

Research Article

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Secularism as Theopolitics: Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar and the Theological Underpinnings of the State in South Asia

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Abstract: Carl Schmitt's well-known declaration that "all significant" modern political concepts are "secularized theological concepts" has sometimes been treated as hyperbole: a metaphorical axe aimed at the frozen sea of legal positivism, a provocation rather than a thesis. In this article, I demonstrate the fecundity of this thesis by applying it to secularism, a concept undeniably central to the Liberal state; crucially, however, I do so in the context of early modern South Asian history and ongoing debates over the secularism of premodern Mughal polity. As I argue, Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar (1542–1605 CE) – a monarch of the Mughal dynasty often cast by South Asian secularists as a precocious emblem of the neutral state – was, in fact, an ideal type of Schmittian sovereign, who nonetheless stands equidistant from both Schmitt and his Liberal opponents in his stance toward religious pluralism. The theological correlate to Akbar's "secularism" was an Islamicate theology of religions, which provided a contentful religious justification for religious pluralism, very different from contemporary "post-metaphysical" arguments. The final section of the article takes a critical turn, as I examine Akbar's legendary reputation in the present, my intervention into his "secular" mythos, and the special difficulties involved in applying Schmittian concepts to an early modern, non-Western sacred king.

Keywords: Carl Schmitt, political theology, Akbar, South Asian history, secularism, religious studies

1 Introduction

There are many political theologies because there are, on the one hand, many different religions, and, on the other, many different kinds and methods of doing politics.

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II*¹

For historians of South Asia, the early modern South Asian monarch Abū al-Faṭḥ Jalāl ud-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar (1542–1605 CE) needs little introduction: he stands out in the popular and scholarly imagination as a ruler identified with successful polity and the achievement of harmonious intercommunal relations. Not only did Akbar employ Jains and Brahmins² and entertain Jesuits at his court,³ sponsor intra- and interreligious

¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 66.

² While non-Muslims were employed in various capacities by the Mughals before Akbar, in the summary of Audrey Truschke, "direct patronage ties and looser forms of affiliation drew Sanskrit intellectuals, both Jains and Brahmins, into the Mughal court beginning in the 1560s." Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 23.

³ MacLagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul*.

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debates, eliminate the *jizya* or tax on non-Muslims,⁴ and prohibit forced conversion,⁵ he was also the progenitor of what is sometimes referred to as the “Mughal translation movement”: this was the undertaking, begun by the Mughal court in the sixteenth century, to fund the translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian, the courtly and scholarly lingua franca. The products of this venture have frequently been held up as emblems of religious irenicism, reasoned investigation into religion, or, at the very least, precocious cosmopolitanism. More than simply an emblem of tolerance, Akbar has become, in popular and in scholarly portraiture, nothing less than the secular state made flesh, a pre-modern paragon of even-handed religious polity modeling a liberal ideal.

In the last few years, a dissident strain of scholarship has emerged, spearheaded by the historian Azfar Moin, which invokes the slogan of “political theology”⁶ and sacred kingship in discussing Akbar’s polity and the question of its legacy and interpretation. Akbar, this literature underscores, was the quintessential sacred ruler: a messianic [*maṣīḥ-wār*] appearance of divine light in the Mongol bloodline whose reign culminated in the first conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in a certain celestial position since the birth of the Prophet Muhammad⁷ – thus portending, for his hagiographers, the onset of a new millenarian episteme. Such a portraiture would appear to pose a significant challenge for the interpretation of Akbar as a Nehruvian in the rough: Akbar could not, it would seem, be both a “secularist *avant-la-lettre*,” devoted to *separating* sectarian identity from polity, and a millenarian sacred king par excellence, intent on *uniting* political and religious powers in his own person.

In this article, I aim to recover and affirm both facets of Akbar’s legend – the sacred and the secular. Akbar, as I conclude, leveled his theology of religions into an integral form of sovereignty⁸ over religion [*dīn*] and the world [*dunyā*] – one which allowed for a generous amount of religious liberty for the subjects, yet reserved an *ius reformandi* for the King. Such a formulation, while alien to the twentieth and twenty-first-century postmetaphysical tradition of secular thought, resembles an earlier recension of secularism in the mode of Henry VIII, Kantorowicz’s Frederick II, and, to some extent, Hobbes’ Leviathan. This mode mandated not the separation of earthly and spiritual powers, but their unification and ascription to the sovereign.⁹

4 Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, vol. 1, 39.

5 The edict of religious toleration, or that “[n]o man should be interfered with on account of his religion, and any one was to be allowed to go over to any religion he pleased” is one of the purportedly outlandish decrees which the disgruntled courtier Badā’ūnī claims was enacted in the year 1001 AH, the year of March 1593 to March 1594 CE. Abū’l Faḍl, notably, while he often goes out of his way to paint Akbar as religiously tolerant, does not mention any such order in the relevant portion of his *History of Akbar*. He does, however, record a speech of the Emperor against forced conversion of Hindus in the year 986 AH (March 1578–March 1579). Abd al-Qādir ibn Muḥammad Badā’ūnī Shāh, *Muntakhab Ut-tawārikh* (Volume II), 392–3; Abū al-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar* (Vol. 7), 641–97; Abū al-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar* (Vol. 6), 61–3.

6 Azfar Moin was, to my knowledge, the first to bring Schmittian concepts to bear on the study of Akbar in particular and Mughal rule in general. The working basis for this application was first spearheaded in a 2017 article, “Millennial Sovereignty, Total Religion, and Total Politics,” and subsequently developed in a special issue of the journal *Modern Asian Studies* devoted to developing the framework proposed in Moin’s titular article, “Sulh-i Kull as an Oath of Peace: Mughal Political Theology in History, Theory, and Comparison.” Large portions of my article were developed before the publication of this special issue and have been revised to reflect these new data and analysis. Moin, “Millennial Sovereignty, Total Religion, and Total Politics;” Moin, “Sulh-i Kull as an Oath of Peace.”

7 Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 147.

8 Akbar’s authority is described by Abū’l Faḍl in his preface to the Razmnāma as a “*salṭanat-i šūrī u ma’hawī*,” a term I would translate as “spiritual and mundane sovereignty.” I follow Azfar Moin in applying the notion of sovereignty to the Mughal context. This application does not, as I read it, necessitate conflating Mughal and European political forms. “Sovereignty,” as James Sheehan helpfully asserts, “is best understood as a set of claims made by those seeking or wielding power, claims about the superiority and autonomy of their authority,” whereas “[s]tate making is the ongoing process of making, unmaking, and revising sovereign claims” (3). It is in the light of Sheehan’s formulation that Abhishek Kaicker thus speaks of a “discourse of sovereignty” (8). While I do not here treat the question of South Asian state forms and of Mughal “state-making” in detail, it is relatively clear that Akbar’s claims to power over religion and worldly order can be compared to the ongoing debate over sovereignty in a European context even if the “state[s]” in question took on different forms and the development of “state-making” followed a different trajectory. The formulations of Akbar and his hagiographers had institutional and juridical consequences, while remaining, of course, “claims” that could be “contested.” Sheehan, “The Problem of Sovereignty in European History”; Kaicker, *The King and the People*.

9 My interpretation here is heavily indebted to the recent thesis of Robert A. Yelle in the similar case of Aśoka, the Mauryan emperor also often lauded as a secularist for his policy of inter-religious toleration. As Yelle incisively argues, a designation of

While ample insight into the integralist form of secularism may be found in the anthropological literature on sacred kingship and in historical sociology,¹⁰ in keeping with the occasion of this special issue [the centenary of *Political Theology* and *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*], I here develop an analysis responsive to the oeuvre of Carl Schmitt, the German jurist and political theorist. As I outline, the Akbari sources can productively be brought into conversation with Schmitt in at least two respects.

The first involves the titular interpretation of secularism as a form of theopolitics. In keeping with “Politische Theologie’s” well-known declaration of a systematic correspondence between “the metaphysical image... of the world” in a given epoch and what this epoch “understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization,”¹¹ I use the example of Akbar to apply this thesis to the notion of secularism itself.¹² As I argue, the theological correlate of “secularism” (*avant-la-lettre*)¹³ in the early modern South Asian context was the Islamicate theology of religions.¹⁴ That is to say: Akbar’s “tolerant” polity acquired what plausibility and legitimacy it possessed through association with a longstanding, Islamic tradition of investigation into religious difference – an investigation that took place in an avowedly religious horizon. The Mughal emperor was not merely the passive recipient of this tradition: he also helped develop it, by elevating a more radical, Islamicate form of discourse which made the ability to sensitively interpret religious differences into a norm of religious truth.

My thesis is addressed to students of political theology as well as historians of South Asia. Carl Schmitt has not generally been understood to be partial to “secularization” or the “neutral [i.e. secular] state,” a process and institution he linked to Liberal hypocrisy and de-politicization. In Akbar’s example, however, I hope to sketch out a secularism responsive to Schmitt’s critiques: one that does not, like Rawlsian or Habermasian secularism,¹⁵ deny its metaphysical priors,¹⁶ or, on the other hand, fail to aim at the integral unity which, to the later Schmitt, was the *sine qua non* for a successful polity.

Asoka as a secularist can stand, but only in light of a re-examination of what secularism itself stands for. Secularism, he concludes, emerged not from the conceptual or institutional separation of religion and politics, but from the Hobbesian project of uniting political and religious powers in the sovereign. While Yelle cites Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, he does not, for some reason, borrow from Schmitt’s essay or book on the same. See: Yelle, “Was Asoka Really a Secularist *Avant-La-Lettre*?”

10 See, for instance, the approach of the following works: Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*; Moin and Strathern, “Sacred Kingship in World History;” Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*.

11 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

12 *Ibid.*, 37.

13 Despite the differences in our respective accounts of Akbar, I am sympathetic to the general approach of Rajeev Bhargava in his effort to sketch out a “non-teleological conceptual history of what we today call secularism.” I have similarly attempted to resist a crypto-normative or crypto-political (Liberal) teleology in the historiography – which has often attempted, in one way or another, to chart a course from Akbar to Nehru. Akbar’s “secularism,” as I present it, is discontinuous both with Schmitt’s illiberal “totalism” and with most or all the extant formulations of secularism on offer in the contemporary West. If there is a legitimate genealogical link to be made with modern Indian secularism of whatever recension, it is less direct than many have suggested. Bhargava, “Forms of Secularity before Secularism,” 96.

14 “Theology of religions” is the branch of theology that explores the religious significance of religious diversity. So far as I know, I am the first to assert this thesis. I believe it is also proper to make the more general claim that contemporary secularism writ large also depends on a theology of religions, but I do not have the proper historical background in Western history of religions to directly defend this broader assertion. I adopt the term “theology of religions” to describe Akbar’s project in lieu of phrases such as “comparative religions” because, in my view, “theology of religions” more clearly acknowledges the fact that the Islamic[ate] investigation of religion was carried out in a religious context.

For a generalized introduction to the “theology of religions,” see: Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*.

For instances of the phrase being used with respect to religions other than Christianity, see: Long, “Religions as Yogas;” Dag, “Problematising the Islamic Theology of Religions.”

15 As Jürgen Habermas asserts: “I assume that the constitution of the liberal state can satisfy its need for legitimation in a modest way by drawing on the cognitive resources of a set of arguments that are independent of religious or metaphysical traditions.” Habermas, “Prepolitical Foundations of the Constitutional State,” 104.

16 As Schmitt argues in *Political Romanticism*: “Today, many varieties of metaphysical attitude exist in a secularized form. To a great extent, it holds true that different and, indeed, mundane factors have taken the place of God: humanity, the nation, the individual, historical development, or even life as life for its own sake, in its complete spiritual emptiness and mere dynamic. This does not mean that the attitude is no longer metaphysical. The thought and feelings of every person always retain a certain metaphysical character. Metaphysics is something that is unavoidable, and – as Otto von Guericke has aptly remarked – we cannot escape it by relinquishing our awareness of it.” Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 17.

The matter of unity – or, as Schmitt sometimes puts it, “totality” – is the second point on which Akbar’s form of sacred kingship is conducive to a Schmittian reading. Here, an appropriate entry point would be Schmitt’s work on Thomas Hobbes.¹⁷ The figure of the Leviathan was, according to Schmitt’s (questionable) argument,¹⁸ a “mortal god” meant to guarantee peace and order, which had been degraded into a machine and “destroyed from within.”¹⁹ The culprit was Hobbes’ proviso for private religious freedom. “The distinction of inner and outer” – i.e., between public cult, under the sovereign’s leadership, and private belief – led to the reduction of the state to an extrinsic mechanism, and a resultant lack of “totality,” or organic unity.²⁰ The consequence was a cheapening of communal and individual life: “Once the huge man’s body and soul became a machine,” Schmitt declares, “the transfer back became feasible, and even the little man could become a *homme-machine*.”²¹

Such an argument appears to condemn any form of religious tolerance as a fatal poison. Yet here, once again, the Akbari project presents a curious counter-case. While Akbar’s polity made allowance for religious conscience,²² it did so in the context of repeatedly asserting the king’s mastery over inner and out, form and content – not only external [*ẓāhir*] matters but also the innermost reaches [*bāṭin*] of human souls. Akbar is often contrasted by his chief minister, Abū’l Faḍl, with conventional rulers, concerned only with “surface” or *ṣūrī* affairs – as he writes in the preface to the initial translation of the *Mahābhārata*, kings concerned only with “the outward affairs of common people,” not “affairs pertaining to religion” which would involve “investigating the hidden recesses of... minds,” like Akbar.²³ Abū’l Faḍl’s thesis is that only a sacred king could do the necessary work of bringing the traditional Islamic scholars to heel, or have the wisdom to institute rapprochement amongst South Asian religious communities.²⁴

Indeed, while it would certainly be tenuous to attribute to Abū’l Faḍl an explicit organic theory of the state, it would not be a stretch to attribute to him an absolutist doctrine of “totality,” one which relied primarily on the backdrop of a mystical Islamic Lettrism. This Lettrism relied on concepts referenced in the writings of earlier Islamic authors such as Ibn ‘Arabī and Muḥammad al-Jurjānī: among others, the idea of creation as a process of divine pronouncement, and of the Perfect Man [*insān-i kāmīl*] or sacralized human being as a divine Word.²⁵ The Mughal court’s innovation was to politicize these ideas and apply them to a ruler.²⁶ This led to a form of Lettrist “totalism” in which juridical, religious, political, and hermeneutical questions inevitably came to merge – as they clearly did for Schmitt himself.²⁷

Akbar’s lordship over the dual realms of world and word, *ṣūrat* [extrinsic form] and *ma’nī* [meaning or spirit], *dīn* [religion] and *dunyā* [worldly order], was not merely a pretty literary construction: it had concrete legal and institutional consequences. A 1579 *mahzar* or “decree,” for instance, famously declared the Emperor’s

17 Meierhenrich, “Fearing the Disorder of Things,” 197.

18 For an incisive critique of Schmitt’s thesis which still manages to redeem his central claim, see: Slomp, “The Liberal Slip of Thomas Hobbes’s Authoritarian Pen.”

19 “In the eighteenth century, the leviathan as *magnus homo*, as the godlike sovereign person of the state, was destroyed from within. The distinction of inner and outer became for the mortal god a sickness unto death.” Schmitt, *Leviathan*, 65.

20 While Schmitt’s argument leaves much unstated, he relies throughout his essay and book on Hobbes on the contrast between machine and organism, which tracks the classic contrast between synthetic and organic theories of the state. According to the organic theory, the state or political community is a whole that exists for its own sake, like a living being, and not merely for some extrinsic good, like a tool and/or machine. Organic language is, in the 1937 essay on Hobbes that preceded the 1938 monograph, set side by side with indeterminate theories of “totality.” Schmitt, *Leviathan*, 71, and 76, note 7.

21 Schmitt, “The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes,” 99.

22 See footnote 5.

23 Above is taken from Kovacs’ recent and brilliant translation. Kovacs, “Chapter 2: The Preface to the Razmnāma,” 70.

24 Ibid., 93–6.

25 Arnaldez, “Al-Insān al-Kāmīl.”

26 The Mughal court’s political Lettrism, while finding its locus classicus in Ibn ‘Arabī, has also been related to the influence of a strain of unconventional Iranophilic Letterism first exemplified in the Hurufis [“Letterists”]. The Hurufis saw their leader, Fazlallah Astarabadi (d. 1394) as a messiah, a universal king, and even “a manifestation of God in a human body” (ix) – formulations which prefigure Akbar’s hagiographical portrait in Abū’l Faḍl’s *Akbarnāma*. Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*.

27 As I tentatively propose, the Akbari court’s Lettrism may in fact answer Schmitt’s search parameter for, as he puts it, “[an]other philosophical syste[m] that render[s] the idea of totality possible,” in addition to the work of Hegel and George Sorel. Schmitt, “The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes,” 100.

right to overrule the *mujtahid*-s, or scholars of Islamic law, in the case of a difference of opinion.²⁸ Akbar's later investigation into religious difference implied an even more thorough-going power to interpret and decide between sectarian claims. This authority was manifested in the imperial cult of the *Tauhid-i Ilāhī*, the "Divine Faith" or civic religion open to participants of all sects,²⁹ and in the translation movement, which often rendered Sanskrit or Brahmanical texts into a specifically Akbari idiom.

In asserting the above, I do not, of course, mean to imply that every facet of Carl Schmitt's (unsystematic) critique of Liberal secularism was answered in the (unsystematic) political and literary products of a sixteenth-century Mughal king. Even less do I pretend to deem the Akbari project an unqualified success. I do, however, want to suggest two things: one, that the Mughal sources reward a Schmittian reading, much more than they have rewarded the uncomplicatedly Liberal lens that has often hitherto been applied to them; and two, that, in asking and answering the question of the relation between politics and religion, these sources seem well equipped to challenge some of Schmitt's most tenuous conclusions and even to expose the limitations of his thought.

It is a curiosity, for instance, that Carl Schmitt, the progenitor of the idea of "political theology," does not devote much attention in his writings to the question of "religion." For Schmitt, politics is "the total"³⁰; religion or theology interests mainly to the degree it becomes political,³¹ or as an (unjustly) banished residue or exception. Akbar, by contrast, a sixteenth-century South Asian ruler by all accounts unable to read and write, consigned considerable time and treasure not only to the political question of the relation between the mundane and spiritual domains but also to the religious investigation of religious differences. As a just look at the Akbari political project suggests, the questions of religion and of religious difference are political questions: questions with special purchase on the nature of sovereignty and the constitution of the State. Yet they are also religious questions – i.e., questions that arise in, and therefore must be answered in, a domain in which the legibility of theological and metaphysical questions is preserved.

In the following sections, I will build on these admissions, move beyond these fitful descriptions, and advance toward a fuller account of a political theology of Akbari "secularism." First, I will attempt to give unfamiliar readers a taste of Akbar's own political theology, and how much it could be deemed to fit Schmitt's schema; second, I will offer a more extended meditation on the theology of religions upon which the latter depended, and how this theology of religions helped to mold the Akbari project's "totalism"; and finally, I will offer a few thoughts on Akbar's political mythos in the present, the intervention my interpretation makes in his legend, and how this early modern South Asian comparand might contribute to a greater critical understanding of Carl Schmitt and his thought.

2 From Political Theology to Political Akbar-ology: Abū'l Faḍl's *History of Akbar*

The thematic development of my political theology from 1922 takes a general direction which departs from the *ius reformandi* of the sixteenth century, culminates in Hegel and is evident everywhere today: from political theology to political Christology. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II*³²

²⁸ Hasan, "The Mahzar of Akbar's Reign."

²⁹ I do not treat the *Tauhid-i Ilāhī* in depth in this article. For a discussion of the ongoing debates which attend the interpretation of the latter, see: Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 145, and 300, note 2.

³⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 2.

³¹ Simply pontificating about theology is, for Schmitt, not necessarily meaningfully political. As he clarified in *Concept of the Political*: "The methodical connection of theological and political presuppositions is clear. But theological interference generally confuses political concepts because it shifts the distinctions usually into moral theology." Schmitt remarked in a July 1958 letter to Armin Mohler that "today everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about [...]" It is fair to say, however, that the later Schmitt grew more interested in the political significance of overtly theological questions – an interest which culminated in the "political Christology" of *Political Theology II*. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 65; Taubes and Tribe, *To Carl Schmitt*, 26.

³² Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 32–3.

The king in his kingdom is like the soul in the body and God in the world.
Aquinas, *De regime principum*³³

Allāh akbar: These are the first words of the *Akbarnāma*, the hagiographic history of Akbar's regime authored by his chief minister, Abū'l Faḡl. Wheeler Thackston renders this as "God is supreme." The second possibility is "Akbar is God."

According to the testimony of 'Abd al-Qādir Badā'ūnī, Akbar's courtier and intimate enemy, *Allāh akbar* became the callsign of Akbar's imperial cult.³⁴ Rather than greeting each other with *Salām*, "the emperor's disciples" said "*Allāh akbar*"; the addressee replied, "*jalla jalālahu*" ("May his glory be glorified"). Badā'ūnī even says of those initiated into the Tawḥīd-i-Ilāhī³⁵ that "*Allāh akbar* was used by them in the prefaces of their writings."³⁶ The phrase did not remain confined to initiates: it was also apparently a mass slogan. Badā'ūnī alludes to its popularity with a bitter aside:

Praise be to Him! who ruleth absolutely in his kingdom as it pleaseth him. And the common people with as little sense as brute beasts repeated continually nothing but "*Allāh akbar*." This caused great commotion.³⁷

Badā'ūnī does not clarify in what contexts the slogan was used by commoners. Elsewhere, however, he describes the Emperor's exhibition of himself on the palace balcony to lumpen members of the public – "wolves among the sheep, and hunters of the weak"³⁸ – who, by his characterization, formed a second, extra-courtly column of the Tauḥīd-i Ilāhī cult.³⁹ *Allāh akbar* was cut on coins and fashioned on the imperial seal.⁴⁰

In introducing Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar by way of this well-known controversy, I seek first of all to underscore an obvious but unremarked upon irony: that in selecting Akbar as a central emblem of the secular state, secularists have chosen an imminently Schmittian figure – the Mughal sacred king *par excellence*. Further – in response to a longstanding historiographic dispute⁴¹ – I contend that the controversies that dogged Akbar's reign were real and concerned matters which concern us: the sacralized nature of his authority, his religious polity, and theology of religions.

Any honest appraisal of the *Akbarnāma* would thus note, for instance, the almost total absence from the text of any mention of the Prophet, praise of whom would ordinarily decorate the preface. In the *History of*

³³ Aquinas and Dyson, *Aquinas*, 36.

³⁴ Abd al-Qādir ibn Mulūk Badā'ūnī Shāh, *Muntakhab Ut-tawārikh* (Volume II), 349.

³⁵ The "Divine Unity" or the "Divine monotheism": one of the unofficial titles of the *Dīn-i Ilāhī*, Akbar's imperial cult and/or supposed synthetic religion.

³⁶ As, indeed, it seems to have been used by Abū'l Faḡl himself. Abd al-Qādir ibn Mulūk Badā'ūnī Shāh, *Muntakhab Ut-tawārikh* (Volume II), 349.

³⁷ Ibid., 319.

³⁸ Ibid., 336.

³⁹ Ibid., 335–6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 213.

⁴¹ The question of Akbar's orthodoxy haunted the earlier historiography. In the realm of more popular writing, there is the blanket assertion of public intellectual Amartya Sen in his *The Argumentative Indian* (2004), that "[d]espite his deep interest in other religions and his brief attempt to launch a new religion, Din-ilahi (God's religion), based on a combination of good points chosen from different faiths, Akbar did remain a good Muslim himself" (18). Like others before him, Sen is pressured into deeming Akbar orthodox – a verdict beyond the powers of an economist to deliver – because a precociously irenic but theologically eccentric Akbar would be of less political use. Indian secularism – founded on a vision of the State's even-handedness vis-a-vis entrenched religious groupings – would founder if its heroes were revealed to be misfits whose tolerance emerged from unorthodox and therefore potentially unpopular theologies. A similar logic is at work in M. A. Roychoudhury's classic *Din-i-Ilahi: The Religion of Akbar* (first published 1941), which flatly states that "Akbar was not an apostate" (v); throughout the text, unconventional dictates of Akbar or clashes with religious jurists are coded as political, not religious, or argued orthodox on substantive grounds. Khaliq Nizami's *Akbar and Religion* (1989) is the exception which proves the rule: finding Akbar heterodox, he still preserves his status as a secular hero by neatly dividing Akbar's "social ideals" or "humanism," characterized by a concern to promote "an atmosphere of religious good-will and tolerance," from the ruler's religious ventures (224). "When Akbar had the mantle of religious leadership on his body," Nizami declares dramatically, "the traditions of secularism in Indian polity were under his feet" (228). Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*; Roychoudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi*; Nizami, *Akbar and Religion*.

Akbar, the absence of one sacred being was clearly meant to make room for another.⁴² This dog whistle, so to speak, did not pass unnoticed by contemporaries: pertinent in this respect is a conversation produced by the poet Ẓuhūr ibn-Ẓuhūrī between himself and his patron, Muḥammad ‘Ādil Shāh, on the merits of his own text *vis-a-vis* the famed Abū’l Faḍl’s. While praising the Mughal courtier as “talented and versatile,” the poet finds his peer’s lack of faith disturbing: “My writing,” he declares, “contains from beginning to end an eulogy of the Prophet[.] The *Akbarnāma*, on the other hand, is devoid of any sweetness or appeal because it has no word for the Supreme God.”⁴³

Indeed, the *Akbarnāma*, for all its emphasis on “peace for all,” was a text conceived not in the repose of precocious Rawlsian neutrality, but in enmity against a politico-theological enemy: the conservatives among the ‘ulamā, or religious jurists at court.⁴⁴ Read as a dispassionate document, its argument is often unpersuasive and peculiar, even when situated in its intellectual context.⁴⁵ Treated as a *political* – i.e., polemical and sectarian – theology, however, its argument becomes more legible. In its opening pages, Abū’l Faḍl refers to this political polarity through the vocabulary of *taqlid*, “imitation” or “convention,” a concept he uses to open up a space for his newly unencumbered politico-theological doctrine. His “temperament” or *fīrat*, the writer professes, does not allow him to speak simply and conventionally – to, “like fools who belong to the mob of tradition, enter the threshold of eulogization of the Most Holy Lord... contented with borrowed metaphors and workaday tropes.”⁴⁶ By presenting himself as immune to the temptation to default to safety and convention, Abū’l Faḍl sidesteps the obligation to hew explicitly to the exigencies of orthodoxy or tradition.

Yet just as Schmitt was not an advocate of blanket theocracy, so Akbar’s sacred kingship did not consist in a literal assertion of godhood. Indeed, when the propriety of *Allāh akbar* as a slogan was questioned, Akbar, according to Badā’ūnī, denied that he would ever think to claim divinity, insisting that he “merely looked to the sound of the words.”⁴⁷ This answer itself suggests that the slogan was preferred because it was suggestive of correspondence between divine and political authority – but also that it was not meant to assert a simple identity.

In the *Akbarnāma*, the meaning of the phrase is first unpacked by the purple paragraph that follows it:

Allāh akbar! What a lofty realization, and a wonderful recognition! For pursuers of truth, seeking subtlety, and morning-souled, enlightened minds; who are discerners in detail of the columns of creation, and appliers of the compass to the tablet of wisdom and insight: in [understanding? or expressing?] the elemental indwelling [*tarakkub-i ‘unṣurī*] and the material body,

⁴² I paraphrase here the comment of Azfar Moin on the *Ta’rīkh-i Alfi*, or History of a Thousand Years, the universal history commissioned by Akbar in 1582. This history, as Moin argued, similarly diverged from tradition in beginning not with the creation of Adam but with the death of the Prophet. “The norm[...],” Moin writes, “was to imagine the past as beginning with the advent of a sacred being, an embodied presence. The Millennial History, by contrast, began with the end of a sacred being, an embodied absence.” Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 147.

⁴³ Basu, “Bijapur Court Culture,” 599. Basu’s citation does not refer to Ẓuhūr ibn-Ẓuhūrī’s *Muhammad-nāma*, but to the *Basātin al-salāṭīn*, a later work. That said, the *Muhammad-nāma* itself does contain similar comments on the *Akbarnāma*. According to the translation and summary of Bhagwat Dayal Verma, Ẓuhūr is there said to declare that Abū’l Faḍl’s work is a literary achievement, but that his own is superior because “[it] is characterised, from cover to cover, with the glorification of God and praise of the Prophet, not to be found in [the] *Akbar-nāma*.” The king, in response, compares the *Akbarnāma* to “the ‘Bhārat Nāma,’ the book of the Hindus.” Verma, “History in Muhammad Nama,” 109–10. Thanks to Zoë High for the references.

⁴⁴ In Abū’l Faḍl’s words, the enemy is “those copy-book-worshippers who populate *madrasas* and those who are sunk in the morass of traditionalism and think that the only way to know the truth is to accept things stored away long ago, worthless tiles from the flea-market, and scribblings on old pages produced by forgers” [Thackston’s translation]. Similar passages dot the text. Abū’l-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar*, vol. 6, 103.

⁴⁵ Indeed, something like this perspective – that the *History of Akbar* constitutes nothing more important than “a personal puff for a pal” – is the (in my view faulty) conclusion of Peter Hardy, whose piece otherwise offers a perspicacious presentation of the *Akbarnāma*’s preface, many of whose perspectives I have purloined for my own purposes. Hardy’s dismissal comes largely because he (rightly) notes that Abū’l Faḍl’s exaggerated hagiography, though phrased in broadly Sufic and Illuminationist terms, does not entirely cohere within the context of this tradition. I believe that Hardy neglects the political and polemical valences of Abū’l Faḍl’s project, which largely drive the latter’s willingness to say things that might have struck his contemporary readers as strange or unsupported on their face. Hardy, “Abul Fazl’s Portrait of the Perfect Padshah.”

⁴⁶ Abū’l-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar*, vol. 1, 13. My own translation.

⁴⁷ ‘Abd al-Qādir ibn Mulūk Badā’ūnī Shāh, *Muntakhab Ut-Tawārīkh*, 218.

i.e., the precious coinage and the sublime pearl—which the frame of evaluation does not encompass, and the scale of estimation cannot weigh; and [which] one does not get into by measuring word[s] [*goft*], and [which] is beyond the measure of contemplation—nothing save Speech, which is a moving breeze and a billowing wind, have they found.⁴⁸

Allāh akbar does not mean “Akbar is God”; but neither does it here simply mean, “God is great.” If it did, it is not clear what connection this “lofty realization” would have with the lines that follow it.⁴⁹ The truth-seekers Faḍl subsequently refers to contemplate not the ineffable Creator, but the apotheosized human being: a synthesis of the soul, described here as an “elemental indwelling” of the pearl of divinity, and the material body, also a token of precious value.

Although not expressed explicitly, the implication is that the relationship between these two terms – the soul and the body – corresponds in some way to the relationship between the two words, *Allāh* and *Akbar*. The passage thus comments on the significance of *Allāh Akbar* qua the political slogan.⁵⁰ The logic of the exegesis is incarnational: Akbar – an ideal token of the human type, a synthesis of divine being and material form – is the middle term that translates the ineffable God into speech, and, more broadly, as the *Akbarnāma* will go on to assert, into history.

The mention of “speech” [*sukhan*] that closes the quotation above prompts an epistemological turn: an investigation of the text’s own semiotic ground. Abū’l Faḍl lauds the nobility and power of *sukhan* as so forbidding as to prompt silence, while, on the other hand, underscoring its inability to comprehend the ineffable: “Praise to the God beyond compare [*bī-chūn*] is beyond the premises of possibility,” he writes, “and eulogy of the Lord without like is greater than the accounting of beings.”⁵¹ The difficulty, at first abstract, soon becomes a personal and spiritual crisis for the authorial voice: no text can begin without a preface which praises God, and yet Abū’l Faḍl finds himself unable to write one. This crisis is eventually resolved as the author gives ear to another internal voice, which addresses him with the following:

Oh sculptor in the picture-studio of *ma’ni*, why don’t you compose a book, [whose] preface you may decorate with praise? You should write the account of the ruler over the age and over the earth, the jewel in the crown of kings, and praise of the divine will come [of itself] into the writing, and benediction of God into the picture.⁵²

How should this suggestion resolve anything? The voice explains:

Praise does not require praise: for the creations of the Maker are [themselves] flawless praise of the perfect Distributor of Justice, pronounced in a tongueless tongue. And it is evident that in the material world, there is no greater effect [i.e. contingent thing] and no nobler matter than the precious being of glorious kings: the execution of the external order of the world is dependent upon the sacred strength of their grasp.⁵³

There is no difficulty with praise, Abū’l Faḍl seems to say, as it is not the creation that praises God: God praises himself in the language of creation. Praise of this sort, as it is “pronounced in a tongueless tongue” – i.e., Being itself, understood as a language – avoids the limitations of human speech [*sukhan*]. It is not, however, all creatures that constitute this language of praise in equal measure, but Kings, in particular, who are the *crème*

48 *allāh akbar. in chi daryāftist zharf wa shinakhtist shigarf! ki haqiqat-padhirān-i daqīqa-ras wa roshan-damīrān-i ṣubh-naḥas ki bārīk-bīnān-i jadāwil-i āfirinīsh wa pargār-gushāyān-i lauḥa-yi dānīsh u bīnīsh and dar tarakkub-i ‘unṣurī wa paikar-i hayūlānī, naqdī-yi girān-māya wa gauharī-yi wālā-ṭab’, ki dar kālbud-i qīmat na-gunjad wa mīzān-i qiyās bar na-sanjad, wa ba-mikyāl-i guft dar nayāyad, wa az miqyās-i andesha bīrūn bāshad, ghair az sukhan, ki nasīmet mutaharrik wa hawā’e mutamauij, niyāfta-and.* My own translation, based on the Persian transliteration in: Abū al-Faḍl ibn Mubārak, *The History of Akbar*, vol. 1, 2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from this text are my own, from Thackston’s transcription. I have also consulted his translation.

49 While this interpretation of the passage is original, and, so far as I know, novel, my broader understanding of the argument of the *Akbarnāma*’s introductory section is indebted to Peter Hardy’s aforementioned article (see footnote 45).

50 A natural, if imperfect, comparison might be to Schmitt’s interpretation of Hobbes’ declaration in the *Leviathan* that “Jesus is the Christ” – or, more loosely, the slogan, “One God, One King.”

51 Abū’l-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar* (Volume 1), 6.

52 Ibid., 14.

53 Ibid.

de la crème of the created order. “To hand over a world to a [single] individual,” Abū’l Faḍl continues, “and to assign worldly venture to a [single] person, is to place the world of meaning [*jahān-i ma’nī*] in him, or rather to fashion the soul of the world of meaning.”⁵⁴ The use of the term “meaning,” or *ma’nī* prolongs the semiotic analogy: Akbar is King of the world – and thus, the focal point of the hermeneutico-ontological horizon. The double-meaning of *ma’nī*, as a word also meaning “spirit,” however, prompts a broader discussion of the special nature of Akbar’s authority, over both externals and inner, spiritual, or religious matters.⁵⁵

As it further dilates on the incarnational nature of its subject, the *Akbarnāma* mixes and matches concepts and vocabulary from several sources and traditions. On the one hand, Akbar is described pointedly by Abū’l Faḍl as a Perfect Man [*insān-i kāmīl*] – not a typical title for a King. The idea of the *insān-i kāmīl* derives from the other “Akbarian” tradition – that of *al-shaikh al-akbar*, the Andalusian philosopher Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240).⁵⁶ In the latter’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* [“Bezels of Wisdom”], the Perfect Man is first and foremost the first man, Adam. The creation of Adam occurs when God desires to comprehend the beauty of his own attributes and essence. God requires, therefore, “an all-inclusive being containing all of [His Names]” that will serve as a mirror.⁵⁷ God or “the Real” [*al-haqq*] creates the universe to be that mirror, but, without Adam, it remained “an indistinct shape without a spirit in it... an unpolished mirror.” Adam becomes the spirit of the world, and therefore, “the clearness of this mirror.”⁵⁸ “All that exists in the divine forms,” Ibn ‘Arabī asserts, “that is, (God’s) names, appears in the human structure.”⁵⁹

In the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, the idea of the Perfect Man as a divine Word is especially associated with one other figure in addition to Adam: this is the Prophet Jesus, whom the author understands to have been conceived directly by divine and/or angelic breath. In the *Akbarnāma* as well, Jesus, unexpectedly, becomes a central presence.⁶⁰ Akbar’s birth is treated as an event of world-historical significance, explicitly compared to the birth of Christ. The original incarnational event, however, in this case, is supposed to have taken place long ago, with the impregnation of the mythical Mongolian princess, Alanquoa, an event described in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. Abū’l Faḍl writes:

One night the divine light-bred [Alanquoa] was sleeping on [her] tranquil bed, leaning upon four quiet cushions, when all of a sudden a wondrous light cast a beam into the tent; and that light entered the mouth and orifice of that well-spring of knowledge and presence, and that edifice of chastity became pregnant by that light, in the fashion of Mary, the daughter of Amram.⁶¹ Subḥāna’llah!⁶²

The Mongol tradition of Illuminationist divine right is the second general source the *Akbarnāma* draws on for its hagiographic synthesis. Abū’l Faḍl does not simply reproduce this claim, however, but instead gives it an expansive twist: Alanquoa herself, though not immaculately conceived like Mary, became a “workshop of Being” only as a result of a lengthy development of this divine light, which had been “taking shape in the cradle of instruction over thousands of years, generation after generation.”⁶³ After Alanquoa, the light became

⁵⁴ Ibid. Here my translation follows Thackston’s.

⁵⁵ Ibid. For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of “meaning,” or *ma’nī*, see the following section.

⁵⁶ *Al-insān al-kāmīl* as a phrase preexists Ibn ‘Arabī; it is found both in Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed* and in Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī’s *Tahdhīb al-akhlaq* (The Reformation of Morals). In Sufi thought, however – despite some earlier discussion of the figure of the perfect human being – the concept as now understood first appears in Ibn ‘Arabī’s oeuvre, and, within that, first in the first chapter of the *Bezels of Wisdom*. Morrissey, *Sufism and the Perfect Human*, 51.

⁵⁷ Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam*, 16.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁰ On the strangeness of this comparison (of Akbar to Jesus), which was not typical for Islamic regimes of any period or place, see Moin, “Akbar’s ‘Jesus’ and Marlowe’s ‘Tamburlaine’.”

⁶¹ “Daughter of Amram,” as Thackston explains, is a traditional Islamic title applied both to Mary and to “Miriam, the sister of Moses and daughter of Amram.” Abū’l-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar* (Vol. 1), 484.

⁶² Ibid., 217.

⁶³ [...] *ki candīn hizar sāl baṭnan ba’d batn[īn] dar maḥd-e tarbiyat dar āwarda*. The immediate antecedent of this clause is unclear, but, from context, would imply at first that it is Akbar himself who is being described. Ibid., 40–1.

manifest again in Hindūstān “after the education of many further generations, traversed in the holy garb of other manifestations, for the sake of obtaining perfection.”⁶⁴

The sheer ambition of this apotheosis has been underappreciated by the historiography. The *History of Akbar* seeks to accomplish something of nearly Hegelian proportions: a history of a man who, in his person, represents the culmination of the historical experience of a divine Spirit over the course of many thousands of years. In light of space constraints, however, rather than going on to fully unpack this doctrine of “temporal divinity,”⁶⁵ I will pause to take stock of the relevance of what I have presented for the larger argument. At the minimum, I hope I have demonstrated in this reading that the *Akbarnāma* certainly contains a “political theology” – most basically, a way of anchoring political authority in metaphysics. The *History of Akbar*, as I would more broadly argue, is justly and helpfully related to nearly every relevant understanding of this phrase.

First, on the broadest level, it is obvious that one cannot understand Abū'l Faḍl's project without confronting the question of the relation of the religious and the political. The question of the relation is one that Abū'l Faḍl himself forces on his readers through repeated, provocative references to Akbar's authority over both.⁶⁶ Even more so, a contemporary reader cannot understand the text's position without establishing some critical distance from a presentist understanding of the relation. Reading the *Akbarnāma* will thus require the broader, critical context that many invoke through the phrase, “political theology.”

Second, one cannot comprehend what Abū'l Faḍl is up to without reconstructing the *Akbarnāma*'s broader metaphysical, philosophical, and theological context. Otherwise, the majority of what Abū'l Faḍl says will come off to a modern reader as fluff: an unpersuasive, exaggerated rhetorical divinization of a historical monarch whose polity can still perhaps be appreciated for its “tolerance.” While it may be possible to study the “Mughal state” from a comfortable distance while treating theology and metaphysics as chaff and window dressing, it is not possible to read the *Akbarnāma* while remaining so aloof. The plausibility of the text's understanding of legitimacy and sovereignty depends on its metaphysics and theology. Such a situation calls to mind Schmitt's Weberian, “sociological” understanding of political theology as a descriptive methodology.⁶⁷

Third, as was described at the outset, the *Akbarnāma* is a polemical text, aimed against a politico-theological enemy. The work thus contains a “political theology” in something close to the way Heinrich Meier understands this term: a doctrine rooted in metaphysics and theology that centers the either/or for/against of the Schmittian political, a domain governed by the friend/enemy distinction.⁶⁸

Yet *The History of Akbar* also, finally, arguably contains something over and above the “political theology” Carl Schmitt first developed. Even as he extolled the possibilities of Catholic politics,⁶⁹ kept company with members of the Conservative Revolution,⁷⁰ and served as supposed “kronjurist” for the Third Reich, the Schmitt of these tumultuous times mainly refrained from lifting the hood of theology and religion and

64 *ba'd az tarbiyat-i candīn qarn-i diḡar ki dar malābis-i qudsī-yi maẓāhir-i diḡarān barāye istikmāl ser mīfarmud.* Ibid., 42–3.

65 Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 99.

66 This aspect of the Akbari formulation is discussed in more detail in the following sections. While it is sometimes asserted that no distinction of any kind existed in pre-modern Islamic thought between worldly matters and religion, between, as it were, *dīn* and *dunyā*, this idea is simply not tenable. A distinction existed, just not of the “oil and water” sort now sometimes assumed. For a sensitive discussion, see the following: Abbasi, “Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular?”

67 Schmitt's sociology is the (in his words) “hermeneutical sociology” of Max Weber. Indeed, shortly after the publication of the first edition of *Political Theology* in 1922, Schmitt in that same year republished its first three chapters in a Festschrift volume for Weber, *Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber*. According to the summary of Reinhard Mehring, Carl Schmitt understood himself to share with Weber an approach to the State neither materialist nor legal-positivist, but rather focused on a “hermeneutical horizon of meanings.” He additionally identified with Weber's sometimes genealogical mode of analysis, which could expose the religious roots of modern and apparently secular phenomena. In correspondence from 1974, Schmitt indicated that he considered the question of the interpretation of Max Weber to be synonymous with the question of political theology. Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography*, 106–10.

68 Meier, “What Is Political Theology,” 82–5.

69 Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*.

70 Schmitt's friendship with the conservative revolutionary novelist and thinker Ernst Jünger from the beginning of the 1930s to the end of his life is undeniable; his degree of intellectual congruity with this intellectual movement is questionable. For a skeptical account, see: Bendersky, “Carl Schmitt and the Conservative Revolution.”

tinkering with the innards. He was a jurist, after all, not a metaphysician or theologian. In the well-known formulation of Schmitt's 1922 essay, metaphysical images of the world belonging to a given "epoch" determine the structure of how human beings think about sovereignty.⁷¹ There is not much sense that one could achieve political goals by fine-tuning these images. This would be almost as far-fetched as if Foucault attempted to create his own "discourse," or Castoriadis his own "social imaginary."

It is mainly in his last testament, the bitter and cryptic *Political Theology II* (1969), that Schmitt partially abandons this prior restraint.⁷² In the latter text, Schmitt hints at a development of his thought in excess of "political theology": an unorthodox "political Christology" that posited a state of "stasis" or "uproar" within the Trinity itself.⁷³ Even God, apparently, does not transcend the political. Schmitt in *Political Theology II* attempts to oppose one "legend" – that political theology is forbidden to Christians post-Constantine – with another, i.e., "that political theology is written into Christianity because of the Incarnation."⁷⁴ This late-stage merging of metaphysics or theology with myth follows up on a closing aside in a 1937 essay on Hobbes, in which Schmitt muses that perhaps "the 'total' concepts of modern times are not at all meant as concepts but as myths," and that "[t]otalization thus means mythization."⁷⁵ In *Political Theology II*, Schmitt speaks admiringly of the totalitarianism of what he understands to be Hegel's marriage of religion and state and approves a comparison of himself to Eusebius, the fourth-century Bishop who served as Constantine's apotheosizer. "To be named alongside Eusebius is an undeserved honor for me," the unrepentant German writes, "although I would not deny the compliment, which implies a validation [of my position]."⁷⁶

Schmitt's Constantine, however, never came: Abū'l Faḍl's reigned.⁷⁷ The political theology Abū'l Faḍl developed in the *Akbarnāma* was not only (1) a renegotiation of the boundaries between *dīn* and *dunya* [religion and the world], (2) a conception of sovereignty with theological and metaphysical correlates, or (3) a political enmity justified in the language of revelation. The *Akbarnāma* rather contains what Schmitt, toward the end of his life, could only gesture toward with his "political Christology": a definite politico-theological doctrine reconciling God and man, politics and religion, philosophy and history in one sovereign leader. This "political Akbar-ology" was neither wholly new nor wholly dissolvable into its metaphysical, theological, and political priors. It was, like Schmitt's agonistic Trinitarianism, a daring synthesis.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 45–6.

⁷² In what follows, I am indebted to the argument developed in the aforementioned unpublished article, graciously provided to me by the author: LeQuire, "From Political Theology to Political Christology."

⁷³ Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 122–8.

⁷⁴ Hoelzl and Ward, editors' introduction to *Political Theology II*, 27. Also quoted in LeQuire's paper.

⁷⁵ Schmitt, "The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes," 100.

⁷⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 47.

⁷⁷ Schmitt famously had little personal regard for Adolf Hitler, whom he dismissed early on, in 1923, as a "hysteric" (142). In his *Glossarium* (diaries), Schmitt later described Hitler as an "entirely empty and unknown individual" who had emerged "from the darkness of a social, moral, and intellectual nothingness, from out of the pure lumpenproletariat, from the asylum of a homeless non-education." Hitler was at most a "pure henchmen," a "tragic criminal," "someone condemned by history to do evil." The reference to Eusebius in the prior quotation from *PTII* is probably best understood to be directed toward a future Schmittian sovereign, not as a wistful look back at what might have been – particularly as Schmitt's career ambitions in the Reich were thwarted by the SS long before by the Allied victory. Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography*, 428.

⁷⁸ These theses are not intended to exhaust the fruitful comparisons that might be drawn between Carl Schmitt and Jalāl ud-dīn Akbar. Given that Akbar's later-stage political project rested on a kind of eschatological exception – the millennial conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn and the spiritual upheaval it promised – it would, for instance, be possible to develop an explicit comparison between Akbar's role as "Lord of the conjunction" and Schmitt's classic definition of sovereignty as inhering in the decision about the exception. An interpretation of this sort has been suggested by Caleb Simmons in the context of a discussion on premodern Indic concepts of sovereignty; Simmons cites an interpretation of Schmitt by the aforementioned Robert A. Yelle. A broader, implicit comparison along these lines has been suggested by Moin in his *Millennial Sovereign* when he, for instance, speaks of Shāh Jahān's throne as illustrative of a view of sacred kingship as "both a space and a state of exception that was above the constraints of the ordinary" and which suggested a power "above the juristic norms of Islam." Simmons, "Devotional Foundations of Earthly Sovereignty," 3, 16; Yelle, "The Trouble with Transcendence;" Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 240.

3 The Totalism of the Akbari Dispensation

Should house and precinct experience the absence of the dread and the hope of a Leader, and not become integrated into a political order, [then], without the awe of the receiver of God's splendor, how would the uproar of [this] hornet's nest of a world ever come to rest?

Abū'l Faḍl, *Āin-i-Akbarī*⁷⁹

In the introduction to this essay, I suggested that Akbar's form of integral, theopolitical kingship could be productively compared with Carl Schmitt's discourse on "totality" in the highly specific context of his inter-war critique of Thomas Hobbes.⁸⁰ A careful reader of these writings will notice, however, that in the 1938 monograph on Hobbes, "totality" and its more ideological synonym, "totalism," remain in the background: they are referenced only in the context of passing remarks which decry how "western democracy [incorrectly] perceives [the image of the Leviathan] to be a polemical horror picture of a 'totalitarian' state and of 'totalism.'"⁸¹ "Total," for its part, is demoted to a mere "catchword," "which can have an infinite number of meanings."⁸² Such a cautious approach probably reflects Schmitt's disillusionment with the regime in Germany. The jurist appears at pains, in his *Leviathan*, to dissociate his position from national socialism and "totalitarianism."

In the 1937 essay ("The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes") which preceded this book, however, the treatment of "totalism," "totality," and "total" is more positive, if somewhat vague. Hobbes' state, Schmitt argues, does not lack totality *in concreto*: there is in it a "total" obedience, for instance, which comes part and parcel with the state power's "total responsibility for protecting and securing the safety of citizens."⁸³ However, Hobbes' notion of "the state as a covenant entered into by individuals" is entirely inadequate, and "did not suggest the [actual] totality" of the Hobbesian state.⁸⁴ Hobbes, Schmitt asserts, misinterpreted the substance of his own creation, and missed its total nature. The "sovereign-representative person," the Leviathan, is in actuality "much more than the sum total of all the participating particular wills" – a merely numerical totalism. An individualistic covenant entered into out of fear could "affirm" but not "crea[te] this new god."⁸⁵

In the essay's conclusion, Schmitt returns to the question of "totality," a concept he here embraces but recognizes as underdetermined. The stakes of the inquiry are serious: even if the nature of "totality" is not clear, the consequences of its absence – a mechanical state and age – are evident and existentially dire. The mechanization of the state, Schmitt argues, has led to a mechanization of the human being, and to a corresponding absence of "meaningful totality" even in individual life. However, "[f]or the word and concept totality to remain meaningful and not to become a misleading catchword," he acknowledges, "it must rest

79 *har gāh khāna u maḥalla bi-bīm-i peshwā'ī dīda dar muntazam na-gardad, bi-saṭwat-i ān padhīranda-yi far-i izīdī shorish-i zanbūr-khāna-yi dunyā chīgūna farū nashīnad?* Abul-Fazl-i-'Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, 290.

80 I restrict myself in this essay to a discussion of Schmitt's more free-wheeling discussion of "total," "totality," and "totalism" in the context of these writings – in particular, as I go on to clarify, the 1937 essay. Schmitt speaks of the "total state" in a different and more specific sense in *Concept of the Political*, where this phrase stands for the interpenetration of state and society brought about by democracy and a resultant totalistic politicization. This view rested on a sharp distinction between liberalism and democracy, and a further distinction between democratic modern states and the situation in absolutist regimes, in which the state maintained a monopoly on politics. In his 1933 essay, "Further Development of the Total State in Germany," Schmitt looks favorably upon the Italian fascist state as a strong state not tolerating "the development of any sort of forces hostile to the state," while in the same breath decrying the situation in Germany as a situation of "total parties" – a tacit critique of the NSDAP. Schmitt here seems to move against totalitarianism as conventionally understood: he calls the totality of the state in the sense of a state which "indiscriminately gets into all the spheres of human existence" a merely "quantitative[ly]" total state, writing of the bonafide total state that it is "a state [which] can discriminate between friend and enemy," and more generally that "every genuine state is [therefore] a total state." Schmitt, *Four Articles: 1931-1938*, 21–3;

Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 22–3, 69–70. Also see discussion in: Court, "A Transition in Carl Schmitt's Political Thought."

81 Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 71.

82 Ibid., 76, note 7.

83 Schmitt, "The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes," 96.

84 Ibid., 97.

85 Ibid., 98.

on a specific philosophical connection.”⁸⁶ Casting-about for options, Schmitt floats several possibilities: “the ‘finite infinite’ of Hegel’s philosophy,” the apprehension of “totalization” as a “mythization” in the philosophy of Georges Sorel, and the doctrine of “temporal divinity” which “Hegel ascribes to the leading people in world history.”⁸⁷

The idiosyncratic Lettrism of the Akbari court can, I provocatively suggest, be regarded as another candidate. It provided a philosophical backdrop which, in its own context, integrated sovereignty and religion, worldly wisdom and spiritual aplomb – in a manner intended to have implications at once philosophical, juridical, and political. Moreover, it did all of this while constituting a dramatic exception to one of Schmitt’s core assumptions: namely, that any “total” or “genuine” state must necessarily minimize pluralism along relevant axes. The mature Akbari regime, while by no means a “neutral” state, and by all means committed to peace and security, made recognition, investigation, and toleration of religious diversity one of its fundamentals. In what follows, I explore the internal logic of this Lettrist totalism as it is presented in Abū’l Faḍl’s corpus, before contrasting its terms with Hobbes – as he appears in Schmitt’s critique – and Schmitt’s late thirties, ambivalent, antitotalitarian but nonetheless illiberal position.

4 Emperor of Form and Meaning: The Politico-theological Doctrine of Abū’l Faḍl

He packed his bags: the one who, gestated for a period of two centuries / [had] emerged from the womb of mother time

One like him will not appear in a hundred thousand years / the world will end before [it is] pregnant with [his] like
*Akbarnāma*⁸⁸

“Lord of *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī*, the unique [*yagāna*] Akbar Shāh”: so reads the first hemistich of one of the verses the *Akbarnāma* inscribes to mark its patron’s passing.⁸⁹ The terms *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī* can literally be rendered “form” and “meaning,” or, less literally, “appearance” and “essence.”⁹⁰ As their use here suggests, they were central to the *Akbarnāma*’s articulation of Jalāl ud-dīn Akbar’s claim to integral power.

The idea of Akbar as a “Lord of *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī*” was multivalent across multiple domains: it suggested sovereignty over linguistic form and content, external affairs and inner life, the exoteric and the esoteric, matter and spirit, religion and politics. While *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī* could refer to any or all of these, the logic of the linkage between them disproportionately depended, again, on a backdrop of mystical Lettrism that equated word and world, and thus, the duality of form and meaning in spoken or written language with other salient dualities and divisions.

The application of *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī* to a theory of language and semiosis is most explicit in an important early section of the *Institutes of Akbar* devoted specifically to the visual and written arts, entitled “The Institute of the Picture-Studio.” “*Ṣūrat* leads the way to its Lord,” the text there asserts, “and takes [one] to *ma’nī*, just as the shape of a character [causes one to arrive at] the letter and word.”⁹¹ An explanation of this process as evident in language is provided in a subsequent paragraph:

From the domain of knowledge [*ilm-zār*] of the divine, a ray of light falls upon the person [*nafs*] endowed with speech [*nāṭiqā*]. The mind [*dil*] sends it to the cosmopolis of the imagination, which is the interstitial zone between immaterial [*mujarrad*] and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *bar-bast rakht an-ki ba-ḥaml-i dū ṣad qirān / āmad padīd az shikam-i mādar-i zamāndar ṣad hizār sāl na-gardad chū u padīd / gītī siturdan ast zi ābistan-i chunān*

Metre: – – u – u – u u – – u – u –

Abu’l-Fazl, *The History of Akbar*, Volume 8, 574–5.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ I am indebted in this section to the analysis made in the following article: Franke, “Emperors of *Ṣūrat* and *Ma’nī*.”

⁹¹ *ṣūrat bar khudāwand-i khud rahnamūnī kunad wa u ba-ma’nī chunān-chi paikar-i khaṭī ba-ḥarf u lafẓ rasānad*. Abul-Fazl-i-Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, 111.

material [*māddī*], so that [a hybrid whole]—an isolation mingled with relation, and a liberty mixed with obligation—arises. And from there, stepping onto the top of the tongue, with the help of the air, it enters the little peep-holes of the ears; and after this, shedding the burden of relation from its shoulders with each step, it returns to its own locale.⁹²

The written word works much the same way, with the difference that the ray of light travels through the fingers onto the page, remaining there until it is liberated through the eye of the reader.

The description of language in the above is reminiscent of the aforementioned passage in the *Akbarnāma* on the meaning of the political slogan, “Allāh Akbar.” Where the word or character is “an isolation mingled with relation, and a liberty mixed with obligation,”⁹³ the phrase *Allāh[ū] Akbar* is said to describe a combination of “the elemental indwelling [*tarakkub-i ‘unṣurī*] and the material body, i.e., the precious coinage and the sublime pearl”: divinity, that is, manifest in the body of a man, just as it manifests in the materiality of speech or writing. While “[the letter] is,” according to the Abū’l Faḍl, “the inner chamber where light is confined,”⁹⁴ Akbar is himself, again, a manifestation of divine light in the Mongol bloodline. As a couplet glossing the *Akbarnāma*’s introductory paragraph declares:

What sort of Speech should this be that has been made manifest?

It has pulled down the veil from the eighteen thousand [worlds].⁹⁵

This verse, in my reading, alludes to the process of Creation in its Akbarian⁹⁶ description as a process of pronunciation: According to one reconstruction,⁹⁷ God sends his vivifying breath out in a cloud of “fixed entities” or “immutable essences” [*a’yān-i ṣābitah*], somewhat akin to the Platonic forms,⁹⁸ which are the “letters” pronounced. God’s speech brings the *a’yān-i ṣābitah* from behind the veil of unmanifest existence to embodiment.

Language, as Abū’l Faḍl goes on to clarify, orders the world, taking on a governmental role: “Without [speech’s] aid, execution of the rule of meaning/Spirit [*ma’nī*] would be impossible[;] and without its assistance, prosperous inhabitation of the wasteland of [embodied] form [*ṣūrat*] would be inconceivable.”⁹⁹ It is probable, given this context, that the “Speech” referred to in the aforementioned hemstitch is the Emperor himself: he is the incarnate praise of God that bridges the gulf between divine and human speech, between – in Akbarian terminology – “the Names” and “the names of the Names.”¹⁰⁰

The ability of language to transmit divine light in the magical movement from form to meaning is, moreover, related by Abū’l Faḍl to the charism of the Emperor. In “The Picture Studio,” the identification of Akbar with writing is accomplished through subsequent passages that detail the size of Akbar’s library, his sponsoring of translations from various languages, his breadth of knowledge, and his particular attention to the written word among the other arts. The “world-Lord,” Abū’l Faḍl professes, “delegates great attention [to writing], and he looks deeply into [the issue of] form and meaning [*ṣūrat u ma’nī*].”¹⁰¹ Here, the latter terms again refer most evidently to semiotic categories.

92 *az ‘ilm-zār-i izzat partau-ī bar nafs-i nāṭiqa uftad. dil u rā ba-shahristān-i khayāl ki barzakhī ast dar mujarrad u māddī firistad tā tajarradī-yi ta’allaq-āmez u iṭlāqī-yi taqāiyud-āmūd padīd āyad. wa az ānjā gām bar bām-i zabān nihāda ba-dast-yārī-yi hawā ba-darīcha-yi gosh dar āyad.* Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, 112.

93 Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, 112.

94 *dar naẓr-i ḥusn-dūstān, jilwah-gāh-i nūr-i muqaid* Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, 111.

95 Thackston’s translation. *in chi sukhān būd ki shud āshkār / parda bar andākht zi hazdah hizār*

Metre: – u u – – u u – – u –

Abū’l-Fazl, *The History of Akbar* (Volume 1), 16.

96 At the risk of misunderstanding, I use “Akbarian” here in its accustomed usage, to refer to the oeuvre of Ibn ‘Arabī. “Akbari” refers to Jalāl ud-dīn Akbar.

97 Lory and Muḥyi ‘l-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, “El simbolismo de las letras y del lenguaje según Ibn ‘Arabī,” 99–108.

98 Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam*, 10.

99 *sar-anjām-i dāru ‘l-mulk-i ma’nī bī-dastyārī-yi ān imkān na-padhīrad, wa ma’mūrī-yi khīrāb-ābād-i ṣūrat bī-madad-kārī-yi ān dar andesha na-gudharad.* Abū’l-Fazl, *The History of Akbar* (Vol. 1), 2.

100 Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī.”

101 *gītī-khudāwand farāwān tawajjuh bar gumārad wa dar ṣūrat u ma’nī zharf-nigahī farmāyad.* Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, 111.

That *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī* have a broader range, however, can be noticed in any number of passages from Abū'l Faḍl's hagiographic corpus. In some, "form" and "essence" are set side by side in the binary of "evident" or "external" [*ẓāhir*] and "hidden" or "inner" [*bāṭin*].¹⁰² Elsewhere in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, Akbar is thus designated "the world lord [who is] the chief over *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*, and the Emperor of [both] outer and inner [*ẓāhir u bāṭin*]." ¹⁰³ While *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* are also multivalent terms, they are relatable to concrete claims about Akbar's judgment of character: his insight into the mind and heart, a realm of hidden and inaccessible things. "Even while being completely occupied with worldly matters," Abū'l Faḍl writes in his preface to the *Razmnāma*, "his mind lays bare the recesses of the minds of various groups of people and gains awareness of the secrets of their hearts."¹⁰⁴

These powers are also linked by Abū'l Faḍl to the issue most central to our concerns: namely, Akbar's authority over both religion and worldly order [*dīn* and *dunyā*].¹⁰⁵ The first such usage comes in the first two incidences of the phrase "*ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*" in the *Akbarnāma*. As the unnamed voice of assurance again declares:

Praise does not require praise: for the creations of the Maker are [themselves] flawless praise of the perfect Distributor of Justice, pronounced in a tongueless tongue. ... Lordship over *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī* and, the ability to resolve the riddle of inner and outer, should be delegated to him, for he is the decorator of the royal throne, and the raiser of the standard of the shadow of the divine for our blessed age.¹⁰⁶

While the language above is somewhat opaque, a clue to what Abū'l Faḍl may have in mind soon follows. "So long as, in [this] material world," the *History* declares, "leadership over the masters of hermitage, which they call 'sanctity,' and headship over those who possess attachment, which they term 'government,' remained separate, amongst the human race, the tumult of opposition held souls in confusion."¹⁰⁷ Abū'l Faḍl terms "these two precious offices" – i.e., sainthood and sovereignty – "the underpinning of administration over *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*."¹⁰⁸

A similar formulation occurs in an aforementioned passage in the preface to the *Razmnāma*, the initial translation of the *Mahābhārata*. There, Abū'l Faḍl addresses the tendency of earlier, conventional kings to hand off spiritual matters to religious authorities, a situation that has led to general spiritual blindness. Even "exalted kings, who are pillars of this world," the courtier complains, did not make it their business to question "the hidden recesses of the minds of the 'wearers of turbans' [i.e. the traditional Islamic scholars]," deeming the hidden things "among the affairs pertaining to religion [*mu'āmalāt-i dīnī*]" and therefore outside their purview.¹⁰⁹ Yet Akbar – whom the text implies is a "manifestation of the divine name 'the Hidden' [al-Bāṭin]"¹¹⁰ – carries the capacity

¹⁰² One fundament for this linkage may, again, the oeuvre of Ibn 'Arabī. In the summary of William Chittick, the philosopher taught that "[r]evelation is an outward form (*ṣūra*), while God's own knowledge of Himself and the cosmos is the inner meaning (*ma'nā*), the spirit and life behind the form." Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 34.

¹⁰³ This passage comes at the beginning of a section listing knowledgeable persons in Akbar's court. "Since the world lord is the chief over *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*, and the Emperor of [both] outer and inner," Abū'l Faḍl begins, "he found five groups fitting." *az ānjā ki gīti-khudā peshwā-yi ṣūrat u ma'nī wa kār-giyā-i bāṭin u ẓāhir ast, panj guroh rā dar-khwar dar-yāft*. Abul-Fazl-i-'Allāmī, *The Āin-i Akbarī*, vol. I, 232.

¹⁰⁴ Kovacs, "Chapter 2: The Preface to the Razmnāma," 88.

¹⁰⁵ Abū'l Faḍl thus refers to Akbar as, for instance, "the king of *ṣūrat* and *ma'nī*, the leader in religion and the world [*pādshāh-i ṣūrat u ma'nī, peshwā'je-yi dīn u dunyā*]." The phrase *dīn u dunyā* is also featured prominently in dueling versions of Abū'l Faḍl's preface to the *Razmnāma*, the initial translation of the *Mahābhārata*, which describes the Indic god Kṛṣṇa as a sacred king in terms reminiscent of and contrastive with Akbar. I have previously interpreted this as a "mirroring" of the Akbari project of sacred kingship in the portraiture of a South Asian deity. See discussion in: Smolin, "The Mirror of Realities," 169–76; Abū'l-Fazl, *The History of Akbar*, vol. I, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Above is my own translation. Thackston translates the first clause of the second sentence as "[r]ule of the material and spiritual and absolute authority over the external and internal." Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Kovacs, "Chapter 2: The Preface to the Razmnāma," 70.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

to judge what is concealed, and thereby to overrule the ‘ulamā.¹¹¹ As such, the Lord of “form and meaning,” “inner and outer” has attained to a truly unitary, politico-theological caliphate.

For true believers in Akbar, it is worth noting that this integral authority apparently held a personal appeal: it provided relief from the existential anxieties that can result from the contradiction between worldly wisdom and religious stricture.¹¹² While I refrain in this essay from discussing Akbar’s imperial and popular cult, testimony on this point is available in a familiar source. Whereas the *Akbarnāma*’s introduction skips swiftly from the personal to the world historic, presenting an account of its author’s writer’s block as a propaedeutic to a grandiose apotheosis of its central subject, the history’s *khātima* or afterward retreads this narrative in a more intimate mode, while filling in a few autobiographical details. Akbar, once again, becomes the bridge that reconciles earth and heaven and inspires speech: here, however, as Abū’l Faḍl tells it, the King does so by freeing him from a mistaken quietism. While he had previously believed that the “complete man [*mardum-i timām*]” must take no interest in the world, Akbar’s enlightening influence leads to a resurgence of worldly ambition as well as spiritual insight.¹¹³ It is in the context of the story of Abū’l Faḍl’s ascendance at court and his assumption of the role of chief hagiographer that Akbar’s integral power over multiple domains is again introduced. “One morning,” the courtier remarks, “I began to beg for the illumination of the Lord of Light’s presence, and to request the appearance of this *ṭilism* which resolves difficulty.”¹¹⁴ Akbar’s charism leads to Abū’l Faḍl’s mastery over both *ṣūrat* and *ma’nī*, an achievement that leads him, ultimately, to the written word – itself a hybrid, as we have seen, of these two principles.¹¹⁵ While his new-found outlook leads the author at first to long for military achievement, the courtier is instead directed by Akbar to brandish the pen rather than the sword. At first, filled again with doubt – he professes no command over or attraction toward rhetoric [*sukhan-sarāyī*] – he is revitalized by his patron: “The imperial order,” Abū’l Faḍl concludes, “is a charm for oratory, and a talisman which illumines knowledge.”¹¹⁶

5 Death by Distinction: Schmitt’s Monograph on Hobbes’ Leviathan

In the eighteenth century the leviathan as *magnus homo*, as the godlike sovereign person of the state, was destroyed from within. The distinction of inner and outer became for the mortal god a sickness unto death.

Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*¹¹⁷

In the previous section, I described how Akbar’s totalistic sovereignty was expressed through his authority over various binary formulas: “form” and “meaning,” “evident” and “hidden,” and “inner” and “outer.” Schmitt’s 1938 book (*Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes*), by contrast, while not addressing the subject of “totality” directly, speaks of this ideal apophatically in describing the “magnus homo’s” death by binary and differentiation. While mentioning various oppositional pairings – “content and form, aim and character,”¹¹⁸ “invisible *vis-a-vis* visible, conviction *vis-a-vis* attitude, private *vis-a-vis* public, stillness *vis-a-vis* noise, [and] esoteric *vis-a-vis* ordinary”¹¹⁹ – the jurist focuses most of his ire on the distinction between “inner and outer” mentioned in the aforementioned epigraph.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 72.

¹¹² For a salient point of comparison, which I sadly do not have space to develop here, see the following essay: Hegel, “The Relationship of Religion to the State (1831),” 228–30.

¹¹³ Abū’l-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar*, vol. II, 251.

¹¹⁴ *ṣubḥ-gāhī bar dargāh-i ḥaḍrat-i nūr daryoza-yi ḡiyā’i mī-kard u pedā’i-yi in ṭilism-i dushwār-kūshā mī-ṭalbid*. Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. II, 252.

¹¹⁵ Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. II, 252.

¹¹⁶ *farmāyish-i shāhinshāhī afsūn-i sukhan-sarā’i u ṭilism-i dānish-afrozī ast*. Abul-Fazl-i-‘Allāmī, *The Āin-i-Akbarī*, vol. II, 253.

¹¹⁷ Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, xii.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 62.

The rubric of “inner and outer” had an illustrious career in early modern German political theory, where it was invoked as a metaphor for (external) state power and the (inner) freedom of the individual and/or public – a backdrop beyond the scope of this article.¹²⁰ As employed by Schmitt in this context, however, the phrase picks out the disjunction in Hobbes’ system between external cult and inner conviction. While the *Leviathan* mandated public assent to the religious dogmas decreed by the sovereign, Schmitt emphasized that Hobbes had included a small “proviso” for private dissent. The latter is introduced in the course of a discussion of miracles, which itself inaugurates Hobbes’ examination of the principles that should govern a “Christian Commonwealth.”¹²¹

Hobbes here, in a manner of speaking, seeks absolute assurance against the “exception”: the possibility that a prophet with direct authority from God could appear, perform miracles, and override a subject’s due obedience to his king.¹²² There are only two scriptural criteria, the *Leviathan* responds, according to which a prophet may be judged genuine: “the doing of miracles” and “the not teaching any other religion than that which is already established.”¹²³ In addressing the first criteria, Hobbes reaps the happy harvest of the skeptical, empiricist metaphysics he has been sowing since the *Leviathan*’s first pages. Dreams being “for the most part natural”¹²⁴ – a left-over of the sensory experiences accumulated throughout the day¹²⁵ – and visions being, in many cases, nothing more than a dream confused with waking life,¹²⁶ there is simply no assurance, he explains, that a claim to have received divine instructions is not actually a lie or an error.¹²⁷

Hobbes’ gloss on the second criteria – allegiance to the Christian religion – is of a different nature, but equally striking. “How great soever the miracle be,” Hobbes declares,

yet if it tend to stir up revolt against the king, or him that governeth by the king’s authority, he that doth such miracle, is not to be considered otherwise than as sent to make trial of their allegiance. For these words, *revolt from the Lord your God*, are in this place equivalent to *revolt from your king*.¹²⁸

Hobbes defends this startling statement by asserting that the origins of Judeo-Christianity lie in essentially *political* covenants. The Hebrews had made God king on Mount Sinai, with Moses as the communicant of God’s will; likewise, the gospel itself consists of assent to Christ’s kingship. Obedience to God being obedience to a king, loyalty to a king is therefore – by a blurry logic – one and the same as loyalty to the gospel. Religion is merely a continuation of politics by other means.¹²⁹ There is no miracle or vision or angel from heaven,

120 A notion of outer and inner – of external state compulsion and inner spiritual or moral development, of their relation and possible rapprochement – can be attributed to early modern German thinkers of various political persuasions, among them Christian Wolff and Immanuel Kant. Wolff, in the summary of Leonard Krieger, attempted to “transcen[d] the traditional spiritual-worldly division of labor between the individual and the state” by “replac[ing] it with an end means distinction – the actual striving toward perfection is the function of individuals and the role of the state is to furnish the means for its success.” This, Krieger asserts, was a Protestant secularization of Gelasian dyarchy or the earlier doctrine of the two swords (Church and State). While Kant has generally been cast as an opponent of organicism, Krieger argues that this formula oversimplifies the issue: in Kant’s thought, “[t]he state became an instrument for the realization of moral freedom through the external compulsion which, in the name of the inner moral law, it exerted against men’s immoral and unfree natural acts.” Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom*, 69, 124.

121 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 247.

122 Or, to restate the point in more congenial terms, Hobbes provides his sovereign with authority to judge the exception: whether or not the miracle or divine message, etc., is genuine.

123 *Ibid.*, 249.

124 *Ibid.*, 248.

125 *Ibid.*, 12–4.

126 *Ibid.*, 13–4, 248.

127 *Ibid.*, 249.

128 *Ibid.*

129 The following article fleshes out Hobbes position in a highly original manner which cries out for comparison with the multifaceted debate over the divinized king Fir’aun in Akbar’s court, and the echoes of this dispute in the Akbari translation movement. While I have written previously on the latter, I do not here have space to fully flesh out the comparison. Yelle, “Hobbes the Egyptian;” Smolin, “The Mirror of Realities,” 200–25.

Hobbes concludes, that should tempt the subject of the state to disobedience.¹³⁰ The head of state retains the power to judge the exception – and thus remains genuinely sovereign.

However, obedience is not the same as belief. The king may, as Hobbes says, “oblige me to obedience,” including public assent to belief in a particular miracle or dogma; but not, of course, “to think any otherwise than my reason persuades me.”¹³¹ While this logic may be impeccable given Hobbes’ assumptions, the conclusions he reaches are an entailment of his radical agnosticism about religious or supernatural questions, be they miracles, visions, or even the issue of the Scriptures’ divine authorship.¹³² As these are uncertain matters, not subject to proof by argument or experience, it is the voice of authority alone, established by reason, that should decide them; yet authority does not extend to what is impossible for it, namely, the persuasion of private doubts.

As Schmitt explains to his readers, Hobbes’ agnosticism was, most immediately, designed as an enlightened defense of a royal miracle: Charles II’s healing touch.¹³³ Paradoxically, however, this defense of politico-religious authority was also the beginning of liberalism’s divestment from the theological: “The neutral state,” he writes, “originated at this point.”¹³⁴ Yet it did come about all at once. Hobbes’ allowance for private conscience – the byword of the times, written directly into the Peace of Westphalia a few years earlier¹³⁵ – remained, at first, a “barely visible crack.”¹³⁶ It took “a liberal Jew,” Spinoza, to expand this crack into the dreaded “inroad of modern liberalism,” leading to a “decisive turn in the fate of the leviathan.”¹³⁷

How was this accomplished? According to Schmitt, Spinoza, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, followed Hobbes’ lead in making “external cult” subject to the state. Rather than emphasizing public assent to a common creed, however, he focused on the opposite: the free reign given to a private “piety.” Hobbes’ move to publicize and politicize religion, in other words, was met with an insidious response, which privatized religion’s substance, leaving the exterior as an empty and fragile husk to be eventually brushed away. This reversal of “inner and outer” was, in Schmitt’s tendentious account, perpetrated by an “outsider.” “The Englishman [Hobbes],” he writes, “did not endeavor with... [his] proviso [for private dissent] to appear out of context of the beliefs of his people but, on the contrary, to remain within it, whereas the Jewish philosopher... who approached the religion of the state as an outsider, naturally provided a proviso that emanated from the outside.”¹³⁸ Spinoza’s move was influential and set in motion a momentous chain of events:

Now it is the inverse: Individual freedom of thought is the form-giving principle, the necessities of public peace as well as the right of the sovereign power having been transformed into mere provisos. ...The absolute power of the state, the sovereign-representative person, defeated the estates and the church and governed public events and the politico-historical stage while driving the invisible distinctions of outer and inner, public and private to an ever sharper separation and antithesis. Through Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius, Hobbes’ theory emerged victorious on the continent, but only at the expense of the relationship between outer and inner which was reversed.¹³⁹

In effect, de-mystified, drained of metaphors and antisemitic outbursts, Schmitt’s narrative describes a recognizable process: that through which an early, integralist secularism, consisting in the triumph of the (politico-theological) state over the (politico-theological) church, mutated into the secularism of separation evident in

¹³⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 249–50.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹³² Yelle, “Was Aśoka Really a Secularist Avant-La-Lettre? Ancient Indian Pluralism and Toleration in Historical Perspective,” 765. *Ibid.*, 259.

¹³³ Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 54.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹³⁵ While Schmitt does not draw attention to this language, it would seem an important historical referent. The treaties guaranteed a minimum of toleration for subjects who held a different religion from their ruler, involving a freedom to “attend privately with liberty of conscience [*conscientia libera*] their services in their houses free from any inquisition or molestation.” Straumann, “The Peace of Westphalia as a Secular Constitution,” 181–2.

¹³⁶ Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 57.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 57–8.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

the “neutral state” – a government supposedly innocent of metaphysical commitments and walled off from religion.

The next insidious step after the prying apart of “inner and outer” was the exploitation of a dichotomy between “content and form, aim and character,” or *in concreto*, ethics and law. This distinction, which Schmitt pins on “the nineteenth-century Jewish philosopher, Friedrich Julius Stahl-Jolson,” resulted in “the elimination of content from the notion of truth and justice” and the emergence of Schmitt’s principal enemy in his earlier, seminal works: legal positivism.¹⁴⁰ Its result, in Schmitt’s framing, was a state drained of life and vigor, a machine state without character finally unable to resist its intimate enemies. In his concluding paragraph, the jurist bitterly blames his own spiritual enemies – Spinoza, Stahl-Jolson, legal positivists, Freemasons, and a whole host of other distinction-mongering villains – for the constitutional state’s demise at the hands of “illiberal” parties (i.e., the communists and national-socialists), who “cut up the leviathan and divide[d] his flesh among themselves.”¹⁴¹ (It was in a similar spirit that, on January 30, 1933, Schmitt had written, “[o]n this day, one can see that Hegel [i.e. the Hegelian state] died.”)¹⁴²

There are multiple axes on which Schmitt’s narrative in the above could be set alongside the Akbari sources I have discussed – none of which, of course, would involve a naive splicing of the sixteenth-century South Asian materials into Schmitt’s terms. For the moment, however, I will restrict myself to a clear point of contrast.

By the argument of Schmitt, the state’s death by distinction, its inability to secure a unity of “form and content,” “inner and outer,” began with an apparently minor concession to religious freedom. In the hagiographic materials on Akbar, by contrast, religious tolerance and even purported freedom of conscience was a propaedeutic to Jalāl ud-dīn Akbar’s integral rule over *ṣūrat* [form] and *ma’nī* [meaning], *ẓāhir* [outer], and *bāṭin* [inner]. The immediate difference, as I alluded to in an earlier section, is not that the Akbari regime was not a “total state” in the basic sense of one able to “discriminate between friend and enemy,”¹⁴³ but that Akbar’s assumption of the mantle of spiritual and temporal authority was polemically aimed at the conventional Islamic scholars,¹⁴⁴ and not at religious diversity as such. The ‘ulamā were an obstacle, in the courtly view, to “peace for all” [*ṣulh-i kull*], or the rapprochement of the regime toward all sectarian parties; they also happened to hold jurisprudential power Akbar desired to appropriate. Translated into Hobbesian terms, this would be as if Charles II’s primary antagonists were Protestant pastors-cum-legislators, who stood in the way of him claiming the spiritual authority necessary to achieve good terms with Catholic laity.¹⁴⁵

There is a deeper contrast here to be drawn, however, with both Schmitt and Hobbes.

Rather than uncomplicatedly collapse the “total religion” of monotheism into an undifferentiated “political monotheism”¹⁴⁶ – the explicit move of Hobbes in his *Leviathan*, and the implicit tendency of the *cuius regio, eius religio*-phase of European secularism – Akbar in my reading sought a form of integral authority that could transcend but also mediate between spheres and sectarian identities. The Mughal emperor, a sacred being, rose above divisions and differences; he did not abolish them. Indeed, the peculiarity of the Akbari regime, as I will explore in the following sections, was that its rhetoric, so to speak, actually gained momentum from the encounter with religious diversity. Rather than make light of difference by making it a private and unimportant affair, Akbar’s court sought to educate the populace into a greater awareness of it, encouraging the potentially dizzying and unnerving encounter with religious pluralism. Such a situation – an integral,

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴² Court, “A Transition in Carl Schmitt’s Political Thought,” 14.

¹⁴³ Schmitt, *Four Articles: 1931–1938*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 128.

¹⁴⁵ The situation of Charles II with respect to matters of religious toleration, while not conforming to the aforementioned hypothetical, was complex; it would be fair to say that Charles himself favored more toleration than he was allowed. For a sensitive summary, see Mandelbrote, “Religious Beliefs and the Politics of Toleration in the Late Seventeenth Century,” 94–100. As Azfar Moin judges it, “millennial sovereignty [i.e. the Akbari project] in Mughal India was a radical move against total religion,” an attempt to stave off the religious violence brought about by an uncompromising sort of Islamic monotheism. Moin, “Millennial Sovereignty, Total Religion, and Total Politics,” 96.

¹⁴⁶ Here, I depart somewhat from Moin’s argument in the article cited earlier.

totalistic project of politico-theological sovereignty which depended on a backdrop of (internal) pluralism – would no doubt have seemed paradoxical to Carl Schmitt in any period of his life.¹⁴⁷ Yet to every rule, so to speak, “there are exceptions.”¹⁴⁸

6 Seeker, Sovereign, Sacred Being: Akbar and Religion

Many times he said, “A human being is one who sends equity out in the forefront of his quest and selects from every [religious] group what is pleasing to wisdom. Perhaps in this manner the lock, the key to which has been lost, can be opened.”
*The History of Akbar*¹⁴⁹

Alongside the *Akbarnāma*’s portraiture of Akbar as the culmination of history, and its attribution to him of an integral spiritual [*ma’hawī*] and temporal [*ṣūrī*] sovereignty, is something equally striking: the notion of Akbar as not only a sacred being but also a sacred being in search of religious truth. Akbar, in Abū’l Faḍl’s pregnant expression, is “the perfect man... the Truth-worshipping king... the sovereign of the world who has lifted the veil from the external and the internal *by his seeking for and finding God* [emphasis added].”¹⁵⁰ This searching and finding is linked, in the *Akbarnāma*, with political authority and with polity: the quest for religious truth involves not only private gnosis but also a state-sponsored investigation into religious diversity, an investigation which Faḍl frames as uniquely fitted for a person of his patron’s rank and as bestowing “peace to all” [*ṣulḥ-i kull*].¹⁵¹ Akbar is no ordinary King, with rule only over externals. Rather he is one whose gnostic insight and spiritual rank affords him “rule of the material and spiritual and absolute authority over the external and internal.”¹⁵²

Any treatment of the term and concept religion in a premodern non-Western context, of course, merits a brief statement of position. Despite various arguments to the contrary, religion – translatable in various senses through various terms in Persian and Arabic such as *dīn*, *madhhab*, *kesh*, *millat*, *ummat*, and *ṭā’ifa* – was imminently a category in elite Persophone circles in sixteenth-century Hindūstān. Bequeathed to the Mughals was a long tradition of Islamic concern with religious diversity,¹⁵³ borne out particularly in the genre of Islamic doxography, extant since at least the tenth century.¹⁵⁴ Unlike the contemporary discipline of religious studies, but similar to earlier discourses of religion in the West, the Islamic investigation into religious difference was both avowedly impartial and carried out in a broadly religious and assumedly sectarian context.

A taste of this tradition can be given through a brief mention of a contemporary source: the *Tauḍīḥ al-mīlāl* [*The Explanation of Religious Communities*], a translation into Persian by the Mughal courtier Muṣṭafā

¹⁴⁷ Such a picture, in my understanding, would be paradoxical to Schmitt insofar as the difference in question was internal to the regime and significant to it – emphasized rather than minimized – yet also integral to its flourishing. Schmitt’s idea of politics is preoccupied with difference: yet for Schmitt, difference is inherently conflictual. The concept of the political precedes the state – the political being a condition irreducibly characterized by struggle and heterogeneity. Order is achievable only through an embrace of this agonistic human condition. As Schmitt puts it at the conclusion of his “Age of Neutralizations and De-politicizations”: “life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life, and out of the power of an integral understanding of this arises the order of human things.” Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations (1929),” 96.

¹⁴⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

¹⁴⁹ Abū’l- Faḍl, *The History of Akbar*, 63. Thackston’s translation, I have added brackets to supply the context of religious disputation provided by the sentences beforehand.

¹⁵⁰ My own translation. *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵¹ The slogan, more than any other, of Akbarian theo-secularism. I have refrained from glossing this phrase in detail here largely because of the excellent discussion in Azfar Moin’s aforementioned body of work.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 15. Here, I have used Thackston’s translation.

¹⁵³ For the viability of applying the concept of religion to a premodern and precolonial Islamic context, see Rushain Abbasi’s magisterial article: Abbasi, “Islam and the Invention of Religion.”

¹⁵⁴ How far one traces back this tradition depends on how much one differentiates apologetic or polemical writings from the more analytic genres of *al-mīlāl wa al-niḥāl* and *maqālāt al-fīraq*. Writing on religion in the plural “started appearing in the earliest Islamic centuries,” but the earliest examples of the latter seem to be from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Akram, “The Study of Religions in Premodern Muslim Civilization,” 4–5.

Khāliq dād ‘Abbāsī of the *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-niḥal* [*The Book of Sects and Cults*], the classic Arabic doxographical work by Muhammad al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153 AD).¹⁵⁵ This work, commissioned by Akbar late in his reign, opens with a pledge to “divide the world by separating out beliefs [*ra’y-hā*] and schools of thought [*madhhab-hā*],” not, as other texts have purportedly done, by ethnos [*ṭā’ifa* or *ṣin*], geography [*iqḷīm*], or law [*sharī‘at*].

If *dīn* and *millat* are, indeed, commensurable to “religion,” Shahrastānī’s text would appear to give a lie to the notion that it was the European West alone that applied a concept of “religion in the plural” to the known world. Indeed, references to “the world,” and “the people of the world”; verbs of cutting, partitioning, and division; and nouns expressing generic classificational categories are repeated *ad nauseum* in the opening sections of al-Shahrastānī’s text. The *Kitāb al-Milal* also potentially countermands another modern shibboleth: the argument that, in the premodern world, the categories contemporaries read as religious were, in their own context, “ethnic and civic” divisions.¹⁵⁶ The *Book of Sects and Creeds* specifically disaggregates the study of *dīn* from approaches to human difference based on these categories. A principle of division based on *madhhab* produces a taxonomy of groups that includes Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Magians [i.e., Zoroastrians], grouped together under the heading of the genuine religions, and, on the other hand, “people of twisted opinions and futile inclinations,” such as the Philosopher, the Materialist, and the Sabian, “and the worshippers of stars and idols, and the Brahmins [*barāhima*].”¹⁵⁷

This division between true and false in the realm of *dīn*, it is important to note, does not reduce entirely to sectarian or apologetic concerns, but is rather rooted in the text’s rationalism. Religious difference is identified with reasoned discourse: disputation on “rational question[s]” and “intelligible principles.” Shahrastānī notes that, by the principle of noncontradiction, whenever there is debate *within* a genuine religious community [*dīn* or *millat*] on a particular point of doctrine, “truth, in the case of all questions, will be with one group.”¹⁵⁸ Yet, in the parlance of J. Z. Smith, bonafide religion, here, is still not simply “our religion,” but a plural category that affords Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians basic legitimacy.

The *locus classicus* for such a view is the Qur’ān. Indeed, most of the groupings that *Kitāb al-Milal* enumerates in its opening passage, and all of the legitimate religions – the Muslims, the Magians, the Christians, and the Jews – are those recognized by Qur’ānic precedent (22:70): “Indeed, those who have believed and those who were Jews and the Sabeans and the Christians and the Magians[:] Allāh will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection.”¹⁵⁹ Here, also, religious diversity is implicitly posed as a problem – albeit one that may persist until its resolution at the end of days.

A basic familiarity with this Islamic tradition of writing on religion is necessary to appreciate many of the moves the *Akbarnāma* makes as it frames Akbar as a tolerant king. Thus, for instance, the expansion of the *ibādat-khāna* – the religious debating hall – to non-Muslims is described by Abū’l Faḍl in the following way:

On the twentieth of the divine month of Mihr [the first autumn month], the flame was kindled for private interview in the midst of the interconnected assembly ... Pure [wine] began to be separated from the dregs, coin from counterfeit. ... Sufis, philosophers, preachers, jurists, Sunnis, Shiites, Brahmans, Jatis, Seoras, Cārbāk [i.e. cārvāka-s, the materialist philosophers mentioned in Sanskrit doxography], Christians, Jews, Sabeans [*ṣābi*], Magians [i.e. Zoroastrians], and various sorts of other people rejoiced in freedom from worry when they saw the calm of the imperial gathering and when they witnessed the emperor ... and thus, without fear of rancorous antagonists, they revealed their secrets.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ All translations from this text are my own. Shahrastānī, *Tauḍīḥ al-milal*, 26. For the sake of comparison to the original Arabic text, I have also consulted: Shahrastānī, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 63–4.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ “[I]n every [genuine] religious community [ummat], the upright [*rāst-gār*] is always one group [*guroh*]; for when there is contrariness among two parties, truth will always be on one side. Thus, when, in every community, the factions of that community are opposed to one another, one is correct [*ḥaq*] and the other wrong; and, similarly, it is impossible, when two people differ on principles which are intelligible [*uṣūl-i ma‘qūl*], for both to be truthful in their claim. Necessarily, with respect to every rational question, truth will be one. And for this reason, truth, in the case of all questions, will be with one group.” *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Ṣaḥeeḥ International, *The Qur’ān: English Meanings*, 318.

¹⁶⁰ Abū al-Faḍl ibn Mubārak, *The History of Akbar* (Vol. 6), 53. I have here modified Thackston’s translation.

The presence, in this throng of religious friends, enemies, and others, of the “Sabeans” – the enigmatic group mentioned in the Qur’ān and in doxographical texts – may indicate an intention to invoke the aforementioned apocalyptic context of Sura 22, verse 70. Here, however, it is not God who judges between “the Jews and the Sabeans and the Christians and the Magians” at the end of days, but Akbar, the culmination of history, the Lord of the millennial Conjunction [*ṣāhib-qirān*],¹⁶¹ who assesses “the truth of religious and sects” through “arguments and proofs.”¹⁶² It is “the world lord’s insightful search for truth,” carried out through disputation with Jesuit priests and Brahmins, according to Abū’l Faḍl, that finally unravels the riddle of religious difference.¹⁶³

7 Translation as Inquiry and Representation

No discussion of Akbar’s investigation into religion, of course, would be complete without mention of the sovereign’s “translation movement,” or sponsoring of renderings of Indic texts from Sanskrit to Persian. Indeed, the same Khāliqdād ‘Abbāsī mentioned above who rendered the *Kitāb al-milal* into Persian had also translated the *Kathāsaritsāgara* and the *Pañcākhyāna*. The products of the *maktab-khāna* [translation bureau or “writing-house”], while evidencing a dizzying array of diversity in translation praxis, reflect the imprint of the project described above: a religiously grounded but aspirationally impartial investigation into religious difference preoccupied with issues of statecraft and sovereignty.

A reading of this “translation movement” in the light of Akbari political theology should keep two facets in productive tension. On the one hand, the project was a form of state-sponsored inquiry, carried out according to strictures of accuracy,¹⁶⁴ which although different from contemporary Anglophone standards of translation, could nevertheless be exacting. Its products were, in theory, “public”-facing, intended to educate Akbar’s Muslim and non-Muslim subjects on the scope of religious diversity in Hindūstān.¹⁶⁵ On the other hand, while containing a wealth of information on Brahmanical knowledge systems, these translations also provided scaffolding for a portrayal of Akbar as not simply a sacred King but a divinized *Hindūstāni* sovereign. As an outgrowth of Akbar’s ambitions, the products of the translation movement functioned as instances of representational political rhetoric.¹⁶⁶ Indic history and theology were fashioned into a backdrop for Akbar’s imperium – turning each, so to speak, into a mirror for the other.

¹⁶¹ For reasons of space, I have not detailed this eschatological-cum astrological aspect of the Akbari mythos, which is the subject of a book-length treatment in Moin’s *The Millennial Sovereign*. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*.

¹⁶² Abū al-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar* (Vol. 6), 51.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶⁴ While I cannot speak to the whole of South Asian literature before the colonial period, I have found in my readings of early modern Indo-Persian texts that translators’ introductions do make explicit reference to accuracy as an ideal, or even to a notion of literal translation. This is especially the case for books that went through multiple translations into Persian. Muṣṭafa Khāliq Dād ‘Abbāsī, the translator tasked with rendering the *Pañchatantra* into Persian, thus cites Akbar’s doubt about the accuracy of previous translations as an explicit justification for his work. “This book, passing several times from language to language, and from one telling to another,” he writes, “undoubtedly had undergone additions and diminutions, and alteration and change.” Abbāsī makes pains to assert that his own translation had been executed “word for word, in accordance with... everyday speech, in plain Farsi, without formality of style or ostentatious language.” Muṣṭafā Khāliqdād ‘Abbāsī, *Panchākhyānah (Pancākhyana) yā Panj dāstān*, iv–v. Translations my own.

¹⁶⁵ This program is expressed explicitly by Abū’l Faḍl in his *dibācha* to the initial translation of the *Mahābhārata*: there, he decries the prejudice and ignorance of the great mass of Hindus [*hunūd*] and Muslims, their ignorance of ancient books in their own traditions, and their squabbling amongst themselves and with each other. The translation of the *Mahābhārata*, it is implied, will bring rapprochement and mutual enlightenment, by, for instance, disabusing “the common people among the Muslims” of their naive cosmology and young-earth creationism. Such rhetoric implies some sort of process of dissemination by which the products of this courtly translation project were envisioned to find a broader reception – which, indeed, they did, in the centuries thereafter. Kovacs, “Chapter 2: The Preface to the Razmnāma,” 94–5.

¹⁶⁶ I have refrained here from offering a full-throated theory of how political rhetoric and representation functioned in the premodern Mughal context. It is clear to me, however, that there is some ground for a comparison of Schmitt’s writings on

This mirroring was sometimes unambiguous and direct. In a chapter of Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī's universal history *Rauzat ut-Ṭāhirīn* [Garden of the Chaste] consisting of extracts from Sanskrit texts, for instance, the rulers of Hind are introduced as avatars of Viṣṇu, in terms which could be read to imply an appropriation by Akbar of this role.¹⁶⁷ The section begins:

In description of the Kings of Hindūstān, who, according to the belief of the Barāhama [Brahmins] of Hind, have manifested in numerous manifestations; and each manifestation is by them designated [an] "avatar"; and they say that, in that time when the riotous and wicked came to take form; the Protector of the World, for the sake of the accomplishment of [these] urgent matters, displayed the benevolence of [his] visage; and for the sake of defense against that company and the amelioration of the matter, the World Protector, the possessor of perfection, took form.¹⁶⁸

Sabzawārī's terminology here echoes the language of "manifestation" [*maẓhar*] in the *Akbarnāma*; here, however, divine light manifests not in the Mongol bloodline but in the office of the ruler of Hind. An even more explicit translation of the doctrine of *avatāra* into Akbari terms takes place in another recension of the work's introduction: God, Sabzawārī there writes, "makes every person a manifestation of the light of His own majesty and grace, in accordance with [their] aptitude and ability."¹⁶⁹ This is a (sympathetic) reading of Brahmanical theology, refashioned so to resemble Abū'l Faḍl's Illuminationist restatement of the idea of the Perfect Man.¹⁷⁰

A similar mirroring can be observed in Sabzawārī's treatment of the Kṛṣṇa avatar, introduced as "the greatest of the avatars [*buzurgtarīn-i awatar-hā*]."¹⁷¹ While in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the proximate cause of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation is attributed to the earth's exhaustion and grief at having to deal with warrior bands of Daityas or demons, in Sabzawārī's text, it is introduced at first as a more general problem of unjust polity: "in that age," he begins, "[...] every city and town was under the control of headstrong kings and impetuous rulers [*wa dar ān rūzgār.. har shahre u balda dar taṣarruf-i rājhā-yi sar-kash u rāyān-i khud-rā'i būd*]." Brahma, seeing the earth distressed, thus goes to Kṣīra sea, and "[makes] request for the aim and object of the earth from the True God [*maqṣad u maṭlab-i zamīn rā az ma'būd-i ḥaqīqī dar-khwāst*]."¹⁷²

The subsequent story of the birth of Kṛṣṇa is rendered faithfully: the moment when Kṛṣṇa's mother and father, Vasudeva and Devakī, await the birth of the Lord in prison is painted in particularly vivid terms. While the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* speaks of Devakī concealing an inner illumination, which is revealed only indirectly

representation in his *Constitutional Theory, Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, and *Hamlet or Hecuba* with the representations of Akbar evident in hagiographical texts such as the *Akbarnāma* and in Abū'l Faḍl's preface to the *Razmnāma* (the initial translation of the *Mahābhārata*). For Schmitt, as David Pan summarizes, "representation [is] the mechanism and tradition... the space where an order attains a concrete form." An approach that reads the products of the translation movement representationally would face complications, but seems superior to me to an analysis of the Akbari translation movement as either purely literary or purely political; it is also superior to the "legitimation theory" approach earlier criticized by Audrey Truschke. Pan, "Afterward: Historical Event and Mythic Meaning in Carl Schmitt's *Hamlet or Hecuba*," Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*, 141.

167 Beyond the echoes of Akbari formulations in Sabzawārī's reading of the doctrine of *avatāra*, this comparison is also suggested by the structure of the text. The *Rauḍat ut-Ṭāhirīn* [Garden of the Pure] proceeds, according to the summary of Muzaffar Alam, from "the histories of pre-Islamic prophets, Greek philosophers, and Persian and Arab kings" in its earlier chapters to the rule of Akbar in its conclusion; its fourth chapter deals with the pre-Mughal history of Hindūstān. In the summary of Audrey Truschke, "Ṭāhir Muḥammad presents his *Mahābhārata* as a testimony of kingly rule in ancient India upon which Indo-Islamic rulers, above all Akbar, could build their political claims." Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam c. 1200-1800*, 67; Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*, 138.

168 Translation my own. Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, "Untitled [Extract from *Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn*]," I.O. Islamic 753, Folio 1a.

169 *u qabīlyat maẓhar-i anwār-i jalāl u jamāl-i khud gardānīd*. Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, "Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn," 366a.

170 The notion of the Perfect Man was applied by Ibn 'Arabi to the figure of the human being as such; particular human beings, however, instantiate this ideal in varying degrees. In the summary of Fitzroy Morrissey, while humanity as a whole reflects divinity, "[s]ome individuals... are more prepared to receive the divine manifestation than others, and hence are more perfect than others." Morrissey, *Sufism and the Perfect Human*, 121.

171 Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, "Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn," Folio 384b; Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, "Untitled [Extract from *Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn*]," I.O. Islamic 753, 31a.

172 Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, "Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn," Folio 384b; Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, "Untitled [Extract from *Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn*]," I.O. Islamic 753, 31a.

through the brilliance of her smile, the Persian text makes her manifestly light up her environ. “They say that when Devakī became pregnant in prison,” Sabzawārī writes, “and came near to the point of giving birth, her face began to shine such that the entire prison became bright and illuminated.”¹⁷³ The birth itself is dramatized in the following way:

When the second watch of the night, in the eighth *tithi*, in the month of Bhādoṇ, in the *badī pakṣa*, had elapsed, [the time] when Devakī would give birth drew near. The guards laid down their heads to the sleep of ignorance, and the chains fell from the hands and feet of the prisoners; and a cloud formed in the air; and the child was born from the womb of Devakī. Although he was dark-skinned, still, because of the illumination of his beauty, the whole of that jail became like a bright and radiant day. Devakī, seeing that newborn, with that appearance and virtue, said to herself, “This boy does not seem, in appearance, like the children of men. He is a possessor of perfection, manifesting in this birth.” [She] loosed her tongue in praise and veneration of him, saying, “Blessed is the mother and father upon whom the true Creator bestows children such as you.”¹⁷⁴

While the resplendence of the baby Kṛṣṇa is referenced in the Sanskrit text, it is not the primary way that the divinity of the newborn god is conveyed. In the Mughal courtly context, by contrast, the above recalls an aforementioned series of passage from the *Akbarnāma*, in which the miraculous impregnation of Alanquoa, the mythical progenitor of the Mongol royal bloodline, is described. Alanquoa is there an exalted being, “nourished by divine light [*nūr-parward-i ilāhī*],” radiating beauty and brightness, “the light of piety evident from her countenance [*anwar-i khudā-shināsī az chahra-ash paidā*].”¹⁷⁵ She conceives in a manner compared explicitly with Mary, the Mother of Christ: in a single flash of divine light.¹⁷⁶ As a result, the text tells us, “[her] abode was always bright with the splendor of that light, and from time to time it illuminated upon her externally and internally.”¹⁷⁷ When Alanquoa’s relatives doubt her story, the effulgence flashes down from heaven again into her tent in a manner for all the “dark-minded [*tīra-ray*]” doubters to see.¹⁷⁸ This light, as the court history emphasizes, became manifest most evidently and perfectly in Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar, the son of the other Mary, “Maryam-Makani.”

Other products of the translation movement manifest a similar desire to craft Indic deities and kings into figures who mirror Akbar.¹⁷⁹ As I have elsewhere argued, this mirroring transformed the Sanskrit texts into a kind of *speculum principum*, which could exemplify ideals and ambitions but also set limits for the Akbari project. At times, the Persian renderings appear to address Akbar himself, offering him advice and cautioning

173 *gūyand ki chūn devakī dar zindān ḥamila shud wa waqʿ-i ḥaml-i u nazdik rasid, rūyash ān-chunān tābān gardid ki timām zindān roshan u munauwar mī namūd.* Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, “Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn,” Folio 385a. Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzavārī, “Untitled [Extract from Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn],” I.O. Islamic 753, 31b.

174 *chūn dū-pahar az shab-i tithih-i ashtamani az māh-i bahādūn dar pakḥah-i badī munqaẓī gardid, nazdik shud ki dewakī waqʿ-i ḥaml numāyad. nigāh-bānān sar ba-khwāb-i ghaflat nihādand, wa zanjūr az dast u pā-yi zindāniyān dar gasht wa bar rū-yi hawā abarī farāham āmad u farzand az baṭn-i dewakī mutawallid shud. agar-chi siyāh-fām būd, amma az partau-i anwār-i jamāl-i u timām-i ān zindān manand-i rūz-i roshan u munauwar gardid. devakī ān maulūd rā ba-dān shakl u shimāl dīda bā khud guft ki īn pīsar ba-ṣūrat-i atfāl-i khalāʿiq na-mī-numāyad. ṣāhib-i kamālīst ki dar īn nashāʾ zuhūr namūda. zabān ba-sitāyish u taʿẓīm-i u gushūda, guft ki saʿadat-i mādar u pidarī ki mithal-i tu farzandān-rā khāliq-i ḥaqīqī ʿaṭā farmāyad.* Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī, “Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn,” Folio 384b; Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzavārī, “Untitled [Extract from Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn],” I.O. Islamic 753, 31a.

175 The first translation reproduces Thackston’s phrasing; the second is my own. Abūʿl-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar (Volume 1)*, 216–17.

176 “One night the divine light-bred [Alanquoa] was sleeping on [her] tranquil bed, leaning upon four quiet cushions, when all of a sudden a wondrous light cast a beam into the tent; and that light entered the mouth and orifice of that well-spring of knowledge and presence, and that edifice of chastity became pregnant by that light, in the fashion of Mary, the daughter of Amram. Subḥānaʾllāh!” [my translation]

shabī ān nūr-parward-i ilāhī bar bistar istirāḥat pahlū nihāda u bar chār bālīsh-i istirāḥat takiya zada būd ki nā-gāh nūrī-yi shigārf dar khar-gāh partau andakht wa ān nūr dar kām u dahān-i ān sar-chashma-yi ʿirfān u ḥazūr dar āmad, wa ān iffat-qibāb bar minwāl-i ḥaḍrat mariyam bint-i ʿimrān az ān nūr ābistān shud. subḥānaʾllāh. Ibid., 216.

177 Above is Wheeler Thackston’s translation. Ibid., 219.

178 Ibid., 220.

179 As I have argued in my dissertation, many of these involve the person of the Indic god, Kṛṣṇa. In some texts, Kṛṣṇa is figured as a type of Akbar: a purely spiritual sovereign who, like the Mughal ruler, possesses spiritual [*maʿnawī*] authority and claims to be a sacred being reflecting God’s perfection, not a god. In others, Kṛṣṇa becomes Akbar’s mirror image or shadow: a deceitful magician sowing war rather than affording peace to all [*ṣulh-i kull*]; or, alternatively, a tyrant who, as Akbar was accused to have by some in his court, vulgarly claimed godhood and brought ruin to the realms of religion and politics alike. Smolin, “The Mirror of Realities.”

him against certain excesses (such as explicit self-divinization).¹⁸⁰ Despite these notes of anxiety, however, Indic theology overall became the backdrop for a (positive) political representation: an incarnational fashioning of Akbar that may have been the courtly response to an extant elite¹⁸¹ and popular¹⁸² desire on the part of South Asian non-Muslims to view the Mughal king as an avatar of Viṣṇu.

8 Akbar and Hindūstān: The Preface to Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat*

The assimilation of Akbar to Viṣṇu (and *vice versa*) resulted in complex dynamics, which I cannot offer a detailed account of here. I will, however, briefly discuss the broader relation of Akbar to his kingdom, Hindūstān, as presented in an understudied section of a prominent text: the versified preface to the literary translation of the *Mahābhārata* produced by Abū'l Faḍl's brother, the poet Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak, or "Faiḍī." Faiḍī's verses not only pare particularly well with the "argument" of his brother's preface to the *Akbarnāma*, examined at the beginning of this article, but also do a good job of introducing how the Hindūstāni nature of Akbar's kingdom was dealt with by the court. In these couplets, the poet frames Hindūstān as a land of literature and learning blessed by Akbar's enlightened leadership, with deep, occult connections to *Fārs* and *Yūnān*, Persia and Greece. Over the course of the preface, Hindūstān and Akbar gradually merge.

As in the *Akbarnāma*, the argument begins from a meditation on speech [*sukhan*]. In his initial pair of verses, Faiḍī lauds the seemingly limitless expanse [*muḥīṭ*] of discourse in general, and the *Mahābhārata* in particular, writing:

ābirū-bakhsh ceshmeh-sār-i sukhun / Āshnā-yi muḥīṭ-i bī sar ū bun
The well-spring of speech is dignifying
Acquainted with the ocean that is without beginning or end
mī kunad bā lab-i sukhun pardāz / sar guzishtī zi mulk-i hind Āghāz
Through the narrator's lips, [Speech] carries out
the commencement [of] a tale from the country of Hind¹⁸³

180 Aside from the treatment of Kṛṣṇa, the manner in which Persian translations of Sanskrit texts helped to develop a notion of the bounds and limits of the Akbari project may be directly observed in the *Razmnāma*'s rendering of the fifty-ninth chapter of the "Rājadharmā" section of the "Śāntiparvan" and its description of the myth of King Vena and King Pṛthu. This section of the text, according to Abū'l Faḍl, consists of advice about "the proprieties of external and spiritual sovereignty [*ādāb-i salṭanat-i šūrī u ma'nawī*]" – precisely the formulation the *Akbarnāma* and the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* use to shorthand the Akbari project of integral, politico-religious rule. Audrey Truschke has also analyzed the "Rājadharmā" translation as being addressed directly to Akbar, though she does not emphasize the same aspects of the text in her analysis as I have in mine. Smolin, "The Mirror of Realities," 188–99; Truschke, "A Padshah like Manu."

BL Add. 5641, folio 22a. I have accessed this manuscript, again, through the reproduction in the following: Willis, *Translation and State: The Mahābhārata at the Mughal Court*, 252.

181 As Badā'ūnī alleges, "cheating thieving Brahmins... told the Emperor that he was an incarnation, like Ram, Krishna, and other infidel kings; and though Lord of the world, he had assumed his shape, in order to play with the people of our planet." The Brahmins also allegedly bring Akbar proof in the form of Sanskrit verses prophesying his emergence: "[t]hey... wrote this nonsense on an old looking paper, and showed it to the Emperor, who believed every word of it." Abd al-Qādir ibn Mulūk Badā'ūnī Shāh, *Muntakhab Ut-Tawāriḫ*, 336.

182 Tantalizing evidence of the popularity of this idea is provided in the traveler's account of one "Ioannes Oranus." Describing the belief of the inhabitants of Hind in the appearance of God in various physical forms, animal and human, in various periods, Oranus writes, "[t]hey say God will also appear in this Age. Others imagine, That he hath already appeared, and that Echebar [Akbar] is hee." Wheeler, *Early Travels in India*, 78.

My attention was drawn to this passage by Carl Ernst in the aforementioned article: Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism?," 183.

183 "Faiḍī," "Mahābahārat" (Manuscript, n.d.), I.O. Islamic 761: Folio 1a. In deriving my own critical transcription and translation of this text, I have also consulted other manuscripts, including but not limited to the following: Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak "Faiḍī," "Mahābahārat" (Manuscript, n.d.), Persian Manuscript +188, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak "Faiḍī," (Manuscript, 1850), Persian Manuscript +94, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak "Faiḍī," (Manuscript, n.d.), MS Walker 87, Bodleian Library.

As asserted here, it is *sukhan*, speech or literature itself, which is the source of the text – the author is only the instrument. Like Abū'l Faḍl, Faiḍī thus universalizes his writing to establish the broadest and most impressive stage for what will follow. Yet there is, I would suggest, a tension introduced here as well, between the theme of the beginninglessness, and therefore the universality, of speech, and that of locality: *sukhan* is endless, but the tale is an Indic one, which, in Faiḍī's framing, needs some introducing. His response extends the category of *sukhan* – and accordingly, literary achievement and truth – to the Sanskrit text itself.

Because the prestige of the translation – and, by extension, that of Faiḍī, and his royal patron – depends upon its South Asian subject matter, the poet launches immediately into a eulogization of Hindūstān.

hind nī 'ālam-i khiradmandī / mulk-i taslīm u takht-i khursandī
Hind? Nay, the Domain of Wisdom
The Realm of Reverence, the Capital of Contentment
*ān ki cashm u chirāgh*¹⁸⁴ *-i gardūnast / khāl-i rukhsār-i rub'-i maskūnast*
That which is the eye and light¹⁸⁵ of the celestial vault
The mole on the cheek of the inhabited quarter [of the world]¹⁸⁶

The marked locality of Hind is here quickly replaced with ideality. Hind is not merely a geographically demarcated realm, but rather a domain of spiritual and intellectual virtue. This idealized image is thereafter deepened by a comparative perspective: Hindūstān is laudable because it is comparable in these virtues to the Greeks – indeed, as Faiḍī suggests, South Asian learning was actually the *source* of classical wisdom:

Sākinānash ba-danish afzūnī / saḥab-i nishā-yi falātūnī
Its inhabitants [are intent upon] the increase of knowledge / Possessing a Platonic intoxication¹⁸⁷

If the above suggests a diffusion of Greek thought into India, a few lines down, Faiḍī reverses the directionality of this exchange:

wa ān falātūn keh ānceh yādash būd / tamtam-e hindī ūstādash būd
And that Plato, whatever he had learned / Tamtam the Indian was his teacher¹⁸⁸

Indic wisdom is, by implication of the above, responsible for the flowering of Greek thought. Tamtam, or Tūmtūm the Indian, a shadowy figure linked to magic, mathematics and astrology, first appeared in Hellenized Islamic contexts some six hundred years prior, in the writings of Muḥammad ibn Umayl al-Tamīmī (d. 960 AD).¹⁸⁹ Faiḍī's claim of epistemic primacy for Hindūstān through Tūmtūm should not be dismissed as an odd reference in a throwaway line: It was, after all, reprised in prose, in another work attributed to the poet laureate – the *Shāriq al-ma'rifat*, or *Shining of Gnosis* – in a passage that links Plato to not only Tūmtūm but also Vyāsa, the mythological author of the Mahabharata.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴ Yale 94 here reads *chashm-i chirāgh*. Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak “Faiḍī,” “Mahābahārat” (Manuscript, 1850), Persian Manuscript +94, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Folio 3a.

¹⁸⁵ That is, the “apple of the eye,” i.e., the favored part of the world. The line also carries an obvious solar metaphor, which resonates with the motif of Akbar as a sun-king.

¹⁸⁶ Metre: x u – – u – u – u u –

hind nī 'ālam-i khiradmandī

Metre is stable throughout all following verses in the exordium.

“Faiḍī,” I.O. Islamic 761, Folio 1a.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ See entry in: Sezgin, *Geschichte Des Arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 4, 119.

¹⁹⁰ “[Plato was] in the most humble [degree of] discipleship [amongst] the disciples of Tamtam the Indian, who was a very great philosopher of former times. Plato, in his collected writings, wrote of his perfections in a perfect, indeed, the most perfectly detailed manner. [Plato] became the master of the age. And this [Tamtam], his spiritual precept, [was] in the line of the disciples of Swami Vyāsa.” Above is my own translation, based on the following sources: “Shāriq Al-Ma'rifat” (No date), I.O. Islamic 1355, Folio 1b. Majmu'a-i Rasa'il, 2. See also translation and discussion in the following article: Ernst, “Fayzi's Illuminationist Interpretation of

Akbar is first introduced by Faiḍī in these verses rather simply, as a King who favors the land with his presence. Thereafter, however, a slow divinization of the sovereign commences. Not only is the almanac beautified by Akbar's particular horoscope, but he represents the perfect arrangement of time: "the [choicest] arrangement of nights and days / the most select of materials and elements."¹⁹¹

The exordium closes by returning to the theme introduced at the outset: that of Speech, or *sukhan*, as a boundless sea. The final verses, however, modify this image so as now to point to the power and praiseworthiness of Faiḍī's imperial patron. "Of his qualities," Faiḍī writes, "there can be no calculation/and of his expanse [*muḥīt*], no shoreline can be found." While *sukhan*, as the true author of the text, was initially lauded with its familiarity with the entire ocean of discourse, the poet himself is now described as thirsty [*tishna-lab*], with lips desperate to drink in the whole sea [*muḥīt-āshām*].¹⁹² The reader is no longer quite sure, by the end, whether the subject of which Faiḍī cannot get enough is Hindūstān, Akbar, the *Mahābhārata*, or something that subsumes all three: a discursive merging of land, leader, and (Indic religio-historical) text through translation, which is, perhaps, the preface's point.

9 A Key for the Lock: Translation as Theory and Practice

Both the generalized *raison d'être* for Akbar's translation bureau – the notion of translation as a powerful rubric for confronting and sublating difference – and the more esoteric idea of a lineage linking Hind, Fars, and Yunan [India, Iran, and Greece] by way of a *prisca theologia* – entered Akbarian state ideology through a controversial source.¹⁹³ This was a counter-tradition termed, by its enemies, *ghulū*,¹⁹⁴ or "exaggeration," which, by the early modern period, had spawned a "cultic milieu"¹⁹⁵ of unconventional neo-Zoroastrian Iranophilic sects embracing a series of unconventional doctrines: reincarnation, cyclical time, and a Persian supremacism anchored by a heterodox Lettrism focused on the Persian, rather than Arabic, alphabet. One of these groups, the Nuqtawī's or "Pointalists," received protection from Safavid persecution in Akbar's Hindūstān. Akbar's realm also became a place of refuge for the followers of Ādhar Kaivān, the leader of a similar, eponymous group who was himself allegedly invited to court by Akbar and Abū'l Faḍl. While Ādhar Kaivān did not deign to visit in person, he sent a letter, in "pure Dari Persian," which, when read backward, was Arabic, turned upside down, Turkish, and turned upside down and read backward, Hindi.¹⁹⁶

Like the Nuqtawī's, Ādhar Kaivān was a Lettrist sect, which claimed access to a "heavenly language," a Persianate tongue from which all other languages descended, and in which their sacred text, the *Dasātīr*, was written. The Ādharis asserted as a matter of religious teaching that religious difference was nothing more than linguistic: just as all languages were offshoots of primeval Persian, all religious teachings were translations, in some extended sense, of the *Dasātīr*.¹⁹⁷ If the *Milal wa al-niḥal* genre drew self-consciously from a Qur'ānic grammar of religious difference, certain portions of *Dasātīr* seem to be written with an eye to one-upping this Islamic precedent, fusing prophecy directly with doxography. A series of verses from the first section – a discourse attributed to Mahābād, the first prophet – thus prognosticated the emergence of various religious groups – *furoh*-s, in the "heavenly" language of the original, or *guroh*-s, in the "translation," with references to Brahmanical sects¹⁹⁸ and, in a later section, the rise of Muhammad.

Vedanta," 358. As Daniel Sheffield has recently argued, the influence of some notion of a *Prisca Theologia*, or a perennial theology was evident in Akbar's official ideology of *sulh-e kul*. Sheffield, "Exercises in Peace."

¹⁹¹ Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak "Faiḍī." "Mahābahārat," 1b.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ See discussion in: Sheffield, "Exercises in Peace."

¹⁹⁴ See Hodgson, "Ghulāt."

¹⁹⁵ I am, so far as I know, the first to apply this concept to this phenomenon. See Campbell, "The Cultic Milieu Revisited."

¹⁹⁶ Ernst, "Concepts of Religion in the Dabistan," 448.

¹⁹⁷ See discussion in: Sheffield, "The Language of Heaven in Safavid Iran."

¹⁹⁸ The principle of description for these communities is relatively abstract and qualitative, with groups identified according to the perfection and defect of their practices their beliefs: thus, the text predicts the emergence of a religious group which will,

The *Dabistān-i madhāhib*, or School of Religions, composed by a follower of this group, Mīr Dhu'l-fiḡār Ādhar Sāsānī [aka Mūbad Shah] in the next century between 1645 and 1658 CE, provides an excellent exemplar of how the Islamic language of religious difference described earlier gave rise in the early modern period to a broader, Islamicate, Persophone dialect. On the one hand, Ādhar Sāsānī professes to have produced an even more impartial investigation into the essence of religion [*ḥaqīqat-i dīn*] than his Islamic predecessors,¹⁹⁹ combining purported research into primary texts with ethnographic research. On the other hand, the religious importance his *Dabistān* affords to the investigation of religious differences is also something over and above that of the *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-niḥal*.

The religious aspect of Shahrastānī's interest in religious diversity was avowedly apologetic: the world is to be cleared of the doubt and division sowed by Satan through reasoned investigation into different beliefs.²⁰⁰ For Ādhar Sāsānī, the operative logic is somewhat the reverse: the ability to account for religious diversity in sensitive, charitable, and positive terms is a kind of test of religious truth, one his own religion, Ādhar Kaivān, passes with flying colors. To adopt the phrasing of J. Z. Smith, the measure of the religiousness of a religion – for Sāsānī – is its interest in, and ability to parse and account for, religious diversity.

One of the most striking examples of this religious “stress-test” occurs in the opening section of the doxography, where Sāsānī reproduces the testimony of one Mūbad Khwushī, a convert to the Ādhari faith: “In the days of youth,” Khwushī begins,

I had the desire that I should attain to a spiritual guide [*pīr*]. Thus I approached the Shaikhs of Iran, of Tūrān, and Rūm [i.e., Greece or Rome], and Hind—Muslims, and Hindus [*hunūd*] and fire-worshippers [*gabr*] and Christians and Jews. All said to me, “Leave your own sect [*kesh*], enter our path.” Yet my heart was not partial to the changing of sect, and the adopting of religion, and the laying aside of rites: for none of them gave me any evident respite. ... This [i.e. the appeal to change one's faith] is the speech of the bigoted [*muta'aṣṣib*]; and [yet] each one of the Shaikhs esteemed himself to be without prejudice.²⁰¹

Subsequently, Mūbad Khwushī is given a vision, in which he sees a large body of water with many small tributaries. After seeking, unsuccessfully, to quench his thirst in the riverbeds, full of sediment but not much water, Khwushī is directed by his father to ask God for help. “This great sea,” an angel explains to him, “is Ādhar Kaivān; the little streams are the Shaikhs.” The sediment [*lāy*] and mud [*gil*] of the riverbanks, Mūbad Khwushī realizes, were the prejudice and envy of the sectarian leaders, which prevented him from embracing any of their faiths.²⁰²

Mūbad Khwushī's stance as an open-minded seeker, his distress at the conflicting claims of the various religions, the interchangeability or equivalence, for him, of the religions and their arguments, the sense of competition implicit in the “Shaikhs” respective appeals to him – all these seem shockingly modern.

despite their wisdom, violate the (as of yet universally observed) Ādhari principle of non-violence toward harmless animals. Another verse uses what seems to be a modification of the Sanskrit/Hindi word, *tapas*, meaning heat or ascetic mortification: “furohī pekar hawand fardār shāla wa kāla wa tapāshid.” “A group will become manifest,” the text's translation states, “knowing and doing the good, ascetic[s], in servitude to the leader.” “Tapās,” a gloss explains, “is little eating and drinking and sleep on God's path, and in worship of him.” [Transliteration of short vowels here is based on nothing more than whim.] Dasātīr-e Āsmānī, 27.

199 “After the concluding of [this] epistle, it will be disclosed that some esteemed [persons] declared that *Milal wa niḥal* [and] *Tabaṣṣurat al-awām* [a thirteenth century Persian doxographic text], in which creeds and sects are discussed, are not free of partiality, [and so], necessarily, the essence of religion will remain undisclosed [by them]. Even further, many [religious] groups have come into being after these [previous books]. In accordance with this request [i.e., to produce a more up-to-date book], [the author] set out to write this epistle.” Fānī, *Dabistān-i madhāhib* (Vol. 1), 367. Having alluded to the bias of past doxographic texts – including Shahrastānī's – the author heralds his achievement as a triumph of translational transparency, without the slightest “whiff of prejudice [ta'aṣṣub] and partiality.” “That which came to be written [here] of the creeds of various sect[s],” Ādhar Sāsānī writes, “is from the tongues of the possessors of that creed and [from] their Book.” “There was nothing of the author in this account,” the *Dabistān*'s final line declares, “save the role of a translator [tarjumān].” Fānī, *Dabistān-i madhāhib* (Vol. 1), 367.

200 Shahrastānī, *Tauḍīḥ al-milal*, 29–31.

201 *marā dar aiyām-i jawānī ārzūy ān būd ki ba-pīrī rasam. pas nazd-i mashā'ikh-i īrān u tūrān u rūm u hind, az muslimānān u hunūd u gabr u naṣāra u yahūd bi-raftam. hama mara guftand az kesh-i khud naql namūda ba-rāh-i mā dar-āyī. amma dil-i man ba-naql-i kesh u giriftan-i dīn u hishtan-i āyīn māyil na-būd, chi az ishān gushāyish-i dar-kār-i man āshkāra nashud. in suḥan-i muta'aṣṣibān ast u har kudām az mashā'ikh khud rā ba-bi-ta'aṣṣubī mī-sitūdand.* Fānī, *Dabistān-i madhāhib* (Volume 1), 40.

202 *Ibid.*, 40–1.

Twentieth-century theologians spoke in similar terms to Khwushī of the challenge of religion pluralism, but generally as a novel phenomenon, a consciousness of religious diversity produced by globalization and the “enforced proximity of each religion and culture to every other.”²⁰³ Likewise, historians of the colonial period in South Asia, with its public religious debates between missionaries, Muslims and Hindu reformers, have remarked on “the availability of a new conceptual object called religion... known through its propositional doctrines,” and “the emergence of a new kind of subject whose job it was to decide on the truth and untruth of competing religious claims.”²⁰⁴

It would be tempting to attribute the precociousness of the *Dabistān* or of the Ādhari religion to something particular to this moment in the early modern South Asian and/or Iranian context. Yet there is evidence that here – as in general – Ādhar Sāsānī was riffing on an older trope. A very similar first-personal passage, after all, occurs in a prominent sixth-century text, the early Persian translation of the Pañcatantra entitled *Kalila and Dimna*.²⁰⁵

In the preface of this book, the translator, Burzoyah, describes the path that took him from a successful career as a physician at the court of the Sassanian Emperor, Khusraw Anūshirwān (d. 1579) to a full-blown existential crisis that left him grappling with the problem of human mortality and the futility of his profession. Turning to the study of religion for succor, Burzoyah encounters the problem of religious difference. “The disagreements among the nations were perfectly clear,” he remarks,

Their disagreements on the definition of the Creator and the beginning and end of things were innumerable, but everyone was convinced that he was right and the others wrong. I therefore determined to make an inquiry into what the scholars of every sect had to say about their beliefs and doctrines and thereby try to gain a satisfactory foothold. When I persisted in my efforts and research I found that every nation had much to say about the preference for their own religion and the superiority of their own sect and spent a lot of time vilifying opposing creeds and anathematizing their opponents. In no way did I find anything helpful to me [...]²⁰⁶

Burzoyah’s narrative culminates – as many do – in a trip to Hindūstān, where he participates in many “discussions and ... deliberations,” and brings back “many books” – including the Pañcatantra, which he subsequently translates under the patronage of Anūshirwān.²⁰⁷

Burzoyah’s statement closely resembles another case closer to hand: the figure of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar – the Perfect Man, World-Emperor and sacred King *par excellence*. A speech of Akbar’s from the time of the aforementioned expansion of the *ibādat-khāna*, recorded by Jesuit visitors to the Mughal court, reprises many of the same sentiments as the Sassanian physician:

[Akbar] said, ‘I perceive that there are varying customs and beliefs of varying religious paths. For the teachings of the Hindus, the Musalmans, the Jazdini, the Jews and the Christians are all different. But the followers of each religion regard the institutions of their own religion as better than those of any other. Not only so, but they strive to convert the rest as to their own way of belief. If these refuse to be converted, they not only despise them, but also regard them for this very reason as their enemies. And this causes me to feel many serious doubts and scruples. [Therefore] I desire that on appointed days the books of all the religious laws be brought forward, and that the doctors meet together and hold discussions, so that I may hear them, and that each one may determine which is the truest and mightiest religion.’²⁰⁸

For those unpersuaded by Jesuits, there is no need to take their word for it. Even Akbar’s intimate enemy, Badā’ūnī, does not attribute all of the former’s religious faults to cynicism, pride, or bad influence: “the Emperor,” he writes, “was possessed of an excellent disposition, and was an earnest searcher after truth,

²⁰³ Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*, 3.

²⁰⁴ Tareen, “The Polemic of Shahjahanpur,” 63.

²⁰⁵ While the Persian text of this work is lost, it survives in Arabic translation. I am indebted here to the discussion in an article of Rushain Abbasi’s, which, among other things, made me aware of the existence of this preface and its relevance to my concerns. Abbasi, “Islam and the Invention of Religion.”

²⁰⁶ Munshi, *Kalila and Dimna*, xli.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xlvii.

²⁰⁸ Monserrate, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate*, 182.

but very ignorant and a mere beginner.”²⁰⁹ As a result of this naivete, but also because of a “peculiar acquisitiveness,” a “conviction” took hold of the King “that there are wise men to be found and ready at hand in all religions, and men of asceticism and recipients of revelation and workers of miracles among all nations, and that the Truth is an inhabitant of every place.”²¹⁰

There is no way, of course, to peer inside the mind of a long-dead Mughal King. It is for this reason – the feeling that history should move from speculation about “personal religious inclinations” to, as Carl Ernst terms it, “a more realistic analysis of policy aspects”²¹¹ that the figure of Akbar as one with a religious interest in the question of religious difference has been sidelined. By reminding the reader of the preponderance of this “romantic” narrative in the sources, I mean to underscore two points: First, that the question of Akbar’s motivations – cynical, sincere, or mixed – is a question that the sources themselves implicitly or explicitly answer, and so part of the data that must be taken into account; and second, that part of the contemporary disinclination to take Islamicate narratives of the search for religious truth among the religions [*adyān*] seriously – particularly when they concern a King – derives from a disaggregation of the religious from the political.

By way of conclusion, I would suggest that Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar investigated other faiths, met with fakirs, Sheikhs, and Jesuits and sponsored interreligious debates and translations of Sanskrit texts, not because he held all their positions to be valid from a position of disinterested “tolerance,” but because he wanted earnestly to determine their degree of differentiation and truth. In his own words, he sought the “key ...which has been lost”²¹² and found it in a meta-theology that exalted translation and philosophical and metaphysical investigation [*taḥqīq*] over devotion to convention and tradition [*taqlid*].²¹³ The “world lord’s insightful search for the truth” – as Abū’l Faḍl again put it – was not, however, simply a private, “romantic” reality, religious in the contemporary sense: it was one element of a political theology, the key to his secular and sacred authority alike. For his hagiographers, Akbar’s ability to find as well as search for truth was proof of his eschatological significance and granted him special authority – including the right to a kind of extended *ius reformandi*.

This political theology did, in its practical outcroppings, encourage “tolerance” in the accustomed modern sense with respect to non-Islamic faiths. Its anchoring element, however, as I hope I have been able to demonstrate, was not a devotion to neutrality as a trans-metaphysical ethical ideal, but an appreciation of religious difference as a weighty *religious* question requiring charity and intelligence. The Islamicate tradition of writing on religion in the plural [*adyān* or *madhāhib*] was theologically and metaphysically grounded and was not, so to speak, neutrally neutral; indeed, to its enemies, it was not necessarily so tolerant at all.²¹⁴

While the so-called “Mughal translation movement’s” treatments of Indic texts were laborious and serious, they also had a way of carving up alien theologies along studied lines of interpretation. The theological contents of Sanskrit texts were generally assimilated into a capacious, broadly neo-Platonic Islamicate cosmology in which, for instance, gods such as Brahma appeared as subsidiary entitles under a supreme deity, and fantastical events were speculated to have occurred in some age of the jinn before the creation of Adam.²¹⁵ Similarly, the Ādhari author of the *Dabistān-i madhāhib* combined a rhetoric of tolerance for all religious traditions with a rationalizing or demythologizing principle according to which nothing contrary to reason would be affirmed. The tension between these two principles – tolerance and rationalism – was reconciled by an interpretative criterion that treated as symbolic or didactic anything that did not seem plausible within

²⁰⁹ Abd al-Qādir ibn Mulūk Badā’ūnī Shāh, *Muntakhab Ut-tawārikh*, 263.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 263–4.

²¹¹ Ernst, “Muslim Studies of Hinduism?,” 179.

²¹² Abū’l-Faḍl, *The History of Akbar* (Volume 6), 16. Thackston’s translation.

²¹³ See discussion in Moin, “Sulh-i Kull as an Oath of Peace,” 736.

²¹⁴ On the possibility, long played-down or denied, that Akbar used state policy to suppress more conventional Islamic thought and worship, see: Khan, “Akbar’s Personality Traits and World Outlook,” 26–8.

²¹⁵ Here I speak partially from my own direct as a translator and student of these translations. For a brief discussion on the role of the sun in this schema and in Mughal courtly ritual practice, see, among many other passages: Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 235–7. For discussion of a later, particularly baroque Persian trans-creation carried out on the basis of these principles, see: Alam, “Strategy and Imagination in a Mughal Sufi Story of Creation.”

Ādhari metaphysics and cosmology: myths of struggles against demons were thus, for instance, interpreted as struggles against the passions, and the Viṣṇu avatars analogized to divine names or qualities.²¹⁶

While these translational departures from “the original” have often been understood by contemporary scholars as distortions testifying to the scholarly and philosophical limitations of their authors,²¹⁷ I would beg to differ. This metaphysics proceeded not from prejudice or partiality, but from a reasoned consideration of what sort of entities do and do not exist. Entire subject areas in the modern academy attempted and still attempt to “translate” mythos into history according to a similar method. Ongoing work on the “historical Jesus,” for instance, re-interprets a handful of two-thousand-year-old accounts of an apocalyptic miracle worker in Palestine to produce a variety of subject-portraits, all in harmony with naturalistic assumptions. However defunct in the present, Max Muller’s idea of the “disease of language” and reinterpretation of all myth as solar myth pairs well, so to speak, with Ādhar Sāsānī’s reinterpretation of all prominent holy sites as survivals of ancient astrological cults. Indeed, in broader terms, the entire enterprise of the history of religions – or of history more broadly – can be characterized as a project of rationalization: a process by which “minority histories,” with their indigestible gods and miracles, are translated into a flattened, scientized time horizon.²¹⁸ If contemporary scholars of religion are not willing to depart from the metaphysical and political orthodoxies of their own time in interpreting other peoples’ religions, they cannot very well fault a convinced member of a precolonial esoteric sect or a Mughal sovereign for instantiating a similar tendency. Truth, after all, does not contradict truth.

10 Conclusion: Waiting for a Conuigator?

It is nothing but a modern folly to try to alter a corrupt moral organization by altering its political constitution and code of laws without changing the religion... At best it is only a temporary expedient—when it is obviously too great a task to descend into the depths of the religious spirit and to raise that same spirit to its truth—to seek to separate law and justice from religion. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia* §552²¹⁹

In his Presidential Address to the 25th Session of the All-India Muslim League (1930), the Urdu poet and political philosopher Muhammad Iqbal addressed the paucity in British India of any basis for what Carl Schmitt would have termed “substantial equality”²²⁰ – i.e., some axis of difference on which Indians could be said to differ from non-Indians and on the grounds of which unity and nationality could be affirmed. According to Iqbal, most of the options for solidarity were simply not extant. India lacked any “common race-consciousness,” spanning too much land and too many diverse peoples²²¹; religious diversity posed a serious

²¹⁶ Behl, “Pages from the Book of Religions,” 137.

²¹⁷ This is particularly true with respect to the peculiar reception history of the Ādhar Kaivān sect, whose *Dasātīr* was embraced credulously by Orientalists such as William Jones and Anthony Troyer as an ancient text in a genuinely primeval Persian. The explosion of this impression produced vicious denunciations, and thereafter a period of neglect. More recent scholarship, while adopting a more detached stance toward the *Dasātīr*’s historicity, criticizes the perspective on religious difference exemplified by the *Dabistān*. While the text’s premise of “translatability and universality” might seem to offer the prospect of a tolerant and fair-minded approach to religious difference, Carl Ernst remarks, “what is less obvious is the price to paid... by rigidly imposing a singular philosophical and religious worldview as the ultimate explanation of everything.” Ernst seems concerned about the text’s ability to seduce his peers in something of the way it influenced prominent Orientalists of bygone years, and he cites Aditya Behl as an example of the recent “attract[ion]” of scholars in “the field of the religions of South Asia... to [the Dabistān].” Yet Aditya Behl, in his essay, had adopted a rhetoric similar to Ernst’s own. While the “activity of translation” is “central” to the Dabistān, Behl wrote, this was a notion of translation “grounded not in modern ideas of faithfulness to an original source, but in the esoteric mysticism of a sect of Zoroastrian holy men.” Behl refers, in one passage, to “the incommensurability of religious beliefs” as a truth which Ādhar Sāsānī tantalizingly “comes face-to-face with” at certain moments in his book, yet seems incapable of grasping. Behl, “Pages from the Book of Religions,” 113–49; Ernst, “The Dabistan and Orientalist Views of Sufism,” 33–52.

²¹⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 97–113.

²¹⁹ Cited in Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 101. My understanding of this quotation and its place in the latter text has been shaped by the discussion in the following unpublished article: LeQuire, “From Political Theology to Political Christology,” 5–7.

²²⁰ Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 11.

²²¹ Iqbal, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, 10.

issue as well, both because of the lack of homogeneity within Hinduism and since Islam made its own political claims on Muslims. “Islam is not a Church,” Iqbal declared, but “a State conceived as a contractual organism long before Rousseau ever thought of such a thing.”²²² The only hope of preserving India would be to implement a federated structure of relatively homogenous states, sutured together by a *modus vivendi*.

In one passage, however, Iqbal allows himself to consider a counter-factual – could India ever have been one nation? The answer, surprisingly, is yes:

[Such unity] might have been a fact in India if the teaching of Kabir and the Divine Faith of Akbar had seized the imagination of the masses of this country. Experience, however, shows that the various caste units and religious units in India have shown no inclination to sink their respective individualities in a larger whole. Each group is intensely jealous of its collective existence.²²³

Given that Iqbal has already addressed the undesirability of imposing a single religious outlook on the subcontinent, it is likely that the sort of “teaching” and “faith” he has in mind here is a theology of religions: a meta-religious outlook²²⁴ that could have helped to mediate and sublate religious difference, rather than dissolve it completely.

Akbar’s popularity in scholarly, popular and political literature over the last century and a half is a testament to the continued political importance of his myth. Indeed, the speech of Iqbal’s quoted above has been reproduced recently by the historian Manan Ahmed, whose *Loss of Hindūstān* (2020), somewhat like Amartya Sen’s earlier *The Argumentative Indian* (2004), holds up the Mughals in mourning the withering away of the image of a “neutral” and tolerant South Asian polity.²²⁵

The continued political importance of Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar recalls an earlier claim of Ashis Nandy: that Indian secularists, in moments of crisis, failure, or *ernstfall*, look back to “theolog[ies] of tolerance” implicit or explicit in “Sufi and Bhakti poetry, medieval saints ..., and names from history like Ashoka, [and] Akbar” to level against the Orientalist, Hindu nationalist, or illiberal/antisecularist enemy.²²⁶ In this essay, I have attempted to clarify Akbar’s legend and the political meaning of his myth – somewhat as Schmitt did with the myth of the Leviathan in his *Leviathan* or with political theology itself in *Political Theology II*. “Until the Day of Judgement,” Schmitt wrote in *Political Theology II*,

the Augustinian teaching on the two kingdoms will have to face the twofold open question: Quis judicabit? Quis interpretabitur? [‘Who will decide? Who will interpret?’] Who answers in concreto, on behalf of the concrete, autonomously acting human being, the question of what is spiritual, what is worldly and what is the case with the *res mixtae*, which, in the interval between the first and the second arrival of the Lord, constitute, as a matter of fact, the entire earthly existence of this spiritual-worldly, spiritual-temporal, double-creature called a human being?²²⁷

²²² Ibid., 12.

²²³ Ibid., 8.

²²⁴ I came to this concept and formulation (“meta-religion”) intuitively, not realizing until the final stages of revision for this article that it had been prefigured by James Laine in a magisterial 2014 monograph (*Meta-Religion: Religion and Power in World History*). Laine defines meta-religion as “a truth so taken for granted that its proponents see it as consistent with what is only natural and reasonable,” and therefore one which stands above particular sectarian claims and “particular religions.” Moreover, meta-religion, like all religion, is for Laine political, and is particularly the basis for diverse, multi-religious (and frequently imperial) polities (12). The main difference between my argument in this article and Laine’s in *Meta-Religion* seems to be that Laine applies the term not only to the polities of Alexander the Great, Ashoka, Akbar, and Napoleon, but also to the secular Enlightenment tradition as it stands even today in Europe and the United States. Working within Carl Schmitt’s framework of political theology, I, conversely, have absorbed Schmitt’s concern about “neutralization” and “de-politicization” – i.e. about a process of secularization which occludes and therefore potentially weakens the theological and metaphysical backdrops that always already underlie political order. In contrasting Akbar to contemporary liberal thinkers, I have, in other words, tended to take Rawlsian and Habermasian secularism at its word about being at least aspirationally “post-metaphysical.”

²²⁵ Asif, *The Loss of Hindūstān*, 12–3.

²²⁶ Nandy, “Closing the Debate on Secularism: A Personal Statement,” 114–5.

²²⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 115.

Akbar, according to his hagiographers, was the exemplary case of a “spiritual-temporal, double-creature”: a Perfect Man [*insān-i kāmīl*] reflecting and mediating divinity to human beings, and a divine Word made master of the hermeneutico-ontological domain. This portraiture, as I have argued, appears eminently compatible with Schmitt’s (admittedly fragmentary) thoughts on how to flesh out a positive sense of the state’s “totality”: i.e., as he writes, in “the ‘temporal divinity’ that Hegel ascribes to the leading people in world history,” which exemplifies the idea of “finite infinity” and the mediation between “immanence and transcendence.”²²⁸

In the preceding sections, I have attempted not so much to provide a complete description of Akbari political theology – a perilous task – as to provide enough of a picture from my own readings of relevant primary sources to make a convincing argument for what this political theology did *not* consist in: i.e., either a precocious Rawlsian Liberal neutrality in the rough, or a totalism which would mandate the elimination of heterogeneity. Akbar’s polity, I propose, is a horse of a different color: a pre-modern form of integral “secularism” (*avant-la-lettre*) that stands equidistant both from Carl Schmitt and from his enemies, and which can, in the ongoing quarrel between liberal and illiberal parties in the era of another crisis of democracy and state, help to clarify our understandings of both.

By the way of conclusion, I will speculatively sketch two generalized contrasts between Akbar’s “millennial sovereignty” as I understand it, and Carl Schmitt’s “political theology” and broader intellectual project. These are meant, of course, in a constructive spirit: not as attempts to foreclose future forays into Mughal political theology, but as provocations and/or serious objections to my own arguments intended to stimulate response from students of Schmitt and South Asia more knowledgeable than I.

The first involves a difficulty with political theology as a descriptive or “sociological” methodology, and the way it deals with pluralism and difference. As theorized by Schmitt, political theology conventionally assumes a fixed backdrop of metaphysics or theology that determines the structure of concepts of political authority for a given period and region. However, in the milieu of an early modern Islamicate South Asia characterized by a diversity of cultural and political expressions, the historian does not find any correspondently fixed or monolithic backdrop. Rather, in the texts I read, worlds and images of the world – *ecumenes*, *epistemes* – collide, commingle, and merge.

As I again suggest, it is this pluralism and openness that allowed for Akbar’s innovations in the political sphere. Akbar’s “translation project” was arguably an attempt to encourage and direct the process, to broaden an awareness of the degree of diversity within South Asia. The (potentially disorienting) apprehension of difference was meant to inspire faith in Akbar as an empowered sacred being and religious seeker, with a character and intellect uniquely equipped to sensitively interpret, manage, and, to some extent, transcend this troubling difference. Yet however troubling, pluralism here served as an advertisement, not an obstacle – a situation difficult to apprehend in Schmitt’s terms.

The second issue I want to raise is related not only to the first but also to a generalized objection that could be posed against my freewheeling way of dealing with the master categories of “religion” and “state.” In an essay titled *The Age of Neutralizations and De-politicizations* (1929), Carl Schmitt writes the following:

All concepts of the spiritual sphere, including the concept of spirit, are pluralistic in themselves and can only be understood in terms of concrete political existence. Just as every nation has its own concept of nation and finds the constitutive characteristics of nationality within itself, so every culture and cultural epoch has its own concept of culture. All essential concepts are not normative but existential. If the center of intellectual life has shifted in the last four centuries, so have all concepts and words.²²⁹

At first glance, Schmitt here seems to say something rather shocking, even in terms internal to his thought. His thesis in the above appears to expose a rift between the “descriptive,” Weberian vision of political theology set out in the *Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber*, and his later, openly eschatological vision of a political theology-cum-“political Christology.” As György Geréby argues, Schmitt’s adoption of a “conceptual-sociological”

²²⁸ Schmitt, “The State as Mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes,” 100.

²²⁹ Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations (1929),” 85.

approach seems on its face to deny the hermeneutic of continuity, which is the *sine qua none* for tradition. A division of history into “monads of time period” makes comparison between epochs a perilous task.²³⁰ If “all concepts and words” undergo a sea change as the concrete order of society shifts, then translation across epochs would seem an impossible prospect. “Religion” in the twentieth century would mean something very different than “religion” in the nineteenth.

Such a perspective poses an even bigger problem for the comparison of political ideas. Any juxtaposition between Schmitt or Hobbes’ political treatises and Abū’l Faḍl’s writings on Akbar belies significant discontinuities between the concrete situation in a European nation-state and that in an early-modern South Asian empire. This problem is, of course, a hoary one. It can partially be addressed by anthropological approaches to sovereignty which blur the division or by theories such as Seth Richardson’s of the “presumptive state” – i.e., that, even so far back as six thousand years ago, premodern “states” aspired to powers of “integrative sovereign authority” which they did not actually and/or consistently possess.²³¹ It is not certain, however, if that – or any other response – could fully meet Carl Schmitt’s challenge.

Yet while it is undeniably hyperbolic and historicist in outlook, it is obvious even from the essay’s immediate context that Schmitt does not mean to deny the possibility of trans-historical terms and categories – the aforementioned passage, after all, employs them – or of understanding the “essential concepts” of other centuries – the essay goes on, after all, to describe and compare, in the twentieth-century Deutsch, the “central domains” that governed various epochs of European history. Read in a different spirit, I take the essay to inspire a helpful way forward.

As the philosopher Donald Davidson has argued, “we make maximum sense of the words and thoughts of others when we interpret in a way that optimizes agreement,” and thereby “englar[ge] the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion.”²³² Doing so does not explode the possibility of difference, but lays the groundwork for meaningful disagreement. In the same way, I would suggest that the historian should not, as Brent Nongbri and others have done, put up a wall of incommensurability between “our” religion or politics and theirs, insisting that we cannot translate terms even in the face of apparent family resemblance. This strategy has a way of sealing us within the homogenous, empty time of our own dismal epoch. Rather, just as Schmitt insists that every “culture... has its own concept of culture,” we should insist that each religion has its own concept of religion, and each polity or political project its own concept of authority and community. Many “religions” – i.e., those discourses and traditions that show up to us as “religions” in the present – took *some* stock of religious others, finding their own bases for comparison and accordingly for (outward-facing) identity. Some – as I believe is the case in the case of Islam – actively cultivated a sense of religion as a question. It is in this spirit – one of, as Wendy Doniger once put it, “compar[ing] ourselves as comparativists” with others who had also translated and compared – that the historian of political theology should engage with Akbar’s example, and the challenging questions it continues to pose.²³³

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²³⁰ Geréby, “The Theology of Carl Schmitt,” 25.

²³¹ Richardson, “Early Mesopotamia,” 4.

²³² Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” 19.

²³³ Doniger, “Post-Modern and -Colonial -Structural Comparisons,” 67.

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