

Historical Inquiry in Shi'i Studies: Description, Explanation, and Epistemic Justification

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Abstract

This article examines the methodological foundations of historical studies in the field of Islamic and Shi'i thought, with particular emphasis on the dual processes of description and explanation as constitutive components of scholarly justification. The study aims to clarify the nature of historical inquiry by distinguishing between purely descriptive approaches and descriptive-analytical approaches that seek to explain historical phenomena through causal, rational, and narrative models. Employing a qualitative and analytical method grounded in epistemological analysis, the article surveys major theories of historical explanation and investigates their application within religious and doctrinal research. The findings demonstrate that explanatory historical studies are inseparable from justificatory frameworks, especially in contexts where belief, truth, and epistemic authority are presupposed. The article further argues that coherentism and reliabilism represent the two most influential methodological approaches governing justification in Shi'i historical studies, each yielding distinct outcomes in the interpretation of sources and propositions. The study concludes that greater methodological clarity regarding justification, source selection, and explanatory models can significantly reduce ambiguities in contemporary historical research and contribute to more rigorous and epistemically grounded studies of Shi'i intellectual tradition.

Keywords: Historical Methodology, Shi'i Thought, Description and Explanation, Epistemic Justification, Coherentism and Reliabilism, Historiography of Islam.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context of the Study

Historical studies occupy a central position in the scholarly investigation of Islamic and Shi'i thought, as they provide a systematic means of engaging with the intellectual, doctrinal, and social dimensions of religious traditions across time. Scholars of Shi'i studies have long sought to examine both the internal structures of Shi'i doctrines and their external historical contexts, employing diverse methodological tools drawn from historiography, epistemology, and religious studies. In contemporary classifications of religious research, such inquiries are often divided into primary studies, which address religion and its essential domains directly, and intermediary or instrumental studies, which function as methodological means for accessing and interpreting religious sources. Within this framework, historical inquiry serves as a critical intermediary discipline, shaping how religious propositions, narratives, and doctrines are understood and justified.

1.2. Theoretical and Methodological Grounds

Despite the widespread application of historical methods, the types, status, and modes of methodology in the study of religions—particularly in relation to historical investigations—have remained largely understudied and insufficiently theorized. This methodological underdevelopment persists even though the nature of the questions posed by scholars is closely tied to the methodological frameworks governing their research traditions. As has been observed, “the nature of the questions raised by each orientalist reflects the methodology prevailing among orientalists and their schools of thought” (Hosseinzadeh Shanehchi, 2003, p. 10). Consequently, a critical understanding of methodological orientations is indispensable for evaluating historical studies, especially where external (orientalist) and internal (religious) perspectives intersect.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

This lack of methodological clarity has contributed to enduring ambiguities regarding the nature, scope, and objectives of historical studies in religious scholarship. A central point of contention concerns whether historical inquiry should be confined to the description and reporting of past events and beliefs, or whether it should aim to explain historical phenomena by uncovering their causes, reasons, and structural conditions. These ambiguities are particularly pronounced in the study of Islamic and Shi'i traditions, where historical research is inseparable from epistemic presuppositions concerning belief, truth, and justificatory authority. The divergence between insider and outsider perspectives has further

intensified methodological tensions, often resulting in conflicting interpretations of the same historical data.

1.4.Objectives and Scope of the Study

The present study seeks to address these challenges by systematically examining the role of description and explanation as the two foundational components of non-purely descriptive historical studies in Shi'i thought. Its primary objective is to clarify the methodological and epistemological dimensions of historical inquiry by focusing on the justificatory component through which historical propositions are evaluated and accepted. In doing so, the study explores how historical knowledge is constructed through the interaction of evidence, interpretation, and epistemic commitment, and how different explanatory models—causal, rational, narrative, functional, and structural—operate within religious and doctrinal research.

1.5.Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its explicit attention to justification as a decisive yet often neglected element of historical methodology in Shi'i studies. While previous research has addressed source criticism and forms of historical explanation, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the epistemological frameworks that determine how historical claims are legitimized. By comparatively examining coherentism and reliabilism as two influential justificatory approaches, this article demonstrates how methodological commitments directly affect the interpretation of Qur'anic texts, Ḥadith reports, and historical testimonies, as well as the resolution of conflicts among competing historical propositions.

1.6.Contribution to the Field

By positioning itself at the intersection of historiography, epistemology, and Shi'i doctrinal studies, this article fills a significant gap in existing scholarship concerning the methodological foundations of explanatory historical research in religious studies. It offers a conceptual framework for distinguishing descriptive historical writing from descriptive-analytical inquiry and for assessing the epistemic implications of different justificatory models. In this context, the study also provides a comparative outline of methodological approaches employed in historical studies, thereby illustrating how divergent methodological commitments shape both research questions and interpretive outcomes.

1.7.Structure of the Article

The article is structured as follows. The first section examines the nature and scope of historical studies and introduces the distinction between descriptive and continuity-based approaches to historical phenomena. The second section analyzes the concepts of description and explanation and reviews major types of historical explanation. The third section focuses on



the methodological component of justification, with particular emphasis on coherentist and reliabilist perspectives. The final section compares these approaches and summarizes their implications for contemporary historical research in Shi'i thought.

2. Historical Studies Based on Description and Explanation

Scholars of Shi'i thought seek to investigate all internal and external dimensions and structures of Shi'i intellectual tradition, as well as its broader domains, and in doing so have employed a variety of methodological approaches. It should be noted that in more recent classifications of studies related to religion and religiosity, such inquiries have been divided—based on a functional perspective—into primary studies and intermediary or instrumental studies. Within this framework, primary studies pertain to religion itself and its various domains, whereas disciplines such as Ḥadīth and Qur'anic exegesis function as tools for attaining religion and for understanding the totality of its constituent domains (Gharamaleki, 2001, p. 49).

Although Western scholars of Shi'ism themselves differ in their application of historical methodologies, one cannot overlook a certain degree of coherence among their approaches, given the similarities in research methods and investigative tools commonly employed in Western scholarship. Moreover, regardless of how research domains are classified¹ or the degree of precision with which scientific realities are presented, it is an established and undeniable fact that the Western encounter—and the methods utilized therein—for understanding Islamic sources, doctrines, and sects differ substantially from those held by Muslims themselves. This divergence arises from multiple factors, including intellectual inclinations, motivations, modes of understanding subject matter, and internal versus external religious perspectives.

Modern methodologies, while capable of contributing to the explanation or discovery of certain truths, may also entail dangerous and irreversible

1. These domains, when viewed from a temporal and methodological perspective, are divided into traditional and modern branches. According to this view, the method employed in explaining Islamic law—within the scholarly practice and intellectual tradition of Muslims—corresponds to traditional studies, encompassing the three disciplines of theology (*kalām*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and ethics. Naturally, the most central focus of these disciplines is the sacred texts, namely the Qur'an and Ḥadīth. In contrast, what has emerged from the Western engagement with Islamic thought—whether directly or through Muslim responses to it, particularly over the past two centuries—is referred to as modern studies. These include the psychology and sociology of religion, philosophy of religion, and the history of religions (historical studies of religions and sects). Nevertheless, the interpenetration of these two modes of study, as well as their respective subfields, is both evident and unavoidable (Gharamaleki, 2001, p. 49).



consequences when misapplied or when research is conducted improperly. For this reason, “attention to the types of methods employed by Western scholars or by approaches aligned with them is of particular importance, insofar as they present an epistemic system grounded in Islamic/Shi‘i propositions and teachings” (Hosseinzadeh, 2011, p. 44). This concern is especially salient given that the proposed epistemic system, by taking into account the nature of Islamic/Shi‘i sources and the means of access to them, claims to yield beliefs that are both sincere and epistemically justified.

Prominent contemporary historians maintain that knowledge can be divided into three types: direct knowledge (sensory knowledge), indirect knowledge (historical knowledge), and generalized knowledge (inductive knowledge). They further acknowledge that indirect knowledge may—at its most developed level—also be presented in the form of generalized knowledge. Another important point they accept is that three conditions—time, reality, and evidence (along with their interpretation)—constitute the fundamental elements of knowledge. These elements, in effect, give shape to belief, propositional truth, and justification over time (Stanford, 2005, p. 190). This observation is made to demonstrate that historians, like epistemologists, adopt a cognate perspective; otherwise, historical inquiry would be reduced to mere reportage.

Historians have articulated at least two distinct meanings of history. In one sense, history refers to the examination of past events (history as event and human experience over time). In another sense, it denotes research into the past—history as narration, reporting, and scholarly investigation (Stanford, 2005, p. 190).

From the perspective of the historical researcher, human actions do not possess intrinsic significance in and of themselves; rather, value and importance are attributed to actions that carry meaning and exert social impact.¹ Consequently, an action requires comprehensive analysis across political, cultural, social, and other dimensions within its temporal context, ultimately leading to a profound and precise understanding of the past. On this basis, the historian must first establish factual reality (description) and then seek answers to questions of causality (explanation) (Stanford, 2005, p. 191). It is therefore argued that a historical phenomenon can be properly interpreted and its meanings fully grasped only when it is examined in all its dimensions (Ahmadi & Ghafariyan, 2003). This is the very approach adopted by researchers in the field of Islamic and Shi‘i studies.

1. Some scholars argue that the primary focus of history is not the event itself, but rather the perceptions and sentiments of people regarding the event. Accordingly, history is considered a reflection of truth as understood in the mind of the historian (Ahmadi & Ghaffarian, 2003).



3. The Nature of Historical Studies

Divergent interpretations within this type of research¹, ambiguity in defining historical study, obscurity in the scientific process of historical investigation, the lack of clearly articulated strategic rules, and disagreements concerning the meaning of historical knowledge—as well as whether the aim of historical studies is merely to describe and report *how* events occurred or rather to explain *why* they occurred—have collectively contributed to ambiguity in defining historical studies and clarifying their intended purpose (Gharamaleki, 2001, p. 263).

Nevertheless, it may be stated that, based on its literal meaning, the nature of historical studies consists in the study of the historical—that is, anything that possesses historical identity, whether it be an event or a form of thought or knowledge. Accordingly, some scholars have defined historical studies as “the systematic process of collecting and purposefully evaluating data related to the past in order to identify the effects, causes, and trajectories of events.” In this definition, historical studies constitute a chain of evidence and concepts related to the past (Gharamaleki, 2001, pp. 261–262), which may assume diverse forms.

Considering the value and the quantitative and qualitative diversity of historical data², it may be argued that the application of historical studies within the domain of Islamic/Shi'i teachings—and the use of historical materials therein—proceeds according to two distinct meanings and approaches:

4. Approaches to the Historical Phenomenon

4.1. The Descriptive Approach

According to this approach, the historical phenomenon is an event that occurred in the past, and the researcher's sole objective is to identify historical reality. Consequently, the more successfully the researcher employs analytical tools and techniques to traverse temporal distance through historical propositions and situate themselves within the past, the deeper and more accurate their knowledge of the event or reality becomes.³ This approach, therefore, is predominantly descriptive in nature.

1. For this reason, various methods have been proposed for historical studies; for example, the approaches of Joanna Nell, Raymond Pang, and Will Leedy can be mentioned (Gharamaleki, 2001, p. 263).

2. Similar to primary sources, secondary sources are “current sources, or sources that have been recompiled” (Gharamaleki, 2001, p. 254).

3. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, this approach faces a number of challenges. Among these is the fact that the researcher effectively removes a constitutive element of historical inquiry, namely time, and consequently is unable to address the positive and negative effects and outcomes of historical phenomena. Moreover, acceptance of this approach has given rise to disagreements concerning the validity of labeling such work as “historical



4.2. The Continuity-based Approach.

The second approach views the historical phenomenon as something extended across time—originating in the past and continuing, at least minimally, into the present. From this perspective, the value of a historical phenomenon lies in its continuity; thus, the historical character of an event or idea is contingent upon the persistence of its trajectory over time (Stanford, 2005, pp. 189–191).

It must be noted, however, that historical studies conducted within this second approach are subject to serious methodological risks. Some of these risks—arising from both positive and negative personal and research-related characteristics—include selective engagement with propositions or evidence, reductionism and exclusivism (whereby the researcher views a historical event as an isolated fragment lacking continuity), the conflation of motivation with outcome (which renders historical inquiry static and devoid of dynamism), and the conflation of propositional judgment with value judgment (Gharamaleki, 2001, p. 284). Naturally, this form of historical study entails a higher degree of analysis.

This second approach constitutes the methodological path currently employed in religious research and in doctrinal studies of religious traditions. Its two fundamental components—following belief in and acceptance of the truth of propositions, which are necessary prerequisites of scholarly inquiry—are description and explanation (that is, the interpretation of evidence and the justification of why events occurred).¹ These together form the justificatory component of historical studies.²

5. Description and Explanation in Historical Studies

As noted earlier, when historical studies are dominated by analytical concerns, the researcher must, at the most critical stage of inquiry, justify the trajectory of investigation. This justification unfolds in two stages: description (the identification of what a phenomenon is and the verification of factual reality) and explanation (the elucidation of why it occurred—its cause or reason).

studies,” as opposed to alternative designations such as historical sociology and related fields. These divergences in viewpoint have led scholars of religion, particularly in its newer areas of inquiry, to adopt alternative approaches (Stanford, 2005, pp. 189–191).

1. Accordingly, approaches to the study of the development of thought are oriented toward this perspective; outside of it (i.e., the first approach), the outcome is limited to mere description or an inadequate form of analysis.

2. For discussions of the historical background of historicism, its influential figures and their views, as well as its impact on patterns of thought and knowledge and the critiques thereof, see Arab Salehi (2008, parts A and B).



Regarding the distinction between *cause* and *reason*, it has been argued that the social and human sciences are primarily interpretive sciences concerned with meaning, whereas the natural sciences are causal sciences. Naturalists maintained that human behavior should be predicted on the basis of causes and that society is part of nature, knowable through the same methods by which nature itself is known. In contrast, interpretivists regarded human beings and human society as fundamentally distinct entities possessing their own specific modes of understanding. This group emphasizes reasons rather than causes. In causal explanation, intention, meaning, and motivation are irrelevant, and the relationship between phenomena is described as necessary and automatic in accordance with law-like regularities. In contrast, reasons involve intention, purpose, and meaning. Rainfall has a cause, but the killing of Abu Muslim by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur has a reason (Soroush, 1988, p. 56).

From another perspective, the distinction between *cause* and *reason* lies in the fact that a cause is a factor that unconsciously and inevitably compels an entity to react, whereas a reason is a conscious affirmation within the mind of a rational and self-aware individual, adopted in order to act rationally in accordance with it (Little, 1994, p. 55). In other words, humans act on the basis of reasons, while natural entities operate according to causes. The behavior of nature is meaningless, whereas human behavior is meaningful. For example, two individuals may stand up; one may do so out of respect, the other out of contempt. The physical act is identical, but because the event possesses an inner dimension, unlike natural phenomena, it acquires multiple meanings. Thus, understanding a human action precedes its mere observation (Little, 1994, p. 58).

Accordingly, the task of the historical researcher is not merely to establish a proposition within a historical sequence—as is the case in purely descriptive historical studies—but to interpret it alongside other related sets of data and to address the cause or reason for its occurrence (Naraq, 1986). Hence, it has been asserted that history loses its appeal if it answers only the question of *how* and neglects the question of *why* (Zarrinkoub, 2000, p. 56). History, therefore, may be defined as “the recounting of past actions in such a way that we come to understand not only the sequence of events but also the reasons for their occurrence” (Walsh, 1984, p. 25).

Given the relative nature of both description and explanation, description may be understood as the articulation of characteristics, commonalities, and similarities between the object of study and other entities. According to Mardiha (2003), description enumerates the features, states, signs, properties, and related attributes of a phenomenon in order to distinguish it from others. At the descriptive level, knowledge consists in



examining a set of signs and propositions that aim to convey what something is. Explanation, by contrast, involves revealing why something exists, identifying the causes of its emergence, and clarifying the conditions of its being. The identity of a phenomenon is completed by adding determinations that account for its reasons, and through explanation, the object attains full independence and objectivity. Explanation renders intertwined and complex matters manifest and intelligible.

In a broader sense, explanation involves placing phenomena that were previously regarded as independent into meaningful relationships with one another and establishing new connections among phenomena previously assumed to be closely related.

Furthermore, explanation entails at least two essential tasks: first, providing causal or rational accounts of events; and second, demonstrating the relationships among those events. Once events are explained, their interconnections become perceptible, their apparent fragmentation is resolved, and the intellect emerges from confusion and astonishment, gaining a sense of mastery over the phenomenon. Previously, the phenomenon dominated the intellect by confounding it; through explanation, this domination is reversed (Soroush, 1995).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that explanation is not always the primary objective of scientific inquiry, including historical research (Little, 1994, p. 14). For example, the conventional aim of many historical studies is merely to clarify neglected or ambiguous aspects of history (Mofakhari, 2010). Consequently, numerous historical investigations are primarily descriptive rather than explanatory. For this reason, attention to the various forms of explanation is particularly relevant to historical studies that explicitly adopt an explanatory approach.

6. Types of Explanation

Explanation takes various forms. Western scholars generally maintain that explanations in historical inquiry proceed along three main lines: (a) explanations aligned with those used in other sciences (law-based explanations, grounded in nomological and predictive models, universal laws, or nomological determinism); (b) explanations not aligned with the methods of other sciences (interpretive and argumentative explanations); and (c) narrative explanations, which are specific to historical subjects (Stanford, 2003; Khatami, 2000; Walsh, 1984; Bryan, 2002).

Among the most effective forms of explanation is narrative explanation. In this model, attention is given to the partial nature of an event, its relationship to other events, and its underlying reasons. Through this approach, events are traced back to their roots and their internal relations



are elucidated (Stanford, 2003; Khatami, 2000). Accordingly, one of the most important components of this method is the reconstruction of the past and the placement of historical phenomena within the concrete context of historical reality. This is precisely the point at which explanation is directed simultaneously toward both the causes of formation and the processual unfolding of events.

Nevertheless, scholars in this field maintain that explanation *in* history (that is, explanation based on historical realities) can never be fully complete. This is because, despite the abundance of evidence in historical realities—some of which may even be regarded as definitive and not in need of interpretation—there always remain numerous areas of ambiguity. It should be acknowledged that this view bears significant resemblance to interpretive approaches. The apparent divergence seems to stem from whether causality (*why*) and interpretation (*how*) are treated as separate or intertwined categories, and from the degree of their interconnection. This is particularly the case given that historians rarely operate with a simple one-cause/one-effect model (Sarukhani, 1997; Stanford, 2003).

On this basis, two additional explanatory models—functional explanation and structural explanation—are also considered forms of causal explanation. In each, the researcher seeks either “functional causes” (explaining the whole through the part) or “structural causes” (explaining the part through the whole). The functionalist model views society as an integrated whole, analogous in certain respects to an organism. When society is understood as a system, functional explanation consists in identifying the role or utility of each part for the whole and the needs it fulfills (Mardiha, 2003, p. 52). According to Stanford (2003), structure is defined as “the relationship between parts and wholes—not just any relationship, but one that determines the character of the whole” (p. 90). Mardiha further notes that “the structuralist model seeks the explanation of a system in its underlying structure, so that by uncovering the general structural formula, the components can be interpreted” (p. 45). Sarukhani (1997) emphasizes that “some argue that functional explanation stands in opposition to causal explanation, since one should not equate the efficient causes of a phenomenon with its functions or utilities” (p. 514).

The conclusion, therefore, is that description and explanation of a proposition or narrative constitute two fundamental stages of non-purely descriptive historical studies, aimed at establishing and interpreting historical realities.



7. The Methodological Component of Justification in Historical Studies

After identifying the type of explanation employed in historical research, it is equally necessary to identify the methodological components of explanation. This enables the researcher to discern distinctions, orientations, and approaches, to understand the researcher's perspective on explanation and analysis, and to become aware of the implications of each standpoint. Among the most significant outcomes of this analysis is the ability to locate points of contention between internal (insider) and external (outsider) perspectives.

It is evident that the examination of various dimensions of Islamic/Shi'i issues—especially in foundational and doctrinal matters—proceeds through rational arguments grounded in intellectual cognition (e.g., issues of divine unity), through transmitted arguments based on textual evidence (e.g., the doctrine of the Imamate and its characteristics), or through a combination of both (e.g., proofs of resurrection). Consequently, any research or body of knowledge produced is shaped by the type of sources employed. Accordingly, in the application of historical studies¹—particularly from an epistemological perspective—alongside two fundamental presuppositional components, namely belief² in and truth³ of propositions, another decisive component comes into focus: the component

1. In one view, revelatory and transmitted proofs—both sacred and non-sacred texts—are treated within a single framework; in another view, all texts are regarded uniformly as historical and non-sacred.

2. One dimension concerns the relationship between the researcher and the proposition, and extent to which it is knowledge-generating, particularly on the basis of theories oriented toward the object of belief (the belief component). See *An Introduction to Epistemology* (Shams, 2005, pp. 87–90; Moser, 2006, pp. 102–114).

3. Another dimension concerns the relationship between the proposition and its referent or external reality, especially with emphasis on correspondence theory or coherence theory and the harmony among propositions (the truth component) within theories of the nature of truth, with particular reference to the views of Professor Motahhari (Hossein-Zadeh, 2011, pp. 113–116; Shams, 2005, pp. 118–120; Moser, 2006, pp. 138–139). These criteria, especially within the differentiated domains of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the majority of historical data, constitute the principal instruments for assessing truth. In the case of the Qur'an, the criteria for assessing its revelatory nature lead to a correspondence-based account, while abundant and coherent historical evidence—such as that found in the example of the historical background of the designation “Rāfiḍī”—results in the affirmation of the truth of the proposition. The latter example likewise indicates a form of correspondence with external reality, even though it does not arise from a single proposition. Thus, it is not misleading to claim that the criterion consists in the realization and existence of some form of correspondence between a proposition (or set of propositions) and external reality, such that its truth is established through common-sense certainty (that is, the certainty of the community of experts and the justification of propositions through appropriate evaluative tools).



of *justification*. This refers to the relationship between the researcher and external reality. Acceptance of and commitment to one or more propositions is contingent upon providing an appropriate justification that establishes a connection between the believer and reality—the content of the proposition—through the use of informational sources.¹ Only then can a meaningful response be offered to questions concerning how research in the domain of Shi‘i thought is formed.

There is no doubt that numerous considerations influence the justificatory dimension of research, and their positive and negative effects on description and explanation cannot be regarded as negligible. Factors such as the scope of the researcher’s knowledge, the selection and use of sources, methodological subtlety, and biases and presuppositions—along with their various subcategories—can shape the organization of historical studies in different ways across their foundational assumptions and produce divergent results. For example, reliance on Sunni sources in discussions of the Imamate yields an approach markedly different from one based on Shi‘i sources. Thus, in comparative discussions of an orientalist’s methodology, such differences can be identified with considerable clarity.

Various perspectives have been proposed regarding the notion of justification. Some of these approaches focus on propositions themselves, seeking to justify them by identifying intrinsic properties. These are referred to as *internalist theories*, among which foundationalism² and coherentism are prominent examples. In contrast, other theories seek justification through factors external to propositions; these are known as *externalist theories* (Moser, 2006; Hosseinzadeh, 2011), among which reliabilism is a key example. What follows is a brief exposition intended to clarify the trajectories of the two approaches most commonly adopted by researchers in the field of religious thought.

7.1. Coherentism

As noted earlier, internalist theories focus on the relationships among propositions, without recourse to factors external to them. In coherentism, the researcher seeks to explain justification by demonstrating the existence of an organized, reciprocal structure among propositions. In this approach, the justification of a proposition depends on its coherence or lack thereof with other propositions. Each proposition, insofar as it is related to others, both supports and is supported by them. Accordingly, to the extent that a

1. Naturally, this stage occurs after the proper collection of data, which is one of the key stages of historical studies, as noted above.

2. According to foundationalism, propositions are divided into two types: basic and non-basic propositions. The criterion for this division is the dependence of non-basic propositions on other propositions (Shams, 2005, pp. 127–129; Hossein-Zadeh, 2011, pp. 161–168).



proposition derives justification from others, it simultaneously contributes to their justification. However, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of coherence itself and the difficulty of defining the set of propositions with which a given proposition must cohere constitute some of the most significant critiques of this approach (Shams, 2005; Moser, 2006). These issues render the process partly subjective, influencing the structure of scholarly works while simultaneously expanding the scope for critical evaluation.

7.2. Reliabilism

The presence of several shortcomings in the principal internalist theories and their variants has led to the development of externalist theories, in which the justification of beliefs is grounded in factors external to the content of the belief itself. In addition to encompassing elements of coherentism, reliabilism offers a more comprehensive and, ultimately, less problematic foundation than its competitors.¹ The most essential component of reliabilism is the requirement to rely on a trustworthy, reliability-conferring process within the historical context of the subject under investigation. Justification, on this view, is achieved through such reliable processes, with the important proviso that historical perspectives and methods are not inherently in conflict with textual sources.

Accordingly, reliability-conferring processes are generally and directly related to:

- (a) epistemic subjects (such as divine unity, prophethood, and the Imamate in historical-religious studies of doctrine);
- (b) modes of argumentation, including rational, transmitted, or combined methods; and
- (c) sources of human knowledge, such as revelation, Ḥadīth, and historical reports or testimonies.

Thus, in this approach to historical studies, what is of central importance is, on the one hand, the method employed in justification (namely, the transmitted method and, in some cases, a combined method), and on the other hand, the manner in which sources are engaged.² Only under these

1. Nevertheless, reliabilism, in addition to attending to factors external to the content of propositions in justification, also incorporates foundationalism within itself, insofar as some propositions may function as basic and justificatory for others. In other words, “the more systematic the method of producing a belief, the more reliable that method will be, and the resulting belief will be more justified” (Alvand, 2003, p. 87).

2. Furthermore, within this approach, the quality of assurance—whether in terms of certainty and conviction, confidence, conjecture, or the absence of doubt or illusion—is of particular importance. This issue has at times been discussed in disciplines such as legal theory (uṣūl al-fiqh) and jurisprudence (fiqh). For example, see discussions on the probative value of certainty and conjecture (Khomeini, 2003, p. 84; Khomeini, 1997, p. 28). For an examination of the



conditions can reliabilism—when coupled with a phenomenological perspective that undertakes the description of Shi‘i doctrinal teachings and elucidates the functions of their concepts within an epistemic and doctrinal system—justify and explicate epistemic foundations without becoming trapped in mere historicism. Consequently, unlike the previous approach, historical coherence alone is insufficient for justification. It appears, however, that this perspective, due to its emphasis on reliability-conferring factors, also significantly reshapes the very designation of such inquiries as “historical studies.”

8. Conclusion

Among the various perspectives on the justificatory component, coherentism and reliabilism emerge as two effective methodological approaches. As discussed earlier, coherentism is grounded in the coherence and mutual consistency among elements of transmitted evidence and reports. Accordingly, when several propositions align against another proposition, justification proceeds either by abandoning the opposing proposition or by reinterpreting it. In this way, the convergence of multiple historical propositions may even lead to the exclusion or reinterpretation of a Qur’anic verse or a report attributed to an infallible authority. The foundation of this approach lies in the rational acceptability of the authority of justificatory sources—that is, expert testimony and, in this context, the totality of propositional contents (see Hosseinzadeh, 2007, pp. 294–295). In contrast, the reliabilist perspective maintains that the two aforementioned types of credibility are fundamentally different, even though both must be rationally justified. From this viewpoint, the Qur’an and Ḥadith—under their respective conditions of epistemic authority—occupy a far higher level of reliability. Consequently, even if an opposing view is supported by multiple other propositions, such propositions lack justificatory force, whereas the authority of the Qur’an and authenticated Ḥadith remains intact.

Accordingly, historical studies—through at least two distinct perspectives in terms of method, components, and outcomes—constitute one of the significant domains of religious scholarship. Moreover, the approaches articulated in analytical or descriptive–analytical historical studies manifest themselves most clearly in the justificatory component and in the two elements of description and explanation. Among these approaches, coherentist and reliabilist perspectives represent the most important methodological frameworks in this type of historical inquiry.

relationship between these discussions and the position of traditional hermeneutics in historical studies, see Va‘ezi (2007, pp. 83–87).



Comparative examination of these approaches can substantially contribute to resolving ambiguities in the analysis and evaluation of emerging trends in historical studies. The trajectory followed in this type of historical research can be summarized in two main parts. The first concerns the process through which historical studies are formed, and the second pertains to the manner of engagement with the sources required in historical inquiry.

Another type of historical study—based purely on description—is typically employed in biographical writing on transmitters, the introduction of historical figures, and bibliographical descriptions. Therefore, apart from its promotional or introductory function, and due to the predominance of its descriptive character, it may be regarded as having less scholarly significance than the preceding analytical approach.

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