ORIGINAL ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

ISSN: 2692-515-x, Impact Factor: 9.23
American Academic publishers, volume 6, issue 01,2026

Journal: https://www.academicpublishers.org/journals/index.php/ijai

METHODS USED IN STUDYING THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS IN "AL-MILAL WA'N-NIHAL"

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Annotation: This three-part article discusses the life of Abulfath Shahristani, who founded his school in the study of the history of religions, and the methods he used in the study of world religions in his book Al-Milal wa-n-nihal. The first part of the article gives information about the importance of the work, the second part about the methods used by Shahristani in the study of religions, and the third part about the typological and geographical methods.

Keywords: Abulfath Shahristani, «Al-Milal wa n-nihal», history of religions, methods, hermeneutics, objectivity, historically, classification.

Undoubtedly, one of the most valuable works on the study of the history of religions in the Muslim world is Taj al-Din Abu'l-Fath Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani's Kitab al-Milal wa'n-Nihal ("The Book of Sects and Creeds"). Shahrastani was born in 1075 in the city of Shahristan, Khorasan. Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal is one of the most famous and esteemed books on the history of religions. In the first part of his work, the author discusses the history of Islam, while in the second part, he examines the beliefs and religious-philosophical teachings of the peoples around the Mediterranean and the East. This work is considered one of the most prestigious among writings on the history of religions, both before and after its time.

Given the lack of direct scholarly research on Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal and the fragmented nature of available sources, this study approaches the subject in three distinct parts. The first part examines the work's significance and position within the broader corpus of writings on the history of religions. The second part analyzes the methodological approaches employed by Shahrastani in his study of religions, with particular attention to his use of objectivity, descriptive exposition, systematic terminology, hermeneutical interpretation, historical contextualization, and engagement with divergent views. The third part critically explores Shahrastani's methods of classifying religions and belief systems, highlighting his systematic and comparative approach.

I. The Position of Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal Among Other Works on the History of Religions:

As Islam spread across the world, non-Muslim communities who initially accepted Islam often did not fully abandon certain aspects of their previous beliefs. Consequently, Muslim scholars began to study the pre-Islamic beliefs of these newly converted communities. In fact, the Qur'an itself refers to pre-Islamic beliefs such as Judaism, Christianity, Sabianism, and sorcery; however, the doctrinal and ritual aspects of these faiths required further explanation and clarification. Thus, some Muslim scholars undertook the task of writing various works on the beliefs, lifestyles, and cultures of non-Muslim peoples.

It is important to note that works written for the study of religions other than Islam generally exhibit two distinct approaches. The first approach is influenced by the discipline of kalām and is reflected in works such as Maqālāt, Dīyānāt, and Firaq, which were composed

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with the purpose of defending Islam. In works of the Maqālāt type, the beliefs of certain sects and other non-Islamic religions are compared with Islamic doctrine and often subjected to rigorous critique [1:29–30].

The earliest works of the Maqālāt type were primarily written by scholars of Shi‘ite belief and were known as Ashāb al-Maqālāt [2:1]. Over time, however, ‘Ahl al-Sunnah scholars also began composing works in the Maqālāt genre. Among these scholars, the most renowned was Abu’l-Hasan Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari. His work, Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Musallīn, is considered the most famous example of this genre [3:406–407].

The second approach observed in works on the study of non-Islamic religions is exemplified by texts such as Al-Milal wa’n-Nihal, in which other faiths are explained without criticism. In works following this approach, not only Islamic sects and movements but also other religions and creeds are studied objectively and descriptively, without polemical intent. Such works are considered encyclopedic descriptions of religions, based on available sources and empirical observations. The most significant example of this approach is undoubtedly Al-Milal wa’n-Nihal. One of the notable features of this work, written with the aim of systematically introducing the world’s religions, is that, unlike earlier writings, it provides detailed information on Buddhist and Hindu teachings [4:199–200].

II. Methods Employed in the Work:

Shahrastani did not rely on a single method in classifying and analyzing religions and sects. In his work, he made extensive use of objectivity and classification, more so than many other scholars. However, in certain matters, he approached issues from the perspective of a Muslim theologian [5:405–411]. For this reason, some researchers consider Shahrastani’s work to represent a “Islamized history of religions.”

Ulrich Rudolph emphasizes that the sources Shahrastani used in writing this work are largely unknown [6:108–109]. Although Shahrastani does not explicitly specify all the sources he consulted, he occasionally alludes to them in certain sections. For instance, when discussing celestial religions, he draws on the works of Abdulqahhar al-Baghdadi and Abu al-Qasim al-Ansari; regarding the beliefs of pre-Islamic Arabs, he refers to Ibn Nadim and Ibn Hisham; in discussing Indian religions, he cites Hasan ibn Musa al-Navbahthiy, Ya‘qubi, Mas‘udi, Qazi Abduljabbar, and Abu Isa al-Warraq; and for Zoroastrian beliefs, he uses the scholarship of Jaihani [7:59–60].

There are also differing opinions regarding Shahrastani’s own religious affiliation. In the introduction to his French translation of Al-Milal wa’n-Nihal, the French scholar Daniel Gimaret evaluates Shahrastani as an Ash‘arite theologian [1:63]. However, Guy Monnot, who collaborated with Gimaret on the same translation, considers him to be an Isma‘ili Batini [1:11].

The reason Western scholars have reached these two differing opinions may lie in Shahrastani’s approach to studying sects: he primarily employed Sunni methods, while occasionally citing Isma‘ili-Batini teachings as examples in certain discussions.

Those who consider Shahrastani to be Isma‘ili-Batini point to several issues discussed in his work as primary reasons, including: the special missions of the Ulul-‘Azm prophets [7:45]; the tradition that the first created being was the intellect (‘aql’) [7:63]; matters related to the Imamate and the spiritual aspect of prophethood; the mediatory role of angels and prophets [8:11]; and the reference to Hasan Sabbah’s Fusul al-Arba‘a, translated from Persian into Arabic [7:176–178].

According to the consensus of Muslim scholars, Shahrastani followed the Shafi‘i school in jurisprudence and the Ash‘ari school in theology. These assessments of his personal

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Journal: https://www.academicpublishers.org/journals/index.php/ijai

orientation help in understanding the methods employed in Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal. The work utilizes the following scholarly approaches:

a) The Method of Scientific Objectivity and Description

One of the aspects of Shahrastani's work that is highly valued by nearly all scholars is that the author placed special emphasis on scientific objectivity when studying religions and sects other than Islam. This feature is rarely found in earlier works. In this regard, Shahrastani followed the principle expressed by Imam al-Ash'ari concerning the study of different beliefs:

"I have seen people who write or speak about religions and sects, who search for errors in what others say, await the mistakes of their opponents, deliberately criticize them for these mistakes, misrepresent opposing views, and strive to present themselves as right. This is not the way of true scholars and rational individuals" [9:3].

When studying Greek, Indian, and other religions, Shahrastani refrains from declaring their beliefs to be either true or false. According to Shahrastani, this approach does not constitute a concealment of truth. As he emphasizes in the work:

"For through properly applied rational methods, the light of truth and the winds of falsehood cannot be concealed from discerning minds" [7:23].

In his use of the method of objectivity, Shahrastani clearly distinguishes himself from other scholars. Unlike many of his predecessors, he states that he directly read and analyzed the original texts of the beliefs he examined. For example, regarding the doctrinal views of Greek philosophers, he writes:

"Earlier Muslim scholars frequently relied on the works of Greek philosophers when studying religions other than Islam, and when their views conflicted, they strongly refuted them. We, however, have read those works, carefully examined their ideas, and analyzed them in detail" [8:65].

Shahrastani was criticized for not openly criticizing the religions he studied and for approaching them with objectivity. Nevertheless, in certain sections he does offer critiques and presents his own views, particularly with regard to Judaism and Christianity. It may also be noted that he refers to the influence of philosophers on Mu'tazilite doctrines and expresses the view that beliefs outside of Islam constitute bid'ah (religious innovation) [10:182–183].

b) The Hermeneutical Method

Among modern scholars, Mircea Eliade is regarded as one of the first to apply the hermeneutical method in the study of religions. Relying on religious sources, Eliade employed the hermeneutical approach to explain the emergence and development of religions, emphasizing the interpretation of religious meanings within their own internal frameworks [11:106–111].

Shahrastani was among the earliest scholars to employ a hermeneutical approach in discussing religious doctrines. In the "Third Introduction" of his work, he applies the hermeneutical method to the issue of "the first doubt that arose among humanity, its interpretation, and its origin." Shahrastani maintains that the plurality of religions and the differences among them emerged on the basis of doubt. He explains:

"The first doubt to arise among humanity was the doubt of Iblis. Iblis placed his personal opinion above divine text (nass), preferred desire and obstinacy over obedience, and believed himself superior to Adam on the basis of his own created nature" [7:23].

In accordance with the hermeneutical method, Shahrastani compares the issue of "doubt" with passages from the Gospel and the Torah, stating:

"From this doubt of Iblis, seven additional doubts emerged. These doubts were so deeply embedded by Iblis in the human mind that they later attained the status of values and

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beliefs. These doubts are elaborated upon in four sources: the Gospels of Luke, Mark, Matthew, and John; the command of prostration in the Torah; and the debate between Iblis and the angels" [7:23].

Interpreting the command of prostration, the exegete of the sacred text explains it as follows:

"God then commanded the angels, saying: 'Tell Iblis that his acknowledgment and submission regarding My being the Creator of all things are not sincere. Had they been sincere, he would not have asked, "Why?" I am God; there is no deity besides Me. There is no place for questioning what I do. The creatures I have created are the ones who shall be questioned".

Shahrastani adds that this theme is expressed in the Gospel as it is in the Torah [7:25].

Shahrastani does not cite the Qur'anic narratives concerning Adam and Satan, since people of his time were already well acquainted with these accounts. Thus, in studying the history of religions, Shahrastani seeks to explain—through what was a novel hermeneutical approach for his era—the sources that led to the distortion of religions and religious beliefs by means of comparative analysis. He ultimately concludes that the corruptions found in religious traditions are linked to "the doubts of the accursed Iblis" [7:27].

c) The Method of Opposition (Mukhalafah)

Another method employed by Shahrastani in Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal is the method of opposition (mukhalafah). In applying this method, Shahrastani does not directly criticize other belief systems. Rather, this approach is mainly used when discussing the beliefs of the People of the Book and the pre-Islamic (Jahiliyyah) traditions. He refers to the Arabs of the Jahiliyyah period as ummiyyūn (unlettered). He states:

"Before the prophethood of the Messenger of God, the People of the Book and the unlettered were opposed to one another. The unlettered were those who were illiterate. The People of the Book lived in Medina, while the unlettered lived in Mecca. The People of the Book followed the religions of the Asbāṭ (the twelve sons of Jacob, peace be upon him), whereas the unlettered followed the religion of their forefathers.

The direction of prayer (qiblah) of the first group was Bayt al-Maqdis in Jerusalem, while that of the second was Bayt Allah in Mecca. The former adhered to external legal rulings, whereas the latter followed the traditions of their forefathers. The opponents of the People of the Book were unbelievers such as Haman and Pharaoh, while the opponents of the second group were the Muslims, who affirmed the oneness of God" [7:189–191].

Shahrastani adopted the method he called "opposition" (mukhalafah) from the philosophy of Ibn Sina [1:108].

III. Shahrastani's Various Methods of Classifying Religions and Beliefs:

In Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal, Shahrastani employed various methods to classify religions and beliefs. He categorizes religions according to four main criteria:

1. Religions revealed through scripture: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity;
2. Religions whose scriptural revelation is doubtful: Manichaeism;
3. Religions not revealed through scripture but possessing their own legal or ritual codes: Sabianism;
4. Those without scripture or moral law: Philosophers, idolaters, and Brahmins [12:240].

Additionally, in the introduction to the second volume of his work, Shahrastani classifies beliefs as follows:

1. Some people deny what is known through perception and reason. These are the Sufis.

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2. Some accept what is known through the senses rather than reason. These are the naturalists.
3. Some accept what is known through both perception and intellect, but reject or do not recognize divine limits and commandments. These are the Dahriyyah and philosophers.
4. Some accept what is known through perception and intellect together with divine rules and commandments, but do not acknowledge Sharia or Islam. These are the Sabians.
5. Some, in addition to the above, acknowledge Sharia and divine commandments but do not recognize the Sharia of Muhammad (peace be upon him). These are the Jews and Christians.
6. Others accept all of the above, including Sharia and religion. These are the Muslims.

These constitute the categories of people who either accept or do not accept Sharia and religion" [8:4–5].

Additionally, Shahrastani divides religions in his work into two parts. In the first part, he discusses religions that were either revealed through scripture or not [7:46–235]. In the second part, the author provides information on beliefs that he describes as "contrary to reason and reflection, and full of superstition." The teachings in the second part are studied in four categories:

1. Sabians and their associated sects;
2. Greek philosophers;
3. Pre-Islamic Arabs (Jahiliyyah);
4. Indian religions and beliefs, including Brahmins and idolaters [13:25–26].

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that Abu'l-Fath Shahrastani strove for an objective approach in the study of religions and beliefs. While examining various religions and creeds, he sometimes offered critiques and delineated the boundaries of certain doctrinal issues. This approach ensures clarity in studying both the fundamental principles of religions and their historical foundations. For this reason, Shahrastani's classification of religions primarily relies on logic, and he considers beliefs contrary to Islam only within a defined methodological framework. In short, Shahrastani's *Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal* serves as a fundamental source for the objective study of the history of religions and for engagement with sacred texts.

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