The Mughal Experiment: The Indo-Islamic Legacy of Global IR

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Some of the factors that alienate one part of the world from another are the divergent conceptions of divinity, religion, and God. People living in different parts of the world have not only developed multiple approaches to divinity, religion, and God, but also witnessed holy crusades over these matters which, in turn, have brought about countless hardships and atrocities. The questions of whose religion is appropriate and whose God presides over the others have dominated a great deal of the conversation. While various Western and non-Western religious traditions have sought to comprehend God as the creator of the world, what tends to set much of the orthodox Western thought apart from several non-Western modes of thinking is the notion of 'God-world duality': as per the orthodox Western monotheistic view of God, the world (including human beings) is detached from God due to 'original sin', and, therefore, the world is a fallen construct bound to observe conflicts typified through the Augustinian mentality of 'good vs. evil' (Walker 1989). Alternatively, for most of the non-Western religious traditions, either the world is capable of being merged with God (Sommer 2009) or the world is 'Godless' (Olivelle 2019).

In the academic discipline of International Relations (IR), the orthodox Western thought (dependent upon God-world duality) has rationalized the pursuit of national interests in world affairs through a biblical invocation of the fallen condition of humankind, a kind of tarnished golden rule, that overlooks the evil done unto 'others' because it is the only alternative to their doing it unto 'us' (or 'self') (Falk 1987). Regrettably, this strategic attitude of 'good vs. evil' and 'self vs. others' – emanating from St. Augustine's considerations on the duties of Christian emperors of Rome to defend the empire (Hoover 2015) – has led people to lose sight of the harmonies that connect the humankind scattered across Westphalian divides. Against this backdrop, the Sufi tradition of 'non-duality' or 'God-world inseparability' emerges as a valuable intellectual resource that has the potential to enrich the ongoing discourses on 'Global IR' – that is, the growing body of literature that aims to incorporate a variety of hitherto unemployed non-Western knowledge-forms for the purpose of overcoming the limits of Western-centrism in theory and practice of IR. One of the instantiations of the Sufi approach to 'non-duality' or 'God-world inseparability' can be traced back to the Indo-Islamic model of Mughal Empire, especially the one propagated by Akbar's regime. This article explores the Mughal Sufi visions of human society, rulership and polity as a potential non-Western knowledge-form to supplement the Global IR research agenda.

The Origins of Human Society: A Naturalistic Approach

The naturalistic understanding of social origins and the vision of the ruler as God's vicar on earth are dominant aspects of medieval and early modern Islamic discourse. On the one hand, human survival is contingent upon mutual aid that can be realised only within a human association. On the other hand, the very differences in human skills and dispositions that are critical for the perpetuation of social life engender friction and threaten to erode the foundations of society; social harmony demands the existence of rules of conduct and of a ruler endowed with the skills qualities and resources to render justice.

Undeniably, the ancient Greek tradition had a formative influence on Islamic meditation on these issues. The nexus

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between man's natural propensity toward sociability and the emergence of society forms a prominent theme in Aristotle's *Politics* as well. The question concerning the existence of an Arabic translation of *Politics* has not been settled. It is, however, possible that parts of the work were circulated in Arabic or Persian translations, and that Aristotle's political ideas passed into the Islamic world through various Arabic, Syriac, and Persian sources (Syros 2008). Despite his advocacy of the idea about man's political nature, Aristotle does not paint a rosy picture of social life and is acutely aware of the destructive potential of internecine conflict and strife. He provided a repository of ideas about the origins of human society, the role of government, justice and the qualities of the good ruler, which Islamic thinkers aligned with the teachings of the Quran as well as with the political structures and the specific conditions that underlay the spread of Islam, and the emergence of various Islamic polities that sought to enunciate a variety of solutions to the effective ordering of social life and the ways in which a ruler fulfils his role as God's representative on earth.

In glossing on the Qur'ān (2: 247), Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (ca. 930–1023) articulates the notion of rulers being divinely sent (*mabʿūth*) pretty much like prophets. A century later, the Sufi scholar Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) embraces this naturalistic approach to the creation of human society while proclaiming the ruler to be God's shadow on earth in charge of maintaining order and peace and implementing the ordinances of the *sharīʿah*. For Al-Ghazālī, human activities arise in response to man's three basic necessities: food for nourishment and survival; clothing for protection against heat and cold; and shelter from heat and cold and against threats to the security of the family and its possessions. Unlike animals, which feed on raw plants, are immune to cold and heat and do not need buildings, human beings, driven by the aforementioned needs, had to invent five crafts from which all other arts and professions originated: farming, herding, hunting, weaving and masonry. These occupations required tools, which led to the emergence of specialised craftsmen, notably carpenters, smiths and tanners (Mikhail 1995).

In line with earlier Greek and Muslim political writers, Al-Ghazālī highlights the need for mutual cooperation among humans, who engage in various professions by making the point that a loaf of bread can only become round and ready to eat after a thousand labourers have worked on its production. If the opinions of all those working together to prepare food and procure for other needs were divergent, and if their temperaments were in conflict with one another like the temperaments of wild animals, each one would live in isolation, no one would benefit from the labour of the others, and they would be incapable of settling in one place and pursuing the same end. God has implanted in humans the need for comradeship and love. Hence, people congregated together for the sake of fellowship and exchange of knowledge, founded cities, built houses close to one another, marketplaces, inns and many other things (Othman 1960).

Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that in human nature there is not only love but also hatred, envy and competition. These feelings and passions generate social friction. Al-Ghazālī addresses how human society can resolve social tensions. God, he argues, has endowed some men with the ability to rule over others, and endowed them with the skills and resources that are necessary for the exercise of political authority. Subsequently, rulers appointed government officials, judges and chiefs of marketplaces; they built prisons; and they demanded from all members of society respect for justice. As such, Al-Ghazālī defines one of the sovereign's prime functions as upholding social order and suppressing dissension: one of the chief duties of rulership is to obligate people to assist one another so that they all benefit from one another through mutual collaboration under the supervision of the ruler and his aides in the same way that the organs of the human body cooperate and help one another. In his treatise Naṣīḥat al-mulūk (*Counsel for Kings*), Al-Ghazālī projects the imagery of the Sultan/ruler as God's shadow on earth (Bagley 1964). The ruler is constituted by God and receives divine effulgence and, as God's delegate over his creatures, he is entitled to the obedience and goodwill of his constituency.

The Divine Nature of Royal Rule: Akbar's Moves beyond Prophecy

In the multi-ethnic Mughal Empire, cultural diversity and ethnic rivalries raised some doubt on the 'sociable quality' of human nature. One of the earliest Indo-Islamic political authors to articulate this doubt was 'Alī Hamadānī (d. 1384), a distinguished Sufi scholar and author of the *Zakhīrat al-mulūk* (*The Treasuries of Kings*) (Rosenmüller 1825). Hamadānī, another Sufi scholar, emphasises that disparity in men's natural aptitudes leads to differences in their souls and natures. The inclinations, motives and purposes of humans are different, and these differences are

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reflected in their words, deeds and religious creeds. Vices such as tyranny, injustice, hatred, enmity and avarice are deeply ingrained in the human soul. But God has ordained that man can be kept on the right path by a righteous ruler who can assure that the precepts of the *sharī'ah* are upheld among all men, regardless of their class or status, and can prevent the strong from oppressing the weak (Hardy 1988).

The conception of the ruler as the deputy, vice-regent and shadow of God on earth occurs in the *Fatāwa-i-Jahāndārī* (Precepts of World Rulership) of Ziyā' al-Dīn Baranī (1284–1356), a confidant of the Sultan of Delhi Muḥammad ibn Tughlaq (ca. 1300–1351, r. 1325–1351) and a seminal historian of fourteenth-century India. Intriguingly, Baranī goes beyond previous Islamic theorists in asserting the supremacy of kingship over prophecy, since prophecy aims at the perfection of religiousness and as such it amounts to stewardship which, in turn, is associated with frailty and poverty, whereas kingship signifies lordship and embodies such virtues as power, magnificence and benevolence, which are more divine than those of prophecy. The paradigmatic king, then, is God's replica on earth and ought to embody the divine qualities of grace and wrath, and to reward the virtuous and correct wrongdoers (Sarkar 2005).

The most forceful statement in favour of the divine provenance of rulership was put forward by Abū'l-Fażl 'Allāmī (1551–1602), grand vizier of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605; r. 1556–1605), in his work *Ā [] Akbarī* (The Institutes of Akbar). The *Ā [] Akbarī* is an administrative manual, which also renders a composite portrait of Akbar's imperium and provides first-hand information about the inner workings of the Mughal court (Streusand 1989). It displays Abū'l-Fażl's masterful reworking of ideas garnered from a wide range of sources, notably the Greek philosophical heritage, al-Fārābī's political philosophy, and the Sufi tradition, which culminates into the grandiose vision of Akbar as the incarnation of the 'perfect man' (*insān al-kāmil*) and is testimony to Abū'l-Fażl's exposure to the '*Akhlāq* literature', a textual tradition which was one of the main sources of inspiration behind the administrative manual (*dastūru'l-'amal*) issued by Akbar in 1594 for Mughal officials (Haidar 1998).

The *Akhlāq* ideas on the origins of human society had an important influence on Tursun Beğ's *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, one of the earliest specimens of Ottoman political literature (İnalcik and Murphey 1978). Tursun Beğ offers a narrative of social genesis modelled on Ṭūsī's, but he does not identify the ruler as physician. Instead, he highlights the importance of the *sharī'ah* as the cornerstone of a healthy and durable society and of sound and stable government. Following in Ṭūsī's footsteps, Tursun Beğ distinguishes the proper spheres of divine law and temporal (worldly) government to establish the indispensability of a ruler for the maintenance of all forms of human society, but he goes beyond previous *Akhlāq* writers and delineates a theory of political obligation at the core of which lies the idea about man's rational ability to recognise and acknowledge the benefits that derive from political authority.

Even though Abū'l-Fażl (1927) does not engage in a systematic inquiry into the genesis of social life, he does observe that in human societies, contention and strife would never abate, nor would selfish ambition disappear without the existence of a ruler. Humankind, being under the burden of turmoil and lust and due to the lack of rules, would perish; the world, as a great market and venue for the mutual provision and exchange of goods, would descend into chaos; and the whole earth would become deserted. Certain persons who are enlightened by royal justice are keen to choose the path of obedience, while others, driven by the fear of punishment, abstain from violence and tread in the path of rectitude. Abū'l-Fażl compares the ruler's function, to safeguard order in his realm, suppress seditious individuals and repel outside threats, to that of a gardener who roots out thorns and weeds, trims the leaves and branches, and waters the young trees. In depicting the ruler as the defender of justice, Abū'l-Fażl draws upon Ṭūsī, evokes Galen's humoral theory, and applies the analogy of the body politic to the art of rulership: the ideal sovereign should guarantee the prosperity and health of society and apply remedies for the various diseases that may occur in the body politic. Just as the equilibrium of the natural body requires the equipoise of its component parts, in like manner the balance of the social organism is contingent upon the equitable division of ranks and allocation of duties: by means of the warmth of the ray of unanimity and concord, a multitude of people is moulded and metamorphosed into a single body.

The Strategies for a Stable Polity: Lessons from the Akhlāq Literature

In the Indo-Islamic political tradition, the influence of ideas about man's natural impulse for communal life seems to

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have evaporated. Indo-Islamic political discourse on social origins is characterised by an abiding concern for eliminating the potential of discord and sedition and the means of achieving social concord and political unity. These sentiments were given powerful expression in Abū'l-Fażl's *Institutes of Akbar*. Although Abū'l-Fażl does not explicate the process whereby first communities were formed, he points to the endemic problems of social organisation and asserts the role of the ruler in providing security and justice. As with *Akhlāq* authors, Abū'l-Fażl envisions the ideal sovereign in the role of the healer of the body politic. He attributes a divine origin to rulership and eulogises Akbar as the reformer of the Mughal polity and the guarantor of religious unity.

Following *Akhlāq* writers Abū'l-Fażl proposes a scheme of four occupational groups that correspond to the four elements: warriors, who represent the element of fire and suppress friction; artisans and merchants, who are likened to air; the learned – such as philosophers, physicians, experts on arithmetic, geometricians and astronomers – who correspond to the element of water; and farmers and workers, who are the equivalent of earth. A special responsibility of the ruler is to create and coordinate the parts of the political community and treat the ailments afflicting the body politic. Abū'l-Fażl sees religious differences as the greatest threat to unity and tranquillity: one person thinks, for example, that by controlling his passions he worships God, whereas another cultivates self-discipline. But when the time of reflection comes, people must rid themselves of prejudices and bigotry, and partake of the glory of harmony. Akbar's benign and harmonious rule, Abū'l-Fażl maintains, encourages the members of society to set aside their religious differences. He proclaims Akbar to be the source of light that emanated from Adam through a number of biblical figures and great rulers of the past, including Turco-Mongol rulers, Timur, and Akbar's predecessors, Bābur (1483–1530; r. 1526–1530) and Humāyūn [1508–1556; r. 1530–1540 and 1555–1556) (Mukhia 2009). One of the core aspects of Akbar's political programme was the religious legitimation of political power through the creation of a new system of religious beliefs, the *dīn-i ilāhī* (the divine religion/faith) in 1582. The *dīn-i ilāhī* involved the fusion of elements from diverse religions, particularly Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Jainism, and was largely the crystallisation of theological debates among the representatives of various religions at the Ibādat Khāna (House of Worship) that had been established by Akbar in 1575. Its underlying ethos involved shedding off hatred in moments of reflection, and choosing love and harmony over hate and discord.

Nonetheless, Akbar's death and the ascent to the throne of his son Jahāngīr (1569–1627, r. 1605–1627) signalled a return to *sharī'ah* practices (Franke 2005). These developments are mirrored in Muḥammad Bāqir Najm-i Sānī's (d. 1637) *Mau'iẓah-i Jahāngīrī* (*Admonition on Government/Admonition for Jahāngīr*, 1612/13). Najm-i Sānī (1989) served as governor of various provinces of the Mughal Empire during the reigns of Jahāngīr and Shah Jahān. He makes a strong case for the *sharī'ah* as the essential framework for a salutary rule. Humans differ with respect to their innate qualities and dispositions, and no one is able to advance to a higher station without divine guidance. Laws ensure order in the affairs of the world, the physical sustenance and well-being of humankind, and a stable social organisation. Najm-i Sānī envisions the righteous and benevolent ruler as the refuge of the oppressed and the protector of vulnerable members of society. The cardinal royal virtues include justice, rectitude and the ability to resist irascibility and temptations. A central duty of the ruler is to ensure that the members of society perform their tasks without indulging in illicit activities. He must also curb their whims and desires and assure that all social groups live in security and prosperity. The ruler must engage in military operations in conformity with the *sharī'ah*. Last but not least, a sovereign vested with supreme authority should guarantee internal order and peace and enhance the foundations of 'true religion'. Najm-i Sānī's exposition of the precepts on princely conduct culminates in a eulogy of Jahāngīr as the epitome of the virtues of the great Iranian kings of the past, such as the grandeur of Farīdūn and the dignity of Jamshīd, and the paragon of good governance: his ever-expanding rule ended tyranny and oppression and inaugurated a long period of justice (*'adl*), equity (*ensāf*), tranquillity and prosperity for all his subjects, which prompted famous rulers to voluntarily submit to his rule.

Though there are multiple possible philosophical interpretations and practical implementations of *sharī'ah* which may or may not lead to good governance in contemporary political scenarios (Idriz and Kaminski 2019, Ridwan and Mayapada 2022), it is Akbar's Indo-Islamic model of *dīn-i ilāhī* – with its Sufi approach to 'non-duality' or 'God-world inseparability' – that can be reconceptualized and recontextualized to imagine a syncretic model of good governance, a model of good governance which could interlink the knowledge-forms flowing from diverse religious/cultural/civilizational sources and origins (Jonboboev 2014). This kind of an intellectual initiative is particularly relevant in the present era of global politics that remains marked with the "turn to the religion" (Kubalkova

2013) or "return of religion" (Fahy and Haynes 2018). Needless to say, this kind of intellectual initiative can go a long way in improving the Global IR literature that seeks to reconcile the seemingly divergent Western and non-Western scientific as well as metaphysical approaches.

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