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Akbar's Religious Reforms: Unifying Mortal Enemies

Khadija S. Sadia

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Akbar's Religious Reforms: Unifying Mortal Enemies

A Capstone Submitted to the

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By

Khadija Sadia

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Student Name (print or type) Khadija Sadia

Faculty Supervisor (print or type) Sean Farrell

Faculty Approval Signature S Farrell

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HONORS CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

In the late 1500s, Emperor Akbar from the Mughal Empire was the most well-known emperor for his religious tolerance. As Europe faced the flames of the Inquisition Era, down in the Indian subcontinent, Akbar was determined to make his empire a place of unity and peace. This desire which I examine is largely due to his experiences in a cosmopolitan area where Akbar saw the unity already there. With the cultural and religious tensions that occurred all throughout the Mughal Empire, Akbar established the House of Worship and his own Divine Religion in efforts to unite his people. These two points, in particular, caused massive controversies, as some praised the idea, while others opposed it greatly. Most historians agree that both of these establishments were created as a way for Akbar to establish imperial stability. However, throughout my research, I analyze a variety of different historians, along with the primary sources written by those who have observed the emperor greatly and hence argue that Akbar wanted to prove to his people through the establishment of the Ibadat Khana and the Din-i-Ilahi that all religions have the same fundamental principles.

Akbar's Religious Reforms: Unifying Mortal Enemies

Khadija Sadia
HIST 495
Senior Capstone
December 8, 2019

In the summer of 1582, a minor political dispute between Emperor Akbar and the Nagarkot raja quickly shifted towards religiously violent persecution of Hindus, due to public misunderstanding and rivalry between the Muslims and Hindus within the Mughal Empire. Akbar withdrew his favors from the raja of Nagarkot and decided to bestow Birbal, the position of the new raja of Nagarkot.¹ To accommodate the shift of the new princely power, Akbar sent Husain Kuli Khan, and the *amirs* (military noble commanders) to accompany the new raja to Lahore in order to protect him from the forces still under the commandment of the old raja.² As Husain Kuli Khan and the *amirs* approached their destination, fear and panic arose amongst the Hindu majority of Nagarkot, seeing a body of armed Muslims riding through to install a new raja.

Forces from both sides met at the Fortress of Bhun to fight in support of who they thought held the rightful position as the Nagarkot raja. Considering that Emperor Akbar sent Husain Kuli Khan, one of the greatest generals of the Mughal Empire, along with the *amirs* to fight against the small force that the previous raja had, it was not difficult to see who was going to win. However, this political affair quickly turned into violent persecution when both sides focused on religious differences rather than the difference in political beliefs.

The rivalry amongst the Hindus and Muslims caused some of Husain Kuli Khan's men to defy Akbar's order and persecute all of the Rajputs and Brahmans who were defending the temple of Mahama, along with the killing of 200 black cows under the

¹ Henry Miers, *The History of India: As Told by its Own Historians. The Muhammadan Period*, ed. John Dowson (London: Trübner & Co., 1873), 356.

² *Ibid.*, 357.

property of the Hindus. The fortifications fell, the buildings were destroyed, and Akbar's men used their boots to fill it with the spilled blood to "cast it upon the roofs and walls of the temple".³

Although it appears as if the Muslims were the root cause for this tragic religious catastrophe due to their interference and removal of the previous Hindu raja, this becomes invalid when understanding that the reason why Akbar appointed Birbal in the first place was due to him being Hindu. Birbal was not just any ordinary Hindu, he was a Brahman and also given the honorary title of Káb Rai (Chief of Poets).⁴ Birbal was a very close advisor to Akbar which is why he was appointed to become the raja of Nagarkot, in hopes of a peaceful transition with the coming of the new raja.

Despite Akbar's careful efforts to become the tolerant emperor that he always desired to be, tragic events such as the one that took place in Nagarkot were quite common throughout the empire. This opposition amongst the Hindus and the Muslims grew as time passed by within the empire. Yet, given all of the experiences, Akbar tried to perceive the best qualities in all religions. In fact, Vincent Smith, the most well known historian regarding Akbar's religious policies claims that these policies were created to establish peace and unity. Most scholars agree with Smith that Akbar's ultimate goal was to bring imperial stability hence; Vincent Smith is referred back into most historians' analysis. However Makhan Lal Roy Choudhury claims that it wasn't the Ibadat Khana but rather Akbar's Divine faith which was created to bring peace and unity

³ Ibid., 358; Henry Miers brings together a collection of different sources from both Abu'l-Fazl and Badauni, who were both Muslim, hence it debunks the question of religious violence used as propaganda. Both of these individuals are considered as some of the most reliable sources as they have recorded Akbar's detailed history which includes the good and the bad all throughout his reign.

⁴ Ibid., 356; Brahman is referred to a priest who belongs to the highest level in the Hindu cast.

within his empire. Iqtidar Alam Khan argues that Akbar's ideas of religious reforms were inspired by the people he was surrounded with, hence the nobles were the source of his inspiration. Baroda R. Krishnamurti claims that the only way religious tolerance was able to have a large impact over the people were due to how Akbar bribed his subjects. Athar Ali argues that many historians undervalued Abu'l-Fazl, Bada'uni, and the Jesuit's father's works as a way to understand how Akbar envisioned both the Ibadat Khana and the Din-i-Ilahi, which should not be so since Akbar spent most of his time discussing these ideas with him. And finally, Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś claims that the Jesuits were vital to improve the methods of unification within the Mughal Empire. Through the in depth analysis that I have performed reading some of the historians who analyzed Akbar's religious policies I have decided to analyze his reign in a different aspect. In this paper, I argue that Akbar's experiences from his *early childhood* caused him to acquire a strong political desire to *prove* that all religions have the *same principles* in order to unify the Muslims and Hindus in the Mughal Empire. This analysis will be done by getting an insight of the experiences he faced as a child, and depth analysis of the Ibadat Khana and the Din-i-Ilahi to understand why he would want to prove that all religions have the same fundamental principles.

Origins of Religious & Cultural Differences

The origins of the animosity between the Mughal emperors and the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent started when Akbar's grandfather, Babur, conquered the land that became the Mughal Empire in 1526.⁵ The skepticism and dissatisfaction that many

⁵ Mughal is the Persian word for Mongol.

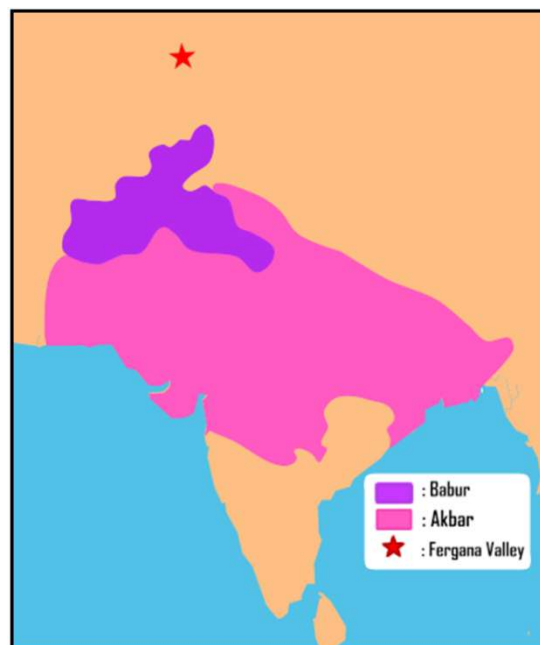
of the people showed against Babur and his entire lineage was due to the fact that they were foreigners, who were drastically different from the people of Hindustan both culturally and religiously. Akbar grandfather, possessed Persian, Turkish, and Mongol roots, hence the ethnic and cultural background caused a major clash.⁶

In the following map shown to the right, the star indicates Babur's place of origin, the Fergana Valley, which was the place where

Akbar's grandfather initially ascended the throne.⁷

Observing the map, it is visually apparent that the Indian subcontinent was extremely far away from Fergana Valley, which was where the ancestral roots for all of the Mughal emperors derives from.⁸

Since Babur was the only Mughal emperor born in the Persian lands surrounded by the Persian people, its religion, and culture, it is understandable why he would have a major



⁶ Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire was considered to be an outsider amongst his people. Babur's paternal blood made him a Persian-ized Timurid, and on his maternal side he was a descendant of Genghis Khan; These clashes started to become apparent when the Muslim rulers tried to impose Islam on the large majority of Hindu subjects. The mentality was that these emperors were already foreigners and on top of that, they wanted to impose their own religion which is why both religious and ethnic clashes are brought into the picture. Soon Persian culture, language, religion, and armies that were implemented in the Mughal empire as time progressed by allowed the Persian roots to be intertwined within the foundations of the new empire itself; Francis Robinson, *Mughal Empire* (Oxford, England: Oxford Islamic Studies Online", or *Ibadat-Khana*(Great Britain & Ireland: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

⁷ Babur (Akbar's grandfather) was forcibly removed from his throne at a young age and later pursued to take over the Mughal Empire in 1526; this map was created by me so there is no citation.

⁸ This valley is located in present-day Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Persian influence.⁹ However, the question that arises is how the rest of the emperors of the Mughal Dynasty were able to retain strong Persian ties, considering they were not born and raised in the heart of the Persian Empire.

By briefly analyzing the reign of Akbar and his predecessors, we can understand the amount of Persian influence and support that the Mughal emperors received. Babur was able to conquer and establish himself as the emperor of the Mughal Empire due to the military support of the Persian army, more specifically the Safavid army.¹⁰ When his son Humayun re-conquered Delhi after coming back from his exile, he was able to do so with the Safavid alliance in which he was provided with military support.¹¹ Although Akbar was not a religious Muslim, he himself also depended on the strong Islamic Persian alliance and their military support in order to stabilize the Mughal Empire. With this information we can state that the early Mughal emperors were quite dependant on the Persian aid, which helps us understand as to why their subjects were distasteful of the “alien” rulers in the region. It is important to clarify that the only reason Babur and Humayun was able to receive help from the Safavid Empire was by agreeing to their terms, in which one of the conditions was to convert to Shia Islam. This also emphasizes the point as to how these emperors were viewed as foreigners. While some historians say that they actually did covert, others say that they only pretended to do so in order to get military support. Hence, with the dependency that the early Mughal emperors had on the Persian powers to rule South Asia, The price of that alliance was

⁹ Babur, Humayun, and Akbar brought many Persian influences within the empire, to the point where the national language was changed to Persian. Although Akbar decided to bring back many of the traditions previously held in the Mughal Empire, Persian influences were outnumbered greatly in comparison.

¹⁰ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Religious Transformations in the Early Modern World: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108

that they ruled as Shia rulers and that only reinforced the religious and cultural divide between the Mughal rulers and the people they ruled.

When Akbar came into power, he recognized that he needed strategic planning to stabilize his rule. While other Mughal emperors enforced strong Islamic laws on the people, Akbar was accepting of other religions, and allowed his subjects to practice the freedom of religion. Kuczkiewicz-Fraś brings up the point that even Christians during that time thought Akbar's idea regarding religious tolerance was absurd, considering that it was the norm for all sovereigns around the world to impose his or her own religion throughout their kingdom.¹² This concept was exceptionally unusual and made many of his loyal Muslim supporters question their king.¹³ However, Akbar was confident with his decision to become a tolerant ruler because he recognized that otherwise mayhem and destruction could eventually lead to the collapse of the Mughal Empire. These relatively new ideas that Akbar had, did not develop overnight, rather it was due to this childhood experiences which helped him make decisions later in the future.

Akbar's Childhood

Akbar was born in 1542; two years after his father had just been exiled from the Mughal Empire. During this vulnerable time of need, it was a Hindu family who gave refuge to them. Hence, during Akbar's early childhood, he had a very close relationship with the Hindus. In fact, growing up for Akbar, many of his trusted supervisors, such as his tutor, was a Hindu. Consequently, growing up in a relatively cosmopolitan and

¹² Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, *Akbar the Great (1542–1605) and Christianity: Between Religion and Politics* (Krakow, Poland, Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia, 2011), 82.

¹³ Ishwari Prasad, *A Short History of Muslim Rule in India: from the Conquest of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1936), 362.

diverse context helped Akbar to see the light in the different religions that he was exposed to as a child.

Akbar's overall religious tolerance largely comes from his father's approach to critical situations which he experienced during his childhood. According to the *Humayun-Nama*, Akbar witnessed many disputes between his father and his uncle, Kamran Mirza, regarding who was the rightful ruler of the Mughal throne. Even though Akbar's uncle had betrayed Humayun on countless occasions, Akbar's father refused to execute his brother and instead, offered to send him to Makkah where he could seek repentance before he died shortly afterwards due to natural causes.¹⁴ In Sarita Mandana's book, she even questions how Akbar managed to survive during the hostility between his father and uncle, since Kamran Mirza plotted to kill his own nephew several times.¹⁵ Seeing his father's actions and how Humayun was able to keep his patience and tolerate the hatred given towards him, we can see how this had a lasting impact on Akbar.

Having to live in an unstable environment throughout Akbar's childhood during the exile, Akbar had been exposed to a variety of individuals with different race and religion. This exposure helped him become comfortable with individuals who were slightly different than him and his beliefs. In fact, the Indian medievalist Satish Chandra, states that Akbar was born and raised in an atmosphere where liberal sentiments were imposed; hence it would have been looked down upon if one was narrow minded about others' religious ideas. Although this idea was very rare at the time, it indicates that

¹⁴ Begam Gulbadam and Annette S. Beveridge, *The history of Humayun= Humayun-nama*. (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 260.

¹⁵ Sarita Mandana, *AKBAR: The Mighty Emperor* (India: Penguin Books, 2010), 131.

some religious leaders attempted to promote a more liberal approach to religion in order to unite different religious groups together.¹⁶ Akbar's basic ideas of religious tolerance hence stemmed from being surrounded by earlier liberal efforts to promote religious toleration.¹⁷ Therefore when Akbar was old enough to rule, he took those elements and tried to modify and implement them throughout the Mughal Empire.

The difference was that Akbar was raised under Persian rule where the majority of the people were Muslims, and for the most part, the only Hindus who were present were servants who were loyal to the Mughal emperors. When Akbar tried to implement these same ideas it was a bit difficult to do because he ruled over a Hindu-majority population who did not favor the Persian rule.¹⁸ Which meant that attempts regarding the unification of the Muslims and Hindus were much difficult to implement because many did not support the emperor due to cultural and religious differences causing there to be imperial instability?

Akbar's Religious Policies

Seeing the religious unrest that occurred all throughout the empire, Akbar was determined to modify these ideas of religious tolerance and attempted to modify them to his needs in the Mughal Empire. Akbar wanted to unite his people together; however, he was vigilant regarding his religious policies especially during the beginning of his reign. The complication that Akbar was presented with was that he was an emperor of a

¹⁶ Ishwari Prasad, *A Short History of Muslim Rule in India: from the Conquest of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1936), 252-3.

¹⁷ Begam Gulbadam and Annette S. Beveridge, *The History of Humayun= Humayun-nama*. (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 254.

¹⁸ Merry E. Wiesner, *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 86.

very religiously diverse empire. The Muslim minority was divided up between the dominant Sunni population and a minority Shia population both of whom resented each other. On the other hand, Hindus were the majority within the empire, but the variance of the Hindu religious beliefs meant that the Hindu majority was hardly unified themselves.¹⁹

As the emperor witnessed religious chaos amongst the different religious sects, he was desperate to unify his people and prevent the empire from collapsing. Akbar noticed that when it came to religious sects, the problems were not caused by the authenticity of the sacred book, but rather it was only the minor beliefs which generated divisions. To unify his diverse population, Akbar was determined to dissect and examine the basic foundations of each of the religions present within his realm. By doing so he could prove to his people that all religions had the same basic principles, which would create an understanding amongst each other. With this strategy of unification for the Mughal subjects in mind, in the year 1575, Akbar founded the *Ibadat Khana* or the House of Worship at Fatehpur Sikri.²⁰

Ibadat Khana (*House of Worship*)

Akbar knew that he wanted to establish a place where members of different

¹⁹ The Hindus were divided up due to the practices of different forms of worship, beliefs of deities, festivals, saints, rituals, and shins, which caused religious complications between members of the same religion; Merry E. Wiesner, *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789*. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 106.

²⁰ Fatehpur Sikri was the capital of the Mughal Empire and founded by Emperor Akbar himself; Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Religious Transformations in the Early Modern World: a Brief History with Documents*. (Boston, MA: Macmillan Higher Education, 2009), 106.

religions could come together in peace. Accordingly during Akbar's 12th year of reign, he was in search for skillful architects throughout his empire to construct this vital establishment required for peace and for the "adornment of the spiritual kingdom".²¹ With Akbar's vision, the establishment of the Ibadat Khana was created with the purpose of gathering scholars from, "various religions to discuss their beliefs and practices in front of the emperor".²² Akbar knew that the creation of this establishment would be revolutionary and was a key element to unify his people.

When the construction of the Ibadat Khana was finally completed, Akbar chose to proclaim the big news on a Friday in hopes of being showered with God's blessings and protection as it was the most holiest day of the week. Abu-I Fazal, the court historian states that the following was stated by Akbar.

All order and sects of mankind- those who searched after spiritual and physical truth, and those of the common public who sought for an awakening, and the inquirers of every sect- should assemble in the precincts of the holy edict, and bring forward their spiritual experiences, and their degrees of knowledge of the truth in various and contradictory forms in the bridal chamber of manifestation...To the delightful precincts of that mansion founded upon truth, thousands upon thousands, of inquirers from the seven climes came with heartfelt...There were four noble sections in that spiritual and temporal assemblage.²³

It's important to note here that although Akbar This idea that Akbar proclaimed thousands of people came, was not exactly true, at least not all at one time, and he might have said this number in exaggeration to show to his people what he wished to popularize, Ibadat Khana. Through Vincent Smith's work, he states the Ibadat Khana

²¹ Ishwari Prasad, *A Short History of Muslim Rule in India: from the Conquest of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1936), 158.

²² *Ibid.*, 107.

²³ Antonio Monserrate, *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, SJ on His Journey to the Court of Akbar*, trans. John Somervell Hoyland (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 157-159.

was only equipped to fit 150 people although there were times when the Ibadat Khana would get pretty filled up with people.²⁴ But just as Akbar said regarding the 'search for the truth' was very appealing to some individuals, while others could not see the significance behind its creation.

The location of the Ibadat Khana was beneficial for the people as it was built in the empire's capital, in the middle of the place gardens, making it attractive for all those who came to the discussions. With the majority of the regular attendees coming from Akbar's court, the location was convenient as the close proximity made it easier for the courtiers to frequently attend the weekly religious discussions it was placed right next to the palace.²⁵

Looking at the primary source from Muntakhab Ut - Tawarikh, it is clear that although the Ibadat Khana was founded in 1575, it wasn't until 1578 when it was open for all religions.²⁶ Hence, with this evidence, we can assume that Akbar wanted to gradually make the changes within his empire by initially experimenting how the formatting of the religious discussions should be composed. This also suggests that since Akbar truly wanted to unify his people, he wanted to make sure his methodologies were near perfect before allowing the establishment open for all religions. This indicates that Akbar's general proclamation that Abu'l-Fazl recorded was not given in 1575, but rather in 1578, since from Badauni's source, we know that at the beginning the Ibadat Khana was not open for all religions.

²⁴ Vincent Arthur Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul, 1542-1605* (Clarendon Press, 1919), 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁶ Abdul Qadir Ibn Malukshah, *Muntakhabu - T – Tawarikh Vol. 3*, trans Haig, Wolseley, Tr. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1925), 462.

In 1578, when the Ibadat Khana was opened for all religions, Akbar's weekly religious discussions were held on Thursday nights and other holy nights.²⁷ This is an important detail that either suggests that he always put Islam above all other religions or it could be due to his political strategy to show his Muslim subjects that the creation of the Ibadat Khana would not cause him to abandon Islam. The nature of Akbar's rule later in his reign suggests that the latter would probably be accurate²⁸. The choice of the day would be very pleasing for the Muslims since preaching about Islam, especially on the most holy day of the week, would be considered a huge opportunity to receive an abundant amount of blessings.

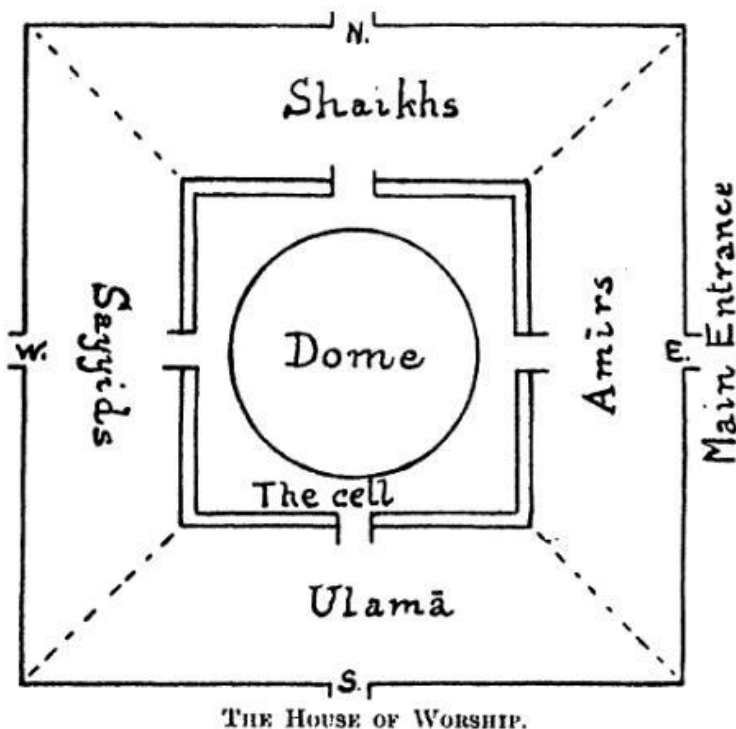
Going back to the purpose of the Ibadat Khana, it is certain that Akbar did not construct the establishment to be originally served as a mosque. Through Smith's analysis of the descriptions during the construction phase of the Ibadat Khana, the main chamber had always been a large singular room enough to accommodate at least 150 people with a verandah all around.²⁹ Initially all of the different parties were intermixed with one another, however after tensions arose, Akbar decided to divide each of the parties into assigned groups. In order to continue the theological debates, the partition to separate the four different groups, was done with, "curtains, low railings, or fretwork". These are the four categories that Akbar divided the people of his court into that Akbar mentions during his general proclamation quoted at the beginning of the paper. Akbar

²⁷ Akbar being a Muslim followed the lunar calendar system in which after the sun sets on Thursdays, the following day (Friday) begins which is the day of the week which Muslims consider holy. Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar's "House of Worship", or 'Ibadat-Khana*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 718.

²⁸ Akbar was never an orthodox Muslim, however, later on when he practiced his religion his own ways, he took elements from several religions including their practices. Analyzing most of his practices it is most related to Sufism.

²⁹ Ibid., 717.

ordered all of the Shaikhs to sit on the north side, Amirs to the east, the Ulama to the south, and the Sayyids to the west.³⁰ Although this setup solved the tensions when the different groups were mixed together, it later on caused the religious tolerance aspect to disappear.



According to Badaoni, when engaged in theological discussions, the Emperor Akbar stayed close to the division closer to the Shaikhs. These were the rulers of a tribe or a royal family member, or in more specific terms, they were the rajas (kings) who were dispersed throughout the Mughal empire. Considering that rajas and emperors were both politically-oriented elites, we can conclude that the reason why Akbar was more interested in spending more with them was because as leaders they faced similar conflicts of maintaining peace within the kingdom. Since Akbar's creation of the Ibadat Khana was ultimately established due to finding a way to maintain the peace within the empire, by working closely with the other rulers, he was trying to find ideas on how rulers could implement religious tolerance within the empire.

³⁰ The Sayyids were an Islamic chief or leader, Shaikhs were the rulers of a tribe or a royal family member, Ulama were the Muslim scholars and the Amirs were the aristocratic or noble with a military title of a high office; Al-Badaoni, *Muntakhab At Tawarikh*, ed. George S. A. Ranking, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1990), 202; Vincent A. Smith, *House of Worship*, The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 716..

When the Ibadat Khana was first created, it faced a lot of criticism from the orthodox Muslims because Akbar's attempt for an interfaith dialogue concept was not common during the 16th century. Regardless, Akbar was patient and every week he invited the courtiers to come and participate or just listen and observe in the Ibadat Khana.³¹ Akbar invited scholars from every religion practiced within the Mughal Empire in order to represent the faith at the Ibadat Khana. These included Hindu, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Christian, Jains, Sikhs, and Sufi leaders.³²

As time passed by, Akbar's theological debates became more popular to the extent that there was a shortage in the seating. The few people who were seated were the ones most qualified or educated about the topic of a specific religion. Frequently, the discussions were so engaging that they would 'last beyond mid-day on Fridays'. In those situations, one of the attendants of the court, would take over and perform the emperor's duty to continue the Ibadat Khana discussions.³³

For the most part, Akbar's Ibadat Khana discussions were going great until in the year 1579, Akbar decided to put in place some major reforms regarding the religious politics apparent throughout his empire, which caused a massive decline in the participation of the Ibadat Khana. The most major and controversial reform was the Infallibility Decree, a document that 'certified' Akbar as being a 'just ruler' and gave him the title of a *Mujtahid*, "infallible authority in all matters relating to Islam." In the written records of the *Ain-i-Akbari*, 'Administration of Akbar', it goes in depth stating that in the

³¹ Smith, *Akbar's "House of Worship" or 'Ibadat-Khana*, 715.

³² Ibid., 715.

³³ The individual who would be chosen to take the duty of monitoring the discussion would be selected based on their kindness, ways in which they dealt with people and their confidence regarding their spiritual knowledge. Ibid., 710.

entire church history of Islam, this was unique, as this decree gave Akbar the ability to become the final arbiter in both civil and ecclesial matters. Hence, “the intellect of the just king thus became the only source of legislation, and the whole body of the learned and the lawyers bound themselves to abide by Akbar’s decrees in religious matters.”³⁴ The reason why this had become so controversial was because this title was reserved for the original four early Muslim scholars who were trained to study the Islamic law at a specialized school, and with an extensive understanding and knowledge of the Quran and Sunnah.

Whilst claiming himself to be a pious Muslim with the Infallibility Decree, Akbar in addition also demanded that instead of the well known Muslim declaration of the faith, (There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah), Akbar changed the declaration to, “There is only one God, and Akbar is his khalifa”.³⁵ This was understandably very scandalous in the eyes of his Muslim subjects, considering Akbar removed the name of the prophet and replaced it with his name in attempts to popularize and create a ‘modified’ version of the declaration for all of his subjects to follow throughout his empire.³⁶ With the change of the declaration, Akbar stated that

“If the people wished it, they might adopt his creed and His

³⁴ Abu'L. Fazl Allami, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochman (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1997), xxxvii.

³⁵ Khalifa refers to the word leader, ruler or successor

³⁶ Mohsin Fani, *Dabistan i Mazahib*, trans. David Shea & Anthony Troyer (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund, 1843), 97.

Majesty declared that religion is conceived to be established by choice and not by violence.”³⁷

Akbar wanted his people to follow this declaration hoping that his people would be united together through the understanding that they are devoting themselves to Akbar.

Along with the failure to popularize the creed, his Ibadat Khana discussions also started to dwindle down due to the misunderstandings that the different religious groups had with the emperor. One of the most detailed examples of mutual misunderstandings can be found in the personal accounts written by the Christians during their time spent at the Mughal court, one of them specifically being the letter correspondence between Emperor Akbar and Pope Gregory XIII. Akbar requested the Pope to send his most knowledgeable priests along with bringing the book of law and the Gospel to his court.³⁸ Even though his letter was pretty short and concise, Akbar tried expressing his utmost eagerness to the Pope in hopes that his request would be granted. Reading his letter the Pope thought that God had inspired the Mughal emperor to convert to Christianity. Therefore, when the Jesuits came to his court and found out he also showed the same

³⁷ Regarding this, Roy Choudhury claims that this was led to the propaganda for Akbar's religion later to come. However, the "propaganda" as Choudhury mentions, was three years prior to the creation of Din-i-Ilahi. The reason why his religious reforms in 1579 would not be considered to be propaganda, was because when the creation of the Din-i-Ilahi does come, it is very liberal sounding in the tone of, whereas in 1579 Akbar was a bit too radical in comparison. Hence between the years 1579 to 1582, Akbar was still changing his decisions regarding how the unification process would be applied amongst his subjects. It is also important to note that during the creation of the Din-i-Ilahi he later does not add anything that requires his subjects to completely change their belief system, whereas during the creation of his creed in ways accepting it may change an individuals' fundamental belief system ; Makhan Lal Roy Choudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi, Or The Religion of Akbar* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), 1078.

³⁸ John Correlia-Afonso, *Letters from the Mughal Court: The First Jesuit Mission to Akbar (1580-1583)* (Bombay: The Institution of Jesuit Sources, 1981), prologue.

eagerness to the idol-worshipping religions, they soon also stopped coming to the Ibadat Khana discussions.³⁹

In attempts to restart the Ibadat Khana discussions, the members of different religious groups refused to participate. This was because they were offended at the emperors' mockery of their religion, or realizing that Akbar never wanted to convert to a new religion during the Ibadat Khana discussions. Akbar analyzing the situation and realizing that his people did not understand the concept of interfaith discussions, it occurred to Akbar, that the main problem was that the Ibadat Khana did not create unity amongst his subjects but rather created divisions, since in that setting the people were literally divided and turned against each other due to the difference of religions. Hence, although Akbar established the Ibadat Khana to understand the core principles to bring unity, for the attendees, they were focused more on the differences of religion rather than trying to understand the similarities between the religions. Therefore, Akbar was determined that his subjects needed a common similarity with each other first so that later they could identify themselves as a unified unit. Hence seven years after the creation of the Ibadat Khana, in 1582, Akbar established the Din-i-Ilahi.⁴⁰

³⁹ The Jesuits that were sent to the Mughal court were the ones who had been living in Goa, southwestern part of India where it was under the colonization of Portuguese. When the Europeans heard that the Portuguese Jesuits were going to meet with Emperor Akbar and his great interest in Christianity, it was a very hopeful journey. In Europe, it was normally custom that whichever religion their ruler practiced, that would also be the religion of their subjects as well. Hence, Europe was hopeful of a new alliance with the Indian subcontinent.

⁴⁰ Choudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi, Or The Religion of Akbar*, 279.

Din-i-Ilahi

When Akbar was aware that his efforts to unify his empire started to degenerate, he was devastated, yet refused to abandon his mission, and continued his persistent nature to establish unification and peace within his realm. Consequently in the year 1582, Akbar established the Din-i-Ilahi (Divine Faith) as his last efforts to unify his people. This was a so called syncretic religion that was introduced by Akbar in hopes of fixing what the Ibadat Khana failed to do, prove to his people that all religions were based upon the same principles. Thus, in doing so unifying his people by establishing a mutual understanding amongst his subjects.⁴¹ With the aid of the extensive collection of knowledge that Akbar had acquired over the course of seven years during the Ibadat Khana discussions, Akbar had a deep understanding regarding the fundamental principles that constituted each of the religions. The emperor then utilized this knowledge and implemented them in order to form the foundations of his syncretic religion.

From a primary source, *Dabistan i Mazahib* (School of Religions) written by a philosopher who was present during the creation of the Din-i-Ilahi, he states the ten virtues of Din-i-Ilahi as the following:

- “1. Liberality & beneficence
2. Forbearance from bad actions & repulsion of anger with mildness
3. Abstinence from worldly desires
4. Care for freedom from the bonds of the worldly existence and violence as well as accumulating precious stores for the future real and perpetual world
5. Wisdom and devotion in the frequent meditation on the consequences of actions

⁴¹ Ibid., 276.

6. Strength of dexterous prudence in the desire of sublime actions
7. Soft voice, gentle words, pleasing speeches for everybody
8. Good society with brothers, so that their will may have the precedence to our own
9. A perfect alienation from creatures and a perfect attachment to the Supreme Being
10. Dedication of soul in the love of God and union with God the preserver of all⁴²

Interpreting the ten virtues of Akbar's religion, many of these same virtues were also present in the other religions that Akbar was familiar with. Hence although this is a translated source from the Persian language, the terminology used to define the virtues can provide information regarding which religion it was originally adapted from. These virtues mostly came from the religions that Akbar was exposed to throughout the Ibadat Khana discussions which consisted of Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, and Sufism.

Although Din-i-Ilahi was created in 1582, there was a substantial amount of uncertainty as to what the purpose of the syncretic religion was until 1587. It is clear that in this religion, there was nothing written or a religious text. Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś claims that the reason to why it took Akbar five years to officially start Din-i-Ilahi was due to his aspiration to bring peace within his kingdom by bringing together his people of different faiths. Therefore, the advantages of not having any written rules and regulations, was that it provided Akbar with a vast amount of freedom to modify the syncretic religion in whichever way was necessary for the empire's well-being. Otherwise with a fixated piece of literature to concretely define how to maintain religious

⁴² Fani, *Dabistan i Mazahib*, 85.

peace, would have caused chaos, thus defeating the purpose for his motives to establish imperial stability⁴³

Roy Choudhury claims that that according to Bartoli, Emperor Akbar had a formal council before the religion was officially established.⁴⁴ Before the actual meeting took place, the courtiers were given instructions to prepare themselves and “accept it with reverence whatever it might be”⁴⁵. Choudhury then analyzes the tone and the language of this and claims that it contradicts with Akbar’s famous saying during his Ibadat Khana discussions, “Why should I claim to guide men before I myself am guided?”⁴⁶ Going back to the argument of this paper, it is important to recall that although Akbar wanted to bring religious peace and unity amongst his people, his motives were derived from his desire to strengthen his imperial stability. With this information we can validate that throughout the years, Akbar’s political stance changed according to what he thought would be best regarding the unification of his people. This information also validates that the concept of Din-i-Ilahi as a purely political rather than a religious one.

Choudhury also analyzes the primary source *Ain-i-Akbari* or “*the administration of Akbar*” and states that Din-i-Ilahi is built upon the same religious ideals and principles as the other major religions around the world. The only difference with Din-i-Ilahi is the form of worship.⁴⁷ An important clarification that needs to be made here is that according to Akbar, Din-i-Ilahi was never considered to be a new religion, hence there

⁴³ Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, *Akbar the Great (1542–1605) and Christianity: Between Religion and Politics*, 84.

⁴⁴ Bartoli was an Italian Jesuit writer and historian.

⁴⁵ Choudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi, Or The Religion of Akbar*, 276.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

were no religious text, religious rituals, or worship place.⁴⁸ In fact, there is evidence that within Akbar's close disciples, there were both Muslim and Hindu believers who all considered themselves as Ilahians, yet their forms of worship varied greatly with one another.⁴⁹ Hence, this information validates that indeed Din-i-Ilahi was not a new religion but rather a platform created by Akbar to unify his people.

Accordingly, due to the Din-i-Ilahi's political objective, Akbar was not interested in bringing religious individuals into the order, but rather he was in search for individuals who were best fit to act as an agent for Akbar's political stance in unity. Before the creation of the Din-i-Ilahi, starting in 1579, Akbar began the examination of his courtiers and their willingness to sacrifice their property, life, religion, and honor. Choudhury mentions that it is not that they had to sacrifice all of these "four treasures of life" all at once, but at least one or two of them however additional sacrifices which gave them more prestige and favorable by Akbar. For Akbar, these sacrifices, (labeled as the *Oaths of Fealty*), were so important to him that for each of the "precious positions" that an individual would give up, they would be referred to as obtaining a degree, either having "One Degree", "Two Degree", etc. depending on how many of these 'treasures' an individual would be willing to give up.⁵⁰

With the nature this paper revolving around Akbar's attempts to unify his people and hence his desire to prove to his people that all religions have the same fundamental principles, we can assess as to why the Oaths of Fealty was imperative to his religious

⁴⁸ Fani, *Dabistan i Mazahib*, 94.

⁴⁹ Ilahians refers to the followers of Din-i-Ilahi; Abu'L. Fazl Allami, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochman (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1997), 157.

⁵⁰ Roy choudhury 284

reforms.⁵¹ First however it needs to be understood as to how Akbar was inspired to form the specific sacrifices that the Oaths of Fealty required. As it turns out, Akbar had adopted these four sacrifices from the Sufi order. The only difference however, is that Sufis performed these sacrifices in devotion to God, whereas Akbar desired these sacrifices to honor himself. The Oaths of Fealty was an essential element that ensured one's loyalty to the throne, which was vital so that Akbar could bend them to their will in whichever way he pleased.

It is crucial to understand that since religious tolerance was not understood by the majority of the people during this time period, Akbar was in search of people whose loyalty would be unquestionable. By recruiting his most loyal subjects, even if they did not completely understand Akbar's vision of religious reforms initially, their undying loyalty to the emperor was vital to ensure there would be no hesitation when asked to perform certain tasks for the emperor.

Akbar's prolonged selection process for the best fit to join his new order was due to the emperor being very restrictive as to whom he allowed admittance into this order. In fact, Blochman's translated source states that Akbar was so restrictive in allowing members within the order, that out of the thousands of potential candidates who wished to join, only a few were accepted.⁵² Many individuals were interested in joining the order but Akbar used the method of a 'clearing search' in order to find the right candidate suitable to join the order. During this process, Akbar's main requirements during his

⁵¹ Ibid., 284.

⁵² Abu'L. Fazl, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, 158-60. Here Athar and Akhtar Ali claims the translation that was provided by Blochman was a mistranslation and that Blochmann seemed to have over exaggerated the number of people interested to join Akbar's order. However, this seems to be contradictory to what other historians such as what Iqtidar Alam Khan has to say; M. Athar Ali & M. Akhtar Ali, *Sulhi Kul and the Religious Ideas of Akbar* (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 1980), 332.

search for his 'discipleship' was to recruit his most loyal subjects who were open minded, and along with that, he did not allow radicals from any religion to enter the order.⁵³ These strict requirements were needed due to Akbar's vision to establish imperial stability whilst proving that all religions have the same fundamental principles.

One of the ways in which Akbar tried to establish imperial stability and peace was by mandating all of his state officials to look after the spiritual development of all of his subjects within the empire. What's imperative to discern here is that Akbar did not care what religion his people were following because his goal was for his people to develop spiritually. Previously throughout his Ibadat Khana discussions, Akbar had been well informed knowing that all religions promote peace, which is why Akbar did not care what religion they followed because peace and unity was his main objective. During this process, his state officials had very clear instructions as they were not allowed to oppose any religion, hence state official were also approved by Akbar to ensure his visions to attain peace and unity could be executed.⁵⁴

On the other hand, Iqtidar Alam Khan analyzes both Abul Fazl and Badauni's works and states that there were many individuals who were truly eager to join Akbar in his new order, and did manage to gain admittance from Akbar. This was due to Akbar's close relationship with the nobility. All throughout Akbar's reign, he had very good relationships with the nobility even during the time of the Ibadat Khana discussions as well. Through the records from both Abul Fazl and Badauni, it can be found that ultimately it was the nobility who were interested to join Akbar's order. Akbar was keen

⁵³ Along with those two requirements, Akbar also continued to search for people who were ready to give into the Oaths of Fealty; Choudhury, *The Din-I-Ilahi, Or The Religion of Akbar*, 284-285.

⁵⁴ Ibid.,281-82.

to bring the nobility into the order since they controlled lands throughout the Mughal Empire, hence bringing unity amongst the people living within the empire. While the nobility were interested because in doing so they received special favors from Akbar.⁵⁵

Was Akbar Truly a Religiously Tolerant Emperor?

Throughout the entirety of this paper, we have analyzed how Akbar devoted his entire life to maintain peace within his empire. Along with that concept, we have also examined how Akbar used religion as a mechanism to bring imperial stability within his realm. However, Athar Abbas Rizvi claims that Akbar was not religiously tolerant; rather he was intolerant especially towards his Muslim subjects and “hostile only to the Sunni Orthodoxy.”⁵⁶ In another account from Imam Rabbani, a well known Sufi Imam states that the greatest misfortune occurred when Akbar allowed the Muslims to practice their religion while the ‘infidels’ their religion. He then explains that after some time the ‘infidels’ were able to openly practice their religion whereas the Muslims were prevented to exercise the same freedom. If a Muslim did happen to practice openly they were killed for doing so.

Analyzing both of these accounts, it sounds rather controversial seeing that Akbar’s main goal was to establish imperial stability. However, regarding this issue Kuczkiewicz-Fraś states, “Akbar was trying to shape his state and ruling class on the basis of such principles as liberation, tolerance, justice and equal treatment to all faiths.”⁵⁷ He then explains that the one thing that Akbar could not stand was narrow

⁵⁵ Khan, *The Nobility Under Akbar and the Development of his Religious Policy, 1560–80*, 29.

⁵⁶ Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975), 439.

⁵⁷ Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, *Akbar the Great (1542–1605) and Christianity: Between Religion and Politics*, 84.

minded people. In Akbar's case, he did not punish or pardon an individual based on their belief system but rather their actions. Examining a wide variety of historians, one thing that almost all historians can agree is that Akbar despised religious extremists as he saw them as a disruption to the peace and order of society.⁵⁸ In the examples mentioned above, the first one, Rizvi talks about Sunni Orthodoxy facing hostility. This was due to the fact that the orthodox of most religions during Akbar's time would be the ones to harshly criticize Akbar and *act* against his reforms. In the second example, Imam Rabbani was extremely conservative to the point where he claimed that if an individual does anything that was not done by the prophet himself then that is completely forbidden.⁵⁹ With the constant opposition that Akbar was faced with from Imam Rabbani it would be reasonable as to why he would persecute some of his followers with the same mentality in order to maintain the imperial stability. In fact, Kuczkiewicz-Fraś explains that in order to bring peace within the empire, he wanted to limit the influence of strong orthodox clergy at court. This is due to the reasoning that Akbar did not truly belong to any religion and this was extremely upsetting and heretical in the variety of orthodox individuals.⁶⁰

These two examples were brought into attention to demonstrate regardless of how close his relations were to a particular religion, he was adamant about being tolerant and treating all religions equally. We can gain an insight on this from the past when both Babur and Humayun were in desperate political need, although they were

⁵⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁹ Arthur F. Buehler, *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624)* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 11.

⁶⁰ Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, *Akbar the Great (1542–1605) and Christianity: Between Religion and Politics*, 77.

Sunni Muslim at the time, the Safavid Empire promised to aid them, with the understanding that they would convert to Shia Islam. Hence for Akbar, he was not afraid of going against his forefather's religion which Father Pierre Du Jarric criticized Akbar greatly for abandoning his forefather's religion to allow everyone including the polytheist follow their religion as well.⁶¹ It is also important to note, not only does Akbar goes against his father's religion to bring justice and stability in the empire, he also behaves similarly to his own beliefs as well. Since according to Chourdhyry, if Din-i-Ilahi had to be categorized into one of the existing religions, it would be best described as a Sufi order. Hence although there were many similar aspects Akbar agreed with Imam Rabbani, he puts his own beliefs aside for the empire's well-being.⁶²

Back to the main argument of the paper, in order to further explain how Akbar's religious reforms were established due to the imperial stability and well-being of the empire; we can analyze Akbar's relationship with the Jesuits. Ever since the Jesuits presented themselves in front of the emperor, Akbar had a very close connection with them and was so fascinated that, Akbar later required that his son be taught the Latin language and the Christian ethics. Krishnamurti and Krishnamurthy says this was due to Akbar preparing for the future emperor since there were some aspects that Akbar found very appealing hence he hoped it would help with the imperial development in the future.⁶³ Kuczkiewicz-Fraś even mentions that although Akbar maintained a good

⁶¹ This is stated in order to understand that Akbar had been close to both Sunnis and Shias due to family ties. Father Pierre Du Jarric, *Akbar and the Jesuits*, ed. Sir Denison Ross & Eileen Power (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, 1926), 10.

⁶² Makhan Lal Roy Choudhury, *The Din-i-Ilahi, Or, The Religion of Akbar* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), 287.

⁶³ R. Krishnamurti, & R. Krishnamurthy. *Some Aspects of Akbar's Divine Faith*. (Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 22, 1959), 259.

relationship with the Jesuits that did not stop him from taking military actions against the Portuguese in order to aid the Indian Muslims from the foreigners from the western coast of the empire.⁶⁴ Afterwards when the Jesuits were offended and left, Akbar tried many times to bring them back to court. To which Kuczkiewicz-Fraś states that Akbar did not truly care about the Jesuits themselves, but rather he liked how the missionaries provided the empire with a great supply of books which Akbar desired in order to increase literacy rates within the empire, hence, improving the lifestyle of his subjects.⁶⁵

Akbar's Religious Reforms Continued?

Throughout this paper we have examined how Akbar aspired to promote religious tolerance in order to establish imperial stability and a major part in creating this unification was by trying to prove to his people that all religions have the same principles in order to unify the Muslims, Hindus and other religious groups within the Mughal Empire. Hence in doing so, he devoting several years worth of patience and time to devise his master plan. However, the problem was due to Akbar's creation of the syncretic religion and his opposition to his father's religion, which caused a lot of religious controversies to the point where many of his subjects wanted to plot to kill the emperor thinking that he had gone mad.⁶⁶

After Akbar's death in 1605, his son Jahangir ascended the throne for the Mughal Empire. Ni'amatullah the court chronicler during Jahangir's reign describes the reign of

⁶⁴ Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, *Akbar the Great (1542–1605) and Christianity: Between Religion and Politics*, 84.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁶ Ishwari Prasad, *A Short History of Muslim Rule in India: from the Conquest of Islam to the Death of Aurangzeb* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1936), 5.

Jahangir as a brand new blossoming era when order was put back into place.⁶⁷ With the rise of the new emperor both of his father's life long works, Ibadat Khana and Din-i-Ilahi deteriorated.⁶⁸

In conclusion, Akbar's ambition to establish imperial stability by promoting religious tolerance worked pretty well however, in ways he was a bit too advanced for his time during the late 1500s. The idea of being religiously tolerance being associated with allowing polytheism and other extreme religions, and allowing others to follow one own's religions in peace was rare and unheard of at the time. As we saw everything that Akbar did was for the improvement of the empire. All of these achievements that Akbar was able to implement were due to his wide variety of religious and cultural interactions that he experienced throughout his early childhood. With these experiences Akbar took the time to understand the principles by having the theological discussions to understand the religions more in depth. The fact that Akbar attempted to provide each of the different religions with liberation, tolerance, justice and equal treatment is something that needs to be remembered as it could not have been easy. Thus, the biggest factor that needs to be praised for is throughout Akbar's religious reforms, he desired to unify the mortal enemies within his realm to establish imperial stability so that his subjects could dwell in peace, by changing people's misunderstanding about other religions and proving that all religions are built with the same fundamental principles.

⁶⁷ Ni'amatullah, *Tarikh-i-Khan Jahani. vol 2.* (Dacca: Asian Society of Pakistan, 1926), 668.

⁶⁸ Although the Ibadat Khana and the Din-i-Ilahi no longer exist, that did not mean Jahangir went to his ancestral old ways to force religion upon the people. Rather he was adapted the ideas of religious tolerance but he did so in a much more "sensible manner" and did not aim to innovate different ways to unite the people in religion. During Jahangir's reign, because he had converted to orthodox Sunni Muslim, he reinstalled the large majority of Muslim advisors back within his court and restored order.

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