 79; Ṭabarī 1989, 248–249). As long as one is not contending that one is living in the time of the apocalypse, then the world is governed by a perfectly stable temporal order. The constancy of this order guarantees history as the sequential ordering of events in time.

Ṭabarī's certainty about time's ontological stability contrasts with his equally strong skepticism regarding human knowledge about the past. He insists, from the beginning of the work, that the past can be known only from reports by reliable witnesses. These include unimpeachable sources such as the Quran, available directly as text, and Muhammad's sayings that become accessible through reports that must be verified through adjudicating the chains of transmission (*isnād*) that bring information to the moment of writing (Ṭabarī 1960, 7–8; Ṭabarī 1989, 170–171). In Ṭabarī's text, these chains of names constantly interrupt the narrative's flow. This keeps verification perpetually on the surface of the text. It never becomes a matter subordinated to general disclaimers at the beginning or end, or something pushed to the margins as in the case of footnotes in modern academic practice. Ṭabarī is also committed to providing all alternative traditions for which he has fully authenticated or somewhat plausible chains of human transmitters. This conveys a constant note of caution within the narrative, even though, quite often, Ṭabarī does provide his own opinion on disputed arenas after presenting all the alternatives available to him.[7]

Ṭabarī's view of time and the past combines cosmological certainty with epistemological uncertainty. The occurrence of an event bears relationships to other events by being placed within cosmic time linked to the regular movement of the sun and the moon. Traditional religious sources that are to be accepted on face value guarantee that this will remain the case between creation and apocalypse. But our knowledge of an event's temporal relationships is tied to questioning and verification pertaining to witnesses and rationalization. If we take this double perspective to be a religious commitment—Ṭabarī's Islamic view of the past—it is clearly not a dogmatic understanding that would generate an emplotted narrative. Both in its bases and its implications, Ṭabarī's perspective turns the past into an arena that human beings represent with a commitment to skepticism.[8]

Ṭabarī's work is known for his prodigious citation of confirmatory or contradictory reports regarding all matters contained in his annalistic chronicle. His drive to amass as many traditions as possible reflects cosmological and epistemological commitments. His traditionalism is, I would suggest, not simply a reflection of adopting principles of hadith criticism, developed by his predecessors, into the practice of writing about the past (Khalidi 1994, 73–77; Robinson 2003, 93–95). Rather, the tradition-as-past approach leads to a complex overall conceptualization that privileges contingency as a critical issue with respect to how knowledge about the past becomes available. He posits a clear separation between occurrences in the world and reports about them. His concern is solely with the latter, which he treats with the base expectation that they will vary when describing the same event. His presentations of events then keep the fact of uncertainty in view rather than attempting to approximate what may have truly happened. Doubt is a cardinal principle in his historiographical practice.

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[7] The issue of traditionalism as an aspect of Islamic intellectual cultures is a vast subject beyond the scope of this essay. For an interpretive overview see Graham 1993.

[8] In saying this, I do not wish to suggest that Ṭabarī's work is entirely devoid of topology. My point is that he privileges the necessity of authentication at the micro level, leading to a zigzagging, fractured narrative. For examples of topoi within specific parts of the work see Weststeijn 2010 and Osman 2001.

2.2 Bīrūnī and calendars

If Ṭabarī's work is remarkable for being the written repository of a vast collected memory, that of Bīrūnī exemplifies impressive dedication to empiricism.[9] His *Signs Remaining from Centuries Past* (*al-Āthār al-bāqiyya ʿan al-qurūn al-khāliyya*), composed around 1000 CE, contains extensive discussions of all types of calendrical systems known to him. Like Ṭabarī, Bīrūnī's work combines objective and subjective understandings of time, but the two differ in terms of the coordinates and scopes of their views. Bīrūnī's base unit for time is also the day-and-night cycle, which he legitimizes through reference to astronomical and mathematical proofs rather than citing scripture. The day is then correlated with larger periods (months, equinoxes and seasons, solar and lunar years), all of which are documentable through observation. Bīrūnī points out that human communities differ greatly among each other when it comes to giving subjective meanings to these objective temporal cycles. Giving an account of time from the perspective of human usage is a matter of sifting through received information rather than logical deduction:

> The nearest means for explicating what I have been asked is knowledge of the circumstances of earlier communities and information from past centuries. This is because a majority of it consists of their usages, the traditions that remain from them, and their laws. There is no way to reach this through rational proofs or through analogy with observations of the senses. Rather, (this can be had) only through following the people of books and nations, and the adherents of opinions and sects, by whom these ideas are used. What they make of it is a base on which something can be built later, followed by comparing their traditions and opinions for verifying one with respect to the other (Bīrūnī 1878, 4).

This is the task Bīrūnī proceeds to execute with respect to calendars associated with groups based in the Middle East, Central Asia, and India. Unlike Ṭabarī, his guarantee for the authenticity of a tradition is its logical plausibility rather than a chain of reliable transmitters. But he acknowledges that this can never lead to a full disclosure of the past since traditions that are logically consistent on the surface may be falsehoods stemming from incorrect premises.

Most of Bīrūnī's work is dedicated to the calendars of non-Muslim groups, with efforts aimed at comprehension and description as well as correction of mathematical errors. The discussion of the Islamic Hijrī calendar is one small part of the chapter on 'datings' (*tawārīkh*), which he defines as periods of time for which a certain significant event or point of time is the origin (Bīrūnī 1878, 13).[10] The genesis of this calendar is put in the time period of the third caliph ʿUmar (d. 644), who is said to have chosen the year of Muḥammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 as the beginning of Muslim dating because that was an undisputed part of the Prophet's legacy. He avoided selecting the year of Muhammad's death, which was also not a matter of dispute, because the event was inauspicious. Bīrūnī provides these details without attributing any great cosmic or world historical significance to the migration itself (Bīrūnī 1878, 29 – 31). In fact, what comes after this description points to the impossibility of basing state administration on the Islamic calendar alone. His extensive description of the Hijrī year comes in the work's section on religious observances, indicating that the calendar's primary utility lay in organizing the liturgical year (Bīrūnī 1878, 328 – 335).

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[9] For general information regarding Bīrūnī see Stowasser 2014 and Klein 2005.

In the pragmatic realm, the Hijrī calendar's problem is the Quranic prohibition on intercalation (Quran 9:36 – 37). Bīrūnī states that the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861) was the first ruler to realize that the application of the prohibition on intercalation to the empire's governing Persian calendar was disadvantageous for the population. This is because the government's tax collection was pegged to the beginning of the new year (*nawrūz*), which was meant to occur after the harvest season. Traveling in the countryside, he noticed that although the crops were not yet ripe, he had been asked to grant permission to collect taxes. Investigation of the matter revealed that the prohibition on intercalation since the coming of Islamic rule had caused the new year to 'wander', since the solar year was longer than the aggregate of days that constituted twelve lunar months.

Before the Quranic prohibition, this issue was resolved through adding (intercalating) days or months in appointed years, which brought the practiced calendar back in alignment with the solar year. ʿAbbāsid rulers before Mutawakkil and their viziers had avoided addressing this issue for fear of going against something that was in the Quran. Although Mutawakkil resolved to reintroduce regular intercalation, he was assassinated before the decree could be promulgated. Eventually, the later ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (d. 902) carried out the change according to calculations by scholars working for him. Bīrūnī indicates that the change instituted at this point did not correct the problem in its entirety because the scholars had presumed that intercalation had stopped after the coming of Muslim rule. In fact, the Arabs' Persian predecessors had neglected the adjustment for seventy years by this time already. Muʿtaḍid's reform ended up fixing nawrūz at a different seasonal time from where it had belonged originally (Bīrūnī 1878, 31 – 33).[11]

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[10] The term *tāʾrīkh* (pl. *tawārīkh*) covers a wide semantic field and can be translated as 'history' as well. In the present instance, Bīrūnī is clearly using it in the sense of a date. For an extensive treatment of the term and its relationship to historiographical practice see al-ʿArawī 1997.

[11] Information on al-Muʿtaḍid in other Arabic sources does not seem to present the calendrical reform as a major accomplishment (cf. Malti-Douglas 1999).

For Bīrūnī, time and calendrical arrangements form a puzzle that should be solvable on mathematical grounds. But this turns out to be impossible because information available from traditions held by human groups do not lead to consistent and coherent perspectives. The problem lies in faulty information and incorrect beliefs that seem to compound error upon error as one brings more data into the discussion. A great part of Bīrūnī's work on calendars consists of lists of received information, followed by his own effort to coordinate between the views of different groups. His gamely investigation of this arena is impressive for its assiduousness. But it showcases the diversity of human views of time rather than providing a unified system.

Ṭabarī and Bīrūnī are agreed that while one can be certain about the regularity of time as the background to human lives, reports about occurrences and perspectives must be subjected to processes of authentication. In both cases, views of the past that humans project are to be treated with caution. Doubt can be reduced, but never fully eliminated, through verification and rationalization. The Hijrī calendar specific to Muslims provides the measure of an Islamic era and is critical for marking religiously significant days within the lunar year. But because it does not offer easy coordination with the solar year, it can never be the sole timing system for human life that depends on seasons attuned to the sun.[12]

Comparing Ṭabarī and Bīrūnī, we can see that appeals to traditions and empirical observation can equally be the grounds for maintaining cosmological stability. Human experience is premised on a stable order of abstract time tied to movements of the sun and the moon. However, this constancy is of no help for adjudicating the past as a compilation of human events. For someone committed to traditions, reports vary in terms of their contents as well as their lines of transmission. A chronicler is then compelled to present all viable reports together with a commentary on the shades of trust that can be put in them. Exemplifying this position, the issue of doubt is interwoven into all representations of the past in Ṭabarī's work. Bīrūnī is an empiricist with respect to both the physical cosmos and human discourses. He finds the first of these to be stable and the second entirely inconsistent, whether when considering reports that claim dedication to a single perspective or between groups with rival understandings of the past. Subjecting various calendrical systems to mathematical analysis, he finds that accidents and errant choices have made human accounts of the past a jumble that is impossible to disentangle. But unlike Ṭabarī, he is not led to making the presentation of the past a vast array of reports. Rather, he analyzes reports and situations to create syntheses that are plausible on rational grounds. He shows the reasons for uncertainty and attempts to reduce it to the degree allowed by evidence. The two authors' varying epistemological commitments lead them to manage uncertainty in different ways, resulting in narratives of distinctive casts. While equally ‘Islamic’ in their self-presentation, these interpreters of the past adjudicate the issue of uncertainty of information in substantially different ways.

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[12] This issue is reflected in the fact that societies in which Islam has been a major component have invariably utilized multiple calendars (cf. Taqizadeh 1937–39, 1939–42).

3 Meanings of past events

I now shift to a different aspect of the question of uncertainty within the representation of the past, moving also to literary production in Persian from late sixteenth-century India. I present the conceptual underpinnings of two works that belong to the same milieu. Despite their identical sociohistorical positioning, the two works contain radically different opinions about what narratives of the past imply with respect to the conduct of life on the part of a reader. This then concerns uncertainty about the *meaning* rather than the *content* of narratives about the past.

The two works are the most significant sources for early modern India under Muslim rule. The first is the *Selection of Histories* (*Muntakhab al-tavārīkh*) of ʿAbd al-Qādir Badāʾūnī (d. 1615), a kind of counter-imperial chronicle of Muslim rulers in India until the time of the emperor Akbar (d. 1605). Badāʾūnī was a polyglot man of letters employed by the Mughal court in projects such as translation of the Indian classics Ramayana and Mahabharata from Sanskrit. We can be sure that he was aware of the diversity of human ideas beyond his commitment to Islam. He kept the *Selection of Histories*, his major work of synthetic history, hidden until his death because it contained critiques of royal policy of the time. The second work is the *Book of Akbar* (*Akbarnāma*) by Abū l-Fażl ʿAllāmī (d. 1602), the official imperial chronicle commissioned by Akbar (completed circa 1602). Both works are said to have been started around 1590. They make for interesting juxtaposition because of the authors’ mutual acquaintance: along with being associated with the same court, they held Abu l-Fażl’s father, Shaykh Mubārak Nāgawrī, as a teacher in common.[13]

3.1 Badāʾūnī and the diversity of events

In a point that carries over from the last section, Badāʾūnī begins his work by registering that the problem of history is connected to the issue of credibility of verbal expression in general.[14] He is concerned with what can or cannot be conveyed through speech, and what is the relationship between narrative description and happenings that comprise the past. The impetus for this discussion is the customary obligation to offer God’s praise at the beginning of one’s work. This is a generic convention, for which Badāʾūnī draws correlations between cosmology, speech, and truth.

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[13] For the larger context of writing about the past in India in this period see Conerman 2012 and Ghulāmussayidayn 2009. Although both the sources I consider are available in English translation, I have retranslated the sections cited in the paper in light of matters that concern me.

[14] For general information about Badāʾūnī see Abbas 1987.

The beginning of Badāʾūnī’s work echoes negative theology. His praise for God consists of the fact that he is unable to perform the task:

> O king of the world, how can I formulate thankfulness to you with this forlorn heart that has become the abode of demons and wild beasts? How can I sing your praise with this decaying, obscenity spouting tongue, the food of cats and dogs?
>
> How can the humble mote of dust declare God’s unity?
> How, from its contaminated state, say the praise of the holy essence?
>
> Moreover, constant apprehension and habitual dread limit my searching foot to a limping pace. My tied, slow tongue is constricted in the face of this endless desert.
>
> What my heart knows are mere accidents, what my lip emits mere letters.
> How then can I know you in my heart, or speak of you with my tongue?
>
> It then seems best that I shorten the travel of my pen in this valley and, gathering my confused head back into the tunic of thinking about people and earthly horizons, open my interpretive eye to knowing your perfection-filled creation and imperishable kingdom (Badāʾūnī 2001, 1:1).

The most interesting rhetorical move within this passage is that the impossibility of speaking adequately about God acts as an impulsion to speak about earthly matters. Herein lies his theological justification of history, which is simultaneously contingent upon and disconnected from talk about God. The paradox involved here resurfaces later in the preface:

> When I look well, the world is an old copybook (*nuskha*) that has neither head nor root. Its pages are mismatched, and on each page are written catalogs of affairs of a collection of human beings, whose hands happen to have held the reins of initiating and concluding the affairs.
>
> The old book of kings (*shahnāma*) carries the affairs of the kings of the world.
> You, always, see and read in it the measure of caution.
> This story’s enchantment brings happy sleep to one
> who is delirious and whose mind is scattered from madness.
> But it can also awaken one who, from pride,
> has fallen into sleep of ignorance, being deceived by Satan (Badāʾūnī 2001, 1:3–4).

Here the chronicler is a moralist whose job is to depict a world that does not offer easy comprehensibility. Yet, the confounding diversity is the critical element that can allow the appropriately prepared reader to create a path toward salvation and right conduct. Badāʾūnī refuses to give definitive interpretations of events, deferring the issue to the capacities of the reader:

> *If a crow be a nation’s guide,*
> *it will lead them to the road of destruction* [Arabic].
>
> And if someone’s eye is anointed with the kohl of divine favor, and lit with the light of certitude, he discovers in the world of generation and corruption, the unity of the ancient, majestic creator, free from the fault of accidents and exempt from the stain of transformation and transference (Badāʾūnī 2001, 1:3).

The chronicler takes the past's bewilderment in stride and presents it for judgement by a reader who is required to evolve the right perspective through active engagement with the details. On the question of uncertainty, then, the chronicler's role is to be mimetic rather than judgmental. Overall, speech contained in narratives about the past brings God, the chronicler, and the potential reader in a circle that is constantly in motion in conjunction with the vicissitudes of material existence. The aimlessness of worldly affairs is the greatest lesson that must be repeated without reduction to a rationalized story. The composition and consumption of history translate to the performance of ethical duties made visible by the impossibility of describing God in speech.

At the beginning of his work, Badāʾūnī declares that his purpose is to write a conspectus of the affairs of those who have ruled from Delhi, from Islam's beginning to his own time (Badāʾūnī 2001, 1:4). However, the remit of the *Muntakhab al-tavārīkh* is far broader than the narration of a series of monarchs and dynasties. The work's first volume stretches from the Ghaznavids (977–1186), the first 'Islamic' dynasty in India, to the death of Humāyūn (d. 1556), the second ruler of the Mughal dynasty. He uses the lifespans of rulers to define temporal extensions, within which he tells of political matters and comments on religious and cultural life as evident in the biographies of prominent people. The second and third volumes are concerned with the period of Akbar, the third Mughal ruler, until the Hijrī year 1004 (1595–96). The second volume is annalistic, detailing events in sequence by years, while the third is prosopographical, divided into sections that treat the lives of major Sufis, scholars, medical doctors, and poets. While the scale of the description of Akbar's period dwarfs the treatment of prior kings, Badāʾūnī's method throughout the work is the same: first, a description of a ruler's lifetime as the temporal frame for the details of events, which is contracted in the case of early kings and greatly expanded for Akbar; and second, comments on personalities of religious and cultural import from the period who may or may not have had a direct connection to the court. Overall, the work's contents match the intention stated in the preface in that the past is presented in all its ongoing diversity, through a focus on human figures who are positive or negative moral exemplars working within the unfolding of inscrutable divine intention in the world.

3.2 Abū l-Fażl and political absolutism

Abū l-Fażl begins the *Book of Akbar* with the question of language and its relationship to divine as well as material realities.[15] He has great praise of speech, including the following verses:

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[15] Information regarding Abū l-Fażl's life and work is reviewed in Aḥmad 1975.

> What is this speech whose manifestation
> lifts the veil from the eighteen thousand!
> At this banquet, nothing else equals its headiness,
> it has no rival to its power.
> In this workshop, it accomplishes all works.
> In this court, it sits on the throne.
> Among those who are aware, whatever appears to the heart,
> the heart says to the tongue, and the tongue projects to the ear.
> Its path goes from one heart's door to that of another,
> speaking and hearing are the channels for its movement.
> The moon of speech, seen in the observatory of awareness,
> rises and sets between the tongue and the ear (Abū l-Fażl 2006, 8 – 9).

Further along in the text, the abilities of speech as a revealer of the world, and the conveyer of thought between its conscious inhabitants, are deemed inadequate when it comes to the praise of God:

> The foot of speech, long-handed though it may be,
> breaks its head on the stones before the veil covering your presence.
> Though speech be fat and life enforcing,
> it appears gaunt when presented at the spread of your table (Abū l-Fażl 2006, 11).

The failure of speech causes Abū l-Fażl to descend into an inner dialogue. He surmises that, precisely because God has not endowed human beings with the capacity to fully understand his essence and attributes, speech must be directed toward the task of self-improvement and the carrying out of one's obligations:

> What is meant by praise is that one deposits one's self—accustomed to love its own praise and adornment and to selling itself cheaply—at the threshold of servitude, affecting supplication and humility. It is then cast down from the position of focus on itself and is adorned with the true meaning of its helplessness in the form of abject solicitation. Its inner and outer realities are clothed with lowliness and indigence, until propriety reaches its desired bank and becomes the praise of the just creator of life (Abū l-Fażl 2006, 13).

Having clarified the question of praising God appropriately, Abū l-Fażl maintains that he remains unsatisfied as to the adequacy of his own work. Finally, the voice of guiding wisdom instructs him as follows:

> O fashioner of drawings in the atelier of meaning, you are not to write a book whose preface you adorn with God's praise. You are writing about the circumstances of the ruler of the earth in this time, the jewel within the crown of kings. From this, the praise of God will appear in writing and glorification of him will become pictured. What would be the point of praising praise? The creator's creations are themselves the perfection of praise, which the pure ruler has already issued forth in a non-verbal language. For those with aware hearts, residents of the inner world, finding this equates to apprehending the absolute light. And this takes them to the exalted shadow of praising God, which is, by its essence, the highest station posited by the necessary being (Abū l-Fażl 2006, 13 – 14).

Here, then, we find the denouement of Abū l-Fażl's perspective, in which chronicling the rule of his patron, Akbar, is the ultimate form of praise for the divine. A significant proportion of the preface is given to listing Akbar's titles that describe his superlative qualities in all possible spheres. Abū l-Fażl's ultimate position on the issue of the relationship between speech and truth marks his own work as being different from that of other chroniclers: 'It is confounding that in books on worldly affairs, they bring up praise of the pure giver as an adornment to the book. Here, the very book is put together for the purpose of praising the life-giving God' (Abū l-Fażl 2006, 14).

Abū l-Fażl affirms the impossibility of describing, and hence praising, God and anticipates the contingent quality of earthly reality. But this affirmation leads him to a different place than Badāʾūnī. His self-description as a revealer rests on his capacity to remove the barrier between the hidden and the apparent, activated by his recognition of Akbar's unique cosmological status:

> In the created world, as long as there was a split between the headship of the leaders of the separators (from the world)—called dominion (*valāyat*)—and the chieftaincy of those connected (to the world)—called rule (*salṭanat*)—contention caused by the difference between hidden meanings [attributed to appearances] was the cause of confusion. Today, because of his [Akbar's] high reach, foresight, nobility, wide benevolence, pervasive discernment, and perfection in knowing God, these two invaluable stations—which are the guiding channels within the system of apparent facts and their true meanings—have been bestowed on that solver of the secrets of wisdom, the key holder of divine treasuries. Whenever his holy being extends this quality, each mirror brings out a bit from the manifold hidden meanings, currently in places of concealment, to the safe house of the apparent world (Abū l-Fażl 2006, 15–16).

Abū l-Fażl's ability to recognize and extoll Akbar enables him to fashion himself as the authoritative interpreter who provides definitive meanings of events.

The organization of Abū l-Fażl's *Akbarnāma* mirrors the author's commitments stated in the preface and stands in strong contrast with Badāʾūnī's work. Abū l-Fażl's temporal anchor is the king as a cosmic being; he begins with extended discussions of Akbar's genealogical forbears and his horoscopes generated from different astrological systems. These two topics constitute the physical and metaphysical preliminaries for Akbar's own presence in the world. On Akbar as a materialized being, Abū l-Fażl attends to the miraculous origins of Mongol royal clans (based on a princess conceiving triplets through impregnation by light), the life and legend of Tamerlane, and the activities of Bābur and Humāyūn, Akbar's grandfather and father. The horoscopes show him inscribed in the very structure of the cosmos. The remainder of the work describes Akbar's life and reign in detail, denoted according to regnal years rather than a more abstract time scale such as the Hijrī or another calendar. The original work ends at the forty-sixth year after Akbar's accession (1011 AH/1602 CE), the point of Abū l-Fażl's death.

For Abū l-Fażl, whatever is worth describing is made so through refraction via the prism of Akbar's cosmic personality. Reading the work episodically, we can certainly find text that reads as straightforward description of occurrences that came about in the world. However, the narrative before and after such episodes always provides direct connection to Abū l-Fażl's perspective on time and narration that I have described above. Ultimately, all narrations lead to Akbar's person, not simply in the sense of the human king but as a being who preexisted before his material existence and occupies the place of the ontological axis to the world at the time of Abū l-Fażl's writing.[16]

Badāʾūnī and Abū l-Fażl posit the functions of writing and reading about the past as activities with opposing ends. For Badāʾūnī, the past is an uncontainable source of reflection and guidance on the purposes of human existence. This view on human experience within time extends to the future as well, which is conditioned by the past but is essentially open-ended. The chronicler presents the past through judgments regarding matters such as sources and plausibility of causality, and the reader absorbs these with the responsibility of deriving correct meanings. In contrast, Abū l-Fażl stands, as it were, at the end of contingent temporality. Akbar's presence in the world marks the fact that meanings of all events of the past and the future have become available. The chronicler describes the events with glosses that provide their uniquely correct interpretations. Concurrently, readers acquire this perspective and come to see themselves and the world in the correct light. The ethical imperative is to become the loyal imperial subject, orienting one's view of experience, knowledge, language, and moral conduct to this overarching imperative. Although invoking Islamic precedents in equally strong terms, the two chroniclers' investments in the past reflect radically different cosmological, epistemological, and ethical commitments with respect to themselves as well as their presumed readers.

4 Conclusion

The intellectual perspectives I have highlighted provide a condensed view into certain methodological and terminological issues for considering the conjunction between religion and history. I noted the heuristic nature of 'religion', emphasizing that conventional meanings of phrases such as Christian, Hindu, and Islamic history imply quite different fields of inquiry. Of these, Islamic history has the widest scope, reflecting a reified understanding of Islam as an ahistorical force that drives Muslims' behavior. Rather than jettisoning the notion of Islamic history altogether, I suggested that we reconceptualize it by privileging the agency of those who invoke the term. Islamic history is the continual making and unmaking of Islam in conjunction with ideas and material realities impinging on human beings. This perspective imagines Islam as an ever-changing set of arguments rather than a panoply of beliefs and practices. The arguments do not cohere into a system and their possible interconnections must be documented on a specific basis rather than being presumed from any kind of phenomenological or conceptual universality. To discuss Islamic history does not require that we define Islam. Rather, we analyze materials with an eye toward nuances of similarities and differences in how proponents invested in Islamic ideas project their views. The readings of specific materials I have presented in this article are made possible by adopting this overall perspective on the conjunction between Islam and history.

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[16] For a treatment of the historical effects of this perspective on the king's being in Mughal history see Moin 2012.

The materials I have surveyed ask the following questions: How can we define time and the past? What can be known about the past, and how? Why should we endeavor to acquire knowledge about the past? And how should such knowledge affect the conduct of human lives? There is nothing specifically Islamic about these questions. The issues they raise can be found discussed in theorization regarding the past in most (if not all) sociocultural and religious contexts. The answers I have highlighted point to the variability in how Islamic ideas may be mobilized to address these questions. This leads, in turn, to the plasticity of Islam as a religious discourse. Seen through the prism of the issue of uncertainty, the Islamic spectrum accommodates opposite positions with respect to both the contents and the meanings of the past. Ṭabarī and Badāʾūnī are content to act as curators of the past. Ṭabarī emphasizes the variability of traditions that make the past available to us while Badāʾūnī describes the past as a storehouse from which his readers must draw their own lessons. Bīrūnī and Abū l-Fażl strive after more definite knowledge. Bīrūnī is committed to rationalization based on principles of observation and deduction, but finds it impossible to streamline his information. Abū l-Fażl takes the question of rationality of past events out of the material sphere. Events have ulterior meanings that would be hidden in any other era but are available to him because the political regime under which he lives represents the culmination of time and the cosmos. These authors valorize the issue of uncertainty regarding the past in different ways and hold varying opinions. Although all of them speak in languages imbued with Islamic terminology, they mobilize history to create the religion in different molds. The survey underscores the necessity of imagining the relationship between religion and history with attention to nuances and dense variability.

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