

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Sufi method behind the Mughal ‘Peace with All’ religions: A study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘*taḥqīq*’ in Abu al-Fazl’s preface to the *Razmnāma*

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(Received 11 December 2020; revised 24 May 2021; accepted 25 May 2021)

## Abstract

The mystical method of *taḥqīq* (‘realization’ or ‘verification’ of divine truth), as promoted by the Andalusian thinker Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), was central to the project of managing religious difference in the Mughal empire. The key architect of deploying *taḥqīq* for imperial purposes was emperor Akbar’s senior minister, ideologue, and spiritual devotee, Abu al-Fazl. Specifically, I analyse how the concept of *taḥqīq* appears in Abu al-Fazl’s 1587 preface to the *Razmnāma* (‘Book of War’), the first translation into Persian of the Sanskrit religious epic *Mahābhārata*. The Mughal *Razmnāma* was a monumental achievement, the foremost product of Akbar’s push to translate non-Islamic religious works into Persian. In its elaborate preface, Abu al-Fazl clearly outlines that this translation was an exercise in *taḥqīq*, made possible by a sovereign who had achieved spiritual perfection, and he calls the Mughal empire a ‘Caliphate of *Ṭaḥqīq*’. As such, this study bridges two scholarly conversations which have been previously distinct. One is the renewed focus in Islamic studies on Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas, specifically on *taḥqīq* in the late medieval and early modern periods across the Islamic world. The other is the recent interest in Mughal historiography on *ṣulḥ-i kull* (Total Peace). This article positions Ibn ‘Arabi’s *taḥqīq* within an elite Persianate intellectual milieu that carried the concept to Mughal South Asia, and it demonstrates, through an analysis of the *Razmnāma*’s preface, that *taḥqīq* was politicized by Abu al-Fazl and Akbar to develop the imperial policy of managing religious difference, which came to be known as *ṣulḥ-i kull*.

**Keywords:** Mughals; Ibn ‘Arabi; *Mahābhārata*; *ṣulḥ-i kull*

## Introduction

In the early 1580s, during the reign of Jalal al-Din Akbar (r. 1554–1605), a committee of trained scholars completed a monumental achievement: the first

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translation into Persian of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, referred to as the *Razmnāma* ('Book of War'). This was perhaps the foremost project of Akbar's push to translate non-Islamic religious works into Persian for the benefit of all.<sup>1</sup> The Mughal court savant Abu al-Fazl 'Allami (d. 1605) described the intellectual and religious context for the creation of this translation in his 1587 preface to the work. This preface is best understood as an imperial manifesto for the management of religious difference in the new 'millennial' era of Akbar:

And now that the time for increasing the sight of the blind and fog-enveloped humanity—nay, the era of life for the dead-hearted of the elemental world—has arrived, and in this form of wondrous character [of Akbar] the inner meaning of sovereignty (*salṭanat*) and the secret of caliphate has been confirmed and realized (*ta'kīd-o-tahqīq yāfta*). . . And through the wondrous means of this chosen one of God, the House of the Despotism of Taqlīd (*bayt al-tasalluṭ-i taqlīd*), which over the passing of years and the turning of centuries had been strong of foundation, having collapsed, has become the House of the Caliphate of Tahqīq (*dār al-khilāfat-i tahqīq*).<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, Abu al-Fazl is ecstatic about the future of the world. A long era of blindness and despotic *taqlīd*, 'imitation' or total adherence to precedent, was coming to an end thanks to the thoroughly divinized personage of the emperor. The era was being overturned for a new dispensation, the 'Caliphate of Tahqīq'. I argue that *tahqīq* in this text, meaning 'verification' or 'realization', is the apex of a *bāṭini* (inward or esoteric) approach for deriving universal truths from both scripture and cosmos dating back to the Andalusī Sufi and theorist of human perfection Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). In this view, no single religion or religious text could rightfully claim exclusive transcendent truth for itself. As such, I also assert that the ethos of *tahqīq*, as it appears in this preface, went hand-in-hand with the radically universalist policy of *ṣulḥ-i kull*, 'Total Peace'.<sup>3</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi's impact on Mughal cosmology and sovereignty has been long established. One cannot deny the dual impact, especially during Akbar's

<sup>1</sup> Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Chapter 3. Truschke's book on Sanskrit literature at the Mughal court is a welcome balance to a field which has, until quite recently, focused on Persian literati and their works.

<sup>2</sup> Abu al-Fazl Ibn Mubarak, 'Muqaddama', in *Mahabharat: Buzurgtarin-i Manzumah-i Kuhnah-yi Mawjud-i Jahan bih Zaban-i Sanskrit [Razmnāmah]* (*Mahabharata: The Oldest and Longest Sanskrit Epic*), (eds) S. M. Reza Jalali Naini and N. S. Shukla (Tehran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri, 1979–1981), p. 4. All translations from the preface are my own.

<sup>3</sup> *Ṣulḥ-i kull* had yet to become an operative term by the time of the *Razmnāma*'s completion. This changed as the millennial aspect of Akbar's reign took more definitive shape and the *ṣulḥ-i kull* ideal was retroactively applied to previous years and imperial projects. See the article by Jos Gommans and Said Reza Huseini as well as the framework article by A. Azfar Moin in this special issue. The exclusivism mentioned here, according to Jan Assmann, is inherent to monotheisms. See Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

reign, of so-called *waḥdat al-wujūd* ('Oneness of Being'), the metaphysical claim that everything in existence is a manifestation of one or more of God's perfect attributes, and *al-insān al-kāmil* ('Perfect Human'), the archetypal and often physically embodied human that is the full actualization of all of those attributes.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps by virtue of its relatively unassuming appearance as just one more Form II Arabic verbal noun, however, *tahqīq* has only recently been observed as a distinct term at work in the Mughal elite milieu. In her book *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*, historian Audrey Truschke points to the term as it exists in the preface to the *Razmnāma*. She rightly notes the term's opposition to *taqlīd*, the 'blind following' of precedent, legal or otherwise, often castigated by Muslim intellectuals of the early modern period, and she defines *tahqīq* as 'inquiry' and 'an active investigation that admits new sources of wisdom, including Sanskrit texts'.<sup>5</sup> One can even go further to say that *tahqīq* had revolutionary importance for Islamic epistemologies in that it radically expands the sources of divine Truth (*ḥaqq*) beyond the scriptural canon of Islam. As a philosophical method, it unapologetically affirms the epistemological value of *all* scripture and thus rejects all forms of religious exclusivism and aligns with the prerogative of *ṣulḥ-i kull*, effectively a variant of universalism in which religions must be reconciled to one another and coexist in 'Total Peace'. This argument will be borne out through a close analysis of Abu al-Fazl's preface, but first more must be said of *tahqīq*'s progression from the time of Ibn 'Arabi to the time of the preface's completion in 1587. We must examine the philosophical nature of *tahqīq* and how it developed over the centuries, mixing with other religious trends and political institutions, to provide a foundation for an imperial policy that outlawed all exclusivist views of religious truth.

### Ibn 'Arabi and early *tahqīq*

In 1165, Ibn 'Arabi was born in Murcia, Andalus (Muslim-controlled southern Iberia) to a well-positioned family. His father was employed in service to government—first the local government of Murcia and then the Almohad Caliphate (1147–1248) in Seville. For a time, Ibn 'Arabi followed in his father's footsteps but, after several religious experiences, eventually forsook his career and took up the Sufi path. In the beginning of the thirteenth century, he left Andalus and migrated west, staying in Mecca for an extended period and then travelling throughout the Levant, Anatolia, and Iraq before finally settling in

<sup>4</sup> Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, with special reference to Abul Fazl, 1556–1605* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975); Irfan Habib, 'A Political Theory for the Mughal Empire—A Study of the Ideas of Abu'l Fazl', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 59 (1998), pp. 329–340. These authors have shown, in greater detail, the intellectual debt that Abu al-Fazl owed to the work of Ibn 'Arabi and his followers. For another reference to a Mughal ruler as the Perfect Human, see Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, *The Baburnama in English (Memoirs of Babur)*, (trans.) Annette Beveridge (London: Luzac and Co., 1922), Appendix D.

<sup>5</sup> Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, p. 128.

Damascus. After a productive and prolific life of writing and teaching, which earned him the title ‘The Greatest Shaykh’, he died in Damascus in 1240.<sup>6</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi scholars believe that he wrote hundreds of works, with only a small percentage still extant today. Fewer still have received critical editions. Nevertheless, two of his books—the *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*) and the *Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*)—are perhaps unanimously recognized as his most influential works.<sup>7</sup> The *Revelations* is an expansive work that elaborates upon the concepts found in the *Bezels*. The *Bezels*, however, has received far more commentaries as well as references in other works. The overwhelming popularity of the *Bezels*, for both the shaykh’s supporters and his critics, is likely to be due to the work’s comparative brevity and provocative nature. As a concise and oft-interpreted work, then, the *Bezels* was essential to the spread of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas throughout Islamic civilizations from the late medieval to early modern periods.<sup>8</sup>

To begin to understand the impact of Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy, and *taḥqīq* more specifically, on Abu al-Fazl and the Mughals, a brief overview of that philosophy is required. We can start by stating that his cosmology of God’s immanent divinity in creation effectively re-enchanted the world. His view of a divinized cosmos, as Michael Ebstein has effectively demonstrated, was likely to have been influenced by the Andalusī mystic and emanationist philosopher Ibn Masarra (d. 931), whose Neoplatonic works predated the arrival of Sufism in Spain. In addition to being a Sufi, then, Ibn ‘Arabi belonged to a long tradition of Muslim Neoplatonism, which itself dates back to the origins of Isma‘ili Shi‘i cosmology or even further.<sup>9</sup>

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s unique contribution to this tradition, the entire universe becomes infinitely more significant as *ḥaqq*, divine truth, and one of God’s Names, can be found in all things, but *ḥaqq* can only be perceived through *taḥqīq*. In brief, *taḥqīq* is the process for seeing beneath the surface (*zāhir*) of created manifestations (*mazāhir*) and unveiling (*kashf*) the *ḥaqq* that resides in the interior (*bāṭin*) of those manifestations. These *ḥaqqs* are the realities or essential divine qualities of things, present ‘in the transcendent reality of the Universal Intellect (that is, the divine spirit)’, as William Chittick has put it.<sup>10</sup> In addition to being an epistemological method, *taḥqīq* is also the method for realizing the Perfect Human. By ascertaining God’s perfections, his *ṣifat* (attributes) and *ḥuqūq* (pl. *ḥaqq*) can then be actualized by the aspiring

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed biography of Ibn ‘Arabi’s life, see Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulfur*, (trans.) Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> William Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2005), pp. 1–10.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the spread and development of Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy, see William Chittick, ‘Ibn ‘Arabi and His School’, in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, (ed.) Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 49–79.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-‘Arabi and the Isma‘ili Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Regarding Isma‘ili Neoplatonism, particularly that promoted by the Brethren of Purity (*ikhwān al-safā*), the secretive ninth-century philosophical collective and another probable influence on Ibn ‘Arabi, see Ian Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Brethren of Purity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, p. 77.

seeker, the *muḥaqqiq*. The seeker is meant to ‘verify’ and understand *ḥaqq* of their own accord, rather than through imitation of another or ‘rote learning’, both of which constitute *taqlīd*.<sup>11</sup>

Although *ḥaqq*, often used interchangeably with *ḥaqīqat* (‘reality’), can be found in all existing things, it is even more evident in the Quran and Sunna, which are codices of infinite meaning for the shaykh. Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabi’s innovative interpretation of scripture and Hadith is the backbone of his philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Without his creative *taḥqīqī* readings of the Quran, several of his most controversial ideas would have been without support. The shaykh derives even the method of *taḥqīq* itself from the Hadith corpus: ‘Your soul has a *ḥaqq* against you, your Lord has a *ḥaqq* against you, your guest has a *ḥaqq* against you, and your spouse has a *ḥaqq* against you. So, give to each that has a *ḥaqq* its *ḥaqq*.’<sup>13</sup> There is also reason to believe that the highly Quranic nature of his work is one of the primary reasons why it was so readily received by Muslims. This firm foundation in scripture is what separated Ibn ‘Arabi from other theorists with similar ideas and influences.<sup>14</sup> To put it plainly, Ibn ‘Arabi broke dogmatic restraints on scriptural interpretations through *taḥqīq*, and he was entirely *Islamic* in doing so.<sup>15</sup>

In two sections of the *Bezels of Wisdom*, the shaykh uses Quranic stories, innovatively interpreted, to put forth a universalist theory of the truth behind all religion that presages the reconciliation of religious doctrines that occurs in Abu al-Fazl’s preface to the *Razmnāma*. In the passages of the *Bezels* devoted to the wisdom of the prophets Moses and Noah, Ibn ‘Arabi develops his stance on paganism and idolatry.<sup>16</sup> As for Moses, the shaykh positions the prophet and the pharaoh in a state of dialectical tension, declaring that both are particular

<sup>11</sup> For more on Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of *taḥqīq*, see Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, pp. 77–82; and William Chittick, ‘Ibn ‘Arabi’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-arabi/>, [accessed 14 July 2021].

<sup>12</sup> Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, pp. 17–18: ‘In his view, each word of the Qur’an—not to mention its verses and chapters—has an indefinite number of meanings, all of which are intended by God. Proper recitation of the Qur’an opens up the reader to new meanings at every reading. “When meaning repeats itself for someone who is reciting the Qur’an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance” (F. IV 367.3).’

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> James Winston Morris, ‘Ibn ‘Arabi and his Interpreters. Part II: Influences and Interpretations’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986), p. 740. Morris has shown how many of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas were similar to other Andalusi philosophers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These include Ibn Sab’in, polemically targeted by Ibn Khaldun, and Awhad al-Din Balyani, a purveyor of cosmology akin to *wahdat al-wujūd*. These similarities may be the result of their common intellectual heritage leading back to Ibn Masarra. See Ebsstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*.

<sup>15</sup> Shahab Ahmed argues that Islam—although many have equated it with *shari’a* and legalism in their studies—is defined by exploration of revelation (that is, the Quran), which is reflective of the larger reality of Divine Truth. From this perspective, Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy, which is in perpetual conversation with both revelation and Divine Truth, falls well within the realm of Islam in spite of its controversial status among the religion’s traditionalist interpreters. See Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> The *Bezels of Wisdom* are named as such in that each individual ‘bezel’ (*faṣṣ*) contains the ‘wisdom’ (*ḥikma*) of one of the prophets named in the Quran. There are bezels devoted to prophets ranging from most well-known (Muhammad) to the most obscure (Luqman).

manifestations of God acting according to His plan. As such, the pharaoh cannot be condemned for simply playing his role. Furthermore, the shaykh emphasizes the pharaoh's near-death conversion, declaring that his belief was accepted by God, thereby nullifying his past sins.<sup>17</sup> Ibn 'Arabi's view on the pharaoh in particular became a common critique from polemicists who maintained that God could not have possibly accepted pharaoh's 'submission' immediately before death.<sup>18</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi's rehabilitation of pagans in the Quran continues in his section on Noah, wherein he elaborates on the presence of God in all things, even idols and humans. This *Bezel* contains much of what Sufis in the future would begin to say about paganism and idolatry in the post-Mongol age. It is worthwhile here to give an example of the shaykh's *tahqiq* through scriptural interpretation, since the commentator and translator Ralph Austin states in relation to this section that 'Ibn 'Arabi's approach to the Qur'anic material in this chapter is, at best, reckless, and, at worst, flagrantly heretical.'<sup>19</sup> For example,

The Prophet connected knowledge of the Real [al-ḥaqq] with knowledge of the self (or soul), saying: 'Whoever knows himself (or his soul) knows his Lord' (*man 'arafa nafsahu 'arafa rabbahu*). And God said: 'We shall show them Our signs on the horizons,' meaning the outside world, 'and in themselves (or in their souls),' meaning the inside world, 'until it becomes evident to them,' meaning to the observer, 'that He is the Real' (Qur'an 41:53), in that you are His form, and He is your spirit.<sup>20</sup>

This passage, in which the shaykh firmly established the interconnected natures of God and humankind, is a model for *tahqiqi* interpretation which occurs constantly in the *Bezels*. Ibn 'Arabi begins with a Hadith oft-cited by Sufis and connects it to the Quran, which he then interprets in his own *bāṭinī* (esoteric) way. Here, knowing the soul is equated with knowing one of God's signs. God's signs—rather than simply being evidence that God has created the world—become evidence for his immanent divinity in that world and also in mankind.<sup>21</sup> This principle of God's immanence is then applied to the

<sup>17</sup> For Ibn 'Arabi's commentary on this Quranic account (Quran 10:88–90), see Ibn 'Arabi, *Bezels of Wisdom*, (trans.) R. W. J. Austin (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 250–266. Arabic: Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, (ed.) Abul Ela Afifi (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1966), pp. 197–213.

<sup>18</sup> Concerning the polemics against Ibn 'Arabi, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Ibn 'Arabi, *Bezels*, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn 'Arabi, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Fusus al-Hikam: An Annotated Translation of 'The Bezels of Wisdom'*, (trans.) Binyamin Abrahamov (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 37. Arabic: Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> On the following page, it is further developed through the Quran that God is both immanent and transcendent at once: 'God said: "There is nothing like Him" (Quran 42:11), thus making Himself transcendent, and "He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing" (ibid.), thus likening Himself to creation. (However), when He says "there is nothing like His likeness (*kamithlihi*)", He likens Himself to creation and makes Himself two, and when He says "the All-Hearing the All-Seeing", He makes Himself transcendent and united.' Ibn 'Arabi, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Fusus*, p. 38. Arabic: Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 70.

story of Noah, whose efforts to proselytize the pagans of his day came to naught. Ibn 'Arabi justifies the people's rejection of monotheism, saying,

In their [the pagans'] deceit they said: 'Do not abandon your gods, do not abandon Wadd, Suwa', Yaghuth, Ya'uq and Nasr' (Qur'an 71:23). If they renounced their gods, they would not know the Real in the measure of their renouncement, for the Real is reflected in every worshiped god, whether one knows or does not know (this fact).<sup>22</sup>

He states explicitly, then, that worship in and of itself is laudable since all things are reflections of *al-ḥaqq*. It is impossible to worship anything other than God.

It must be stated here, despite writings such as these, that Ibn 'Arabi was not in any practical sense an antinomian mystic or political revolutionary. In a 1213 letter to the Seljuk sultan Kayka'us I, he advocated a strong *shar'ī* stance against the public religion of non-Muslims: 'I tell you that among the worst things that can befall Islam and Muslims . . . are the ringing out of church bells, the public display of unbelief and the elevation of words of worship of other than God (*shirk*).'<sup>23</sup> Many Sufis who integrated his philosophy into their own felt similarly.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Ibn 'Arabi's works contained radical possibilities for governance and religious reconciliation to which the largely apolitical shaykh did not himself subscribe.

These potentialities had been actualized by the Mughal era. The Ibn 'Arabian esteem for idols appears in Abu al-Fazl's writings in the late sixteenth century, wherein he censures Muslims who call idol worshippers 'idiots':

All [the inhabitants of this land] believe in the unity of God. As for the honor they show to images made of stone, wood, and other things that idiots consider idol worship, it is not so. The writer of this felicitous book has sat conversing with many wise and righteous men, and it is clear that they fashion images of some who have approached the court of the Purified One as aids to prevent the mind from wandering and render worship of God indispensable. In all their practices and customs,

<sup>22</sup> Ibn 'Arabi, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Fusus*, p. 40. Brackets are my own. Arabic: Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in David Thomas, 'Islam and the Religious Other', in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, (eds) David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 163.

<sup>24</sup> Both Shankar Nair and Muzaffar Alam have written how one's proclivity for Ibn 'Arabi's teachings did not preclude scrupulous adherence to Islamic law. M. Alam, 'The Debate Within: A Sufi Critique of Religious Law, *Tasawwuf* and Politics in Mughal India', *South Asian History and Culture* 2 (2011), pp. 138–159, is an excellent study that details the wide spectrum of Sufi belief in the Mughal period. He shows how Sufis received, interpreted, and reinterpreted Ibn 'Arabi's teachings in varied ways, some for more ecumenical aims and others for exclusivist ends. Nair points specifically to Muhibb Allah Ilahabadi (d. 1648), a pious Sufi whose worldview supported the idea that the writings of different religions have truth value: S. Nair, *Translating Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), Chapter 3.

they seek favor from the world-illuminating sun and count the holy essence of incomparable God as higher than action.<sup>25</sup>

In this passage, Abu al-Fazl asserts the philosophy of God's unity as a means to defend the worship of idols. In this view, the idols are loci of divinity which render worship possible. As the last sentence also denotes, the author had no quarrel with polytheists who pay proper homage to Akbar ('Purified One' and 'world-illuminating sun'), another relatable or comparable manifestation of divinity (*mazhar-i haqq*) to make up for the fact that God is 'incomparable'.

This way of thinking about God and religion is a clear descendant of the universalism found in the *Bezels of Wisdom*, which Ibn 'Arabi justified through constant reference to scripture. The shaykh emphasizes this theme of God's comparability and incomparability, or his simultaneous immanence and transcendence, through poetry:

If you insist only on His transcendence, you restrict Him,  
 And if you insist only on His immanence you limit Him.  
 If you maintain both aspects you are right,  
 An Imam and a master in the spiritual sciences.  
 Whoso would say He is two things is a polytheist,  
 While the one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him.  
 Beware of comparing Him if you profess duality,  
 And, if unity, beware making Him transcendent.  
 You are not He and you are He and  
 You see him in the essences of things both boundless  
 And limited.<sup>26</sup>

Both immanence and transcendence, manifestation and non-manifestation, are imperfect descriptors of God's nature; thus, both non-monotheist and monotheist—Hindu and Muslim in the Mughal context—can be equally wrong in their belief. As such, it is the *tahqiq* practitioner's task to unite in the mind these seemingly polar opposites. I assert that the translation of the *Mahābhārata* and its preface are meant to aid the religious communities of the Mughal empire in performing this paradoxical act of *tahqiq* to realize their perfection: one can hold in mind the idea of a transcendent God outside of the cosmos while still recognizing the emperor as an immanent manifestation of God's divinity.

### The post-Mongol reception, development, and application of *tahqiq*

While similarities between Ibn 'Arabi's writings and those of Abu al-Fazl are clearly observable, to say that Abu al-Fazl and Akbar were following their own unmediated interpretation of the shaykh's philosophy would be to omit centuries of historical developments between the time of the shaykh and the 1580s. Beginning after the death of Ibn 'Arabi in 1240, the *muḥaqqiqs*—those

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, p. 152.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn 'Arabi, *Bezels*, p. 75. Arabic: Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 70.

in the tradition of the shaykh were grouped by their adherence to *taḥqīq*—greatly expanded upon his ideas of perfection and religious universalism as part of the institutionalization and popularization of his thought. This is the process by which so-called *wujūdi* philosophy was eventually uprooted from its relatively quietist Sufi context and resituated in the political sphere to suit the aims of empire.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy first spread to his stepson Sadr al-Din Qunawi (d. 1274) and other immediate followers in the mid- to late thirteenth century before synthesizing with Sufism at large. That synthesis was largely due to the broad popularity of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām* (*Bezels of Wisdom*), its many commentaries, and the degree to which early Sufi adopters—especially the loosely defined Kubrawiyya order—packaged his work in easily understandable poetry and prose.<sup>27</sup> When it comes to poetry, of course, one must not neglect to mention the contribution of the poet and Suhrawardi Sufi Fakhr al-Din ‘Iraqi, whose work brought the shaykh’s thought to a much larger audience.<sup>28</sup> The acceptance of his philosophy was also spurred forward by dramatic shifts in Islamic history, namely the Mongol invasion and the subsequent material rise in the power of Sufi institutions.

According to Azfar Moin, the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258 deprived rulers of their primary means to the ritual investiture that could tie them to a sacred chain of being which stretched back to Muhammad and God and was embodied in the caliph’s person. As a result, kings were forced to seek out new sources of sacral power. Among them were Sufi saints, both living and enshrined, whose *wilāya* (spiritual power and proximity to God) was vigorously sought by Turkic and Mongol sovereigns. These rulers, then, patronized saints, shrines, and Sufi orders whose lineages were typically traced to ‘Ali, the Prophet’s nephew and a man of immense spiritual power in his own right.<sup>29</sup> As an enchanted framework which sacralizes the world and allows for the ascension of Perfect Humans, then, Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy meshed quite well with the rising clout of institutionalized Sufism in the service of

<sup>27</sup> Regarding the *Fusus* and its commentaries, as well as the generations of scholars following Ibn ‘Arabi, see Chittick, ‘Ibn ‘Arabi and His School’, pp. 49–79. On the Kubrawiyya’s embrace of Ibn ‘Arabi and their consequent development of his philosophy, see Seyed Shehabeddin Mesbahi, ‘The Reception of Ibn ‘Arabi’s School of Thought by Kubrawi Sufis’, PhD thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 2001; on Ibn ‘Arabi in Sufi didactic poetry, namely that of Mahmud Shabestari and his commentator Muhammad Lahiji, see Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995). These men were articulators of *taḥqīq* par excellence, emphasizing the universalist elements of Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy for the post-Mongol age. As for Kubrawi prose, the Transoxianan Sufi theorist Aziz Nasafi deserves special mention for his ability to summarize and simplify the concepts of *wujūd*, *al-insān al-kāmil*, and *taḥqīq*. See Lloyd Ridgeson, *Persian Metaphysics and Mysticism: Selected Treatises of ‘Aziz Nasafi* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> William Chittick, ‘ERĀQĪ, FAḲR-al-DĪN EBRĀHĪM’, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/eraqi>, [accessed 13 July 2021].

<sup>29</sup> A. Azfar Moin, ‘The Political Significance of Saint Shrines in the Persianate Empires’, in *The Persianate World*, (eds) Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 105–124; and A. Azfar Moin ‘Sovereign Violence: Temple Destruction in India and Shrine Desecration in Iran and Central Asia’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (2015), pp. 467–596.

sovereigns. As a system of thought with both political utility and broad acceptability among Sufis, Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy—including *tahqīq*, of course—quickly spread throughout the Islamic world.

The late medieval and early modern periods were the apex of *tahqīq* as an elite cultural phenomenon expanding the range of acceptable sources of knowledge, as opposed to *taqlīd*, which represented intellectual stagnation.<sup>30</sup> Recently, Khaled el-Rouayheb has written how Sufi *tahqīq* arrived in the Ottoman Middle East in the late seventeenth century during the migration of many Sufis from India. These Sufis brought *tahqīq* from the Persianate Mughal realm to the Ottoman domain, most significantly *bilād al-sham*, Egypt, and the Hijaz.<sup>31</sup> To be certain, this was indeed the *tahqīq* of Ibn ‘Arabi, but why was it coming from India when Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought had presumably arrived in India from the Middle East in the first place? In truth, the moment of *tahqīq*’s broad popularity had already passed. What arrived from India in the mid- to late seventeenth century was the remnant of a longer tradition.<sup>32</sup>

As Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Evrim Binbas have shown, *tahqīq* in Iran and the larger Middle East reached its peak during the reign of the Timurids and the rise of the Safavids in which *tahqīq* could be used for political ends well beyond what Ibn ‘Arabi could have imagined.<sup>33</sup> For Binbas, this turn to *tahqīq* is best represented in the person of Sharaf al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi, the author of the *Zafarnama* and the mastermind behind Timur’s sovereign legend as *ṣāhibqirān* (‘Lord of Conjunction’) and *insān-i kāmīl*. As a self-identified member of the *ahl-i kashf wa tahqīq* (‘People of Unveiling and Verification’), Yazdi believed in the unity of existence and occult interpretation of the Quran in the vein of Ibn ‘Arabi. This Timurid example is especially relevant for considering *tahqīq* in the Mughal context since the Mughals themselves inherited the Timurid legacy.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Abu al-Fazl and Yazdi shared the same profession:

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Melvin-Koushki, ‘Tahqīq vs. Taqlīd in the Renaissances of Western Early Modernity’, *Philological Encounters* 3 (2018), pp. 193–249. In this article, Melvin-Koushki argues for *tahqīq* as an early modern Islamicate, progressivist ethos, also contrasting it with *taqlīd*, as a way of complicating traditional Great Divergence style narratives of philology and intellectual history.

<sup>31</sup> Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), Chapters 7–9. For el-Rouayheb, ‘Sufi *tahqīq*’ is but one kind of *tahqīq* which was in vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is unclear what the connection between them may have been other than a shared regard for independence and rigour in scholarly pursuits.

<sup>32</sup> Zachary Valentine Wright, *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020) has also pointed to a more limited sort of *tahqīq*, visions of Muhammad which verify juridical assertions, at work in the Maghribi Tijaniyya Sufi order. This may very well have been an intellectual descendant of the North African Ash‘ari *tahqīq*—mentioned by el-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History*, Chapters 4 and 5—which encouraged believers to ‘verify’ their belief in the Muslim creed in order to be assured of their salvation in the hereafter.

<sup>33</sup> Ilker Evrim Binbas, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). See footnote 30 for reference to Melvin-Koushki.

<sup>34</sup> Regarding the *ahl-i kashf wa tahqīq*, see Binbas, *Intellectual Networks*, Chapter 3. On Yazdi’s contribution to Timur’s posthumous legend, see Chapter 7.

they lived in total service to the divinizing aims of their sovereigns, writing sacred 'histories' and panegyrics for their respective patrons.<sup>35</sup> In other words, they both sought to demonstrate how their patrons had become fully realized (*muḥaqqaq*) Perfect Humans.

Melvin-Koushki shows how the Timurid *tahqīq* revolution carried on into the Safavid and Mughal empires.<sup>36</sup> Although he emphasizes the aspect of *tahqīq* as progressivism and scholarly verification, he nevertheless notes the term's connection to Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy as a method for human realization and knowledge acquisition. More importantly, however, he demonstrates how *tahqīq* had been synthesized with several other intellectual traditions by the time of the Safavid rise to power, most notably during the reigns of Shah Isma'il (r. 1501–1504) and Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524–1576). This is best exemplified in the school of Isfahan which pioneered what would come to be called '*irfān*' ('gnosis'), a mixture of Ibn 'Arabian, Illuminationist, and Twelver thought. The Isfahani school produced famous *muḥaqqiqs* such as Mir Damad (d. 1631/32) and Mulla Sadra (d. 1636). As for the former, he counted himself among the *ahl-i tahqīq* in stating that the cosmos and scripture alike are to be read for their divine realities, their *ḥaqqs*.<sup>37</sup>

Although Ibn 'Arabi's thought was first spread to India by migrating Sufis,<sup>38</sup> the intellectual history of *tahqīq* in the Mughal empire was linked with the religious and political dynamics in Iran, spurred by the renaissance of Neoplatonism across the eastern Islamic world after the Mongol invasions.<sup>39</sup> In this vein, Melvin-Koushki traces the line of *tahqīq* to the Mughals as represented by Abu al-Fazl's language in a 1584 *firmān* concerning the institution of the millennial *ilāhi* calendar, written only three years prior to the completion of the preface to the *Razmnāma*:

. . . Having freed, that is, the neck of their doctrine from the chain of imitation—repudiated by the prophet-leaders of every nation and people, its flagrant and corrupting effects denounced in every religion in the most vivid of terms—, they are to seek rather the means of verification. They are to pursue no universal or particular objective, down to the most minor, save by way of demonstrative proof and conclusive argument, and their perspicacious, perfecting minds, inspired by divine effluxion and

<sup>35</sup> The *Akbarnama* is in the same genre-bending category as its forebear, the *Zafarnama*. To refer to either of these as simple 'chronicles' (*tarikḥ*) would be a mistake.

<sup>36</sup> Melvin-Koushki, 'Tahqīq vs. Taqlīd', p. 235.

<sup>37</sup> This scientific approach to cosmos and *ḥaqq* is nearly synonymous to Shankar Nair's term 'wisdom' (standing in for a host of emic concepts such as *dhawq* ['tasting'], *kashf* ['unveiling'], and '*irfān* ['gnosis']'), which refers to 'a variety of knowing in which philosophical, dialectical discourse, on the one hand, and literary, metaphorical, paradoxical, or otherwise *non-philosophical* expression, on the other, are deemed to be non-contradictory or even complementary in purpose and function': Nair, *Translating Wisdom*, p. 17. To this I would also add sciences, 'occult' or otherwise, such as astrology, letterism, and dream interpretation, to name just a few.

<sup>38</sup> See William Chittick, 'Notes on Ibn al-'Arabi's Influence in the Subcontinent', *The Muslim World* 82 (1992), pp. 218–241.

<sup>39</sup> See the article by Gommans and Huseini in this special issue.

occult guidance and aid in accordance with the sublimest of principles, are to continually consider scientific truths and philosophical complexities.<sup>40</sup>

In this decree, Abu al-Fazl presents the same dichotomy between *taḥqīq* and *taqlīd* as the quoted passage in the introduction to this article and reflected in the aforementioned history of *taḥqīq*. Here imitation is a chain that corrupts the communities of the world, whereas verification should be sought by all. Only through that means can one sufficiently attain uncorrupted divine truth.

This version of *taḥqīq*, as represented by Abu al-Fazl and other political ideologues such as the aforementioned Sharaf al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi, then, was the result of centuries of development that was not confined to Sufism alone. What I have attempted here is to give an, admittedly brief, overview of *taḥqīq*. As of today, no comprehensive history of *taḥqīq* yet exists. It will be the task of future scholarship to fill in the gaps of our knowledge. What we can know now, however, is the particular use and importance of *taḥqīq* as it appears in the preface to the *Razmnāma*.

### Reconciling religions by translating scriptures: *taḥqīq* vs. *taqlīd*

A primary motif arising from recent scholarship on Mughal-sponsored translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian is the relationship between translation and religio-cultural reconciliation. Key questions that scholars have grappled with are whether the texts in translation were religious in nature and whether the terms ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Islam’ are beneficial for understanding this process.<sup>41</sup> Carl Ernst, for example, in his combined study of Arabic and Persian translations of Sanskrit texts—the *Razmnāma* among them—questioned whether pre-modern Arabic and Persian translations of Sanskrit texts were actually representing a ‘Hindu religion’.<sup>42</sup> In his perspective, only colonial-period and later translations could be said to represent Hinduism as we might think of it now. As such, the view of Hinduism as a distinct religion is the product of British colonialism.<sup>43</sup> Building on this foundation, Ernst declares that the

<sup>40</sup> Melvin-Koushki, ‘Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd’, p. 213. (Translation is Melvin-Koushki’s.)

<sup>41</sup> As has already been mentioned, Truschke’s research in *Cultural Encounters* on the Persian translations of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramayana* has been essential to this article’s genesis. She herself, as the title of the work implies, tends to see these translations as attempts at cultural reconciliations rather than religious ones. Muzaffar Alam ‘World Enough and Time: Religious Strategy and Historical Imagination in an Indian Sufi Tale’, in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, (eds) Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), pp. 107–136, has written how the Sufi master ‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti’s *Mir’āt al-Makhlūqāt* brought together normative Islamic texts and a number of Puranas to meld Islamic and Hindu cosmologies and eschatologies, while still somewhat subordinating Hinduism to Islam. It was an attempt on the part of a Muslim to take Hindu concepts seriously. Alam sees his subject text as an act of religious reconciliation, albeit one without much political consequence.

<sup>42</sup> Carl Ernst, ‘Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages’, *Iranian Studies* 36 (2003), pp. 173–195.

<sup>43</sup> Outside of Translation studies, this view of Hinduism and the problem of religion extend into the study of South Asian history in general. See Romila Thapar, ‘Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity’, *Modern Asian Studies* 23 (1989), pp. 209–231; and also Heinrich von Stietencron, ‘Religious Configurations in Pre-Muslim India

preface to the *Razmnāma* as a whole, despite Abu al-Fazl's religiously charged language and philosophical inquests, was a political project in service of Akbar's aims. Shankar Nair, by contrast, argues for a return to the category of religion, albeit more cautiously and with careful attention to its historically contingent and constructed nature such that emic classifications modulate the etic.<sup>44</sup> He turns to the problems of translation and religion in his work on the *Jūg Bāsishṭ*, the Persian translation of the *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha*.<sup>45</sup> Nair analyses the *Jūg Bāsishṭ* in its intellectual, religious, and linguistic contexts to learn how 'early modern Hindu and Muslim intellectuals co-existed, interacted, and comprehended one another's religious and philosophical traditions'.<sup>46</sup>

While religious and political motives are difficult to separate, it is nevertheless salient to point out that the formation of new empires has often created social and political conditions that lead to the rationalization of religious ideas and practices, giving rise to a heightened self-consciousness of religious identity and difference.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the resolution of religious contradictions was central to the Eurasian empires of the sixteenth century, and the Mughals were no exception. In her study of early Ottoman conversion narratives, Tijana Krstić asserts that the Ottomans and Safavids were very much a part of the so-called 'Age of Confessionalization', when European polities rigidified along religious lines to form disciplined and cohesive subject peoples.<sup>48</sup> In roughly the same period of time, the Safavids embraced a rigorous Twelver Shi'ism, creating Sunni and Sufi Others, while the Ottomans moved towards Hanafi Sunnism and persecuted Shi'is (often more vigorously than non-Muslim minorities). Although Krstić's study stops at Iran, her model can be expanded to include the Mughals who, beginning with Akbar, sought to classify and identify the religions of their realm, contributing to a renewed sense of religious identity among their subjects.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, making religions into distinct and comparable entities was the necessary prerequisite for

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and the Modern Concept of Hinduism', in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, (eds) Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (New Delhi and London: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 51, 81. For a contrasting view, see David Lorenzen, 'Who Invented Hinduism?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999), pp. 630–659.

<sup>44</sup> Nair, *Translating Wisdom*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> This rationalization is akin to that described by Clifford Geertz, "Internal Conversion" in Contemporary Bali', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 170–189. The Axial Age is the classic example of new imperial formations leading to the rise of new religious formations. On the impact of the Axial Age on religion and politics, see Alan Strathern, *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Nair effectively says as much when he—in contrast to scholars who de-emphasize religion—declares, 'Far from a religiously "ambiguous" or "vernacular" space, Mughal-era translations generally self-consciously present two discrete religious traditions—each with its own distinct scripture(s), religious law, ritual regimens, etc.—which can nevertheless be fruitfully compared with one another': Nair, *Translating Wisdom*, p. 8. See also the articles by Dalpat Rajpurohit and

*ṣulḥ-i kull*, a paradigm under which religions were made equal in their subordination to the emperor. This set the Mughals apart from their neighbours. In his letter to the Safavid Shah ‘Abbas, for instance, Akbar chides the Shi’i emperor for his persecution of the *Nuqtavi* sect, and he encourages the ruler to instead enact *ṣulḥ-i kull* for the benefit of his realm.<sup>50</sup> This demonstrates how *ṣulḥ-i kull* had become the Mughals’ institutionalized imperial approach to religions, whereas the Safavids and Ottomans embraced sectarian identities.

In this era then, at least, religion and religious identity had become defined social categories, antedating the arrival of British colonialism. Although the term *ṣulḥ-i kull* would be officially coined after the completion of the *Razmnāma*,<sup>51</sup> Abu al-Fazl touches on the concept through his reference to *taḥqīq* and through his equal regard for opposing religions in the preface, to which this article now turns.

Prior to mentioning *taḥqīq*, and even his reasons for translating the *Mahābhārata*, Abu al-Fazl characteristically begins with a panegyric for Akbar, who is a messianic figure in this work. The panegyric establishes the qualities of the emperor in order to make him the ideal, *ḥaqq*-seeing (*dāda-yi ḥaqq*) axial pivot from an era of *taqlīd* to one of *taḥqīq*.<sup>52</sup> Two of those passages of praise are especially relevant for emphasizing Akbar’s roles as a saint, a Perfect Human, and a protector of religion in order to promote him, as was mentioned in the introduction to this article, as the ‘chosen one of God’ by which the ‘house of the despotism of *taqlīd*’ can become ‘the house of the caliphate of *taḥqīq*’.

The first of these sections emphasizes Akbar’s supreme spiritual gifts and innate perfections (*kamālāt*). The emperor was initially not aware of these gifts and searched for a perfect being to emulate, until it became manifest that he himself was that being.

A bulwark of religion who, despite holy essential perfections (*kamālāt-i qudsiya-yi dhātiya*) and innate, God-given spiritual states—that even the observers of innate essences (*jawāhir-i fiṭrat*) and the connoisseurs of the inner and outer qualities of humankind (*bawāṭin-o-ḥawāhir-i insāniyat*) have rarely accomplished—became a seeker of the perfect being.<sup>53</sup>

[Verse] That which he possessed himself, he desired from a stranger!

Abu al-Fazl argues that the emperor encompasses and protects all religions as the Perfect Being who can see the merit in those religions as a manifestation of divinity. Akbar has the attributes or essential perfections of that archetypal figure who knows the ‘inner and outer qualities of humankind’. In other

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Christopher Atwood in this special issue for examples of Mughal and Mongol-era religious identities being shaped in engagement with imperial formations.

<sup>50</sup> A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 165. Also see the framework article by Moin in this special issue.

<sup>51</sup> On the coining of this term, see the article by Gommans and Huseini in this special issue.

<sup>52</sup> Abu al-Fazl, ‘*Muqaddama*’, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

words, he has fully realized the privileged spiritual rank of humankind—as Ibn ‘Arabi and his followers theorized it—due to their being made in God’s image (*‘alā sūratihī*) and also possessing God’s spirit or essence.<sup>54</sup>

Quite similar to the previous praiseworthy quality, Abu al-Fazl goes on to write that Akbar is a ‘bulwark of sainthood’:

A bulwark of sainthood (*wilāyat*), even though he hides himself beneath the cloak of concealment and veils—but some of those perfectly sincere disciples (*mūrīdān-i kāmīl-i ikhlās*), by way of orienting toward the qibla [Akbar’s person] and by means of correct sincerity, enabled themselves to discover the perfection of this great saint (*walī*)—it came to be abundantly manifest that even in the thick of worldly occupations, he, having immersed himself in contemplating the divine and witnessing its unending beauty, travels in the world of divine unity (*waḥdat*).<sup>55</sup>

This passage qualifies Akbar as a saint who is also a ‘guide’ (*murshid*) in that he is followed by disciples who are perfect in their sincerity. Furthermore, he is a perfect guide since, for Ibn ‘Arabi and his intellectual descendants, the saints are manifestations of the Perfect Human. In spite of the fact that Akbar must deal with worldly affairs as a temporal ruler, these disciples see him as he truly is due to their own status as Perfect Humans in the making. They realize that Akbar is ceaseless in his contemplation and witnessing of God’s divine beauty as he spiritually moves in the world of divine unity while still being attentive to his duties as a monarch.

After establishing the bona fides of Akbar’s spiritual and temporal rulership, Abu al-Fazl then describes what he considers to be the regretful condition of the world before Akbar, and why translation is a necessary means for overcoming that condition. For Abu al-Fazl and his patron, the main problem of the civilizations of the world is the conflict between religious communities: ‘According to his [Akbar’s] own perfect comprehension, he found the dispute between the Muhammadans, the Jews, and the Hindus to have increased, and the overabundance of their denial toward each other [’s faiths] has become clear.’<sup>56</sup> The reference to Jews and Hindus here should be considered idiomatically. While there were certainly Jews in the subcontinent at the time, this expression is a metonym for generalized religious difference in comparison to Islam. The emphasis on difference is rhetorically important since the central issue at hand is ‘dispute’ (*nizā*) and ‘denial’ (*inkār*) of each other’s doctrines (*‘itiqād*). He continues by equating the dispute and denial with ‘fault finding’ (*ta‘anut*) and ‘antagonism’ (*‘inād*). It is understood that this is largely the result of adherence to *taqlīd*—keeping to the established suppositions and scriptural truths of one’s own religion at the expense of others.

For Abu al-Fazl the malign influence of *taqlīd* is the work of a few specific groups within each religion, and he pulls no punches in naming each one of

<sup>54</sup> Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, pp. 166–167.

<sup>55</sup> Abu al-Fazl, ‘*Muqaddama*’, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

them. The first seems to be the elite class of both religions—the ‘*ulamā*’ of Islam and the Hindu Brahmins:

Also from each religious community is one group, considering themselves to be great men of religion, who has put forward the sayings of the abominable exaggerating know-nothings. Having done that, they have convinced the common people of arguments far from the straight path of knowledge through disguise and deception. These damned falsifiers have suppressed—sometimes from ignorance and sometimes from corruption, being driven by fanciful desires and greed—the books of the ancients, the wise words of the sages, and the measured works of past people (*‘amāl-i sanjīda-yi guzashtagān*) so that they might misrepresent them.<sup>57</sup>

This group is primarily guilty of misinforming others and knowledge suppression. The particular knowledge being suppressed is sage wisdom and ancient works. For the Mughals, these included Hellenic sources that were seen as either Hermetic or Zoroastrian, the very works that influenced figures like Ibn ‘Arabi and Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi al-Maqtul (d. 1195).<sup>58</sup> Both of these men were essential to the paradigm of sovereign embodiment at work in the Mughal court of this time.<sup>59</sup> As this is a preface to the *Mahābhārata*, however, the suppressed knowledge is also that of the ancient Brahmins, whose cosmology and philosophy form the subject of the latter section of the preface.

Abu al-Fazl continues to deal out criticisms to both Hindus and Muslims alike by directly accusing them of *taqlīd* and of preventing the common people from engaging in *taḥqīq*:

The bigots without religion and the leaders of the imitators of Hind see their own religion as the creed above all others. They believe that the superstitions (*muzakhrāfāt*) of their doctrines are above fault, due either to non-discernment (*bī-tamayyuzī*) or dishonest means, and they turn toward the path of imitation (*rah-i taqlīd*). They have taught the unsophisticated commoners (*sāda-lawḥān*) these few arguments, thereby holding them back from the *taḥqīq* of true meanings and, instead, firmly establishing them in false belief. All this while the appointed ones of the Ahmadi religion [Muslims], not knowing the highest of subjects and the noble sciences of the Brahmins, consider this group to have only mere trifles.<sup>60</sup>

Several points here are worthy of further address. First, the author directly relates *taqlīd* to religious exclusivism and a sense of supremacy, the very opposites of *ṣulḥ-i kull*. This perspective is common among both Hindus and

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–19.

<sup>58</sup> See the article by Gommans and Huseini in this special issue. *Ishraqi* rituals and terminology were used during Akbar’s reign as a way of aligning the emperor with the glory of the sun, the *nayyir-i azam* (‘The Greater Luminary’).

<sup>59</sup> Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, Chapter 5.

<sup>60</sup> Abu al-Fazl, ‘*Muqaddama*’, p. 19.

Muslims. Furthermore, Abu al-Fazl is castigating certain religious doctrines as ‘superstitions’, which are not recognized as such, effectively due to a lack of *tahqīq*. On the matter of *tahqīq*, he laments that *taqlīd* among intellectuals leads to a lack of *tahqīq* among the ‘unsophisticated commoners’, who are consequently unable to ascertain ‘true meanings’. This is another way of saying that they are prevented from reaching *ḥaqq*, as the *bāṭini* meanings are covered up by the surface meaning of a text and they are thus prevented from perfecting themselves. Abu al-Fazl recognizes that those surface meanings—which in his view are ‘superstitions’—are being taught as if they are essential doctrines, thereby resulting in bigotry. A final point of note in this quote is the author’s term for Islam, the adherents of which he rebukes for not considering the value of Hindu doctrines. Rather than saying ‘Islam’ outright, he calls it the *dīn-i ahmadī*, the religion of Ahmad or the Ahmadi religion. Although it may seem as if Abu al-Fazl is using baroque language to say ‘Islam’ in more words, it would be more correct to say that he is parochializing Islam by qualifying it as one religion among others: Ahmad’s (that is, Muhammad’s) religion. This is Abu al-Fazl’s method of criticism, *tahqīq*, which impartially considers the potential *ḥaqq* of the Quran and other scriptures, treating both Hinduism and Islam as flawed religions above which Akbar must stand.

Abu al-Fazl mostly criticizes religious scholars, but his last prolonged salvo of criticism, here more measured, is aimed at common Muslims who know little to nothing of their faith’s more mystically inclined thinkers:

As for the common Muslims, who have not read well the pages of their heavenly scriptures and have not opened the various histories of the past from the Chinese, Hindus, and others to take heed of their example—moreover they have not read the sayings of the great ones of their own community like Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, Ibn ‘Arabi, and others like them—they [the common Muslims] believe that humankind began only 7,000 or so years ago. They consider these scientific truths and fine points of understanding, widely known among the communities of the earth, to be among the results of the ideas of a 7,000-year-old humankind.<sup>61</sup>

The common Muslims suffer from a general lack of knowledge, whether of their own scriptures or of the histories of foreign peoples such as the Chinese or the people of Hind. The reference to the peoples further east to Muslim domains is itself an innovation marked by the new perspective of post-Mongol Islamic historical awareness, best represented by Rashid al-Din Tabib’s (d. 1318) *Jāmi’ al-Tawārikh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*). This universal history was one of the first of its kind, positioning Islam within a much larger world history, one that included the Mongols, the Franks, and the peoples of the subcontinent.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 19–20.

<sup>62</sup> For an extended overview of this compendium, its author, and their historical context, see Stefan T. Kamola, *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jami’ al-Tawarikh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). D. O. Morgan, ‘Rashīd al-Dīn Ṭāibī’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, (eds)

Abu al-Fazl, then, is accusing common Muslims of historical myopia that, if remedied, could serve to broaden perspectives and lessen the effects of *taqlid*.

Of equal note in the above passage is that the ‘great ones’ (*buzurgān*) here are known mostly for their metaphysical works. In fact, Abu al-Fazl mentions no jurist as a great religious figure. Additionally, Jafar al-Sadiq and Ibn ‘Arabi were also both claimed by different Muslim sects, the former for Shi’ism and the latter for Sunnism. The author was likely to have been purposeful in this juxtaposition, choosing to elide this sectarian tension. Of course, Ibn ‘Arabi’s mention here is also significant for his link to *taḥqīq*, but a lesser-known idea of Ibn ‘Arabi is his view of human history which is much closer to the Vedic model—discussed later in the preface—than the traditional Islamic view of 7,000 years. For the shaykh, there have been many Adams and many Islams.<sup>63</sup> Mentioning Ibn ‘Arabi in this context, then, was meant to emphasize how some Muslim thinkers—and never a representative of dogma—have, in Abu al-Fazl’s view, considered the question of the world’s age more rigorously, much like the ancient Brahmans.

The examples cited thus far have demonstrated the poor condition of the world according to Abu al-Fazl and his patron Akbar. To solve the problem of religious bigotry, the two propose *taḥqīq*, truth acquisition, and self-realization. Akbar himself is referred to in the preface as the ‘Verification-Demanding Mind’ (*khāṭir-i taḥqīq talab*), requiring his subjects to think beyond the typical restraints of their dogma. This necessitates the evaluation of varied sources of knowledge. The appreciation of those sources, however, is hampered by linguistic difference. The project of translation, then, is one of *taḥqīq* seeking to create a more perfect polity:

The Perceptive Intellect [Akbar] decided that the sacred scriptures of the two groups should be translated into the opponent’s language in order that both—by the Blessing of the Holy Breaths, His Majesty the Most Perfect of the Age—rise above their severe fault-finding and antagonism and become [instead] the pursuers of Truth (*ḥaqq*).<sup>64</sup>

In other words, Akbar believed that translation would serve to make *muḥaqqiqs* out of the believers of both religions. Abu al-Fazl continues by declaring what is meant to come after the end of ‘severe fault-finding’ and bigotry, stating ‘Being aware of the good and bad qualities of one another, they might then demonstrate beautiful effort (*masā’i-yi jamīla*) in the reformation of their spiritual states (*iṣlāḥ-i aḥwāl-i khūd*).’<sup>65</sup> *Taḥqīq* must necessarily lead to the perfection of individuals and their faiths, and Akbar oversees that process as the ‘Most Perfect of the Age’.

P. Bearman et al., [http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_6237](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6237), [accessed 8 December 2020].

<sup>63</sup> On this view of time, see Alam, ‘World Enough and Time’.

<sup>64</sup> Abu al-Fazl, ‘*Muqaddama*’, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

It is not just any kind of book that needs to be translated, however: it is specifically scripture, or holy texts of divine self-disclosure. These texts hold truths that must be impartially considered in order to eliminate religious conflict. The *Mahābhārata*, for Akbar and Abu al-Fazl, is an ancient scripture on par with (or perhaps even superior because of its antiquity) to the Quran—which nevertheless goes unmentioned—in terms of the wisdom it conveys. The latter refers to the book as ‘the writing of the skilled lords . . . [which] contains most of the doctrines of the Brahmans, there being not a single book from this group that is greater, more esteemed, or more-elaborated-upon (*mufaṣṣal-tar*) than it’.<sup>66</sup> As the Mughals were a minority government in charge of a Hindu majority, it is only natural then that the *Mahābhārata* would be among the first in line for translation. With this goal in mind, skilled and right-minded intellectuals with knowledge of Sanskrit were gathered together to sit ‘in deep reflection and pondering’ (*az ru-yi ta’ammūq-o-ta’ammul*) in order to translate the *Mahābhārata*. Upon completion of this project, Abu al-Fazl continues, members of different religions were then to distribute the translated text far and wide: ‘to the ends of the earth’ (*bih aṭrāf-o-aknāf-i ‘ālam*).<sup>67</sup> This statement may be a rhetorical flourish on the part of the author, but it reflects the preface’s general sentiment regarding Akbar’s role in the world’s perfection, its *taḥqīq*.

On the matter of said perfection, Abu al-Fazl further specifies how translation brings spiritual benefit, stating

Wherever the scripture of opposing religious communities are translated in a clear and common style with the understanding of the elect (*fahm-i khāṣṣ-pasand*), the unsophisticated commoners, having reached the *ḥaqīqat* (truth or reality) of the matter and being saved from the foolishness of the know-nothing posers (*nā-dānān-i dānā-numā*), orient themselves toward the goal of *ḥaqīqat*.<sup>68</sup>

Translations into the common tongue must be done by those with understanding to counteract ‘know-nothing posers’, presumably the same groups mentioned earlier. In doing so, even common people can grasp *ḥaqīqat*. By using *ḥaqīqat* in this way, Abu al-Fazl is stating that translation will aid the common people in *taḥqīq*, their pursuit of truth and self-perfection. It is only natural, according to the author, that this would lead to the end of bigotry and to the beginning of a new religious unity in which ‘the deniers, having reined in their denial, turn away from extremism (*bi-i’tidālī*)’ and in which ‘the unsophisticated believers (*mu’taqidān-i sāda-lawḥān*), having become a bit ashamed of their beliefs, might become seekers of truth (*ṭālib-i ḥaqq shavand*)’.<sup>69</sup> In other words, the *Mahābhārata*’s translation was meant to facilitate the creation of *muḥaqqiqs*, a class of believers who search for *ḥaqq*, divine ‘truth’, in all things.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

The remainder of the preface is complementary to this goal. Abu al-Fazl describes in greater detail why the *Mahābhārata* is important, while also defining Hindu concepts that readers will need to know. He is accurate, if a bit remedial, in his descriptions. He is concerned with the following issues, regarding which the *Mahābhārata* is enlightening: cosmogony, metaphysics, the antiquity of the earth, and the substance of the universe. Knowledge in each of these subjects is *ḥaqq*, and by knowing more, the communities of the earth come closer to perfection. In each case, however, traditional Islamic views are disrupted. Of course, this is no issue for Abu al-Fazl and his patron; rather, it is a positive feature of the text. By upsetting standard Islamic beliefs, the religion is then relativized as one more religion within the *ṣulḥ-i kull* paradigm. While this brief article is an inappropriate vehicle for an exhaustive cataloguing of all these points, two are worth closer inspection.

The question of the earth's age, as has already been mentioned, is one of the first mentioned in the preface. Abu al-Fazl states that it is, in fact, one of the most disagreed-upon issues in the subcontinent, whether one asks philosophers, ascetics, or jurists.<sup>70</sup> He also relates this topic to the importance, for both rulers and the common people, of learning from history. It is clear that Abu al-Fazl does not recognize a distinct boundary between genres like scripture and chronicle. The two are blurred together in the *Mahābhārata* since he believes it to contain both the bulk of Hindu doctrines as well as beneficial examples from which to learn. These lessons are the primary reason to know history:

Also, the minds of the masses of mankind—especially the great sultans—have a deep propensity to listen to the histories of the communities [of the earth] because God in his divine wisdom has made the science of history popular among their hearts—And this is reason for the historians' lesson—so that they would learn from the past, consider the present a gift, and spend their precious time with the things that God likes. Because of that, kings are all in greater need to hear of the conditions of the past.<sup>71</sup>

If the age of the world is far older than 7,000 years, then there is all the more history for people, and especially monarchs, to learn from and thereby perfect themselves. Historical awareness becomes necessary for the *taḥqīq* of all.

One other point to address is the composition and cosmology of the universe itself. Abu al-Fazl introduces the fact that Vedic cosmology purports the existence of five elements instead of four (water, earth, fire, and wind); the fifth element is *akāsha*, which the author has some difficulty describing. He states that if one consults with the common people of Hind, they seem to equate *akāsha* with the heavens (*āsmān-hā*), but the elite intellectuals declare that it is nothing other than the empty space also known as 'air' (*hawā*). Thus there is no 'thing' that can properly be called 'the heavens'. Within those pseudo-heavens are suspended the 'heavenly bodies' (*kawākib*), which are

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

the holy essences of great past generations that—by way of ascetic cultivation of the self and holy acts of worship—attained luminous forms and spiritual bodies and realized the embodiment of divine attributes and the imitation of divine reality. Thus, they became sovereign in degrees of ascension.<sup>72</sup>

The stars and planets, which both Persianate and Indic cosmology agree have influence over worldly affairs, are here said to be divine figures who ascended in ages past due to their ‘ascetic cultivation’ and ‘holy acts of worship’. The statement that they ‘realized the embodiment of divine attributes and the imitation of divine reality’ (*takhalluq bih-akhlāq-i ilāhī wa tashabbuh bih-awṣāf-i kamāhiya paydā karda*) is especially relevant for this study in that it is cognate with *taḥqīq* and the embodiment of the Perfect Human. To ‘realize’ (*paydā kardan*) is essentially the same principle behind *taḥqīq*. ‘*Awṣāf-i kamāhiya*’ can also be translated as the ‘attributes of the essences of things,’ or ‘attributes of things as they really are’. *Awṣāf* is also synonymous with *ṣifāt*, the attributes of God which are represented in created things. They are, in other words, the *ḥuqūq* of things that can be actualized in order to become a Perfect Human.

The point is that Abu al-Fazl attempts to either reconcile Hindu and Indic principles with Islamic and Persianate ones or to challenge Islamic beliefs. In the second note on cosmology, the Hindu belief in ascendant individuals is encapsulated in language that is coded with *taḥqīq*, or becoming perfect. In the first example, however, the age of the world is put into question, thereby rendering the original Islamic timeline obsolete. As the translation of the *Mahābhārata* is a millennial project completed near the beginning of the *ilāhī* calendar’s institution in 1584, this disruption of tradition is paramount. The Islamic conception of time could no longer be believed in good faith, but the advent of Akbar as a messianic figure allows for a new dispensation to replace it. Furthermore, with *taḥqīq*, one had no need to fear their own religion’s shortcomings, which were, after all, only the products of *taqlīd*. In other words, the age of *taqlīd* had ended, but the Caliphate of *taḥqīq* had only just begun, setting the stage for *ṣulḥ-i kull* or Total Peace.

The conditions of *taḥqīq*’s ascendancy lived on for at least a century, into the reign of Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), as the writings of ‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti (d. 1683), the Sufi shaykh and spiritual adviser to Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658), make evident. In these texts, the esteem given to Ibn ‘Arabi and his particular brand of Sufism remains unparalleled. As for his *Mir’at al-Asrār* (*Mirror of Secrets*), ‘Abd al-Rahman refers to both *taḥqīq* and Ibn ‘Arabi’s *‘ilm-i haqā’iq*, the science of divine realities, by name, while he also champions the prosperity brought about by *ṣulḥ-i kull*.<sup>73</sup> As any good Sufi would have at this time, he viewed each of these concepts as wholly Quranic, having read the book from a

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>73</sup> A. Azfar Moin, ‘III. The Millennial and Saintly Sovereignty of Emperor Shah Jahan According to a Court Sufi’, in *The Empires of the Near East and India: Source Studies of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal Literate Communities*, (ed.) Hani Khafipour (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 213.

*taḥqīqī* perspective. He even uses *taḥqīqī* interpretation of the Quranic account of Jesus's birth as an analogy to provide a scriptural foundation for the Alanqo'a myth, which establishes the divine lineage of the Mongols through immaculate conception.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, in his book *Mir'at al-Ḥaqā'iq*, the shaykh interprets both the Quran and the Bhagavad Gita alongside one another to reveal the unity of religion. He additionally chooses to depict Krishna as a Perfect Human rather than a god in his own right (though the gap in meaning between the two is more of a crevice than a chasm).<sup>75</sup> Although 'Abd al-Rahman's writings show that he is a firm believer in Islam, Abu al-Fazl would not have accused him of *taqlīd*; rather, the Sufi's loyalty to *ṣulḥ-i kull* and his insistence on the continuing relevance of non-Islamic religions mark him as a true *muḥaqqiq* living well after the establishment of the Caliphate of *taḥqīq*.

## Conclusion

In the preface to the *Razmnāma*, Abu al-Fazl presents *taḥqīq* as a revolutionary method in Islamic epistemologies that is meant to overcome the long night of *taqlīd*. Although Ibn 'Arabi originally intended it to be a method for a radical reading of the Quran and cosmos, it could be used to rethink the nature of 'religion' and 'religious difference' more generally. This is all the more evident when *taḥqīq* is properly considered with *wujūd*, the so-called 'Oneness of Being'. In philosophical terms, together the two result in the principle that, since every 'existent' has its own 'truth' (*ḥaqq*), the cosmos is a compendium waiting to be read by a spiritually adept 'diviner of truth' (*muḥaqqiq*).

This shift disrupted the idea that Islam alone was the proper path to God, as some Muslims, and especially Sufis, recognized the implications of an enchanted cosmos that cannot help but reflect the *ḥaqq* of God. Categories such as 'infidel' and 'believer' begin to lose their valence. When the 'pagan' Mongols came to power, these potentialities were fully activated as the method received official sanction. This politicization occurred first and foremost because it provided a basis for the divinization of the ruler, allowing kings to become saints. After all, to become a Perfect Human, one must actualize or 'realize' the totality of God's attributes. However, as underscored by the inter-religious translation project of which the *Razmnāma* was a product, *taḥqīq* in the Mughal court was institutionalized and deployed to unapologetically eliminate the problem of religious difference in all its manifestations. Thus, *ṣulḥ-i kull* required the 'caliphate of *taḥqīq*'.

**Competing interests.** None.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>75</sup> Roderic Vassie, 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti and the Bhagavadgita: "Unity of Religion" Theory in Practice', *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism*, Vol. 3, (ed.) Leonard Lewisohn (London: Khaniqah-i Nimatullah, 1992), pp. 367–378.

**Cite this article:** Pye, Christian Blake. 2022. "The Sufi method behind the Mughal 'Peace with All' religions: A study of Ibn 'Arabi's '*taḥqīq*' in Abu al-Fazl's preface to the *Razmnāma*". *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (3), pp. 902–923. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000275>