

# The Limits of Universalism in Islamic Thought: the Case of Indian Religions<sup>1</sup>

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Every religious tradition is claimed by its followers in a range of identifications, from exclusivist — holding that we alone are correct, and all others are condemned — to more pluralistic perspectives, recognizing some legitimacy and worth in other traditions, and even universalist positions, such as the notion that all humans are destined for salvation.<sup>2</sup> To what extent have Muslims regarded followers of other religions and faiths as to some extent acceptable? In this paper, I propose to gauge the extent to which certain Muslim writers (especially from the philosophical and Sufi traditions) were drawn to apply universalist understandings to the religions of India. The reason for this choice of Indian religions is simple. While classical Islamic theology, on the basis of Qur'anic texts, explicitly recognizes only Jews and Christians as “peoples of the book,” the extension of this category of recognized religious groups to other traditions (such as Zoroastrians in Persia) was and is in practice a matter of negotiation in local contexts, requiring the use of analogy with Jews and Christians, or other forms of argumentation.<sup>3</sup> Pragmatically speaking, Muslim rulers in India had to face the fact that they were a minority in charge of a vast non-Muslim majority, and on the political level they generally dealt with the situation realistically.<sup>4</sup> So what sort of conceptual accommodations were employed by Muslim thinkers commenting on the Indian religions?

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<sup>2</sup> See the articles “pluralisme” and “universalisme” in André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Irene Schneider, “Pluralism: Legal and Ethical-Religious”; Gudrun Krämer, “Pluralism: Political,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 2:533–536.

<sup>4</sup> While Indian Brahmins and others seem to have been assimilated to the category of *dhimmī* early after the Arab conquest of Sind, with a couple of exceptions (notably under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb) there was hardly ever any systematic attempt by Muslim rulers to apply the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims to the Indian population; see Peter Hardy, “*Djizya*. In India,” in EI<sup>2</sup>.

In pursuing this inquiry, my aim is to employ an analysis of religion that takes account of difference without essentialism; I assume that we cannot make generalized and abstract assumptions about the nature of religions, but should instead problematize the concept of religion by taking account of historical acts of interpretation, appropriation, and resistance.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, Muslim philosophers and mystics have been most ready to confer universalistic recognition on the Indian religions to the extent that Indian doctrines and practices could be assimilated to Islamic categories. They employed familiarizing techniques of translation and interpretation with standard Islamic taxonomies to assimilate Indian religions to norms of monotheism and prophecy, as well as more basic concepts of magic, although the issue of idolatry remained a stubborn problem. The examples here are illustrative rather than exhaustive, and they reveal a spectrum of approaches and conclusions indicative of the difficulty of this problem of interpretation.

### **Al-Bīrūnī and Indian religion**

The first Arab Muslim authors to describe religion in India never used a single term such as Hinduism; they referred instead to the multiple religions of India, usually numbered as forty-two, some of which were considered to be monotheistic and prophetic and hence compatible with Islam, while others were not. Early Muslim authors had no clear picture of religion in India, and in fact the term “Hindu” was initially a geographic and ethnic designation.<sup>6</sup> The concept of a unitary Indian religion (although without the word Hindu) seems first to have been proposed in the Arabic description of India by al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), who studied Sanskrit texts on science and religion while in the service of the Turkish conqueror Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 1030); curiously, al-Bīrūnī’s notion of Indian religion in the singular seems to have been forgotten until his great work on India was rediscovered by European Orientalists in the nineteenth century. Al-Bīrūnī is of interest in this discussion, not because he extended a universalizing recognition to Indian religions as such, but because of his typical method of using categories of Islamic thought as templates for understanding the Indian data.

Al-Bīrūnī translated a number of Sanskrit works into Arabic (including selections from Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*) in connection with his encyclopedic treatise on India.<sup>7</sup> Although authors of Arabic books on sects and heresies, such as

<sup>5</sup> Carl W. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 15:1 (2005): 15–43.

<sup>6</sup> Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 22–37.

<sup>7</sup> Eduard Sachau, trans., *Alberuni’s India* (London, 1888; reprint ed., Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1964); Hellmut Ritter, ed., “Al-Bīrūnī’s Übersetzung des *Yoga-sūtra* des Patañjali,” *Oriens* 9 (1956): 165–200; Bruce B. Lawrence, “The Use of Hindu Religious Texts in al-Bīrūnī’s *India* with Special Reference to Patañjali’s *Yoga-Sūtras*,” in *The Scholar and the Saint: Studies in Commemoration of Abu’l Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 29–48; Shlomo Pines and Tuvia Gelblum, “Al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic Version of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*: A Translation of his First Chapter and a Comparison with Related Sanskrit Texts,” *Bulletin of the School of*

al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), generally devoted a section or a few pages to the religions of India, no other Arabic writer followed in al-Bīrūnī's footsteps as a specialist on Indian religion and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass has attempted an assessment of al-Bīrūnī's contribution, praising him for his fair and objective approach to India:

A clear awareness of his *own* religious horizon as a particular context of thought led him to perceive the "otherness" of the Indian religious philosophical context and horizon with remarkable clarity . . . Unlike Megasthenes, Bīrūnī did not "translate" the names of foreign deities; nor did he incorporate them into his own pantheon, and of course he did not possess the amorphous "openness" of syncretism and the search for "common denominators." That is why he could comprehend and appreciate the other, the foreign as such, thematizing and explicating in an essentially new manner the problems of intercultural understanding and the challenge of "objectivity" when shifting from one tradition to another, from one context to another.<sup>9</sup>

Halbfass's admiration for the scholarly achievement of al-Bīrūnī is certainly justified, but these remarks call for some qualification. First of all, as stated earlier, al-Bīrūnī's perception of the "otherness" of Indian thought was not just hermeneutical clarity with regard to a pre-existing division; it was effectively the invention of the concept of a unitary Indian religion and philosophy. Furthermore, Halbfass's praise of al-Bīrūnī's bold proclamation of "otherness" obscures the fact that he had to engage in a remarkably complex interpretation of his sources with many "Islamizing" touches. His translation of Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* was based on a combination of the original text plus a commentary that is still not identified, all rephrased by al-Bīrūnī into a question-and-answer format. Like the translators of pre-Islamic Greek texts (e.g., Plotinus) into Arabic, al-Bīrūnī rendered the Sanskrit "gods" (*deva*) with the Arabic terms for "angels" (*malā'ika*) or "spiritual beings" (*rūḥāniyyāt*), surely a theological shift amounting to "translation." He was, moreover, convinced on a deep level that Sanskrit texts were saturated with recognizable philosophical doctrines of reincarnation and union with God, which required comparative treatment: "For this reason their [the Indians'] talk, when it is heard, has a flavour composed of the beliefs ('*aqā'id*) of the ancient Greeks, of the Christian sects, and of the Sufi leaders."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, al-Bīrūnī made deliberate and selective use of terms derived from Greek philosophy, heresiography, and Sufism to

*Oriental and African Studies* 29 (1966): 302–325; id., "Al-Bīrūnī's Arabic Version of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*: A Translation of the Second Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *BSOAS* 40 (1977): 522–549; id., "Al-Bīrūnī's Arabic Version of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*: A Translation of the Third Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *BSOAS* 46 (1983): 258–304.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976); idem, "al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism," in *Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume*, ed. Hakim Mohammed Said (Karachi: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 372; id., "Bīrūnī, Abu Rayḥān. viii. Indology," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* IV (1990), 285–87.

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 26–27.

<sup>10</sup> Ritter, 167; Pines and Gelblum, *BSOAS* 19 (1966): 309–10.

render the Sanskrit technical terms of yoga. But al-Bīrūnī's rationalistic approach to Indian religions remained isolated and almost forgotten, while his Arabic version of Patañjali was described by at least one reader as incomprehensible.<sup>11</sup> There is some superficial reference to al-Bīrūnī's work on India and the Patañjali translation in the Persian *Bayān al-adyān* or *The Explanation of Religions* of Abū l-Ma'ālī, written in Ghazna in 1092.<sup>12</sup> It appears, however, that the principal readers of al-Bīrūnī's work on India were interested mainly from a historical and administrative point of view; the world-historian and Mongol minister Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318) drew extensively on al-Bīrūnī's geographical information, while the Mughal wazir Abū l-Faḍl 'Allāmī (d. 1602) apparently had al-Bīrūnī's work in mind when he compiled a detailed but uncritical survey of Indian thought in his Persian gazetteer of Akbar's Indian empire.<sup>13</sup> Today both al-Bīrūnī's work on India and his translation of Patañjali exist in unique manuscripts, suggesting an extremely limited circulation. I would like to suggest that al-Bīrūnī's concept of a unified Indian religion, as a polar opposite to Islam, lay forgotten until it was resurrected in a more radical form by European scholarship a century ago; the growth of the Muslim concept of Indian religions took place largely without reference to al-Bīrūnī. Since Sachau's edition (1886) and translation (1888) of al-Bīrūnī's work on India was undertaken at the suggestion of the board of the Oriental Translation Fund, and was entirely subsidized by Her Majesty's India Office, it is tempting to locate this work's historical importance primarily within the larger political concerns of colonial Orientalism.<sup>14</sup> Al-Bīrūnī's rationalistic and reifying approach to religion, which had practically no impact on medieval Islamic thought, is much more palatable to the modern taste, and this helps explain his popularity today.

## Illuminationist Philosophy and Monotheistic Indians

One of the notable philosophical frameworks in the Islamic tradition for understanding religion was the Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) school associated with Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, which is strongly engaged with Aristotelian, Avicennan, and Neoplatonic

<sup>11</sup> Pines and Gelblum, in BSOAS 29 (1966): 302, n. 1, quoting the incomprehension of Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Ghaḍanfār al-Tibrizī; Fathullah Mujtabai, "Al Bīrūnī and India: The First Attempt to Understand," in his *Aspects of Hindu Muslim Cultural Relations* (New Delhi: National Book Bureau, 1978), 51, n. 52, cites reactions to the Patañjali translation by Persian authors Abu al-Ma'ālī in his *Bayān al-adyān*, and Mīr Findiriskī in his translation of the *Yoga Vāsīṣṭha*.

<sup>12</sup> Abū l-Ma'ālī Muḥammad al-Ḥusayī al-'Alawī, *Bayān al-adyān dar sharḥ-i adyān wa madhbāb-i jābilī wa islāmī*, ed. 'Abbās Iqbāl Ashtiyānī, Muḥammad Taqī Dānish Puzhūh, and Sayyid Muḥammad Dabīr Siyāqī (Tehran: 1376/1998), 23–24, 98; H. Massé, trans., "L'Exposé des religions," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 94 (1926): 17–75; A. Christensen, "Remarques critiques sur le *Kitāb bayānī-l-adyān* d'Abū'l-Ma'ālī," *Le Monde Oriental* V–VI (1911–12): 205–16; Lawrence, *Shabrastānī*, 89–90.

<sup>13</sup> Halbfass, 29–30 (Rashīd al-Dīn), 32–33 (Abū l-Faḍl); Abū 'l-Faḍl 'Allāmī, *The Ā'in-i Akbarī*, trans. H.S. Jarrett, ed. Jadunath Sarkar (2nd ed., Calcutta, 1948; reprint ed., New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1978), 3:vii–ix, 141–358.

<sup>14</sup> Sachau, Preface, l.

philosophy. While it has been frequently suggested that this philosophical school played a significant role among Muslim intellectuals in India, the details have not been well established.<sup>15</sup> The first important Illuminationist author to be widely known in India was Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 1502), a prominent Persian scholar from Shiraz, who was known for his writings on Illuminationism and the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>16</sup> Davānī was also a chief minister to the Aq-Qoyunlu rulers Uzun Ḥasan and Ya‘qūb, and his political writings, particularly the *Jalalian Ethics*, were doubtless partly responsible for his fame in India.<sup>17</sup> A number of scattered indications attest to Davānī’s popularity in India during his own lifetime and in subsequent years, and since Davānī and his school are not widely known, I will summarize the evidence here.<sup>18</sup> The Naqshbandī shaykh Khāwand Maḥmūd reportedly studied with Davānī before coming to India to see Babur.<sup>19</sup> Davānī dedicated a political treatise to Sultan Maḥmūd of Gujarat (r. 1458–1511).<sup>20</sup> One of Davānī’s foremost pupils, Abū l-Faḍl Astarābādī, came to Gujarat and taught there.<sup>21</sup> Another Davānī student, ‘Imād al-Dīn Tarīmī, went to Gujarat where he taught rational sciences to Wajīh al-Dīn ‘Alawī (1504–1589), who later became an important Shattārī Sufi master.<sup>22</sup> Davānī was also invited to Sind by its ruler, Jām Nizām al-Dīn (d. 1508), and was evidently planning to go there himself just prior to his death. His disciples Shams al-Dīn and Mu‘īn al-Dīn went in his place and settled in the town of Thatta.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For a recent survey, see Akbar Sobut, “Suhrawardī dar Hind,” in Shahram Pazouki, ed., *‘Irfān, Islām, Īrān, va Insān-i Mu‘āshir: Nikūdasht-i Shbaykh Shibāb al-Dīn Subrawardī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ḥaqīqat, 1385/2007), 125–160.

<sup>16</sup> See my “Controversy over Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*: The Faith of Pharaoh,” *Islamic Culture* LIX (1985): 259–66.

<sup>17</sup> The *Akhlāq-i Jalālī* or *Jalalian Ethics* has been particularly popular in India, and it has been repeatedly lithographed there in modern times, though never printed in Iran. This text was one of the first Persian texts translated into English during the early colonial period, as *The Practical Philosophy of the Mubammadan People*, by W. T. Thompson (London, 1839); cf. my translation of chapter 5 of this Persian text, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, ed. S. H. Nasr and Mehdi Aminrazavi, vol. 2 (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Copies of Davānī’s works preserved in Pakistan include an anthology copied in 1518 and another work copied in 1554 in Tatta (Sind). Cf. Muḥammad Bashīr Ḥusayn, *Fibrīst-i makbtūtāt-i Shīrānī* (3 vols., Lahore: Dānishgāh-i Panjāb, 1969), 2:207, no. 1127; 2:209, no. 1138; 2:235, no. 1302; 2:266, no. 1475.

<sup>19</sup> *Akbar nāma*, II, 301.

<sup>20</sup> Aḥmad Munzavī, *Fibrīst-i mushtarak-i nuskhā-bā-yi khatī-i Fārsī-yi Pākistān* (Islamabad: Markaz-i Taḥqīqāt-i Fārsī-yi Īrān va Pākistān, 1983-), 4:2385.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Makkī al-Āsafī, “Ḥājji Dabīir” Ulughkānī, *Zafar al-wālib Muẓaffar wa ālib, An Arabic History of Gujarat*, ed. E. Denison Ross, Indian Texts Series (3 vols., London: John Murray, for the Government of India, 1910–28), 1:337; trans. M. F. Lokhandwala, Gaekwad’s Oriental Series, 152, 157 (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1970–74), 1:278.

<sup>22</sup> Wajīh al-Dīn ‘Alawī, *al-Risāla al-musammābi-l-ḥaqīqatal-Muḥammadiyya*, ed. with Urdu trans. Muḥammad Zubayr Ghulām Nabī Qurayshī (Ahmedabad: Sarkhej Rawda Committee, 1385/1966), introduction, 9–10.

<sup>23</sup> U. M. Daudpota, “Sind and Multan,” in Mohammad Habib and Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, ed., *A Comprehensive History of India*, vol. 5, *The Delbi Sultanat (A. D. 1206–1526)* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1970; reprint ed., 1982), 1127, quoting *Tārikh-i Ma‘šūmī*, 75.

Another pupil, 'Alā' al-Dīn Lārī, acted as tutor to the emperor Akbar and to his courtier Khān-i Zamān.<sup>24</sup> But in terms of Illuminationism the most important connection of Davānī to India came even earlier through the able minister of the Bahmani kingdom, Maḥmūd Gāwān (d. 1481), who corresponded with many eminent scholars of Iran and Central Asia, such as the Naqshbandī Sufis 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī and 'Ubayd Allāh Ahrār.<sup>25</sup> It was to Maḥmūd Gāwān that Davānī dedicated one of his chief works of Illuminationist philosophy, his Arabic commentary on Suhrawardī's *Temples of Light*, completed in 1468.<sup>26</sup>

There are further indications of the ongoing popularity of Illuminationism in the Mughal period, frequently in connection with the study of Indian thought. In the formulations of the chief minister Abū L-Faḍl, Illuminationism had become one of the underpinnings of the political theory of the empire, so it is not surprising to see that literary works of an Illuminationist bent were composed at this time. As an example, Shahrazūri's thirteenth-century Arabic history of philosophy from the ancient Greeks up through Suhrawardī was translated into Persian and dedicated to Jahāngīr (then Prince Salīm) in 1602.<sup>27</sup> Abū L-Faḍl's brother Fayḍī composed a treatise on Vedantic metaphysics entitled *The Illuminator of Gnosis (Shāriq al-mā'rifat)*, and its vocabulary and style strongly suggests that Illuminationism furnished the base for this explanation of Indian philosophy.<sup>28</sup> And there is a strong Illuminationist underpinning to the Arabic version of the hatha yoga text known as *The Pool of Nectar*, which contains in its preface an Arabic translation of some key Persian texts by Suhrawardī.<sup>29</sup> While Persian and Indian students of philosophy continued to write commentaries on Suhrawardī's works, traces of interest

<sup>24</sup> 'Abdu-l-Qādir ibn-i-Mulūkshāh al-Badāoni, *Muntakhabu-t-tawārīkh*, trans. Wolseley Haig, *Biblioteca Indica*, 97 (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1925), III, 329, n. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Nazir Ahmad, "Language and Literature—Persian," in H. K. Sherwani and P. M. Joshi, ed., *History of Medieval Deccan (1295–1724)* (2 vols., Hyderabad: The Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1973–4), II, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Sa'd al-Dīn As'ad al-Ṣiddīqī al-Davānī, *Shawākīl al-ḥūr fī sharḥ bayākīl al-nūr*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥaqq and Muḥammad Yūsuf Kūkan (Madras: Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, 1373/1953), Arabic introduction, xxvi; this edition is based on a manuscript in the Oriental Manuscripts Library in Madras that is contemporary with Davānī. Cf. Shihāboddīn Yahyā Sohravardī Shaykh al-Ishrāq, *L'Archange empourpré, Quinze traités et récits mystiques*, trans. Henry Corbin (Paris: Fayard, 1976), 33–66, with extracts from the commentaries of Davānī and Ghiyāth al-Dīn Shīrāzī on 67–73; and my translation of book 5 of this Arabic text, in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, ed. S. H. Nasr and Mehdi Aminrazavi, vol. 4 (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd Shahrazūri, Nuzhat *al-arwāḥ va rawḍat al-afrah: tārikh al-ḥukamā*, Persian trans. Maqṣūd 'Alī Tabrīzī, ed. Muḥammad Taqī Dānish Puzhūh, *et al.* ([Tehran]: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī va Farhangī, 1987). The original Arabic text is Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Shahrazūri (d. 1288), *Nuzbat al-arwāḥ va rawḍat al-afrah fī tā'rikh al-ḥukamā' wal-falāsifa*, ed. Khūrshīd Aḥmad (2 vols., Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1396/1976).

<sup>28</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "Fayzī's Illuminationist Interpretation of Vedanta: The *Shariq al-Ma'rifat*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30/3 (2010): 156–64.

<sup>29</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "The Islamization of Yoga in the Amrtakunda Translations," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 13:2 (2003): 199–226.

in the Illuminationist philosophy among later Indian Sufi authors are rare. Yet one Indian Sufi author, ‘Abd al-Nabī Shattārī (active 1601–1630), wrote a commentary on Suhrawardī’s *Wisdom of Illumination*, though his interest in Suhrawardī was probably a result of his immersion on scholastic philosophy rather than a product of his Shattārī Sufi training.<sup>30</sup>

Another Illuminationist author of the Mughal era, Muḥammad Sharīf [b.] Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad b. al-Harawī, made significant comments on Indian religions in his Persian translation and commentary on Suhrawardī’s *Wisdom of Illumination* under the title *Anwāriyya* or *The Luminous Treatise*.<sup>31</sup> Indian sources indicate that Muḥammad Sharīf was the son of the well-known Mughal courtier and historian Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad, author of the *Tabaqāt-i Akbarī* or *The Generations of Akbar*.<sup>32</sup> Muḥammad Sharīf comments on a number of aspects of Hindu religious thought and practice.<sup>33</sup> Like al-Bīrūnī, he distinguishes between the ordinary Hindu worshipper and the philosopher. “The teaching of the philosophers of Persia is not in agreement with anything that contributes to idolatry, such as the teaching of the Qadariyya and the Sharafiyya [two Muslim sects accused of dualism] or the idolaters of India, contrary to the philosophers of India, who, like the philosophers of Persia, are unitarians rather than idolaters.”<sup>34</sup> In this sense Muḥammad Sharīf shared the elitist perspective of the Mughal prince Dārā Shikūh, who disdained the ordinary believers among both the Hindus and the Muslims. Muḥammad Sharīf also comments on the Indian philosophers’ view that perfected ascetics (*murtādān*) and scholars may become connected to the planetary spirits, in an apparent allusion to the yogic practices outlined in chapter IX of *The Pool of Nectar*; these experiences he compares to the ascensions of Idris, Jesus, and Muḥammad.<sup>35</sup> Muḥammad Sharīf makes additional comparisons between the Avicennan theory of

<sup>30</sup> This commentary was entitled *Rūḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ al-ḥikmat al-isbrāqiyya*. A list of nearly fifty writings by ‘Abd al-Nabī Shattārī (mostly commentaries on Sufi classics, Shattārī works, standard philosophical texts, and *wujūdī* writings) is given by Munzavī, II, 999–1000, and also in ‘Abd al-Ḥayy b. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī, *Nuzbat al-khawāṭir wa bahjat al-masāmi‘ wa-l-nawāzīr*, ed. Sharaf al-Dīn Aḥmad (9 vols., second ed., Hyderabad: Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Uthmāniyya), 5:269–70.

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad Sharīf Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn al-Harawī, *Anwāriyya*, ed. Hossein Ziai, Majmū‘a-yi Muṭāla Islāmī (Tehran: Markaz-i Īrānī-yi Muṭāla Farhang-hā, 1358/1979–80).

<sup>32</sup> See C. A. Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-bibliographical Survey* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1970), 1:433–35. Badā‘ūnī (2:363) mentions Muḥammad Sharīf as having revised his father’s history after the latter’s death. This same author (or possibly a brother) under the name of Sayf Allāh b. Khwāja Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad Muqīm-i Harawī produced several other works of a philosophical bent, including *Jawābar al-asrār* or *The Jewels of the Secrets*, as well as *Mir‘āt al-waḥda* or *The Mirror of Oneness*, completed in 1617 in Lahore. Both works were written in the form of questions and answers on difficult metaphysical questions. Cf. Munzavī, 2:951, no. 1611; 2:984, no. 1661. Another MS by the same author, also under the title *Mir‘āt al-waḥda* (collection of Bruce Lawrence, Duke University), has an extensive discussion of religious pluralism in terms of Sufism and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (244 ff.).

<sup>33</sup> Muḥammad Sharīf mentions unusual natural sites in India where perpetual fire and wind occur, which were the object of pilgrimage (*Anwāriyya*, 105–6), cosmological theories of the four ages and the god Brahma (68–69), and incidents from the life of Krishna taken from the *Mahābhārata* (p. 212).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

multiple separate angelic intellects and the deities (*devatā*) whose power the Indian sages recognized in natural phenomena; in both cases, he argues, there is a recognition of a single light or source for these separate manifestations. This insight, he remarked, has unfortunately given way over time to blind worship of bodies in the form of Indian idolatry.<sup>36</sup> This text furnishes an example of how the Illuminationist philosophy, with its basis in the Avicennan critique of religion, provided a means for recognizing the validity of certain aspects of Indian religious thought, although the concept of idolatry acted as a screen for excluding a large sector of Indian religious practices. The Illuminationist school was certainly Islamicate, but since it did not attempt to derive its teachings exclusively from Islamic sources, it was open to reading new teachings, such as those found in India, as part of the same body of material for philosophical analysis. Yet at the same time, Muḥammad Sharīf employs the standard categories of unitarian monotheism and philosophical angelology to conform Indian teachings to Islamic norms.

### **Ecumenic Empire: Abū L-Faḍl's Political View of the Indian Epic**

An oft-cited example of Muslim Indology is the study and translation into Persian of Sanskrit texts (particularly the epics) in an extensive program carried out under Mughal sponsorship; although this enterprise has often been characterized as religious in intent, I would argue that its primary significance is political. The context for the Mughal interest in Sanskrit lies in the imperial program devised by Akbar and followed in varying degrees by his successors. Although earlier writers on the Mughals have treated this interest primarily as an indication of liberal personal religious inclinations on the part of Akbar, this romantic conception should yield to a more realistic analysis of policy aspects in terms of the Mughal ecumenic empire.<sup>37</sup> It is anachronistic to read an Enlightenment virtue of "tolerance" into the religious politics of the Mughal era. The original precedent for Akbar's policies of patronage of multiple religions is probably best sought in the Mongol era, when the prudent insurance policy of the "pagan" Mongols gave generous treatment to Buddhists, Christians, Taoists, and Muslims. Akbar's family conceived of their regime as a continuation of the neo-Mongol empire of Tīmūr (Tamerlane); like Tīmūr, Akbar was furnished with a genealogy that included Chingīz Khān, but in his case it was extended to include the Mongol sun-goddess Alanquwa. The symbolism of world-domination inherent in the Mongol political tradition was given an ingenious philosophical and mystical twist in the writings of Akbar's minister Abū L-Faḍl, who interpreted Akbar's role in terms of the Neoplatonic metaphysics of Ishrāqī Illuminationism and the Sufī doctrine of the Perfect Human. This metaphysical apparatus was

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 34–35, where the editor's speculative emendation *advaita* should be restored to the original manuscript reading *devatā*, "deity." There is no discussion of Advaita Vedānta in this text.

<sup>37</sup> See John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, vol. I.5 of *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36–40, 44–47. For the general concept of ecumenic empire, see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

invoked not merely for its own philosophical consistency, but essentially to undergird the authority of Akbar in an eclectic fashion.<sup>38</sup>

While coinage with Sanskrit formulas and patronage of different religious institutions (including “Hindu” ones) was a feature of most Indo-Muslim regimes, what distinguished the Mughals under Akbar was their attempt to refocus all religious enthusiasm of whatever background onto the person of the emperor.<sup>39</sup> Akbar’s sponsorship of the translation of Sanskrit works was part of the overall literary phase of his reign, which included the regular reading aloud of works from the canon of Persian court literature, history, and Sufism. He assigned to the task a number of courtiers who were scholars of Persian but presumably ignorant of Sanskrit; they were assisted, however, by Sanskrit pandits, so that, from a literary point of view, the translation process probably involved a considerable amount of oral explication in vernacular Hindi prior to the composition of the Persian “translation.” Some translators, like Badā’ūnī, assisted in this project much against their own inclinations. The extent of the sustained translation enterprise can be judged from the numerous manuscript copies, some lavishly illustrated, and the repeated revisions and new translations (in both poetry and prose) of particularly valued texts.<sup>40</sup> In political terms, the inclusion and translation of Sanskrit works was designed to reduce intellectual provincialism and linguistic divisiveness within the empire.<sup>41</sup> Sanskrit and Hindi romances, such as the story of Nāla and Damayānti, seem to have been integrated into a literary continuum along with Near Eastern fables like the story of Majnūn and Layla or the tales of Amīr Ḥamza. Abū L-Faḍl appears to regard the epic *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyana* primarily as histories of ancient India with biographical and philosophical overtones. This even holds true of Puranic extensions of the epic, such as the *Harivaṃśa*, which Abū L-Faḍl describes only as a biography of Krishna. Akbar himself entitled the Persian translation of the *Mahābhārata* as the *Razm nāma* or *The Book of War*, underlining its character as a martial epic.

Abū L-Faḍl’s complicated vision of the purpose of the *Mahābhārata* translation is worth examining in detail. On the one hand, he observes that the epic does contain remarkable philosophical and cosmological perspectives of great complexity. Abū L-Faḍl notes that at least thirteen different Indian schools of thought are mentioned in the

<sup>38</sup> See the stimulating essay of Peter Hardy, “Abul Fazl’s Portrait of the Perfect Padshah: A Political Philosophy for Mughal India — or a Personal Puff for a Pal?”, in *Islam in India, Studies and Commentaries*, vol. 2, *Religion and Religious Education*, ed. Christian W. Troll (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1985), 114–37.

<sup>39</sup> For coinage with Sanskrit and patronage of non-Muslim religious institutions, see *Eternal Garden*, 47–53. See also Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). On Akbar as the center of all religions, see Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography during the Reign of Akbar* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1976), 70.

<sup>40</sup> John Seyller, *Workshop and Patron in Mughal India: The Freer Ramayana and other Illustrated Manuscripts of ‘Abd al-Rahim* (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Akbar & Religion* (Delhi: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i Delli, 1989), 180–81.

text.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, he points out that a quarter of its 100,000 verses are devoted to the martial epic of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, making it a *vade mecum* for the conduct of war and battle, and much of the remainder is “advice, sermons, stories, and explanations of past romance and battle (*bazm o razm*).”<sup>43</sup> In one long passage in his introduction to the Persian translation of the Mahabharata, Abū L-Faḍl recounts a series of justifications for the translation project, all couched as an expansion of his encomium to his patron Akbar, who is eulogized in the most hyperbolic of terms. Abū L-Faḍl outlines five major objectives: reducing sectarian fighting among both Muslims and Hindus; eroding the authority of all religious specialists over the masses; deflating Hindu bigotry towards Muslims by revealing questionable Hindu doctrines; curing Muslim provincialism by exposing Muslims to cosmologies much vaster than official sacred history; and providing access to a major history of the past for the edification and guidance of rulers (the traditional ethical justification for history).<sup>44</sup>

Abū L-Faḍl was interested in the philosophical and religious content of the epic, from the perspective of an enlightened intellectual whose cosmopolitan vision had moved him out of a strictly defined Islamic theological perspective. But I think it is fair to say that this intellectual project was thoroughly subordinated to the political aim of making Akbar’s authority supreme over all possible rivals in India, including all religious authorities. The translation of the Sanskrit epics was not an academic enterprise comparable to the modern study of religion; it was instead part of an imperial effort to bring both Indic and Persianate culture into the service of Akbar.

## Pragmatic Appropriations of Indian Religious Practices

On a very different level, one can see pragmatic and even enthusiastic appropriations of aspects of Indian practices that were seen as practically beneficial and which could be assimilated to familiar categories. This strategy was applied to the meditative practices of the Nāth jogis, known to Indologists as hatha yoga, which became very popular in some Sufi circles. One example of the Sufi adoption of these practices is a short Persian text on yoga and meditation that is pseudonymously attributed to the famous founder of the Indian Chishtī Sufi order, Shaykh Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1236). A number of different versions of this treatise are found in manuscripts held in different libraries, often with different titles, though there is a fair amount of overlap in the contents. The pseudographic attribution to Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī is both an indication of the seriousness with which Indian Sufis approached the practices of yoga, and a

<sup>42</sup> Abū L-Faḍl, in Muḥammad Riḍā Jalālī Nā‘ini and Narayan Shankar Shukla, ed., *Mahābhārat, buzurgtarīn manzūma-yi kubna-yi mawjūd-i jabān*, Persian trans. from Sanskrit by Mīr Ghiyāth al-Dīn ‘Alī Qazwīnī Naqīb Khān *et al.*, Hindshināsī, 15–18 (4 vols., Tehran: Kitābforūshī Ṭūhūrī, 1358–9/1979–81), I, xx.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, I, xl–xli.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, I, xviii–xx.

hermeneutic in itself.<sup>45</sup> In other words, these teachings were important enough that they should have been part of the teaching of the greatest Sufi master in the Chishtī tradition. This attribution is paralleled by the phenomenon we see in the circulation of the most important Arabic work on hatha yoga, *The Pool of Nectar*, which in many manuscripts is attributed to the great Andalusian Sufi master Shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240).<sup>46</sup> This form of pseudigraphic attribution to Islamic authorities is paralleled by the repeated assertion of equivalence between the most famous Indian masters of yogic lore with esoteric prophets of Islam (Idris, Khidr, and Jonah), or the even more striking identification of the Indian gods Brahma and Vishnu with Abraham and Moses.

Chapter 3 of Mu‘īn al-Dīn’s treatise has a composite structure, in which the metaphysical levels and archangels of Islamicate cosmology are linked to the breaths of yogic practice (3.1–6). In the “Treatise on the Nature of Yoga” these are accompanied by what are now unintelligible mantras; unfortunately, the inability of the Persian script to represent short vowels inevitably resulted in chaos whenever it was used for the transcription of Sanskritic phrases. Nevertheless, the text asserts that the realization of these levels is closely related to the supreme spiritual states associated with the Prophet Muḥammad. Indeed, the text goes on to link these states with knowledge revealed during the ascension of Muḥammad to heaven, and moreover it maintains that this knowledge was then conferred on Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī, either spontaneously by the Prophet Muḥammad or (in a second version) through the agency of Mu‘īn al-Dīn’s master, Shaykh ‘Uthmān Hārwanī (3:7–8). In other words, the principal teachings of this yogic text are alleged to be the essential import of what the Prophet Muḥammad received during his most sublime spiritual experience. At this point, Mu‘īn al-Dīn is warned not to transmit this esoteric teaching to just anybody, but the restrictions are generous enough to include all sincere followers of the Chishtī order in later generations (3.9).

The strategy of appropriation demonstrated here is hardly tempered by any sense of difference, in its description of yogic practices as the fruit of the supreme spiritual experience in the history of Islam. Yet in other ways, this text illustrates a failure to synthesize the sources whose alleged unity is its principal contention. This unintentional differentiation between Indic and Islamicate materials is evident in the first two chapters, which present separately and with no attempt at integration an account of yogic physiology and cosmology alongside a Qur’ānic and Islamic account of the nature of the world; the only thing that links the two chapters is their emphasis on the equivalence of the microcosm and the macrocosm.<sup>47</sup>

On an even more basic level is the recognition of Indian practices under the highly flexible category of magic. A 14<sup>th</sup>-century Persian anonymous text on yoga called *The Kamarupa Seed Syllables* draws eclectically upon Islamic references to ease the favorable consideration of occult techniques that are valuable because of their practical

<sup>45</sup> Carl W. Ernst, “Two Versions of a Persian Text on Yoga and Cosmology, Attributed to Shaykh Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī,” *Elixir* 2 (2006): 69–76, 124–5.

<sup>46</sup> See “Islamization of Yoga.”

<sup>47</sup> Ernst, “Two Versions of a Persian Text.”

results.<sup>48</sup> Here one finds that Hindi mantras are transmitted by the prophets Elijah, Jonah, Khidr, and Abraham. This text also identifies the Sanskrit seed mantra *brim* (invariably represented in Arabic script as *rbīn*) with the Arabic name of God *rahīm*, “the merciful.” This is an interesting esoteric variant on the common pun on the Hindu and Muslim names for God, Rām and Raḥīm. The minor spiritual beings called “digit of the moon” (*indu-rekhā*) in Hindi are rendered by the Persian term for angel (*firishta*) (53b). The text demonstrates an unselfconscious domestication of yogic practices in an Islamicate society. Among the breath prognostications, for instance, one learns to approach “the *qādī* [Islamic judge] or the *amīr* [prince]” for judgment or litigation only when the breath from the right nostril is favorable. Casual references mention Muslim magicians, or practices that may be performed either in a Muslim or a Hindu graveyard (47b), or else in an empty temple or mosque (49b), and occasionally one is told to recite a Qur’anic passage such as the Throne Verse (Qur. 2:255), or to perform a certain action after the Muslim evening prayer. We even hear of a Muslim from Broach who successfully summoned one of the female deities known as yoginis, participating in the rites of her devotees (37a). The text is provided with an overall Islamic frame, through a standard invocation of God and praise of the Prophet at the beginning. Likewise at the end, a quotation of a *ḥadīth* saying and some mystical allusions furnish a religious coloring for the magical practices (55a). These practices remain fundamentally ambiguous, however. “If one to whom this door is opened makes the claim, he will be a prophet; if he is good, he will be a saint; and if he is evil, he will be a magician” (55a). For the average Persian reader, the contents of *The Kamarūpa Seed Syllables* most likely fell into the category of the occult sciences, and its Indic origin would have only enhanced its esoteric allure. The text employs standard Arabic terms for astral magic (*tanjīm*), the summoning of spirits (*ihḍār*) (30b, 37b), and the subjugation (*taskhīr*) of demons, fairies, and magicians.<sup>49</sup> The chants or mantras of the yogis are repeatedly referred to as spells (*afsūn*), a term of magical significance. Thus there would be a familiar quality about the text, even when these techniques are employed for summoning the female spirits known in India as yoginis.

A similar taxonomic approach is seen in the classification of the principal Arabic work on hatha yoga, *The Pool of Nectar*. Several of the manuscripts (mostly found in Istanbul) contain descriptions and glosses of the text that stress its character as a work of Indian magic, and bibliographers and catalogers have also classified the text under this category. Copies in Cairo have been variously catalogued under the headings of medicine or cabalism. The seventeenth-century Ottoman bibliographer Ḥājī Khalīfa, listing the text anonymously, described it in terms of its contents as a work “on the

<sup>48</sup> Carl W. Ernst, “Being Careful with the Goddess: Yoginis in Persian and Arabic Texts,” in *Performing Ecstasy: The Poetics and Politics of Religion in India*, ed. Pallabi Chakrabarty and Scott Kugle (Delhi: Manohar, 2009), 189–203.

<sup>49</sup> Prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the terms *yogin* and *yogini* primarily designated sorcerers, according to David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: “Tantric Sex” in Its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 221.

science of magic according to the method of India.”<sup>50</sup> The description of the book in terms of Indian magic was the natural result of the presence of this category in the Islamicate cultural world since early times. The eleventh-century Arabic magical compendium of Pseudo-Majrīṭī, *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* or *The Goal of the Sage*, which was translated into Latin under the title *Picatrix*, contains several standard descriptions of the magical arts of the Indians. *Picatrix* associated Indian magic with the sciences of letters and magical operations through conjuring. The author of *Picatrix* also treats control (*taskhīr*) of planetary spirits as typical of Indian magic.<sup>51</sup> The Ottoman polymath Tashköprüzada (d. 1561) was adapting the text to this category when he said that Indian magic specializes in purifying the soul, and he cited *The Pool of Nectar* as an example.<sup>52</sup> Evidently it was under the attraction of this concept that one manuscript of the Arabic version of *The Pool of Nectar* (Q) was ascribed to Ṭumṭum the Indian, a name also known to the author of *Picatrix*.<sup>53</sup> The same is true of the marginal note in another manuscript (F) connecting *The Pool of Nectar* to Tinkālūshā “the Greek” (otherwise known as “the Babylonian,” from Babylon near Memphis in Egypt); Tinkālūshā was the Arabic version of Teukros, an Egyptian astrologer of the Hellenistic period. Works on talismans and cheiromancy attributed to him mention also Ṭumṭum and another Indian, Sharāsīm.<sup>54</sup> These fanciful names were manifestations of a kind of esoteric exoticism, in which India is interchangeable with other remote and mysterious locales.

The acceptance of a text on yogic techniques among Muslim readers also drew upon underlying similarities with pre-Islamic spiritual practices of theurgy and cabalistic letter-mysticism, which partook of some of the characteristics of magic. Philosophical doctrines, such as the emphasis on self-knowledge, were given a magical twist in the Greek magical papyri that described how to encounter and master one’s inner daimon.<sup>55</sup> From the Chaldaean Oracles to the Neoplatonic meditations of Iamblichus and Proclus, ritual and contemplative practices were used to attain union with the divine. Proclus himself, in addition to writing commentaries on the works of Plato, composed hymns to the planets as the visible representatives of the divine unities, or henads.<sup>56</sup> Invocations of the planetary deities were also practiced by the Hellenized pagans of the ancient

<sup>50</sup> Muṣṭafā b. ‘Abdullāh al-shahīr bi-Hājī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-zunūn ‘an asāmī al-kutub wa-l-funūn*, ed. Muḥammad Sharaf al-Dīn Yaltqāya (Istanbul: Wikālat al-Ma‘ārif, 1362/1943), II, col. 1649.

<sup>51</sup> Pseudo-Majrīṭī, “*Picatrix*”: *Das Ziel des Weisen*, ed. Hellmut Ritter, *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, 12 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1933), 80–83, 138; German trans. Hellmut Ritter and Martin Plessner, *Studies of the Warburg Institute*, 27 (London: University of London, 1962), 83–86, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Manfred Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Gebeimwissenschaften im Islam*, *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, I.VI.2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 361.

<sup>53</sup> Ullmann, 298–99, 381. The name Ṭumṭum is also found in a cabalistic treatise bound with manuscripts C and D.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 279, 329.

<sup>55</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, “The Delphic Maxim ‘Know Yourself’ in the Greek Magical Papyri,” *History of Religions* 21 (1981): 156–71.

<sup>56</sup> Proclus, *Philosophi Platonici, Opera Inedita*, ed. Victor Cousin (Paris, 1864; reprint ed., Frankfurt am Main: Minerva G.m.b.H., 1962), 1315–23; Anne Sheppard, “Proclus’ Attitude to Theurgy,” *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 212–24.

Syrian city of Harran, who continued to flourish in Islamic times under the pretense of being the monotheistic Sabians of old, and these practices were preserved in Arabic works on magic such as *Picatrix*.<sup>57</sup> Hellenistic invocations to planetary deities were translated into Arabic as late as 1462, when a compendium of the Greek writings of the “pagan” philosopher Gemistos Pletho (including a version of the Chaldean Oracles) was rendered into Arabic at the court of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet the Conqueror.<sup>58</sup> The Persian philosopher Suhrawardī, whose allegories are connected with the frame-story of *The Pool of Nectar*, was following in the tradition of Proclus when he wrote a series of hymns to the planetary and celestial intelligences.<sup>59</sup> So from this tradition there existed an analogue in the Islamic world for the practice of summoning planetary spirits with mantras, as recorded in *The Pool of Nectar*, as a kind of overlay on the technique of summoning yogini goddesses. In this way the practices described in *The Pool of Nectar* join the many other secular magical practices of diverse origins that became Islamicized in Arabic versions.<sup>60</sup>

While the examples just given might seem eccentric, they nevertheless share the characteristic of providing a positive evaluation of exotic Indian religious techniques either by attributing them to an illustrious Islamic source, or by more casually classifying them as the lower order of magical phenomena. In either case, the recognition of the other as valid is accomplished by redefining it in terms of the familiar.

## The Limits of the Appreciation of Idolatry

Despite the status of idolatry as a condemned religious practice considered incompatible with monotheism and Islamic belief, many Muslim thinkers toyed with the symbolism of idolatry as a signifier for the transcendence of conventional norms. The topos of “true infidelity” goes back to the deliberately blasphemous Arabic lyrics composed by Umayyad aristocrats as they relaxed in Christian monasteries, where wine could always be obtained and pretty faces might be found. With minor shifts, the same kind of imagery could be applied to Zoroastrians (as with the Magians of Hafiz) or to Hindus. For Persian authors like Sa’dī, the symbolism of infidel religions was interchangeable, as he showed in his picaresque account in his *Būstān* on the temple of Somnath, which mixes indiscriminately terminology from various religions. When treated as a mystical inversion of ordinary religion, “true infidelity” from the time of Ḥallāj onward became a powerful image for transgressing received ideas. Notable masters of this topos in Sufi literature included ‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī, and especially

<sup>57</sup> David Pingree, “Some of the Sources of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*,” *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980): 1–15.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Nicolet and Michel Tardieu, “Pletho Arabicus: Identification et contenu du manuscrit arabe d’Istanbul, Topkapi Serai, Ahmet II 1896,” *Journal Asiatique* 268 (1980): 35–57.

<sup>59</sup> Corbin, *L’archange*, 473–512.

<sup>60</sup> Johan Christoph Bürgel, *The Feather of Simurgh: The “Licit Magic” of the Arts in Medieval Islam*, Hagop Kevorkian Series on Near Eastern Art and Civilization (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 27–52, esp. 37–43.

Maḥmūd Shabistārī, whose *Gulshan-i Rāz* contains extensive reflections on how idolatry may conceal the essence of monotheism.<sup>61</sup> According to Alessandro Bausani, the symbolism of mystical infidelity was one of the dominant characteristics of Persian poetry by the seventeenth century.<sup>62</sup> Yet it was never the case that these raptures on transcending the norms of Islam coincided with cool-headed approval of the ordinary religions of non-Muslims. In terms of the rhetoric of “mystical infidelity,” those common non-Muslims were considered counterfeit infidels.

Nevertheless, one can find in Arabic and Persian literature a tradition of positive aesthetic reception of non-Muslim cultures, even including the idolatrous paganism of pre-Islamic times. In the case of India, we are in possession of a number of travel accounts provided by Muslim authors. Their quasi-Orientalist descriptions of Indian religions often exhibit a “curious mixture of fear and admiration, and familiarity and loathing.”<sup>63</sup> Sometimes the dedication and self-sacrifice of the widow immolated on her late husband’s funeral pyre (the ritual of *sati*) drew admiration and respect, as in Nau’ī’s Persian poem *Sūz o Gudāz (Burning and Melting)*. It was in this vein that Amīn ibn Aḥmad Rāzī, in his florid *Haft iqlīm (The Seven Climes)*, written in 1594, cited from a lost earlier source an account of the wonders of India, including the always popular stories of self immolation as well as the breathing techniques of jogis. I quote this at length because of the literary style of this account:

Muḥammad Yūsuf Harawī, who was one of the competent people of his age, wrote a treatise on the wonders and rarities of the people of India. There he has related, I was in one of the districts of India and heard that a jogi had appeared who wanted to immolate himself in view of the king of that place. The king of that district passed three days in feasting and mirth, and on the fourth day at dawn, when the orb of the sun had arisen from the citadel of the orient and became fixed above the tablecloth of dust, a great crowd of the idolaters gathered. That jogi fled from impermanent existence and was suspended in imperishable nothingness, with the cloak of annihilation on his breast and the cap of renunciation on his head. He came before the king and performed the customs of reverence and the necessary salutations. Like a rosebud, his lip was sealed from speech, and in the manner of a narcissus, he kept his gaze directed at his feet as he stood. At his direction, attendants softened goat and cow manure and piled it around him until it came up to his head and shoulders. Then fire was struck on the left and right, and it began to catch fire until flames arose from all sides, and the moment became hot. At the moment when, candle-like, the flame reached to the throat of that burned one, he turned toward the king and spoke a few words. He bowed his head like

<sup>61</sup> Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Maḥmūd Shabistārī* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> A. Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana,” in A. Pagliaro and A. Bausani, *Storia della letteratura persiana* (Milan, 1960), 242–7; id., “Ghazal. II. — In Persian Literature,” EI<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Empiricism of the Heart: Close Encounters in an 18th-Century Indo-Persian Text,” *Studies in History* 15/2, n.s. (1999): 261–291, quoting p. 291.

a supplicant and laid his forehead on the very face of the flame, and closing his eyes, he expired. (Verse:)

His hot-headed lover put a brick beneath his head;  
he burned so much that finally he put his head on ashes.

After searching for the parts of his body for an hour, they saw nothing there except an ashen residue. (Verse:)

You are raw as long as a remnant of yourself is out of place;  
burn wholly like a candle, so you may become perfect.

Furthermore, in India there is a group of jogis who practice breath control. They carry their unremitting persistence to the point that they take but a single breath every few days, and they consider this skill the height of perfection and the greatest achievement. Among them was a jogi in Benares who had this quality, such that once Khān-i Zamān kept him buried underground for over ten days. Another time he had him spend nearly twelve days under water, like an anchor, but he experienced no harm or injury at all. Also in the region of Punjab there was a madman, freed from the trammels of the world, who had cast the wealth of the two worlds to one side, having neither connection to the world nor inclination to worldlings. (Verse:)

From every eyelash a lily sprang up on his eye,  
sewing up his vision from the bad and good of time.

For his whole life, there is a piece of land where there is a crevice, and he has wedged his left breast, which is the treasury of the jewel of the heart, into that crevice. He has restrained his hand from taking food, and he has kept his eye veiled from slumber. The said Muḥammad Yūsuf has written, I have seen that person, and I heard from the people who were close to him that it is twenty-two years that he has followed this regime. During this time he has not stirred foot or stretched out his hand, and for nourishment he has been satisfied with the smell of food. And God is the lord of assistance!<sup>64</sup>

Here the marvelous figure of the jogi burning himself alive, and performing superhuman acts of asceticism to rival the desert anchorites of early Christianity, is presented in terms derived from the highly refined esthetic of Persian poetry.

Although examples of such aesthetic admiration of Indian ascetics and other marvels could be multiplied, among Indian Muslims there were limits to such positive expressions when idolatry was involved. It may be that theoretical consideration of idolatry in Persia or Anatolia was not nearly as threatening as the question could be in a land (such as India) that was thriving with idolatry. The example I have in mind is the famous story of Moses and the shepherd, memorably told by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in his *Mathnawī* (2:1750–1815). There, we see the shepherd addressing God in the most naïve and simple

<sup>64</sup> Rāzī, *Haft iqlīm*, 2:509–11, quoted by Carl W. Ernst, “Accounts of Yogis in Arabic and Persian Historical and Travel Texts,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 33 (2008): 409–426.

fashion, offering to sew God's shoes, comb his hair, and kill his lice, as well as massage his feet and sweep out his little room. Moses, the arch-monotheist, is enraged at this blasphemy and denounces the poor shepherd in a lengthy and devastating diatribe. But after he departs in triumph, leaving the shepherd crushed in repentance, Moses is addressed by God with a stern rebuke. The sincerity and intensity of the shepherd's worship is all that matters, Moses is told, and in presenting this Rūmī even makes an offhand reference to India as the byword for idolatry. God states to Moses, "I have bestowed on every one a (special) way of acting; I have given to everyone a (peculiar) form of expression. . . . Among the Indians the idiom of India is praiseworthy; among the Sindis the idiom of Sind is praiseworthy. . . . I look not at the tongue and the speech; I look at the inward (spirit) and the state (feeling). . . . The religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the (only) religion and creed is — God."<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, Moses is forced to run after the shepherd to announce his forgiveness in the most liberal acceptance of religious diversity: "Do not seek any rules or method (of worship); say whatsoever your distressful heart desires. Your blasphemy is (the true) religion, and your religion is the light of the spirit: you are saved, and through you a whole (world) is in salvation."<sup>66</sup> It is noteworthy that in contemporary interpretations of Rūmī as a figure who transcends all religion, this particular text has been frequently cited as a proof text, though translators have pushed the text a little farther toward universalism than is probably justified.<sup>67</sup>

A Chishtī Sufi master in India was not willing to go so far. Shaykh Naṣīr al-Dīn Maḥmūd "Chirāgh-i Dihlī" (d. 1356) was one of the principal leaders of this important South Asian Sufi tradition in northern India. Although he seems to have been familiar with the writings of Rūmī (he is perhaps the first Indian Sufi known to quote from the poetry of Rūmī), he tells a tale similar to the story of Moses and the shepherd, but in a quite different fashion. In his recorded conversations, known as *Kbayr al-majālis* (*The Best of Assemblies*), Chirāgh-i Dihlī locates this story unambiguously in India, having the idolater address his idol in Hindi (although the example remains generic, without any identification of the deity). Yet the lesson here is not that God approves of all forms of worship, but that God will accept repentance from idolatry even after many years of such blasphemous behavior.

In the age of the prophet Moses (God's prayer and peace be upon him), there was an idolater among the Israelites, who had practiced idolatry for hundred years. He had not ceased for a single day in these four hundred years, and he did not raise

<sup>65</sup> Jalāluddīn Rūmī, *The Mathnawī*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1977), 2:1753, 1757, 1759, 1770, with slight modifications.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1784–5.

<sup>67</sup> Coleman Barks and John Moyne render the previously quoted verses as follows: "I was wrong. God has revealed to me / that there are no rules for worship. Say whatever / and however your Loving tells you. / Your sweet blasphemy is the truest devotion. / Through you a whole world is freed. / Loose your tongue and don't worry what / comes out. It's all the Light of the Spirit." See *This Longing* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).

his head from the foot of the idol, nor did he pray for any necessity during these four hundred years. One day he got a fever, and he placed his head on the idol's foot and said, '*Tu merā gusāin, tu merā kartār, mujb is tap tabīn churā!*' In Persian, that is, he said to the idol, 'You are my God, you are my Creator, release me from this fever!' He said this in the Indian language, just as it is written. However much he spoke to the idol, what answer comes from stone? No answer came. His fever increased. He got up and kicked it, saying, '*Tu merā kartār nabīn!*' That is, 'You are not my creator!' He went out and saw a mosque before him. He put his head inside the mosque and said once, 'O God of Moses!' From the four directions, the cry came, 'I am here, my servant! I am here, my servant!' This was heard seventy times, without interruption. He was astonished, saying, 'For four hundred years I have not raised my head from the foot of the idol, and I never prayed for any necessity. Today I pray for one, but the idol did not supply my necessity. He gave no reply, no matter how much I implored him. A single time I called out in the name of the God of Moses, and seventy times I heard, "I am here, my servant!" I am His servant! So much of my life has been wasted!' Then he prayed for what he needed: 'O God of Moses, remove this fever from me!' At once the fever left him. . . .

Moses ran barefoot, saying, 'Come! For your repentance has been accepted, and your faith has been found acceptable! It is decreed, even so: "If for four hundred years, nay! If for four thousand years you practice idolatry and never once lift your head from the idol's foot, and then despair of him and come to Us, and just once cry out, then seventy times without interruption I will reply, and every necessity that you pray for I will provide to your desire.'" The master told this story, and those who were present wept with loud cries and exclamations.<sup>68</sup>

The divergence of Chirāgh-i Dihlī's story from Rūmī's narrative reveals a quite different emphasis. The Indian Sufi is not interested in the sincerity and intensity of the idolater's worship, nor does he provide any excuse for it based on universalist notions. Instead, the theological issue of worshipping false idols is front and center, starkly contrasted with the true God known through prophecy as the Creator, and the Hindi language makes the Indian location of this idolatry unmistakable for the Indian Muslim listeners, who would have understood it perfectly in their mother tongue. Thus the story of the idolater's renunciation of paganism and his forgiving acceptance by God is what brings the audience to tears, not the notion that God welcomes all forms of worship. This is an instance in which a strong theological resistance barred this Indian Sufi from extending universalist recognition to Indian religions.

<sup>68</sup>Naṣīr al-Dīn Maḥmūd Chirāgh-i Dihlī, *Khayr al-majālis*, comp. Ḥamīd Qalandar, ed. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Publication of the Department of History, Muslim University, no. 5, Studies in Indo-Muslim Mysticism, 1 (Aligarh: Muslim University, Department of History, n.d. [1959]), 120–25; translated by Carl W. Ernst in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., Princeton Readings in Religions, 1 (Princeton University Press, 1995), 513–17.

## Conclusion

In its most extreme form, universalism extends the recognition of religious validity not just to followers of other religions, but to every sinner, so that Ibn ‘Arabī envisioned the salvation of Pharaoh himself; this is paralleled by the Christian philosopher Origen, whose doctrine of *apokatastasis* or restoration included the salvation even of Satan.<sup>69</sup> Short of that position, there were still a number of Muslim thinkers who proposed varying degrees of positive recognition of the merits of the religions of India, and I have not mentioned all of them here by any means. This they were able to do by employing the categories (such as Sufism, monotheism, political ethics, magic) that were the common currency of premodern Islamicate thought. By pointing to the limitations in their concepts of universalism I am perhaps taking advantage of an ambiguity in our notion of the universal, which is inevitably embedded in the language of some local context or tradition even as it strives for a comprehensive meaning. Nevertheless, these examples indicate that Muslim writers trying to conceptualize the beliefs and practices of Indian religions necessarily drew upon frameworks — political, philosophical, theological, or occult — that were well domesticated in their own culture. As Rūmī put it, “Everyone became my friend from his own opinion.”

<sup>69</sup> Ernst, “Controversy over Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*.”