Translating the ‘Other’: Early-Modern Muslim Understandings of Hinduism

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Abstract

This essay examines the theme of inter-religious translation in the context of early modern India. More specifically, it considers the prominent 18th century Sufi master and scholar Mirzâ Mazhar Jân-i Jânân’s (d.1781) translation of Hindu thought and practice as reflected in his Persian letters on this subject. Through a close reading of the content and context of his translation project, I show that while according the Hindu ‘other’ remarkable doctrinal hospitality, Jân-i Jânân’s view of translation was firmly tethered to an imperial Muslim political theology committed to upholding the exceptionality of Muslim normative authority. Interrogating his negotiation of hospitality and exceptionality and the notions of time that undergirded that negotiation occupies much of this essay. I also explore ways in which Jân-i Jânân’s translation of Hinduism might engage ongoing scholarly conversations regarding the rupture of colonial modernity in the discursive career of religion in South Asia. In the Euro-American study of religion, many scholars have shown the intimacy of modern secular power and the reconfiguration of religion as a universally translatable category. But what conceptual and historiographical gains might one derive by shifting the camera of analysis from the colonial reification of religion to the inter-religious translation efforts of a late 18th century thinker like Jân-i Jânân who wrote at the cusp of colonial modernity? This question hovers over the problem-space of this essay.

Introduction

What are the politics of translation involved in translating non-Christian traditions as ‘religion’? Is religion a universally translatable category? Can religion be translated as a distinct category of life? Such questions have dominated Euro-American reflections on religion in the last few decades. Following Talal Asad’s influential study Genealogies of Religion published in 1993, several scholars of religion have variously argued that the translatability of non-Christian traditions as religion is intimately connected to the events and conditions of colonial modernity. According to this view, through a complex yet powerful regime of colonial knowledge production and translation, previously flexible and loosely connected discursive traditions and practices came to be translated as modern ‘religions’, essentially reducible to certain texts and doctrinal truth claims.

1Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore, 1993).
Thus, today, we imagine world religions as competing ‘clubs’ with clearly defined texts, beliefs and practices, each possessing its own distinct history. Moreover, so the argument goes, this colonial discourse of ‘world religions’ was far from politically neutral. Rather, it was fundamental to authorising the political project of colonialism and the ideological underpinnings of the secular. Put more simply, it is precisely by translating the non-West in its image that the West authorised its own political and normative hegemony. Therefore, the colonial translation of religion as a universal category is central to the modern secular premise of constantly regulating and defining religion as a distinct category of life.2

While one may quarrel with specific ways in which this argument has sometimes been constructed, it is difficult to ignore or deny the power of the colonial discursive economy in the construction of religion as a modern category. But what if one were to shift the camera of analysis from modern colonial translations of native religious discourses and thought to native projects of inter-religious translation? And, what are some of the practices and modes of translating religion found during the pre-colonial period? In what ways were pre-colonial understandings of religion and religious difference different from or similar to colonial approaches to the question of religion? These are among the larger conceptual questions that animate this article. More specifically, this article centers on the major eighteenth-century Indian Muslim scholar Mirzâ Mazhar Jân-i Jânān’s (1699–1781) translation of Hinduism3 for his Muslim audience. Through a close reading of the hermeneutical strategies and conceptual idioms which Jân-i Jânān used to translate Hindu thought and practice, I wish to shed light on pre-colonial early-modern Muslim understandings of Hinduism as a discursive and lived tradition. The study of Hindu–Muslim interactions, in colonial or in pre-colonial India, occupies a space fraught with the claims and desires of nationalist historiographies. Religion scholar James Laine has aptly captured its outlines:

In examining Hinduism and Islam in India, scholars have tended to fall into two competing camps. On the one hand there are the two-nation theorists for whom Islam represents an alien religion in South Asia, brought by invading Turkish armies that always remained incompatible with both Hindus and Hinduism. For this group of scholars, the formation in 1947 of two separate nations India and Pakistan was inevitable.4 On the other end of the spectrum are the one-nation theorists who have typically read cross-religious encounters in India from the perspective of assimilation rather than that of divergence. For this group of scholars,5 the period of Muslim rule from 1200 to 1800 saw a series of cultural encounters in the arts, politics, popular religion and mystical experimentation. Taken together, these encounters led to an India in which Muslims and Hindus shared a common culture and created a new Indo-Muslim civilization ruptured only by European colonial intrusions. As a corollary to this conception, this class of scholars6 has

2For perhaps the most convincing and thorough articulation of this argument, see Arvind Mandair, Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation (New York, 2009).
3I use the term ‘Hinduism’ here, as I do throughout this article when describing Jân-i Jânān’s views, rather reluctantly, and primarily for heuristic purposes. As I discuss later, the positing in the eighteenth century of a clearly demarcated world religion called ‘Hinduism’ involves a fair number of problems and ambiguities.
4For instance, Aziz Ahmad, I. H. Qureshi, I. M. Ikram and to a certain extent Fazlur Rahman are notable members of this camp. This list is, of course, by no means exhaustive.
5Imtiaz Ahmad, Sarvelli Gopal and Mushirul Hassan are all good examples.
typically placed the blame for the emergence and propagation of communalism and religious conflict in contemporary India on colonial rule from 1857–1947.\(^7\)

Lately, various scholars have challenged this binary attitude towards the study of South Asian religions by adopting a historiographic perspective that presumes neither enmity nor harmony but is based on a more nuanced reading of a diversity of encounters.\(^8\) This last approach represents a welcome methodological shift in the field, and one that needs to be further applied to multiple areas of inquiry on Hindu–Muslim relations in both pre-modern and contemporary India. In this context, a particularly important zone of scholarship that might prove fertile in enhancing our understanding of cross-religious encounters in South Asia is that of medieval and early-modern Muslim understandings of Hinduism. In this article, I attempt to make some progress in this direction by exploring the thought of Mirzā Mažhar Jān-i Jānān, a leading Muslim Sufi reformer in eighteenth-century India.\(^9\) More specifically, I reconsider his ideas on Hinduism to explore ways in which he translated a tradition of which he was not a part for the Indian Muslim community. While other scholars, most notably Yohanan Friedmann,\(^10\) Warren Fusfeld\(^11\) and Thomas Dahnhardt,\(^12\) have previously written on this aspect of Jān-i Jānān’s thought, I build on their work by raising and addressing a different set of questions. My primary concern is to highlight and interrogate the problematic of translation in early-modern Muslim studies of Hinduism through a focus on conceptualising the problem of inter-religious translation in the academic study of religion.

The central questions I take up are as follows: employing which Islamic categories and idioms did Jān-i Jānān translate Hindu ideas and concepts? What taxonomies of knowledge did he mobilise in translating one mode of religious categories and discourses into another? What are some of the key hermeneutical choices and strategies through which he tried to overcome potential doctrinal and theological challenges in translating Hinduism for a Muslim audience? What notion of temporality informed the way Jān-i Jānān imagined the relationship between Islam and Hinduism? And, finally, what are some of the major overlaps and differences between Jān-i Jānān’s attempted representations of Hinduism and nineteenth-century British colonial projects of translating religion?

I argue that even though Jān-i Jānān’s translation of Hinduism was remarkably sympathetic and charitable, he nonetheless represented Hindu thought and practice in a noticeably reified and unitary fashion. I will show that Jān-i Jānān’s reading of Hinduism can best be described as ‘juridico-theological’ in character and that posited a direct equivalence between what he called Islamic and Hindu law and theology. His ‘theologisation’ of Hinduism was pivotal to his attempt at framing Hinduism as a normatively coherent monotheistic tradition. I also

\(^7\)James Laine, unpublished paper on file with author. The examples of scholars cited here are my own.
\(^8\)For instance, see Bruce Lawrence and David Gilmartin, *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, 2000) and James Laine., *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (Oxford, 2003).
\(^9\)Jān-i Jānān was Mirzā Mažhar’s poetic epithet. But since he is most well known as Jān-i Jānān, I use this name throughout this article.
\(^12\)Thomas Dahnhardt, *Change and Continuity in Indian Sufism* (New Delhi, 2002).
argue that even as Jān-i Jānān adopted an ecumenically hospitable stance towards Hinduism, he nonetheless advanced a triumphalist Muslim narrative by maintaining Islam’s superiority over Hinduism. Critical to his understanding of the relationship between Islam and Hinduism was the question of time: while upholding the normative legitimacy of Hindu knowledge traditions prior to Islam, Jān-i Jānān maintained that the arrival of Islam abrogated all previous religions and thus rendering Hindus as unbelievers.

The arc of this article moves through four distinct segments. First I discuss Jān-i Jānān’s intellectual biography and the political context in which he wrote. Then I present a select genealogy of Indian Muslim engagements with Hinduism in medieval and early modern India. Next I conduct a close analysis of Jān-i Jānān’s views on Hinduism and highlight key features of his project of inter-religious translation. In the penultimate section I explore possible overlaps and departures between Jān-i Jānān’s and British colonial translations of Hinduism. Finally, in the conclusion, I briefly reflect on the question of how we might theorise and categorise the labour of translation involved in Jān-i Jānān’s engagement with Hinduism.

**Mīrzā Mażhar Jān-i Jānān: a Sufi reformer in a moment of crisis**

Born in 1699, Mīrzā Mażhar Jān-i Jānān was a major Sufi master who served as the leader of the Naqshbandī Sufi order in India. He was the most prominent figure on the spiritual chain of the Naqshbandī order after the pre-eminent late-sixteenth/early-seventeenth-century Sufi Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624). He was also a contemporary of the towering eighteenth-century scholar – also based in Delhi – Shāh Wālī Ullah (d. 1762). In addition to being a Sufi master, Jān-i Jānān was also a renowned Persian and Urdu poet. His scholarly corpus includes extensive writings (preserved in treatises and letters) on various aspects of Sufi practice, psychology and metaphysics, and collections of poetry as well as an important commentary on the Qur’ān.

Boasting a lineage of Afghan nobility, Jān-i Jānān’s father Mīrzā Jān served as both revenue collector (mansabdār) and judge (qāzī) under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Upon resigning from these posts, Mīrzā Jān was traveling back to Agra from the Deccan when Mīrzā Mażhar was born in Kalabagh, in the district of Malwa. Jān-i Jānān received his initial education under the tutelage of his father while living in Agra. Later, he was educated in Sufi thought and practice and also received extensive training in other religious disciplines, such as the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, from the most prominent scholars of his time. Most notably, they included Nūr Muḥammad Badāyūnī (d. 1722) who initiated Jān-i Jānān into the Naqshbandī order, Shāh Ḩafīz Sa’d Allah (d. 1739) and Muḥammad Aḥmad Sunāmī Gulshan (d. 1747). After completing his basic and higher education, at the age of thirty Jān-i Jānān shifted to Delhi where he established his own centre of learning, aptly named Khānqah-yi Mażhariyya. He stayed in Delhi until the end of his life in 1781.13

While headquartered in Delhi, Jān-i Jānān maintained an extensive network of disciples throughout India. Curiously, a steady stream of non-Muslims also visited his Sufi lodge and benefited from his spiritual services, though it is difficult to ascertain their proximity to him.

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His chief disciple was the prominent late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth-century Sufi, jurist, and Qurʾan commentator from the North Indian town of Panipat, Qāzī Sanāʾūllah Pānipatī (d.1839) with whom Jān-i Jānān maintained regular correspondence throughout his life. Contrary to modern Protestant stereotypes that cast ‘mystics’ as entirely detached from the larger society of which they are a part,14 Jān-i Jānān was closely attuned to the political and social contexts and events in eighteenth-century India. Moreover, from his correspondence with his various disciples all over India, Jān-i Jānān also comes across as a very shrewd and adept administrator who maintained a firm grip over the affairs of the Naqshbandī order and the activities of his disciples and vicegerents. Moreover, these letters and correspondences also reveal him as someone acutely sensitive to the task of cultivating a positive image of the order in the eyes of the public. Notice, for instance, an excerpt from the following letter in which he berated Pānipatī for being rude and unkind to some followers of the order in Panipat:

My brother it is quite startling that whoever comes to see me from Panipat tends to be fuming with complaints about you. I have no idea what you do to them. If your forthrightness and honesty is what causes other people to go through pain, then avoid such candor. Treat people with kindness and respect because your current behavior brings a bad name to the order (tariqa) and to its forbearers. Despite attaining all bodily and inner perfections, to alienate the public and to defame oneself in the process is not wise.15

As this sentiment shows, in Jān-i Jānān’s view, the pastoral responsibilities of a Sufi master were not limited to developing the spiritual and affective capacities of the disciple. Just as critical was the imperative of harnessing the public brand of the order. Jān-i Jānān lived through a time of tremendous political tumult and fragmentation. As many as 12 Mughal emperors ruled over India during the course of his life from 1699 to 1781. In the decades following the death of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal Empire gradually yet dramatically disintegrated, as several rival claimants to political sovereignty emerged and gained strength. In addition to the growing presence of the British, the Sikhs and Marathas also emerged as major threats to the political standing of the Mughals.

But perhaps the most traumatic memories of this period for the Muslims of North India were not associated with any domestic non-Muslim entity but rather with the invasion of India by the Afghan ruler-cum-warrior Nādir Shāh in 1739. Nādir Shāh’s invasion caused catastrophic human, ecological and material disaster in North India. The horror of this event was indelibly etched on to the cultural memory of the South Asian Muslim intellectual elite. A particularly vivid description of the devastation brought about by Nadir Shah’s invasion is found in the work of the renowned modern Muslim historian of South Asia K. A. Nizami, who wrote “They [Nadir Shah’s army] would kill every living organism, human or animal. They did not even spare dogs and cats, producing a palimpsest of dead bodies. They also put shops and houses in Delhi on fire. The neighborhood of Chandni Chowk had turned into a pool of blood”.16

Such was the horror of Nadir Shah’s invasion that when Jān-i Jānān’s eminent contemporary Shāh Wali Allah invited the Afghan ruler Aḥmad Shāh Abdāli to India to

14 For an excellent explication of this problem, see Nile Green, Sufism: A Global History (West Sussex, 2002).
16 K. A. Nizami, Shāh Wali Allah ke Siyāṣī Maktūbāt (Delhi, 1969), p. 25.
fight off the Marathas, he implored the latter to not repeat Nadir Shah’s example. Wali Allah wrote in a letter to Abdali: “I take refuge in God from the possibility of a repetition of what happened during Nadir Shah’s invasion; he left Indian Muslims in tatters”. 17

The political vacuum and tumult in India during the eighteenth century intensified intra-Muslim contestations over political authority and capital. Among the most important of these pitted Sunni Afghan Rohillas against Shi‘i Iranians, as they both strived to expand their political clout over the royal court in Delhi. Muslim religious scholars were not unaffected by this political tussle; in fact, they were often directly entangled in this conflict, as was the case with Jān-i Jānān. From Jān-i Jānān’s biographical accounts, it appears that he maintained close relations with Rohilla political leaders such as the influential Najīb al-Dawla (d. 1770), who enjoyed a large following in North India. 18

A product of the Mughal bureaucracy, Najīb al-Dawla was among the most influential political personalities in Delhi during the 1760s. A number of Jān-i Jānān’s disciples were closely associated with him; he had also employed many of them. In turn, Rohilla Afghans constituted a major part of Jān-i Jānān’s pool of disciples who would frequent his Sufi lodge in Delhi from all over North India. Jān-i Jānān’s intimacy with Rohilla Afghans made him vulnerable to the animosity of their chief rivals, Shi‘i Iranian migrants to India. During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shāh ‘Alam the second, several Iranian migrant aristocrats assumed a position of tremendous political dominance in the Mughal court at Delhi.

This was especially true in the aftermath of Najīb al-Dawla’s death in 1770 that saw a steady fall in the political fortunes of the Rohilla Afghans. Najīb al-Dawla’s son, Zābiţa Khān, refused to pay homage to the Mughal Emperor Shāh ‘Alam and adopted a rebellious attitude towards the latter. In response, Shāh ‘Alam, in collaboration with the Marathas, launched a military offensive against Zābiţa Khān and his followers, forcing him into early retirement. The political ascendancy of Iranian Shi‘a in Delhi generated much anxiety for Sunni religious leaders in that city, including Jān-i Jānān. They were particularly disturbed by the activities of the Shi‘i political leader Mirzā Najaf Khān (d.1782), a vizier of Shāh ‘Alam to whom he had deputed the governance of Delhi.

Born in Isfahan, Iran, Najaf Khān came from a family of Safavid aristocrats who had migrated to India during the eighteenth century. After successful stints as government servant and military officer in Bengal and Bundel Khand in North India, he established himself as among Shah ‘Alam’s most powerful viziers. Najaf Khān’s rule over Delhi caused much consternation for Sunni scholars of the city. For instance, in one of his letters to a disciple, Jān-i Jānān expressed his disdain towards Najaf Khān in stark terms: “From the day Najaf Khān has come to this city, every person, from a mendicant to the king, is in a bad condition”. 19 In biographies of Jān-i Jānān, Najaf Khān is presented as viscerally hostile to Sunnis. He is also held responsible for Jān-i Jānān’s assassination in 1781. The story goes like this.

In the last few days of 1780, during the month of Muḥarram, a Shi‘i procession commemorating Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Husayn’s martyrdom passed by Jān-i Jānān’s lodge in Delhi. On seeing the procession, Jān-i Jānān aired some mocking remarks and called

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17 Ibid., Volume 2, p. 91.
18 Dihlavī and Mujaddidī, Maqāmāt, pp. 78–85.
19 Ibid., p.86.
the ritual a needless heretical innovation. Someone attached to the procession overheard these remarks and promptly informed Najaf Khan. A few days later, Jan-i Janan heard a knock on the door of his house. When he opened the door, three men forced their way in. One of them took out a pistol and shot him in the chest. The 82-year-old battled his injuries for three days before succumbing to them on the 2nd of January 1781 (7th Muharram 1195 AH). While gravely injured, he was offered treatment by an English physician in Delhi. However, Jan-i Janan emphatically refused and declared that he would rather die than be treated by an “infidel”.20

Notwithstanding his expression of antipathy for the internal as well as the external other, as demonstrated by the events surrounding his death, the world Jan-i Janan inhabited was hardly divided along predictably religious lines. It is not that eighteenth-century India was a laboratory of inter-faith harmony and peace later supplanted by the intensified communalism of the nineteenth century. Rather, the shifting alliances and power dynamics governing the encounters of such groups as Mughals, Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Iranian Shi’a and Rohillas during the eighteenth century that spanned Jan-i Janan’s life cannot be captured through the prism of religious difference alone.

In fact, what we find here is a situation in which political and indeed military expedience often trumped religious identity. So for instance, Shah ‘Alam the second, the emperor of a supposedly ‘Muslim’ empire, found no qualms in aligning with the Marathas – a supposedly ‘Hindu’ community – in launching a war against the Rohillas, another Muslim group. While the distinction of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ certainly existed, the manner in which that distinction was imagined did not map onto a modern logic of world religions as neatly defined, mutually exclusive and inescapably competitive ‘clubs’. But the question that emerges here is this: what were some of the ways in which the religious ‘other’ was imagined and translated at the cusp of colonialism in India? What operations of translation do we find in such projects of inter-epistemic exploration? And perhaps most importantly, what can the examination of inter-religious projects of translation in the late eighteenth century teach us about early-modern understandings of religion and religious difference? It is on these questions that the remainder of this article focuses, primarily through a close reading of Mirza Mazhar’s translation of Hindu thought and practice. Before attending to that task however, as a way to further contextualise his translations, there follows a brief genealogy of certain important moments of Muslim engagements with Hinduism that preceded Jan-i Janan, in medieval and early-modern India.

Indian Muslim translations of Hinduism: a select genealogy

In writing about Hinduism, Jan-i Janan was participating in a long-running tradition of South-Asian Muslim reflections on Hinduism. The pioneer of this trend was the eleventh-century thinker al-Biruni (d.1030) whose monumental work *The Book Confirming What Pertains to India, Whether Rational or Despicable* still represents one of the most informative and detailed accounts of medieval India. Al-Biruni wrestled with a staggering array of topics ranging from doctrine, law, devotional practice, astrology, astronomy, metrical literature to

oceanography. In addition to its remarkable scope and breadth, al-Bīrūnī’s work is also noteworthy on account of its treatment of Indian religion as a unitary and monolithic entity. As Carl Ernst has argued, “al-Bīrūnī’s perception of the ‘otherness’ of Indian thought was not just hermeneutical clarity with regard to a pre-existing division; it was effectively the invention of the concept of a unitary Hindu religion and philosophy”. 21 Indeed, al-Bīrūnī’s conception of a unified Indian religion is obvious from the very first paragraph of his text.

As he stated, rather trenchantly:

Before entering on our exposition, we must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate the essential (emphasis mine) nature of any Indian subject. For the reader must always bear in mind that the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect, many a subject appearing intricate and obscure when would be perfectly clear if there were more connections between us...They totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa. 22

Here, it is useful to point out that al-Bīrūnī’s essentialist treatment of the Hindu ‘other’ seems remarkably similar to the colonial mentality towards Indian religions that came to the forefront some eight centuries later. I return to this point later.

Al-Bīrūnī’s study of the structure of Hindu thought was divided into six topical rubrics:

1. God (ch.2)
2. the interaction of intelligible with sensible objects (ch.3)
3. the connection of soul with matter (ch.4)
4. transmigration (ch.5)
5. cosmology (ch.6)
6. salvation (ch.7).

He combined an appetite for encyclopedic presentation with a refreshingly blunt appraisal of his intent and objectives in composing this work. Refusing to engage in polemical refutations, he described his labour as one of faithfully reproducing the ‘facts’ of Indian thought and religion as found in the original Sanskrit sources. He saw himself primarily as a serious historian commissioned (by Maḥmūd of Ghaznū) to write an encyclopedic account of a foreign region and people, a task he found immensely difficult yet hugely rewarding. And one for which he regarded himself uniquely suitable and situated. As he declared, oozing with the confidence of a scholar who has just landed the fellowship of a lifetime, showing little penchant for modesty, “what scholar . . . has the same favorable opportunities of studying this subject as I have”? 23

For all his disclaimers about neither endorsing nor refuting his object of study, al-Bīrūnī was more than forthcoming in passing his evaluation on the soundness of Hindu thought. In their doctrinal orientation, he saw the Hindus as closest to the Greeks. Indeed, as Ainsle Embree had pointed out some years ago, among the most remarkable moments in al-Bīrūnī’s text comes when he called Hinduism “not the truth” (which for him meant

23 Ibid., p. 24.
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not monotheistic) but “only a deviation from the truth”. In al-Bīrūnī’s own words: “all heathenism, whether Greek or Indian, is in its pith and marrow one and the same belief, because it is only a deviation from the truth”. Other than drawing parallels between Hindu and Greek thought, another feature that runs through al-Bīrūnī’s is his bifurcation between the elite Hindu scholarly class and the commoners. While showing considerable respect and at times even admiration for the former, he had much less patience for the latter, often ridiculing their practices outright.

He summed up his views in this regard rather explicitly: “The belief of educated and uneducated people differs in every community; for the former strive to conceive abstract ideas and to define general principles, whilst the latter do not pass beyond the apprehension of the senses, and are content with derived rules”. For al-Bīrūnī, in the Indian context, nowhere was this popular attachment to the senses more visible and pronounced than in the practice of idol worship. Writing disparagingly of idol veneration, he made the problematic but nonetheless keen observation that practices like revering idols or images achieve popularity among the masses because of the effect of material objects on the senses. Curiously, he made this point by drawing on an example not from Hinduism but from the relationship that Muslims have with illustrations of the Prophet: “Their joy in looking at the thing [an illustration of the Prophet] would bring them to kiss the picture, to rub their cheeks against it, and to roll themselves in the dust before it”. Indeed, his disdain for the significance of the sensoria and materiality in the performance of religion cut across traditions. Anticipating modern binaries of thought and practice, mind and body, abstract and concrete knowledge, al-Bīrūnī revealingly wrote: “it is well known that the popular mind leans towards the sensible world, and has an aversion to the world of abstract thought which is only understood by highly educate people, of whom in every time and every place there are only few”.

A final comment on al-Bīrūnī before moving to other matters: the traces of Sufism (tasawwuf) on his intellectual framework are visible yet debatable. On the one hand one finds several references to the vocabulary of Sufism in his text, most notably in his comparison between the idea of salvation among the yogis and the Sufi description of the Gnostic (al-‘ārif) and that of the stage of gnosis (maqām al-ma‘rifah). However, as Bruce Lawrence has argued, while al-Bīrūnī quotes Sufi expressions and concepts extensively, their principle value for him is largely functional: “to provide points of reference within a tradition already known to his Muslim readers, making possible the comparison of tangentially Muslim statements with references from Jewish, Persian and Christian but mostly Greek sources, for the ultimate purpose of paralleling and hopefully, elucidating Indian religious beliefs”. Lawrence further argued, “The large number of references to tasawwuf rather than to other Muslim traditions – sectarian or orthodox – cannot be attributed to al-Bīrūnī’s acceptance of Sufi views; rather it is the fundamental parallelism which he perceives between Sufis, Greeks and Hindus,

21 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 27.
26 Ibid., p. 111.
27 Ibid.
especially on the pivotal topics of transmigration and unification, that prompts al-Bīrūnī to make frequent mention of the mystical branch within Islam”.  

Dārā Shikoh (d. 1659), the younger brother of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb ‘Ālamgīr (d.1707), is another Muslim thinker who undertook a noteworthy translation of Hindu ideas and thought. In this regard, his central text is entitled Majma’ al-Bahrayn [The meeting place of the two oceans], a comparative study in Persian of Islamic and Hindu esotericism. In several ways, this text is analogous to a medieval encyclopedia entry on the vocabularies of Hindu and Islamic mysticism. Written in a highly descriptive and enumerative fashion, Majma’ al-Bahrayn consists of 22 different sections, each dealing with a separate topic relating to Sufi thought and metaphysics. Among others, these include the spirit, the soul, the afterlife, prophecy and sainthood, the realms of empirical existence and so forth. The thrust of Darā Shikoh’s intellectual endeavour lies in an attempt to establish a system of equivalence between Sufi metaphysics and the belief-systems of the Indian jogis (sages). For instance, in his discussion on the concept of salvation, Darā Shikoh quite boldly proclaimed that the Hindu idea of mukti is identical to the Sufi notion of nijat (salvation) as both involve the attainment of annihilation (fanā) in the essence of the divine truth (haqq). As he wrote, “the meaning of mukti is that all beings will become annihilated into the essence of the divine truth”.  

Also, with regard to the subject of the afterlife, Dārā Shikoh asserted that:

it is the faith (‘tiqād) of the Indian sages that when individuals will have spent ages in hell-fire, the ultimate afterlife (qiyyāmat-i kubrā) which the Indians call mahā-parā will emerge. This belief is substantiated in the Qur’an in the proclamation that whatever exists on the surface of the earth will eventually become annihilated and only the divine essence of God will remain to subsist.  

As these examples indicate, Dārā Shikoh’s central strategy in this text revolved around familiarising Hindu taxonomies of religion within the framework of a predominantly Sufi lexicon. In this context, Dārā Shikoh seemed most interested in serving the intellectual interests of the elite within both the Hindu and Muslim communities who were familiar with esoteric and mystical categories of knowledge. Such intellectual elitism is a feature common to both Dārā Shikoh’s and al-Bīrūnī’s representation of Hindu thought and practice. In fact, it is a feature that runs through the works of virtually all major Indian Muslim thinkers who engaged in the translation of Hindu ideas and thought, including Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān. In popular discourses and nationalist South-Asian historiographies, Dārā Shikoh is often presented as a tolerant, inclusive and heterodox mystical thinker, standing in stark contrast with his harsh, exclusivist and Shari’a-minded brother Aurangzeb. However, important recent scholarship, most notably by the historian Munis Faruqui, has questioned this binary sibling caricature and popular projection of Dārā Shikoh as a banner bearer of ‘Hindu-Muslim amity’ to great effect.

Through a fascinating reading of Dārā Shikoh’s Persian translation of the Upānisāds Sirr-i Akbar [The greatest secret], Faruqui shows that contrary to the view that situates Dārā Shikoh at the fringes of Islamic normativity, that is hardly how the Mughal prince

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29 Ibid., p. 56.
31 Ibid.
himself imagined his position as a scholar and intellectual. In presenting the Upānisāds as a monotheistic textual archive, Dārā Shikoh saw himself as operating squarely within the Islamic tradition. Moreover, the central objective of his translation was to validate the universality of a monotheistic Qur'anic worldview by documenting earlier expressions of monotheism in the Indian context. And although deeply critical of the Indian Muslim ‘Ulamā’, he was at pains to establish the credibility of his arguments in accordance with traditional sources of Islamic normativity, most notably the Qur’an. The cultivation of Hindu–Muslim camaraderie was hardly at the top of Dārā Shikoh’s intellectual agenda. And the notion that it was so has less to do with him and more with contemporary South-Asian nationalist anxieties and desires, both of the fundamentalist and the liberal secular varieties, to stipulate carefully divided rosters of tolerant mystics and orthodox exclusivists from a past that hardly allows for such neat divisions.32

Apart from al-Birūnī and Dārā Shikoh, other notable medieval and early-modern Indian Muslim writers who engaged in the problematic of translating Hindu religious thought for their Muslim audiences include the Persian historian Abū Sa’īd al-Gardīzī (d.1061) who was a contemporary of al-Birūnī, the twelfth-century scholar al-Shāhrastānī (d.1153) and the fourteenth-century court poet in Delhi Amīr Khusraw (d.1325). In addition to works broader in scope, we also find Muslim studies of Hindu thought that specifically focused on a given topic. For instance, we find a rich and copiously documented tradition of Muslim scholarly engagements with yoga throughout the medieval and early-modern period. Imprints of this tradition frequently appeared in Mughal art and illustrated histories. Muslim interest in the field of yoga ranged from philosophical curiosity to fascination with Hindu meditative practices to the desire to access the occult powers of Indian ascetics. “By far the most important work on yoga by a Muslim author” is the anonymously authored thirteenth-century Arabic text The Pool of the Water of Life (Hawd māʾa al-ḥayāt), a text that was widely translated and often lavishly illustrated with paintings of yogic postures.33

Moreover, as Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst has shown, early-modern Muslim scholars, such as prominent Chishti Sufi masters, also took an abiding interest in translating the Bhagavadgītā in ways that not only “fit Islamic conceptions of the divine” but that also presented it “as a source of proper religious behavior for Muslims”.34 A cautionary note is in order here. From this survey one should not assume that inter-religious translations in India were a one-way street of Muslim intellectuals meditating on Hindu thought and practice. Rather, not only did Mughal rulers actively and avidly sponsor Sanskrit and Sanskrit intellectuals in their courts. They also curated an intellectual landscape marked by tremendous inter-religious as well as inter-linguistic exchange, a landscape in which both Hindu and Muslim scholars not only participated but also actively collaborated. Indeed, as Audrey Truschke has

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recently argued, this intellectual “culture of encounter” was pivotal to the organising logic
and maintenance of Mughal power and sovereignty.\(^{35}\)

To this one should add Carl Ernst’s useful reminder that often the processes of translation
in India did not follow predictable patterns of religious and linguistic identity. It is not
as if only Muslim scholars wrote in Arabic and Persian or that only they translated Indic
Sanskrit texts commonly associated with Hinduism into Islamic languages. Rather, we also
find ample instances of Hindu scholars and secretaries (\textit{munshis}), who were well versed in
Persian and Islamic knowledge traditions, being employed by Mughal authorities and later
by the British, to write treatises on Indian religions in Persian.\(^{36}\)

The arena of Muslim translations of Hindu thought is not limited to expositions in Arabic,
Persian and Urdu, as Tony Stewart has reminded us in his astute examination of premodern
Bengali Muslim writers’ texts that address Hindu concepts and categories. Stewart makes
the instructive point that such works are best approached as “extended acts of translation”
whereby translation “defines a way that religious practitioners seek ‘equivalence’ among
their counterparts”.\(^{37}\) Through a close reading of Bengali texts that strive to achieve such
equivalence, Stewart demonstrated ways in which moments of inter-religious translation in
the Bengali context generated discursive concepts that resist modern religious and sectarian
boundaries. An excellent example of such a concept is that of \textit{Satya Pir} (or the True Master)
that cuts across religious traditions by combining the Sanskrit term \textit{Satya} (true) with the
Persian \textit{Pir} (master) from the Sufi lexicon. Stewart’s work is significant not only because
it urges us to take languages like Bengali seriously as important sites of cross-religious
encounters but even more so in its insistence that it was precisely in the arena of translation
that the intellectual as well as the lived tradition of Bengali Islam came to take shape. The
process of Muslim translations of, and engagements with, Hindu ‘ideational constructs’ was
critical to the formation of Bengali Islam, Stewart argues.\(^{38}\)

Although the survey included above is by no means comprehensive, I hope it conveys
some sense of the diversity and the long-running character of traditions of Indian Muslim
meditations on Hinduism. Building on this tradition, \textit{Jân-i Jânân’s} investigation of Hinduism
was less expansive in scope yet significant in its themes and outcomes. He was primarily
occupied with establishing the validity and coherence of Hindu systems of knowledge and
doctrinal apparatuses, and with determining the nature of salvation awaiting Hindus.\(^{39}\) For
him, translation and evaluation went together. More specifically, one can identify four distinct
challenges or doubts about Hindu thought and practice that \textit{Jân-i Jânân} deemed as most
important to address for a Muslim audience.

\(^{35}\) Audrey Truschke, \textit{Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court} (New York, 2016). Another work that has
argued for the dynamism of such cross-religious and inter-linguistic encounters is Shankar Nair’s excellent recent
dissertation “Philosophy in any Language: Interaction between Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit Intellectual Cultures
in Mughal South Asia” (Harvard University Dissertation, 2014).

\(^{36}\) Ernst, ‘Muslim interpreters’, p. 66.

\(^{37}\) Tony Stewart, ‘In search of equivalence: conceiving Muslim–Hindu encounter through translation theory’,
\textit{History of Religions}, I, 3 (Feb, 2001), p. 263.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., pp. 260–287.

\(^{39}\) The question of the ‘other’s’ salvation has remained a much contested and debated problem throughout
Muslim intellectual history that has occupied the imagination of several major scholars and espoused a variety of
responses and meditations. For more on that topic, see Mohammad Khalil, \textit{Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation
Question} (New York, 2012).
The first and the most obvious challenge was that of casting Hinduism as a monotheistic tradition that might be palatable to his Muslim readers. Second was the problem posed by the question of whether prophets were ever sent to India and by the connected question of what status these prophets held in the Islamic tradition. Third was the problem of reconciling the phenomenon of transmigration or metempsychosis (the transference of one soul to another) in Hindu thought with the disallowance of such a possibility in Islamic theology. And fourth, and perhaps the trickiest task, was that of explaining the practice of idol worship among Hindus within the bounds of Muslim norms of discursivity. Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān tackled these challenges in a very positive, albeit selective, description of Hindu thought and practice. One can conjecture that he based his understanding of Hinduism on oral sources and through his interactions with Hindu scholars in Delhi. It does not seem that he read or was proficient in Sanskrit. Curiously, as Thomas Dahnhardt informs us, several lay Hindus regularly frequented Jān-i Jānān’s lodge in Delhi and received spiritual guidance from him, without having converted to Islam. In fact, his tomb remains a site of veneration and visitation for many Hindus to this day.

Jān-i Jānān’s ideas on Hinduism primarily come to us through a letter (in Persian and later translated into Urdu) that he wrote to a disciple while answering his queries on the subject.  

In the style of seeking a juridical opinion, this disciple had asked: “Did the unbelievers of ancient India (kufār-i hind) also hold a false religion like the pre-Islamic pagans of Arabia or was it a true religion that was later abrogated, and what opinion must one hold about the contemporary followers of the religion?” (kufār-i hind misl-i mushriķān-i ‘arab dīn-i be-aṣal dārand yā ān-rā āṣī budah ast wa mansūkh shud wa dar haq-i pīshnāyān-i ān-hā cheh i’tiqād bāyad kard). Let me turn to Jān-i Jānān’s answers to these questions.

Reifying religion while translating the ‘other’: Jān-i Jānān on the Hindus

In his response, Jān-i Jānān presented a series of equivalences between Islam and Hinduism, as he sought to familiarise the latter to his Muslim audience. He began by positing a scriptural foundation for Hinduism and by casting it as a revealed religion possessing all the features one would expect from a monotheistic tradition. He declared that:

from investigation and research, what one finds out from the ancient books of the people of India (ahl-i hind) is that at the birth of the human species (naw-i insān), God had sent a holy book by the name of (bed) for the correction (islāḥ) of their world (dunya) through an angel called Brahma, who is an instrument of the creation of the world. This book is comprised of

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40 Thomas Dahnhardt, Change and Continuity in Indian Sufism (New Delhi, 2002), pp. 10–11.

41 For purposes of this article, I have relied on Jān-i Jānān’s original letter in Persian that appears in Qamar ul-Dīn Murādabādī’s 1891 collection of Jān-i Jānān’s discourses, Kalimāt-i Tāyyibāt. The Urdu translation of this letter is available in Maqāmāt-i Mazharī that was compiled by Shāh Ghulām ‘Alī Dīlahī and edited and translated by Muḥammad Iqbal Muṣṭādī. I have elsewhere translated (with a commentary) the Urdu translation; see Sher Ali Tareen, “The perils and possibilities of inter-religious translation: Mirza Mazhar Jān-i Janan on the Hindus”, Sagar: A South Asia Research Journal, XXI, (May 2014), pp. 43–51.

42 Qamar ul-Dīn Murādabādī (ed.) Kalimāt-i Tāyyibāt (Murādabād, 1891), p. 27.

43 Persian for Vedas.
four sections and it contains injunctions on the differentiation of right from wrong (‘amr wa nahā) and information about the past and the future.44

He continued, “they have divided the ancient history of the world into four parts and each part has been given the name ‘jug’, and for every jug the correct method of practice (tavr-i ‘amalī) has been derived from each of the four branches of their holy scripture.45

By casting Brahma as God, Jān-i Jānān immediately sought to represent Hinduism as a monotheistic tradition. He went on unreservedly to declare that all Hindu sects believe in the unity of God as the transcendent creator who creates out of nothing (tahuḥ-d-i bārī-yi ta‘lā). Moreover, according to Jān-i Jānān, not only do the Hindus believe in the creation of the world, they also affirm its annihilation (fanā). Further, similar to Muslims, Hindus also assent to rewards and punishments for good and bad deeds, and to resurrection (ḥashar) and accountability (ḥisāb) in the hereafter (iqār bā fanā-yi ‘ālan wa hashar-i jismānī wa jazā-yi ‘amal-nayk o bad mī namāyand).46 In perhaps his most generous moment of writing, Jān-i Jānān rendered a sweeping approval of Indic systems of knowledge by declaring: “these people have a commanding grasp (yad-i t.ūlā) over the non-revealed and revealed knowledges (‘ulūm-i ‘aqlīw aqlī), ascetic practices (riyāzīyāt), pietistic exertions (mujāhādāt) and mystical unveilings (mukāshafāt)”.47 Jān-i Jānān’s imposition of Muslim categories on Hinduism was most apparent when he described what he called the Hindu ‘schools of law’, a frame of reference obviously informed by the schools of law (madhdhāhib/sing. madhdhab) in Islam.

According to Jān-i Jānān, the Hindu master-jurists (mujtahīdīn-i īnhā) derived from the Vedas six different schools of law (mazāhib) and on them based their principles of faith (uṣūl-i ‘aqā‘īd). This is what the Hindus called ‘dharma-shāstra’, meaning the ‘discipline of theological discourses’ (fann-i īmānīyāt), Jān-i Jānān argued. He further claimed that dharma shāstra was equivalent to dialectical theology (‘ilm-i kalām) in Islam.

Jān-i Jānān explained that the Hindus divided the human species into four different castes (chahār firqa muqarrar namūd) and they derived four distinct orders of practice (maslak) from this system. Moreover, “each caste has been assigned a particular order, and the foundation for applied duties (furū‘-yi ā’māl) is based on this system. To this system they have given the name Karma-Shāstra, meaning ‘the discipline of practices’ (fann-i ‘amaliyāt), which is the same as what we [Muslims] call juridical knowledge (‘ilm-i fiqh)”.48

Jān-i- Janan went on to explain the caste system. In a textbook-like description of Manu’s Vārnāsramadharma system, he explained that Hindu sages divided human life into four different stages: the first for the acquisition of knowledge and etiquette, the second for the attainment of wealth and children, the third for the correction of conduct and reform of the self and the fourth for complete renunciation and withdrawal [from the world]. He likened the final stage of renunciation to the attainment of the highest human perfection (ghāyat-i kamāl-i insān) in Sufism. In an interesting choice of translation, he described the

45Ibid.
46Ibid., p. 28.
47Ibid.
48Ibid.
Hindu concept of *Mahā Muktī* as *Nījāt-i Kubrā* (ultimate salvation), in quite similar fashion to Dārā Shikoh’s version a couple centuries previously.  

Jān-i Jānān summed up his evaluation of Hindu intellectual traditions with an endorsement bordering on admiration: “The rules and principles of their religion,” he declared, “possess absolute harmony and coherence” (*qawā'id wa zawā'īt-i dīn-i 'īnhā nazm o nasq-i tamām dānād*).  

Next, Jān-i Jānān confronted the contentious issue of whether prophets were ever sent to India. In this regard, Jān-i Jānān adopted a particularly bold stance by unequivocally declaring that “prior to the birth of Islam, God had indeed sent prophets to India and that their activities have been recorded in the holy books of the Indians. And from their traditions (*āsān*), it also seems that they had attained the stages of perfection and completion and that the general mercy of God (*rahmat-i 'īma*) did not forget the humanity of this vast landmass”. He supported his argument by citing the Qur’anic verses that read: “There never was any community in which a warner has [not lived] and passed away in its midst” and “every community has had an apostle; and only after their apostle has appeared [and delivered his message] is judgement passed on them, in all equity; and never are they wronged”. Jān-i Jānān’s charitable description of Hinduism raised an obvious question: if Hinduism was so normatively acceptable and akin to Islam, then what made the latter superior? In other words, what difference did it make if one were a Muslim or a Hindu if the two traditions were so alike and interchangeable? Jān-i Jānān tackled this question through a curious interpretive move that was intimately connected to the way he imagined temporality and its relationship to religious normativity.  

He argued that Hinduism was a religion that had pleased God but which has now been abrogated. According to Jān-i Jānān, before Muhammad’s arrival, all nations in the world were sent prophets and each nation was only obliged to follow the message of its particular prophet and not that of any other nation. However, after the arrival of Prophet Muhammad in the sixth century, the situation changed fundamentally. After Muhammad’s emergence, he explained, all Eastern and Western religions have been abrogated and as long as the world exists, everyone is obligated to embrace Islam.  

In an attempt to historicise his argument, Jān-i Jānān asserted that although the Muslim tradition made no mention of the abrogation of any religion except those of Judaism and Christianity, there were many religions other than these that were abrogated or that were born and then later died out. As Jān-i Jānān put it, “since the arrival of the Prophet until now 1180 years have elapsed. In this time period, whoever did not accept the message of the Prophet is an infidel, but the people who pre-date the arrival of Islam are not so”. On the difficult question of the identity of the prophets who were sent to India, Jān-i Jānān quite deftly argued that since the Muslim tradition was silent about the existence of most prophets, with respect to the prophets of India, it was also best to remain silent. In  

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49 Ibid.  
50 Ibid.  
51 Ibid.  
52 Qur’an 35:24; Muhammad Asad translation.  
53 Qur’an 10:47. Muhammad Asad translation.  
54 Murādābādī, *Kalimāt-i Ṭayyibāt*, p. 28.  
55 Ibid.
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authorising his argument, he pointed out that God had clearly stated that he had not revealed all prophets sent to humanity when he said in the Qur’an, “Some of them [messengers] we have mentioned to you and some of them we have not mentioned to you”56 (min-hum man qaṣṣaqnā ‘alayka wa min-hum man lam naqṣūṣ ‘alayka). This verse clearly showed that before Muhammad’s prophecy, prophets whose identity God did not reveal may well have been sent to India, Jān-i Jānān argued. Concomitantly, he advised his disciples, “We need not adhere to the conviction that their followers were infidels or that they were punishable by death and neither is it necessary for us to believe that they had attained salvation (nah mā rā jzm bi-kufr wa halāk-i atbā‘-i ān-hā lāzīm ast wa nah yaqīn bi nījāt-i ān-hā). In these matters, it is best to maintain a ‘positive outlook’ (lūsn-i zann) so that no hostility is generated” (bā sharṭī keh ta‘aṣṣub dar mayān nah bāshad).57

In among his most bold moves, Jān-i Jānān further extended this argument to include regions other than India. He posited that even in the case of the natives of Persia, or for that matter with regard to every community that pre-dated the arrival of Prophet Muḥammad and that received no mention in the normative sources of Islam (lisān-i shar‘ dar ahwāl-i ān-hā sākit ast), it was best to adopt the same practice of refraining from charging them with unbelief. In Jān-i Jānān’s view, carelessly anathematising people of other religious communities was contrary to Islam. As he put it, with a plea that combined purpose with brevity: “In the absence of a definitive proof, one must never take lightly the business of calling someone else an unbeliever” (kāfir guftan kasī rā be dalīl-i qat’ī āsān nah bāyad dānast).58

Next, Jān-i Jānān took on the arduous task of clarifying and defending the practice of ‘idol worship’ among the Hindus. He argued that idol worship above all represented a form of meditation. He further explained that this process of meditation was directed towards: (1) certain angels that exist in this world of corruption because of God’s command, or (2) the spirits of certain perfect individuals who exist in this world even after having abandoned their bodily forms or (3) certain living men whom the Hindus perceive as immortal, like the figure of Khidhr in the Qur’an. According to Jān-i Jānān, by concentrating their thoughts on these representations, Hindus create a spiritual connection with the entities represented by them and they thus attain their material and spiritual needs.

Again, Jān-i Jānān translated idol worship into a Muslim idiom by arguing that this practice was reminiscent of the practice common among Muslim Sufis (keh ma‘mūl-i ṣūfīya-i Islāmiya ast) of meditating on the image of their master (pūr) to benefit from his spiritual emanation. The only difference, Jān-i Jānān clarified, was that Muslims do not make a concrete representation of the face of their masters. However, Jān-i Jānān was at pains to distinguish idol worship among Hindus from the worship of idols found in pre-Islamic Arabia. He categorically argued that the idol worship of the Hindus bore no resemblance to the practice of pre-Islamic pagans.

Why? Because, Jān-i Jānān claimed, the pagans of pre-Islamic Arabia used to regard their idols as independent agents, effective in their essence (mu’assir bil-zāt), and not as instruments

56Qur’an, 40:78.
57Murādībādī, Kalimāt-i Ṭayyībāt, p. 28.
58Ibid., p. 29
of divine power (ān-hā buṭān vā mutaṣarrif wa muʿassir bil-zāt mīguftand nah ālah-yi taṣaruf-i īlāhī). Thus, they failed to comprehend the absoluteness of God’s sovereignty by believing that these idols are the gods of earth and that Allah is the God of heaven. According to the rules of divinity (ulūhiyat), this constituted polytheism, Jān-i Jānān argued.59 This was not the case with the idol worship of Hindus as they considered their idols as manifestations of the divine, and not divine in themselves. But what should one make of the Hindu practice of prostrating before idols? Did that not count as polytheism? According to Jān-i Jānān, no, it did not.

He defended this popular Hindu practice by drawing a distinction between a customary prostration meant as a form of greeting (sajdah-yi taḥayyat) and a prostration that demonstrated one’s servitude to another entity (sajdah-yi taʿabbud). While the latter counted as polytheism, the former did not. Jān-i Jānān claimed that the Hindu prostration before idols was of the first variety: a customary prostration meant to show reverence to elders and people of authority. As he put it, “their prostration is one of reverence and not that of idolatry. In their culture, instead of saying ‘Salam’, it is common and customary to greet parents, masters and teachers with a prostration that they call=dandvat. (sajda-yi ān-hā sajda-yi taḥayyat nah sajda-yi ‘ubūdiyat keh dar ā’yin-i ān-hā bi nūdar o padar o pir o ustdād be jāyi salām hamūn sajdah marsūm o ma’nūl ast)”.60

Notice that Jān-i Jānān’s defence of the practice of prostration among Hindus is almost identical to the line of defence that Sufis themselves have often adopted in justifying their practice of prostrating before the graves of saints, especially in the face of Muslim fundamentalist, Muslim modernist and Orientalist attacks in the modern context. This defence has hinged on the argument that the prostration at Sufi shrines represents a prostration of reverence and not that of idolatry. Jān-i Jānān seems to have drawn on, as well as anticipated, the vectors of an intra-Muslim polemic in his quest to validate a non-Muslim practice. In both contexts, a common anxiety propelled the need for a defence in the first place: overcoming doubts over a tradition’s commitment to divine sovereignty.

Finally, on the question of transmigration or metempsychosis, Jān-i Jānān proffered the pithy yet significant declaration that “having faith in [the doctrine of] transmigration (tanāṣukh) is not a necessary condition for one to be charged with unbelief (i’tiqād-i tanāṣukh mustalzim-i kūft nīst)”.61 With this brief masterstroke, he at once released the specter of unbelief from having faith in transmigration while also leaving open the possibility of such a charge. It was not necessary for a person who has faith in transmigration to be called an unbeliever but neither was that impossible. Through this play in ambiguity, Jān-i Jānān took extensive hermeneutical licence in accommodating the ‘other’ while also staying clear of potentially fatal doctrinal landmines.

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid. Literally meaning ‘like a stick’, the practice of dandvat represents a Hindu salutation involving falling, lying prostrate or bowing before a person or an entity. It usually signifies the recognition of moral authority in a situation that demands the expression of such respect.
61 Ibid.
Translation, temporality and hospitality

There are several noteworthy details that emerge from Jān-i Jānān’s exposition of Indian religious thought. First, let us consider the descriptors or units of difference he mobilised in categorising and describing the ‘other’. In other words, how did he refer to what he sought to describe and translate? In scanning his exposition, one finds that on the two instances that Jān-i Jānān called the object of his study by name, he called them “the people of India/the inhabitants of India” (ahl-i hind) and ‘the communities of India’ (mumālīk-i hind). On other occasions he simply referred to them as ‘them’ (īn-hā), or if describing a particular aspect of their thought or practice, as ‘of theirs’ (az īshān). One does not find any references to descriptors such as ‘the Hindus’ that might suggest membership in an explicit religious ‘club’. Similarly, the word dīn, often translated as religion, (as did I in the preceding section) appears only once, when Jān-i Jānān praised the coherence and harmony of ‘their dīn’.

But it seems as though with dīn, Jān-i Jānān primarily had in mind Hindu scholarly traditions and discourses rather than a distinct world religion called Hinduism. This becomes especially obvious in his separate use of the term ā’īn, or customs/tradition, while describing customary practices like prostration as a form of greeting. The distinction of dīn and ā’īn correspond to the difference between what one might call the intellectual and the popular tradition (noting of course the conceptual problems of this distinction by now familiar to scholars of religion). In general, in describing a unit of people, Jān-i Jānān most frequently employed geographic-cum-ethnic categories as ‘the polytheists of India’ (mushrikān-i hind), ‘the Arab unbelievers’ (kufār-i ‘Arab) and the ‘people of Persia’ (qawm-i fāris). Even though he attached specific prognoses of salvation for each of these communities, it is nonetheless worthwhile to note the absence of a world religions paradigm in the way they were presented and classified.

Second, the most distinctive aspect of his account is his emphasis on deploying legal (fiqh) and theological (kalām) categories while explaining Hindu knowledge traditions and practices. In contrast to earlier scholars like al-Bīrūnī and Dārā Shikoh, Jān-i Jānān did not even mention the less legally oriented Hindu texts such as the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavad Gīta or the Upānisāds. Instead, in forming his sketch of the Hindu ‘other’, he most heavily relied on the Laws of Manu, a text soaked with legal injunctions and moral commands. Therefore, we can perhaps most accurately describe Jān-i Jānān’s model of translation as ‘juridico-theological’ in character. This typology, though previously uncommon in the history of Muslim studies on Hindu thought is nonetheless quite consistent with the emphasis on Shāfi‘a-minded piety most commonly found among members of the Naqshbandī Sufi order.62 This is not to say that the Shāfi‘a is any less important for other Sufi orders. Rather, the point being that Jān-i Jānān chose to highlight those aspects of Hindu thought that he considered as most definitive of his own faith as well: law and theology. To him law and theology represented the most characteristic elements of religion. Accordingly, his translation apparatus was also founded on a hermeneutic of essentialism that valorised the apparently legal and theological aspects of Hinduism as constituting the essence of the religion. At the

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heart of his translation project was the desire to ‘monotheise’ Hinduism as much as possible, and to erase any doubts regarding its monotheistic credentials.

This desire reflects a more fundamental conceptual assumption that the authenticity of a religious tradition hinges on its commitment to divine sovereignty. Indeed, it is perhaps this underlying anxiety to establish the primacy of the divine sovereign in Hindu thought that explains his mobilisation of theology and law as the primary units of equivalence between Islam and Hinduism. By showing that much like Islam, Hinduism also possessed a full-fledged theology, Jān-i Jānān sought to present the latter as a coherent and complete monotheistic tradition. Curiously, it is precisely this equation of divine sovereignty and religious authenticity that in the nineteenth century informed British colonial production of such knowledge categories as ‘Sikh theology’ or ‘Hindu theology’, categories that were overtime adopted by native scholars ‘within’ the tradition. I will return to this point a bit later.

Third, it is important to take note of the generally sympathetic attitude that Jān-i Jānān adopted towards Hinduism. While not without its share of ambiguities, some of which I will shortly discuss, the larger emphasis of his reading of Hinduism was nonetheless on exonerating it from possible objections and critiques. From the thorny issue of revering idols, to the question of whether had God sent prophets to India, to the intellectual prowess and coherence of Hindu knowledge traditions, Jān-i Jānān analysis and evaluation were overwhelmingly charitable. However, in an astute move, he packaged his hospitality for the ‘other’ in a manner that would not compromise his fidelity to the dominant normative limits of his own tradition. The key move that allowed him to tread the line of hospitality and heresy was the crucial distinction he made between the Hindus who lived before the mission of Prophet Muḥammad and those of the Islamic era. This distinction cautions us from exaggerating the religious inclusiveness found in Jān-i Jānān’s discourse.

As Yohanan Friedmann has argued,

Mirzā Mazhar’s views cannot be considered as a breakthrough in the historical relationship between Islam and Hinduism. Certainly it cannot be stated without qualification that he considered the Hindus as monotheists or that he refused to declare them infidels, if this is meant to imply that their religion may legitimately co-exist with Islam and that they are therefore exempt from the obligation to embrace the only true faith. 63

Moreover, “Jan-i- Janan’s admission that India, like any other country, had its prophets in times of old does not extenuate the guilt of those Indians who have not followed the Prophet Muhammad during the centuries that came after his call”. 64

Regardless of whether Jān-i Jānān’s views represented a ‘breakthrough’ in the relationship between Islam and Hinduism, more interesting to note is the way in which his understanding of that relationship was based on a particular notion of temporality. Jān-i Jānān’s theological position on the status of Hindus after Muḥammad’s revelation was intimately connected to how he imagined time and the unfolding of history. For Jān-i Jānān, the emergence of Islam in the seventh century inaugurated a radical rupture in time. This moment served as the

64Ibid.
sovereign determinant of the limits of normativity; it represented the borderline separating religion and unbelief, identity and difference.

While the ‘other’ was accorded ecumenical hospitality before this moment, its licence of hospitality expired as soon as it crossed over that temporal line. Time, therefore, not only represented a linear passage of moment or the vehicle in which history travelled. Rather, time was the ultimate decider of what counted as acceptable religion; time was the underlying fault line distinguishing the self and the other, religion and unbelief. Jān-i Jānān’s bifurcated notion of time as neatly divided between pre-Islam and post-Islam was not only a mechanism for the construction of difference between Islam and its various others. More significantly, his understanding of time was also pivotal to the narration of a triumphalist narrative of Islam whereby the introduction of Islam into history overcame and repaired the inadequacies and deficiencies of its past. In Jān-i Jānān’s normative imaginary, by entering history, Islam completed history, rendering all previous moral programmes of salvation invalid and incomplete, and, thus, normatively unacceptable. Time at once authorised the radical exceptionality of Islam and abrogated the normative validity of its competing others.

Fourth, Jān-i Jānān’s sympathetic attitude and endorsement of Hinduism was not only temporally limited to those Hindus who came before Islam. It was also epistemologically limited to elite Hindu scholarly traditions. His charitable attitude did not extend to popular Hindu devotional practices of which he was deeply critical. He was especially scornful towards Muslims who openly participated in Hindu rituals and festivals such as Diwali and Holi. Here, his language was often highly gendered; women, whom he regarded as especially vulnerable to the allure of such festivals, represented the primary target of his repudiation.

For instance, notice Jān-i Jānān’s disdain for Muslim participation in Hindu rituals when he wrote in a different context than the letter/treatise analysed thus far: “During Diwali the ignorant Muslim masses, especially women, enthusiastically participate in this ritual, as if it was their own festival. Simulating the unbelievers, they send gifts to their daughters and sisters . . . Venerating the holy days of the Hindus and participating in common rituals connected to those days necessitate both polytheism and unbelief”.65 (dar ayyām-i diwālī-yi kufār juhulā-yi ahl-i Islām ‘alā al-kuḥuş zaman-i ʾīshān nūsūm-i ahl-i kufr ʿāla bājā mī āwarand wa ʿid-i khud mī sāzand. Wā hadāyā shabīh beh hadāyā-a ahl-i kufr beh khānahā-yi dukhtarān wa khwāharān dar rang-i ahl-i shirk mī farastand . . . taʿzīm namūdan-i ayyām-i muʿāzžama-yi hunud wa bājā āwardan dar ān ayyām nūsūm-i mutaʿraṣṭā nīz mustalzīm-i shirk mustawjīb-i kufr ast.) This was a much different tone indeed from his appraisal of Hindu knowledge traditions and discourses.

In his understanding of Hinduism, Jān-i Jānān seems to have made a clear distinction between scholastic knowledge traditions of the elite and the rituals and practices of the masses. While elite Hindu knowledge traditions were normatively acceptable, their festivals and rituals carried the danger of corrupting the religion of the Muslim masses, especially that of women. Therefore, in Jān-i Jānān’s social imaginary, it was his pastoral responsibility to protect the masses from such corruption by preventing them from simulating the customs and practices of the ‘other,’ in this case the Hindus.

65 Dīhlavī and Mujaddidī, Maqāmāt, pp. 101 and 127.
Jân-i Jânâ'n’s circumspect attitude towards the masses was consistent with Muslim tradition and more specifically with the Qur’anic phrase that says: “the masses are like cattle” (al-‘awwām ka-l-an’ām). Moreover, his anxiety over Muslims simulating the Hindus in their customs and rituals harkens back to the iconic yet fiercely contested saying of Prophet Muhammad (Hadith): “He who imitates a community becomes one of them” (man tashabbaha bi qaumin fa hûwa min-hum). Therefore, in registering his condemnation of Hindu–Muslim interaction at the popular level, Jân-i Jânâ'n was following precedents and normative proof texts squarely within the Muslim tradition.

This is an important point because it cautions us against reading the charitable views of an early modern religious figure such as Jân-i Jânâ'n about another religious tradition as an example of modern religious ‘tolerance’ or ‘pluralism’. The attachment of such categories to Jân-i Jânâ'n would be highly anachronistic and inaccurate. As I have tried to show, his hospitality towards Hinduism, while remarkable at times, was also selective and carefully crafted in accordance with the normative parameters, precedents and possibilities offered by the Islamic tradition. Modern notions of tolerance and inter-faith harmony, invariably connected to the governance calculus of the modern secular state, were by no means the centerpiece of Jân-i Jânâ'n’s hermeneutical horizons or strategies. His was not a secular project of mobilising the discourse of tolerance to overcome the threat of difference to liberal secular governance. Rather, what we find in his work is an innovative elite project of inter-religious translation aimed at making normative space for the ‘other’ while working within the protocols, vocabulary and boundaries of one’s own tradition.

**Colonial and pre-colonial projects of translation: continuities and ruptures**

The question of whether Hinduism represents a colonial invention and that of how and to what degree did colonial rule in India transform the conceptual and political spaces of Hinduism are intensely debated in modern scholarship. Some scholars have argued that the category of Hinduism signals a radical departure from India’s pre-colonial past, and that this term represents a British invention imposed on disparate intellectual traditions and practices otherwise unsuited to such coherent categorisation. According to this argument, the British invented a tradition of Hinduism that best fit a post-enlightenment view of what an authentic world religion looks like, one that mirrored Christianity in its basic outlines but was less mature in its development. This was achieved through measures such as the valorisation of particular texts like the Vedas and the Upānisād as most authentically Hindu, the codification of Hindu law through the co-option of Hindu pandits for that task and the framing of Hinduism as a unified composite of texts, beliefs and doctrines.66

Other scholars have sought to temper the power accorded to colonialism in the construction of Hinduism by showing ways in which the movement towards a ‘unified

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Hinduism’ was already underway before the British. The latter group of scholars does not deny the significance of colonial power in the reconfiguration of Indian religions; they are just less sure about the colonial invention of Hinduism narrative. Although one might further add here that this narrative of colonial rupture is also often unfairly caricatured as an argument for robbing the natives of their agency by assigning all agentive power to colonialism. In any case, as fascinating and important as this debate is, it is curious to note that its parameters have yet to be stretched in any sustained fashion by including the role and importance of Muslim scholars in the construction of what later came to be defined as modern Hinduism. How does the translation project of an eighteenth century Muslim scholar like Jān-i Jānān, as described in this essay, fit into the narrative of translating Hinduism as a world religion essentially reducible to certain texts, laws, and doctrines? It is on this question that I will briefly meditate in what follows.

On the subject of medieval and early-modern Muslim understandings of Hinduism, Carl Ernst has argued that:

there is a significant difference between medieval Islamicate and modern European approaches to Indian religion and culture... Although many Muslims over the centuries engaged in detailed study of particular aspects of Indian culture, which may appear in a modern perspective as religious, there was for the most part no compelling interest among Muslims in constructing a concept of a single Indian religion, which would correspond to the modern concept of Hinduism.

For Ernst, the major exception to this rule is contained in the work of al-Bīrūnī about whom he argues that:

Al-Bīrūnī’s concept of a unified Indian religion, as a polar opposite to Islam, lay forgotten until it was resurrected in an even more radical form by European scholarship a century ago; the growth of the Muslim concept of Hindu religion took place largely without reference to al-Bīrūnī’s rationalistic and reifying approach to religion, which had practically no impact on medieval Islamic thought, is much more palatable to the modern taste, and this explains his popularity today.

This dual set of arguments put forth by Ernst opens some important new avenues of inquiry into the nature of Hindu–Muslim encounters in pre-modern India. In this context, a central issue at stake is that of determining the relationship between the taxonomies of knowledge that governed colonial understandings of Indian religion and those that were already prevalent among both Hindu and Muslim thinkers during the eighteenth century. What is the relationship, if any, between the structures of knowledge that informed colonial conceptions of India’s religious topography and eighteenth-century projects of intra-religious and cross-religious interpretation? To what degree was the process of reification


68Carl Ernst, ‘Muslim studies of Hinduism’, p.1. For a fuller view on Ernst’s formidable research on this topic, see the collection of essays in Carl Ernst, Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga (New Delhi, 2016).

69Ibid.
that led to the development of a unified notion of ‘Hinduism’ in the modern sense of the term already underway in the works of eighteenth-century figures such as Jān-i Jānān? Can we theorise the translation labour of a native Muslim scholar like Jān-i Jānān as the harbinger or preparatory moment for nineteenth-century British colonial translations of religion as a discursive category? These are big questions that can only be adequately addressed through a careful study of a larger sample of Muslim scholarly discourses on Hinduism at varied moments in time. However, Jān-i Jānān’s translation of Hinduism provides us with an inviting opportunity for some preliminary observations concerning possible overlaps and differences between pre-colonial and colonial discourses on religion.

On the one hand, one can certainly identify important points of convergence between Jān-i Jānān’s views on Hindu thought and practice and colonial constructions of religion and Hinduism. Arguably the most striking resemblance between these translation projects is the reduction of religion to a series of descriptive essences. Both these moments held in common a movement towards a unified and monolithic understanding of Hinduism that did not account for the internal arguments and contestations over normative authority that characterise any religious tradition. This process of reduction stands authorised through the privileging of certain discursive resources within a tradition as its most ‘authentic’ and authoritative expressions. In turn, the foundational assumption that enables such a process of valorisation is that the authenticity or the essence of a religious tradition is readily available for description, representation and translation.

For instance, in Jān-i Jānān’s view, it was the dharmaśāstra and the laws of Manu, what he called ‘Hindu law’, that represented the essence or the most characteristic feature of Hinduism, a feature that he found closest to Islamic jurisprudence or fiqh. Therefore, epistemic proximity to Islam constituted for Jān-i Jānān, the primary guiding principle for the location of Hinduism’s essence. Remarkably, British colonial efforts to locate and canonise the most ‘authentic’ form of Hinduism were also informed by a very similar conception of religious authenticity as enshrined in law and theology. The colonial impulse to elevate law and theology as the defining features of religion is most clearly seen in British orientalist William Jones’s translation of the laws of Manu into English in 1794. As Gauri Viswanathan has aptly put it, “it was in the arena of law that Hinduism received its most definitive colonial reworking”. In large measure, this reworking was meant to render accessible the essential truth claims, the legal manual if you will, of a fully translatable religion called ‘Hinduism’. Also, as seen in their desire to seek a Vedic monotheistic Hinduism, Jān-i Jānān and later British orientalists shared the tendency to equate religious authenticity with the figure of a transcendent God.

Could one then argue that the reification of religion as a category of life that took full steam during the colonial moment was already underway in native projects of inter-religious translation, such as the one conducted by Jān-i Jānān? I think not, despite the apparent overlaps highlighted above. It would be conceptually problematic to posit a relationship of equivalence between Jān-i Jānān’s and British colonial understandings of religion and difference. This is so for a few reasons.

With regard to these two situations, not only the politics underlying the translation but also the immediate historical context differed considerably. Most importantly, as reifying as Jān-i Jānān’s translation of Hinduism was, it was not directly connected to the political calculus of the modern state. His investment and engagement with Hinduism was primarily inspired by questions of community: how should members of his community understand and approach the normative traditions of another community. Colonial translations of native knowledge traditions, in contrast, were inseparable from a larger secular politics of statecraft. By defining and regulating the boundaries of what counted as ‘religion’, colonial authorities sought to authorise the role of the secular state as the caretaker of religious identity and difference. Moreover, the very colonial regime of assembling, cataloging and translating native knowledge traditions, enabled by such mechanisms as the census, colonial ethnographies and missionary activity, was inextricable to the political governance of the British over India. This point becomes especially clear if we consider the simultaneous emergence of unitary notions of religion, nationalist politics and the ossification of linguistic identities. Arvind Mandair brilliantly captures this co-emergence of monistic imaginaries of religious identity, language and politics in colonial South Asia through his mobilisation of Derrida’s neologism ‘monotheolingualism’. The juxtaposition of claims to distinct monotheisms and monolingualisms was best encapsulated, Mandair argued, in the thoroughly modern proclamations “I am Hindu; my language is Hindi” or “I am Muslim; my language is Urdu”. Jān-i Jānān’s translation of Hinduism could hardly be judged to have contributed to conditions driving such monotheolingualism.

Furthermore, whereas European notions of Indian religion were informed by a particular tradition of Protestant post-enlightenment thinking, Jān-i Jānān’s construction of the Hindu ‘other’ was a product of Islamic thought and categories. While these intellectual streams may coincide on certain matters like the desire for monotheism and an aversion to popular practices, crucial differences nonetheless persist. Most importantly, unlike colonial Orientalist fantasies that oscillated between projecting Hinduism as either the font of exotic mysticism or as the paragon of philosophical sophistication, Jān-i Jānān was less enraptured by such fantasies. He was more concerned with establishing the doctrinal coherence of Hindu thought than with its fantastical qualities or origins. Also the impulse to rationalise or moderate Hinduism so as to render it more amenable to modern rationalism or natural reason was less pronounced if at all present in Jān-i Jānān’s exposition. To put it succinctly, Jān-i Jānān’s engagement with Hinduism was not animated by a liberal secular politics of ‘religion-making’ (to use Arvind Mandair’s enormously profitable term) tethered to the concerns and anxieties of the colonial state. Thus, despite some points of convergence between Jān-i Jānān’s and colonial translations of Hinduism, they cannot be conflated or read as a continuation of one another. While one might find some affinity and similitude in the reifying tendencies of Jān-i Jānān’s and British colonial representations of Hinduism, the ideological goals and political projects invested in those representations diverged significantly.

72 *Ibid*.
Conclusion

In this article I have examined an important moment of inter-religious translation in eighteenth century India: Mirzâ Mażhar Jân-i Jânān’s translation of Hindu thought, practice and traditions of knowledge. I have argued that the thrust of his translation project centred on approaching Hinduism through the lens of juridical and theological Islamic categories. In this sense, Jân-i Jânān propounded forms of equivalence between Islam and Hinduism that were most consistent with a predominantly juridico-theological mode of translation. Thus, his translation is emblematic of what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has described as the ‘domesticating’ approach to translation; a mode of translation that brings the foreign text as close to the reader, or the original as close to the target language as possible, rather than the other way round.74 This is also what the nineteenth-century German theologian and Bible scholar Fredrich Schleiermacher called a ‘naturalising’ translation, meaning a translation that leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader”.75

Seen this way, Jân-i Jânān seems to have faithfully followed through on Saint Jerome’s description of translation, as articulated by the latter during the early Christian period: “The translator considers thought content a prisoner (quasi captivos sensus) which he transplants into his own language with the prerogative of a conqueror (iure victoris)” .76 But with all its shades of imperial conquest and domestication, Jân-i Jânān’s translation was also explicitly ecumenical in its intent. This juxtaposition of conquest and hospitality places his translation project in illumining contrast to the history of translation practices in the West. In his brief but excellent genealogy of translation in Western thought and politics, Hugo Friedrich argued that “beginning with the second half of the eighteenth century [about when Jân-i Jânān was also writing], a totally new type of translation theory emerged that ran parallel to the increasing tolerance of cultural differences”.77 This tolerance, mainly for other European languages and cultures, transplanted an earlier imperial vision of translation that, to quote Nietzsche in The Gay Science, “was meant to conquer”.78 The case of Jân-i Jânān’s translation of Hinduism presents a useful contrast to the view that marks a clear and unambiguous rupture or shift from conquest to tolerance. His translation inhered both these qualities simultaneously. While according the ‘other’ remarkable doctrinal hospitality, Jân-i Jânān’s view of translation nonetheless remained tethered to an imperial Muslim political theology that not only saw Islam as the finaliser of time. Moreover, according to his view of translation, the ‘other’ was only legible once recoded in the language and grammar of the self. Jân-i Jânān not only tolerated but in large measure even validated and celebrated the Hindu ‘other’. But while so doing, he was also careful to fold all such gestures and hermeneutics of hospitality into a narrative of power committed to upholding the exceptionality of Muslim normative authority.

Most fundamentally, Jân-i Jânān’s representation of Hinduism shows that translation is an inherently flexible and dynamic enterprise, whereby both the translator and the object

75 Quoted in Ibid., p.41.
77 Ibid., p.14.
78 Quoted in Ibid.
of study are simultaneously produced within the making of the translation. In this sense, translation by its very nature is a dynamic procedure that produces a relationship between the 'translator' and the 'translated' that is at once dialogical and indexical. For instance, by attempting the *Islamisation* of Hindu symbols and categories, Jān-i Jānān conducted a translation that presented a particular picture not only of Hinduism but also that of Islam. In effect, he simultaneously made the 'other' look very familiar and yet very foreign.

Jān-i Jānān's engagement with Hinduism also brings to light a point that is obvious but yet worthy of remembering: translation is never a precise scientific process that produces a perfect representation of the original. In any translation enterprise, there are things that are left out, things that are retained and things that never enter into the translation arena. And as typified by Jān-i Jānān’s study of Hinduism, the decision of what gets left out, what stays in and what never becomes a part of the translation process is intimately connected to the translator's hermeneutical temperament and epistemological apparatus. Here, it should be stressed that Jān-i Jānān's sympathetic yet selective reading of Hinduism exemplifies problems of translation that are germane not only to medieval and early-modern Muslim studies of Hinduism but to any project of inter-religious, or for that matter intra-religious, translation that strives to translate the 'other’, the ‘past’ or the ‘unfamiliar’. Indeed, Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān's engagement with Hindu ideas and thought provides us with an excellent reminder that although translation is inescapable to the study of religion, it is also very very tricky. 79

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