Comparison of Religions in the Medieval Arab and Latin Traditions

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Abstract. According to some recent studies, until the 16th or 17th century, there was no concept of religion as such ("religion in general"), because before then, people only recognised their own faith as religion, and it was only after the European Reformation, which created conditions for religious pluralism, that this situation changed. The purpose of this article is to introduce and validate an alternative perspective. The authors argue that long before the European Reformation, in both the Islamic East and Christian West, the concept of "religion" ("faith," "sect," etc.) was utilised by certain scholars, who were engaged in the comparative analysis of religions. Typically, the conceptual framework for such analysis was provided by (proto)science and philosophy: thus, ʾAbū Maʿšar (d. 886) examined religions in the naturalistic context of astronomy (astrology), while al-Fārābī (d. c. 950) used the core concepts of Aristotle's moral and political philosophy. As early as the 13th century, Roger Bacon (c. 1214 – c. 1294) developed the ideas of his predecessors and produced what might be referred to as a synthetic medieval theory of religion, which, in turn, influenced the later discussions on "religion" and religions.

Keywords: philosophy of religion, medieval conceptualisations of religion, medieval Aristotelianism, al-Fārābī, Roger Bacon.

The narrative, according to which religion (or the category of "religion") was a modern invention, is a significant (often crucial and defining) component of several recent studies devoted to the history of philosophical and religious ideas.[1] One strategy used in this narrative is to demonstrate that, before the European Reformation, people were unable to compare religions since they were only aware of

[1] Such studies include, for example, Feil 1986–2012, Asad 1993, Cavanaugh 2009, Nongbri 2013.

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their own faith. As a result, the concept of religion as such ("religion in general") could not emerge. This story is told, for example, by Peter Harrison:

> The Reformation both set up the conditions of religious pluralism which provided the predominant focus for theological disputes in the seventeenth century and furnished a model for the treatment of religious forms, first by positing that other faiths were simply different manifestations of natural religion, and second by giving the non-Christian "religions" a negative role in parochial conflicts within Christendom. As the religious rites and beliefs of other peoples were discovered, and indeed, as information on the cults of antiquity came to light, the possible scope for comparison continued to increase… Controversy and apologetic thus led to the comparison of "religions," which in turn became the discipline of comparative religion.[2]

Here, of course, a number of questions arise. Were Christians really ignorant of "the religious rites and beliefs of other peoples" until the 17th century? Did "information on the cults of antiquity come to light" only at this time, and did earlier Christians (Church Fathers, for instance) know nothing of Greco-Roman polytheistic traditions? Or, if we are discussing the Islamic East rather than the Christian West, was it true that medieval Muslim theologians and scholars were unaware of the existence and peculiarities of the "rites and beliefs" of at least Christians and Jews and never compared their own with them? Did Muslim doxographers fail to recognise (and therefore conceptualise) the confessional diversity of their own community? Lastly, if religion (or the category of "religion") was to emerge from the theological disputes that accompanied the split of a previously unified tradition into several confessions, then why was "religion" not "invented" by Muslim theologians after Islam lost its original unity?

These are rhetorical questions, of course. There is every reason to assume that both in the Christian West and in the Islamic East, some attempts at comparative religious analysis were made as early as the Middle Ages. Of course, this does not imply that in the Middle Ages there were similar comparative religious studies, for example, to those of Max Müller. We are only saying that long before the 17th century, and even before the beginning of the European Reformation, some Eastern and Western thinkers were able to compare religious traditions based, not on a simple "(one's own) religion vs. (someone else's) superstition" dichotomy (which was typically employed at the time[3]), but on more complex criteria, which presupposed, among other things, a concept of "religion" ("faith," "sect," etc.) and ideas

[2] Harrison 1990, 9.

[3] A typical example of a discourse based on this dichotomy can be found in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, where the true religion of the Catholic Church is contrasted

about certain common features that different religious traditions should have. The purpose of this article is to support this claim.

We might start with the following observation: any comparison of religions (faiths, religious sects, etc.) suggests a conceptual framework within which it is carried out. If we remain within the conceptual framework of the monotheistic religious tradition as such, then it is very difficult (although still possible) to go beyond the "religion vs. superstition" dichotomy. However, the cultures of the Middle Ages – if, of course, we can, in principle, talk about such things as "the culture of the medieval Latin West" or "the culture of the medieval Arabic East" – although they were predominantly religious, were not limited to religion alone, but also contained a variety of non-religious elements. Some of these elements, for example, philosophy and the (proto)scientific disciplines traditionally included in it, were cross-cultural, that is, they were common to several cultures. Denying the existence of such elements in medieval cultures and, consequently, reducing these cultures to their respective religions leads to absurd conclusions (for example, that Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, translated into Arabic, *ipso facto* became part of Islam, and translated into Latin, part of Roman Catholicism). Furthermore, the cross-cultural nature of philosophy and (proto)science was thoroughly recognised by the vast majority of medieval thinkers. For example, Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī (1029-1070), in his *Ṭabaqāt al-ʾumam* (*Categories of Nations*), presented a description of the Indian, Persian and Greek scientific traditions, and specified the elements of each that were later incorporated into the body of Arabic science (in particular, he established that Arab scholars acquired the Indian astronomical tables (azyāǧ), known

with all other religious traditions, which are collectively defined as "superstition" that "offers divine worship either to whom it ought not, or in a manner it ought not" (*ST* II-II, q. 92, a. 1, in corp.). However, even under such circumstances, Thomas admitted that at the level of some practices (such as prayer, sacrifice, etc.) religion is no different from superstition (ibid., q. 97, a. 4, ad 2), and rather cautiously, but still he spoke out that these practices are natural and common to all people (ibid., q. 85, a. 1, in corp.). On the other hand, it would be wrong to assert that the "religion vs. superstition" dichotomy is a characteristic exclusively of medieval "integral" monotheism, which preceded the European Reformation, since it was also used in modernity, and not only by Christian theologians (which, of course, is expected), but also by philosophers who wrote about religion. For example, John Trenchard (1662–1723), in his characteristically titled *The Natural History of Superstition* (1709), classified as "superstition" everything that, in his opinion, differed from "true Religion," including "the Fables of the Heathens, the Alchoran of Mahomet, the more gross and impious forgeries of the Papists," etc. (Trenchard 1709, 9).

from the "teachings of Sirhind" (maḏhab al-Sind Hind), through their Persian colleagues).[4] For his part, Ibn Ḫaldūn wrote in his well-known *al-Muqaddimah* (*Introduction*):

> You should be aware that there are two types of knowledge (ʿulūm) that people in [other] countries encounter and that are transmitted through the learning process: natural (ṭabīʿaī), attainable through [our] ability to think, and revelatory (naqlī), acquired from the Creator. Natural knowledge includes the sciences of wisdom and philosophy (ʿulūm ḥikmiyyah falsafiyyah), which are studied by humans through their natural ability to think. Revelatory knowledge includes pre-established revelatory sciences, which rely on the Lawgiver's messages. In these sciences, the role of the [human] intellect is limited to relating secondary questions [literally "branches," "furūʿ"] to the first principles (ʾuṣūl) of science... As for the revelatory knowledge, it is found only in the Muslim religion (millah).[5]

Therefore, if philosophy and (proto)science were elements common to (at least some) medieval cultures, then we can reasonably assume that it was from them that medieval thinkers obtained the necessary conceptual tools with which they could compare religions using more complex criteria than the simple "religion vs. superstition" dichotomy. As we will show later, such tools were primarily borrowed from the fields of astronomy (astrology), philosophical ethics, and political philosophy.

The formation of the concept of "religion" in Islamic theology and philosophy was largely prepared by the Quranic text itself, which used the term "dīn" (pl. "adyān")[6] to denote precisely a religious community. The sixth āyah of the sūrah

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[4] Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī n.d., 16. In the context of our work, the point that follows is of special importance: Ṣāʿid maintained that there was a "divine science" (al-ʿilm al-ʾilāhī), which was developed by non-Muslims and supposedly preceded some of Kalam theology's accomplishments. Thus, he insisted that the Greeks were the first in human history to provide a rationale for the unity of divine attributes, and the Hindus were the first to preach monotheism (ibid., 15, 28). At the same time, the scholar did not ignore the differences between the religious traditions, for which he typically used the term "group" (firqah) and less often the term "religion" (dīn). See, for example, his description of the "groups" of the Sabians and Pythagoreans and his account of the "religion" of the Zoroastrian "Magi" (ibid., 15, 22, 29).

[5] Šaddādī 2005, II, 358–359. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Arabic are made by F.O. Nofal.

[6] The etymology of the word "dīn" remains the subject of heated debate. In particular, Arthur Jeffery insists on the Persian origin of the word, linking it to the Avestan "daena"

"The Unbelievers" (109) clearly supports this assertion by contrasting two semantically equivalent "religions" or "sects": "You have your religion, and I have mine." Apparently, already in the 7th century, the term "dīn" was used to indicate the religious affiliation of an individual or an entire group of people, and it was precisely this usage that was adopted by early Arabic-language writers who produced several masterpieces of both Islamic and Christian literature.

ʿAlī ibn Sahl al-Ṭabarī (d. after 861), the author of *al-Dīn wa al-Dawlah fī iṯbāt nubuwwat al-nabī Muḥammad* (*Faith and Victory in Proving the Truth* [*of the Mission*] *of the Prophet Muḥammad*), the first comprehensive anti-Christian Muslim treatise that has survived to this day, extensively employed the term "dīn" to identify and categorise religious doctrinal practices and attributed to his opponents a "religion" (dīn) consisting of "law" (šarīʿah), "belief" or "doctrine" (iʿtiqād), and ritual, including "fasting and prayer."[7] Besides that, ʿAlī, like his contemporary ʾAbū Maʿšar al-Balḫī (d. 886),[8] frequently used the term "millah" (pl. "milal") as a general synonym for "dīn" when discussing the religions of Christians, Jews, "Magi," and Muslims.[9] At the same time, al-Ṭabarī used the word "ahwāʾ" ("passionate opinions," "delusions") to point out what he considered to be erroneous beliefs.[10] A century and a half later, this term was employed in the title of Ibn Ḥazm's (d. 1064) doxographic encyclopedia, *al-Fiṣal fī al-milal wa al-ahwāʾ wa al-niḥal* (*Distinguishing between Religions, Delusions, and Sects*).

A similar terminological usage can be found in medieval Arabic-language Christian texts. For instance, Theodore ʾAbū Qurrah (d. c. 830), in his *Maymar fī wuǧūd al-Ḫāliq wa al-dīn al-qawīm* (*Memra on the Existence of the Creator and the True Religion*), regularly employed the term "dīn" when categorising the beliefs he was aware of. According to Theodore,

> Religions (adyān) that do not [accept] the Gospel have never achieved [a consistent doctrine about God]. On the contrary, they describe their gods in accordance with the desires of their human, earthly minds. Some say that the planets are divine, some say God has two sons (the Devil and Horomazes, who copulates with his mother), some

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and distinguishing it from the common Semitic "din," which means "judgment" or "retribution." Nonetheless, it is also conceivable that "dīn" was derived from its Hebrew equivalent, initially as a legal and later as a religious-legal term; we can identify a similar etymology in Yiddish (see Jeffery 1938, 133).

[7] Nuwayhiḍ 1973, 45, 110–111.

[8] Yamamoto and Burnett 2000, I, 7–11.

[9] Nuwayhiḍ 1973, 207–208.

[10] Ibid., 108.

> say that God is a one single person, and some say there are two gods – good and evil… But we respond: these attributes are earthly, not divine.[11]

At the same time, ʾAbū Qurrah insisted that religion is not only a doctrinal construct but also a practical (namely, ethical and ritual) one, and it can either draw people toward or away from virtue (faḍl) through liturgical and ritualistic acts.[12] Consequently, in his view, "dīn" refers to a system of beliefs and ritualised actions intended to strictly regulate the relationship between humans and the divine (nāsūt), which is described differently in different religions. Furthermore, according to ʾAbū Qurrah, the more a religion's doctrinal and practical elements align with the idea of goodness and rational truths, the more evidence of genuine divine revelation we discover in that religion.

The pinnacle of theoretical development for the concepts of "dīn" and "millah" was *Kitāb al-millah* (*The Book of Religion*), written by the Arab Peripatetic al-Fārābī (d. c. 950). In this book, the philosopher summarised the evolution of terms described above and gave them the following definitions:

> Religion (millah) is specific views (ārā') and actions (afʿāl) restricted with stipulations and prescribed for the community (ǧamʿ) by its First Head (raʾīs ʾawwal). The Head hopes that, by using religion, the community will achieve a certain goal – either within itself or set by itself.[13] The community can be a tribe, a city or a region, or even a great nation (ʾummah) or many nations. If the First Head is a truly virtuous leader, then by what he prescribes, he guides himself and all those under his rule to the ultimate happiness that is truly happiness; and that religion is virtuous religion. But if the rule of this Head is ignorant (ǧāhiliyyah), then by what he prescribes, he seeks to obtain an ignorant good (ḫayr) – either the necessary good of bodily health, or wealth, or pleasure, or honour, or greatness, or power – only for himself and makes his subjects tools he uses to achieve his goal and to keep it in his possession. Or he seeks to obtain this good only for them and not for himself, or both for himself and them; and these leaders are the best for the ignorant [community].[14]

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[11] Dīk 1982, 241–242.

[12] Ibid., 243–247.

[13] This definition apparently aims to complement the ones provided by al-Fārābī in his treatises *Kitāb al-ḥurūf* (*The Book of Letters*) and *Taḥṣīl al-saʿādah* (*The Acquisition of Happiness*). In the first work, he noted: "Religion… emerges when laws pertaining to theoretical and practical [matters] are created, and when methods of persuasion, teaching, and education are applied to them" (Mahdī 1970, 152). In the second treatise, al-Fārābī touched upon the epistemological value of religion, stating that "the ancients called religion the totality of intelligibles, judgments about which are made rhetorically" (Bū Milḥim 1995, 90).

[14] Mahdī 1991, 43.

Thus, al-Fārābī maintained that the concept of "millah" is universal and that any system of beliefs and practices that has social significance qualifies as a religion in the strictest sense of the word. Along with that, he used the terms "millah" and "dīn" interchangeably as synonyms.[15] According to al-Fārābī, the doctrinal part of religion is defined by *theoretical* (naẓariyyah) and *practical* (ʾirādīyyah) *views*, which, in the case of "virtuous religion," are determined by the corresponding branches of philosophical knowledge. The *theoretical views* are formulated in the "creeds" and concern the following topics: the attributes of God; the attributes, actions, and ranks of spiritual beings; the attributes, parts, and levels of the world; the emergence of the first bodies and the emergence of other bodies from them; the connection of the parts of the world with each other; the justice of the world order; the origin of man and the formation of the soul in him; human intellect, its rank in the world, and its position in relation to God and the spiritual beings; prophecy and revelation; death and the future life (happiness for the virtuous and righteous, and torment for the sinners and wicked).[16] In their turn, the *practical* (or volitional) *views* incorporate hagiographic and ascetic elements that establish the believer's attitude toward the community's history and ethical restrictions. Lastly, al-Fārābī argued that the liturgical and genuinely social significance of religion is determined by the *actions* it prescribes, of which the following can be listed: those by which God is praised and extolled; those that praise the spiritual beings and the angels; those that praise the prophets and the most virtuous rulers; those that blame the most depraved kings and the errant leaders; and those that regulate relationships between people and communicate what is just in respect to each such action.[17]

In general, then, religion, according to al-Fārābī, is a social construct shaped by polis practices: the "virtuous city" follows the principles of true philosophy and "virtuous religion," while the "ignorant city" distorts the system of views based on theoretical and practical philosophy and the set of legal norms preached by the Lawgiver and developed by the expert in the Law, the faqīh.[18]

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, we will now move on to the Latin Christian tradition. Christianity, almost since its beginning, has been in polemic with two religions, Judaism and so-called "paganism." The dispute with Judaism was

[15] Ibid., 46.

[16] Ibid., 44–45.

[17] Ibid., 46.

[18] It is no coincidence that in his *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm* (*Calculation of Sciences*), al-Fārābī placed civil science (ʿilm madanī), law (fiqh), and speculative theology (kalām) in one (namely, the fifth) group. See Bū Milḥim 1996, 79–86.

conducted primarily on the basis of exegesis of biblical texts, while in order to criticise paganism, Christian theologians and apologists extensively drew on philosophical ideas and concepts (in particular, those that belonged to the tradition dating back to Euhemerus[19]). Despite the fact that the category of "paganism" was rather vague,[20] the notion of three major religions emerged in late Antiquity: "There are three religions (religiones) in the world… I mean the Jews, the Christians, and the gentiles."[21]

After the pre-Christian ("pagan") religions in Europe had all but vanished, the polemic with paganism lost its relevance (although some Latin writers, out of loyalty to tradition, reproduced the polemical ideas of Augustine and Lactantius even in the 15th–16th centuries). On the other hand, the Arab conquests and the subsequent spread of Islam drastically altered the Mediterranean's religious landscape and shaped new perspectives for theological discussions. Islam was initially perceived by Christian theologians as a kind of Arian (or Nestorian) heresy, but beginning with the 12th century, it has also come to be interpreted (at least in the West) as a distinct religious tradition.[22] The first Latin translation of the Koran (1143), which was given the title *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* (*The Law of Muhammad the Pseudo-Prophet*), provides evidence that both of these views could coexist in some way. On the one hand, Peter the Venerable, in the introduction to this translation, wrote about the "heresy of the Saracens," which is "the concentration of all heresies."[23] On the other hand, the very use, especially in the title, of the phrase "lex

[19] See Roubekas 2017, Digeser and Barboza 2021.

[20] In Christian literature of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the word "paganism" (or its synonym "idolatry") was generally used to refer to all polytheistic or henotheistic religious traditions known to Christians. Christian authors, on the one hand, were well aware that these traditions might vary greatly from one another. For example, Thomas Aquinas noted that "idolatry was not a unified religion (una religio), but varied among different [peoples], since different [peoples] established different gods for themselves to worship" (*In BDT*, q.3, a.3, ad 4). However, on the other hand, Christian polemicists showed little interest in the differences between pagan traditions; they *a priori* assumed that all the gods of all these traditions were either demons or mere inventions of superstitious and ignorant people. Accordingly, they sought to describe and explain this alleged common origin of pagan deities rather than the specific features of the cults dedicated to them. Only a very few Latin medieval writers, including Roger Bacon, who will be discussed later, were interested in the peculiarities of pagan religions and, for example, drew a distinction between paganism and idolatry.

[21] Migne 1841, 496. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Latin are made by A.V. Appolonov.

[22] See Daniel 1980, 273.

[23] Bibliander 1550, 1.

Mahumet" implies that Islam was regarded as a tradition on a par with two other traditions, Christianity ("lex Christi") and Judaism ("lex Moysi"); so that the translator Robert of Ketton could even say that "the law of Muhammad" is "the greatest testimony and strongest proof of the sanctity and superiority of our law."[24] It should also be noted that in his translation, Robert used the term "lex" ("law") to render the Arabic "dīn" as meaning "religion", and this fact indicates that in a certain context the concept of "lex" could be identical, or at least very similar, to the concept of "religion."[25] Accordingly, we can reasonably assume that the three mentioned "laws" (of Mohammed, Christ and Moses) were perceived as *religious* traditions, that is, as traditions possessing a specific theoretical-dogmatic, practical-ritual, communal-institutional, and similar religious dimensions. Therefore, we can say that by the end of the 12th century, the concept of "tres religiones" ("three religions") from Augustine of Hippo's time was somewhat superseded by the idea of "tres leges" ("three laws").

However that may be, despite all the changes in the religious landscape and in its conceptualisation, polemics with non-Christians remained one of the primary responsibilities of Catholic theologians. Accordingly, beginning in the second half of the 12th century, works started to appear in which Christianity was compared with other religions, taking into account these developments and new translations of non-Christian literature. Of course, the authors of these works pursued exclusively polemical and missionary goals; nevertheless, their comparative studies were based not on the simple "religion vs. superstition" dichotomy but on more intricate principles that presupposed the discovery and documentation of certain features common to all or most religions. An example of literature of this kind is *Pugio fidei adversus Mauros et Iudaeos* (*The Dagger of Faith Against the Muslims and the Jews*, c. 1270) by Ramon Martí (or Raymundus Martini). The author polemicises not only with Judaism and Islam, but also with the "errors" of ancient philosophers,[26] demonstrating

[24] Ibid., 8.

[25] See Glei and Reichmuth 2012, 260–268.

[26] Martí distinguishes between two types of doctrines that claim to explain the universe more or less fully: those that are founded on a law that is (presumably) revealed by God and those "that contain no law except natural law" (Maussac 1651, 154). He lists Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as belonging to the first type, and the doctrines of Epicureans, "naturalists" (naturales), and "philosophers" (philosophi) as belonging to the second. Thus, Martí, using the "presence/absence of law" criterion, distinguishes between religious doctrines (the realm of revealed knowledge) and philosophical schools (the realm of rational, or natural, knowledge). This seems to suggest that the term "(revealed) law" is equivalent in this context to the term "religion."

excellent (for his time) knowledge of the material.[27] Of particular interest is the structure of this work: Martí begins his narration with philosophical theology (that is, with rationally demonstrable propositions about God and the human soul, which are accepted by all three religious laws and even by some philosophical schools) and then moves on to the revealed theology (that is, to the key and in some cases unique dogmas of the three religions that were supposedly revealed by God through his prophets). In the first, philosophical, part of *The Dagger of Faith*, we may find the outlines of what would later become known as natural religion, understood as a set of certain principles supposedly common to all (or most) religions and not dependent on supernatural divine revelation.[28] But Martí didn't come up with any such conception himself. This was apparently primarily because, as the author himself states, "the first and main matter of this *Dagger*" was made up of "the testimonies of the Law, the Prophets, and the entire Old Testament."[29] Put differently, Martí conducted his comparative studies mostly within the conceptual framework of biblical revealed theology, only occasionally exceeding it, and therefore, he was unable to formulate what could be deemed a natural religion concept (and, it is safe to believe, he even had no intention of doing so).

Against the background of such theological studies, the attempt at a comparative analysis of religious traditions undertaken by Roger Bacon (c. 1214 – c. 1294) seems exceptional and unmatched. Certainly, Bacon, like all Christian medieval thinkers, was engaged in the comparison of religions for polemical and missionary purposes. However, unlike all his Latin contemporaries and predecessors, he conducted such comparative studies within the conceptual framework of moral, or

[27] Szpiech 2017, 157.

[28] Regarding the philosophical systems discussed in *The Dagger of Faith*, Martí is solely interested in their "errors," or their discrepancies with Christian doctrine. Thus, he notes that the Epicureans deny both the existence of God and the immortality of the soul; the "naturalists" acknowledge God's existence but reject the immortality of the soul; and the "philosophers" accept both God's existence and the immortality of the soul, yet they disagree with Christianity on matters such as the creation of the world, God's knowledge of individual things, and the resurrection of the dead. During a philosophical polemic against the "incorrect" views of these schools, Martí identifies a number of propositions that are both natural (in the sense that they are known by the "natural reason" of man, without recourse to divine revelation) and shared by the three laws, or religions. In modernity, some authors (such as Edward Herbert of Cherbury or Salomon van Til) used similar propositions (the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, the divine retribution, etc.) to formulate various versions of natural religion, although not all of them used the term itself.

[29] Maussac 1651, 2.

political, philosophy.[30] In his opinion, the primary tool of a Christian missionary should be moral philosophy, since only with its help can one convince "infidels" (as well as doubting Christians) that "it is necessary to recognise and believe in the true religion (secta fidelis), which the entire human race must accept."[31]

In explaining and detailing this position of Bacon, it should be noted, firstly, that when speaking of religion and religions, he mainly used the terms "secta" and "lex."[32] The term "lex" and its use by Latin writers of the 12th and 13th centuries have already been discussed above; as for the term "secta," it must be said that its use in the sense of "religious sect," "religious community," or "philosophical school" was quite common in the Western patristic and medieval tradition.[33] However, two works appear to have had a direct influence on Bacon's use and interpretation of this terminology: *De scientiis* (*On the Sciences*, a Latin translation of al-Fārābī's treatise *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm*, which contains all the main issues of the *Kitāb al-millah* discussed above) and *De magnis coniunctionibus* (*On the Great Conjunctions*, a Latin translation of ʾAbū Maʿšar al-Balḫī's treatise *Kitāb al-milal wa al-duwal*, also known

[30] According to Bacon, "this practical [philosophy] is called moral and political science (moralis et civilis sciencia), which orders man to God, his neighbour, and himself, and also proves [the truth] of this ordering, and effectively induces and attracts us to it. And this science tells how man attains salvation through virtue and happiness, and it leads to this salvation, as far as philosophy can. And from this it is clear in general that this science is nobler than all other parts of philosophy" (Delorme and Massa 1953, 4). Bacon explains the origin of the term "political science" and its use as a synonym for "moral science" as follows: "this moral science is called political science (civilis sciencia) by Aristotle and others, because it shows the rights of citizens (cives) and cities (civitates). And since cities used to bear sway over regions (as Rome ruled the world), this science, although it is called civil from "city," formulates the rights of kingdom and empire. This science firstly teaches us how to constitute the laws and rules of living, and secondly it teaches that these are to be believed and approved, and that men are to be urged to act and live according to those laws" (ibid. 5–6).

[31] Delorme and Massa 1953, 187.

[32] Even so, Bacon sporadically used the term "religio." For example, when considering the importance of astronomy (or, more precisely, astrology) for theology, he spoke of the influence of the planets on "fides et religio et cultura Dei" ("faith, religion, and the worship of God") and on "secta religionum et fidei" ("sect of religions and faith") (Bridges 1897, I, 255). In addition, Bacon adapted Cicero's classic distinction between religion and superstition (Delorme and Massa 1953, 32).

[33] For example, Peter Abelard (1079–1142), in his *Dialogue Between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*, speaks of "different sects (sectae) of faith" (Cousin 1859, II, 644), meaning by them, respectively, the natural law on which philosophy is based, Judaism, and Christianity.

as *Kitāb al-qirānāt*), where the terms "secta" and "lex" were used mainly to translate the Arabic word "millah". Secondly, it is important to note Bacon's dependence on al-Fārābī when considering the pivotal issue of assigning discourse on religion (religions) to the field of political and moral philosophy. Beyond that, Bacon borrowed certain strategies from al-Fārābī for identifying the true religion, or rather, ways of demonstrating that one religion (naturally, in Bacon's case, this was Christianity) was true, and all others were false.[34] In addition, it can be noted that Bacon's peculiar idea that Aristotle had already been engaged in the comparison of religions in his *Politics* likely stems from a misinterpretation of the text of *De scientiis*.[35] As for ʾAbū Maʿšar, Bacon borrowed from him the fundamental principles of the "horoscope of religions," which will be covered in greater depth later.

However, even if the ideas of al-Fārābī and ʾAbū Maʿšar served as a kind of foundation for Bacon's comparative studies, one cannot help but notice that he developed them in a very inventive way to create his own completely original theory. As previously stated, Bacon's primary motivation for studying religious traditions was to demonstrate the veracity of Christianity, and he believed that this demonstration should be conducted within the framework of philosophy rather than theology. This latter view was based on the quite obvious conclusion that it is impossible to argue with the "infidels" and convince them of the truth of Christianity, relying on the essential and unique tenets of the Christian religion, since the "infidels" do not accept them. Therefore, according to Bacon, the main tool of a Christian missionary or apologist should be "that which is common for both faithful believers and infidels, namely, philosophy."[36] But this tool can only be used effectively if there is a universal religious-philosophical language (which includes such con-

[34] Bacon makes it clear that he appropriated from *De scientiis* the two primary approaches to judging the veracity of religions ("modos probandi sectas"), namely "from the perfection of the founder" and "from miracles" (Delorme and Massa 1953, 219–221). Moreover, he also seems to have appropriated from it a kind of general apologetic strategy, which involves, on the one hand, finding philosophical arguments for the truth of a particular religion, and, on the other hand, discovering rational arguments demonstrating the falsity of all other religions (cf. Schupp 2006, 126–132).

[35] According to Bacon, "Aristotle, in his *Politics*, considers the different kinds of sects and says that he wishes to examine four or five of the simple sects and laws of cities (civitates) and see which laws corrupt cities and kingdoms (regna) and which do not… as Alpharabius teaches in his book *On the Sciences*, expounding the view of Aristotle regarding the sects" (Delorme and Massa 1953, 188). For a possible source of this opinion, see Schupp 2006, 118.

[36] Delorme and Massa 1953, 196.

cepts as "God," "soul," "immortality," etc.) or even a set of basic religious-philosophical principles formulated in such a language, which are common to all known religions; otherwise, philosophy would be no more appropriate for apologetic and missionary work than revealed theology. And Bacon does, indeed, define at least four such principles: 1) all religions (sectae) teach the existence of God or gods;[37] 2) all religions include practices associated with the worship of God or gods;[38] 3) all religions teach the immortality of the soul and an afterlife;[39] 4) all religions rely on (alleged) revelation, "for anyone who preaches (proponit) a religion refers to divine authority to be more readily believed."[40] It would be tempting to describe what we have here as a system of natural religion. But in reality these principles are rather scattered generalisations, used by Bacon as a part of the coordinate system within which he classified the "historical" or "revealed" religions, that is, those that were established by historical figures ("legislators"), who referred to divine revelation ("divine authority").

In some way or another, it can be said that religion is natural for human beings (at least when it comes to a basic belief in God or gods[41]), and that all religious traditions share some fundamental principles. However, it is obvious that the "historical" or "revealed" religions differ greatly from each other. Bacon believed that these differences could be explained, firstly, by the influence of celestial bodies on individuals and entire nations;[42] secondly, by differences in the purposes of the respective religious laws (or customs, *consuetudines vivendi*, which in some religions take the place of written religious law); and thirdly, by differences in the amount of "true" knowledge about God that different religions possess.

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[37] Ibid., 198.

[38] Little 1912, 67.

[39] Delorme and Massa 1953, 206.

[40] Ibid., 211.

[41] According to Bacon, all people possess an innate knowledge of God's existence, but this knowledge is "weak" (debilis), and the sins that each person has weaken it even more; this is why "some imagine that there are many gods, while others deify the stars or things of the sublunary world" (ibid., 199).

[42] We should not be surprised that Bacon actively incorporated astrological ideas and concepts into his moral philosophy. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, astrology (astronomy) was regarded as a mathematical science; however, Bacon pointedly notes that since moral philosophy is the "mistress" of all sciences, the conclusions of these sciences can (and even should) be used by it as its own principles. In this sense, astrology's conclusions regarding the influence of planets on individuals and societies are one of the starting points for philosophical discussion on religion and religions (ibid., 4–5).

Bacon maintained that the influence of the celestial bodies causes "the first and main difference" between religions because, according to him, they incline "people to accept [certain] laws either always, or in most cases, or in such a way that the law is accepted with greater willingness."[43] This doctrine, sometimes referred to as the horoscope of religions, most likely has its roots in the ancient Persian and Greek astrology; however, it was known to Bacon and his European contemporaries mainly through the aforementioned ʾAbū Maʿšar's treatise *On the Great Conjunctions*. In medieval astrology (or astronomy, as these terms were essentially synonymous in the Middle Ages), a conjunction was an event where two planets appeared to be visually close to each other in the sky. Furthermore, medieval astrology recognised seven planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, the Moon, and the Sun), and ʾAbū Maʿšar's theory of conjunctions included the idea that certain conjunctions of Jupiter with Saturn influenced the emergence of new prophets and religions.[44] Interpreting ʾAbū Maʿšar, Bacon, for his part, counted six main laws that have emerged or will emerge under the influence of the conjunctions of Jupiter with the other six planets: "the law of Mars" (embodied in the religion of the "ancient Chaldeans"), "the law of the Sun" (exemplified by "the religion of the Egyptians"), "the law of Saturn" (Judaism), "the law of Mercury" (Christianity), "the law of Venus" (connected to Islam[45]), and "the law of the Moon" (the future religion of the Antichrist).[46] Besides these six main laws and their corresponding religions, Bacon mentioned composite "sectae" that emerged under the influence of several planets. For example, Bacon linked idolatry (by which he apparently meant the religions of India) to both "the law of Mars" and "the law of the Sun"[47] and placed "the religion of the Tatars" under the influence of Mars and Mercury.[48] Furthermore, he believed that the impact of certain "constellations" can also explain why individuals (and sometimes entire nations) change their religious beliefs and why one religion borrows ideas and practices from another.[49]

This primary classification, "secundum viam astronomiae" ("according to the principles of astronomy"), is supplemented by another one, "secundum diversitates finium" ("according to the difference in ends"). Within the framework of the

[43] Delorme and Massa 1953, 193.

[44] See Yamamoto and Burnett 2000, I, 37–43, 149–157.

[45] Bacon noted that, although Muslims "primarily follow the law of Venus, they borrow much from Christian and Jewish laws" (Delorme and Massa 1953, 194).

[46] Ibid., 193–194.

[47] Ibid., 194–195.

[48] Ibid., 194.

[49] Ibid., 193–194.

latter, Bacon clarified in a way the content of those religious laws, which he believed originated as a result of the celestial bodies' influence. Citing Aristotle, al-Fārābī, and Boethius, he pointed out that the laws that guide human communities can be either beneficial or destructive, depending on the ends that these laws establish as behavioural guidelines. According to Bacon, there are five (destructive) "simple ends" (carnal pleasure, wealth, honour, power, worldly glory), to which he added "happiness of the other life" ("felicitas alterius vitae"), understood as an end common to all religious laws (since all religions teach about the immortality of the soul and the life after death). This happiness, however, can be interpreted in different ways: either as corporeal delight, or as spiritual delight, or as a combination of both. Consequently, the content of a particular religion is shaped by a certain simple end or ends (because a single religious law might guide a person toward multiple ends), as well as by ideas about the nature of afterlife happiness. For example, according to Bacon, pure pagans (Pagani puri), such as the Prussians, strive for carnal pleasures, wealth, and honours in their earthly life, and they desire the same for themselves in the next one.[50] Christians, on the contrary, aim for spiritual delight in the hereafter even while they use material things in this life "due to human frailty."[51] Notably, this classification does not address issues such as deities, prophets, spiritual beings, the origin of the world, and the like. Bacon examines religions within the theoretical framework of Peripatetic moral and political philosophy and works nearly exclusively with ethical and social categories.

To this we can add the following: although the classification of religions "secundum diversitates finium," just like the primary astrological classification, presumes the existence of six "main religions" ("sectae principales"),[52] the list of such religions in this case appears different and includes paganism, idolatry, the religion of the Tatars, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The reason for this discrepancy could be that Bacon's astrological studies addressed the issue of how some major religions – including those that had vanished by the 13th century – arose (or will arise, if we are speaking about the religion of the Antichrist) in accordance with specific planetary conjunctions, whereas the classification "secundum diversitates finium" referred to the major religions that existed at the time that Bacon wrote his works. Accordingly, paganism and idolatry replaced the vanished religions of the Chaldeans and Egyptians, and the religion of the Tatars substituted the not-yet-emerged religion of the Antichrist.

[50] Ibid., 190.

[51] Ibid., 191–192.

[52] In all his classifications, Bacon maintained the overall number of "main religions" at six, that is, the number of possible conjunctions of Jupiter.

The list of "main religions" changes once again in the case of the third classification, which is made "secundum usum gentium" ("according to the customs of the peoples"). It now includes paganism, idolatry, the religion of the Tatars, Judaism, and Christianity, as well as the religion of the Antichrist (which, however, seems to fall out of the general line and is not given any significant consideration). Formally, this classification is based on how religions differ with respect to topics like polytheism versus monotheism, the presence versus absence of a priesthood, the presence versus absence of sacred scriptures, the presence versus absence of places of public worship, and so on. Factually, though, it is a hierarchical scheme in which religions are arranged according to how closely they align (or do not align) with Christian doctrine and cult practices. Therefore, at the lowest level are the pagans, who "know the least about God, have no priests, but each of them invents (fingit) a god for himself at his own discretion, worships what he wants, and makes sacrifices whenever he wants."[53] Idolatry ranks second, followed by Tatar religion on the third level, Judaism on the fourth, and Christianity at the top of the hierarchy. The religion of the Antichrist, as has already been said above, is mentioned only in passing, as a law that "will temporarily overcome all other laws," except perhaps for a small group of chosen Christians.[54]

It is thus quite obvious that Bacon's study of religions is connected with Christian theology only functionally, that is, insofar as the moral philosophy within which his discourse unfolds is the "handmaiden" of theology and supports the latter with rational argumentation. But whatever we may say about the aims of Bacon's comparative researches, they themselves were based almost entirely on theories and sources of non-Christian origin, including occult and astrological ones. Naturally, this situation could not help but affect the results obtained by Bacon. His concept of the religious horoscope (which assumed, among other things, that the origin of Christianity – and even the birth of Christ himself, insofar as his human nature is concerned[55] – was somehow embedded in a series of similar events associated with the alternation of planetary conjunctions) was at variance with the Christian doctrine. The problem was certainly not with the general principles of astrology as such, since the overwhelming majority of Christian writers (including, for example, Thomas Aquinas[56]) agreed that celestial bodies could influence the lives of individuals and societies. The issue was that Bacon's religious horoscope

[53] Ibid., 192.

[54] Ibid., 193.

[55] See Sidelko 1996.

[56] *ST* II-II, q. 95, a. 5, ad 2.

presupposed the replacement of the *sacred* history of *one religion* (namely, Christianity), as it is documented in scripture and tradition, with a kind of *natural* history of *religions*, integrated into (likewise natural) astrological history, or historical astrology. To this, it may be added that Bacon's work on the horoscope of religions did not remain a unique and isolated fact but was continued by other Western authors[57], and that a logical outcome of these studies was the appearance of doctrines similar to the theory of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), who liberated the history of religions, not only from Christian sacred history, but also from astrology, leaving only the idea of the life cycles and successive alternation of "sects" ("sètte")[58].

In conclusion, the following can be said. Since at least the 9th century, Arabic theological and philosophical literature has used the terms "dīn" and "millah" to refer to and discuss religions. To use Peter Harrison's words quoted above, we can say that it was "controversy and apologetic" that initially led Arab scholars to "the comparison of religions." But whatever the original intentions, the comparative studies themselves often took on a life of their own. For example, ʾAbū Maʿšar considered religions in the naturalistic context of astrology (astronomy), subordinating them to some degree to the influence of the celestial bodies. Al-Fārābī, for his part, regarded religion as a set of beliefs and norms of conduct established by the first ruler of a polis, which made it an instrument of governance and placed it in the context of moral and political philosophy. In the Latin West, these ideas of the Arab thinkers were taken up and developed by Roger Bacon, who created what can be called the synthetic medieval theory of religion. This theory, which made use of the most advanced philosophical and (proto)scientific tools available at the time, definitely operated with a concept of "religion" and certain notions of common religious ideas and phenomena (such as belief in God (gods), sacred scriptures, collective worship, sacrifices, etc.) and, consequently, also implied the actual comparison of religions.

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[57] For example, by Pietro d'Abano (c. 1257–1316) and Pierre d'Ailly (1350–1420).

[58] Martelli 2018, 478–480.

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