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Akbar the Great (1542–1605) and Christianity. Between religion and politics

The second half of the 16th century, during the reign of India's third, and widely regarded as the greatest, ruler of the Mughal dynasty, Jalāl ud-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar, was also the time when the Europeans were becoming increasingly present on the Indian Subcontinent. Especially active among them were the Portuguese – both in the political and economic sense as well as in the cultural and the religious dimension.

After reaching India with the expedition of Vasco da Gama in 1498, the Portuguese very quickly – already in 1505 – started their expansion on the Western coast of the Subcontinent and throughout the next thirty years conquered the territories of Goa (where they established a powerful trading post and which also became the seat of the viceroy and council appointed by the Portuguese king in Lisbon), and Diu. From 1558 the Portuguese forces occupied also Daman, which was an important port on the Cambay Gulf, and thus created a great problem for the Mughals, especially after the annexation of the rich and prosperous province of Gujarat into the Mughal Empire in 1572. The Portuguese naval dominance over the Arabian Sea caused that no Indian ship could sail without the so-called *cartaz* or special pass for safe conducts. For Indian Muslims this situation was especially oppressive since the ports of the Western coast were the point of embarkation for pilgrims going to Mecca.¹ The conflicts (also the armed ones) between the Mughal authorities of the province and the Portuguese happened during the whole of the Akbar's reign.

¹ It was reported by Badā'ūnī that the pilgrims going to Mecca by sea “had to put up with indignities from the Portuguese, whose passports had pictures of Mary and Jesus (peace be upon Him!) stamped on them” and – as Badā'ūnī remarks – for the Muslims to make use of them “would mean to countenance idolatry” (*Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 203).

With the Portuguese territorial and economic expansion, also the Catholic missionaries started arriving in India. The Portuguese actually had a monopoly on promoting Christianity in Asia, and on conducting trade in the overseas territories, provided in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V in the famous bull *Romanus Pontifex* addressed to King Alfonso V of Portugal. In 1534 the Diocese of Goa was established, covering in fact the whole East, from the Cape of Good Hope to China. The missionaries from the newly founded Jesuit order were sent there, partly to serve the Portuguese as chaplains and partly for genuine missionary activities. The colonial authorities in Goa supported the mission with various actions, like distributing rice among the poor, providing jobs in administration or even offering military assistance to the local Indian rulers.

This period of the Indian history – the time of Akbar’s reign and of the strengthening the presence of Portuguese – is very well documented in the historical sources. On the one hand, there are records of Muslim chroniclers, the most prominent place among whom belongs to Abu ’l-Faḥl,² ‘Abdu ’l Qādir Badā’ ūnī³ and Niẓāmu ’d-Dīn Aḥmad Baxšī,⁴ on the other hand, a great amount of documents and letters written by Portuguese missionaries, who often spent many years at the imperial court.⁵ All these writings depict Akbar as a man

² Abu ’l-Faḥl ‘Allāmī (1551–1602) – Akbar’s court historian, secretary and biographer, military commander and theologian. He criticised the traditional Muslim clergy (*‘ulamā*) and influenced the development of Akbar’s religious synthesis. Opposing the narrow-mindedness of the religious leaders and blaming their involvement in shallow forms of worship instead of the praise of transcendent God, Abu ’l-Faḥl had a vast influence at court. His major literary achievement was a history of Akbar and his predecessors *Akbarnāma* (“Book of Akbar”), the last part of which is constituted by *Ā’in-i Akbarī* (“The Institutions of Akbar”). Both works give a vivid and detailed description of Akbar’s court and reign. Abu ’l-Faḥl also translated the Bible into Persian.

³ ‘Abdu ’l Qādir Badā’ ūnī (1540-c. 1615) – an Indo-Persian historian, one of the most important writers concerning the Mughal period in India. From 1574 he worked in the religious office at the court of Akbar and received money from him. His most important work is the *Muntaxab al-tavārīḫ* (“Selection from History”), also called *Tārīḫ-e Badā’ ūnī* (“Badā’ ūnī’s History”), a history of Muslim India including additional sections on Muslim religious figures, physicians, poets, and scholars. The work contains the author’s hostile remarks about Akbar and his religious practices.

⁴ Niẓām al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Muqīm Haravī (d. 1594) – a prominent official during the reign of Akbar, from 1593 a paymaster and commander-in-chief (*baxšī*) of the entire empire. He became famous as the author of the much celebrated history of India, *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī*, which is a comprehensive historical study of the rule of Akbar and includes a study of the other Indo-Muslim dynasties from the 10th to the 17th centuries. His work was the first general history devoted solely to India and became a model for later authors who were to undertake similar historical projects.

⁵ One has to remember that the missionaries were not casual travellers in the Mughal empire, but they had the opportunity of the closest contacts with Akbar and were often acquainted with Indian languages and customs. The detailed accounts of the Indian flora and fauna, religions and traditions, ethnography and history which they sent to their superiors in Europe were usually invaluable and unbiased records. There are three main published books, which contain the earliest

of extraordinary intellect (although he was illiterate), interested in the world, tolerant, finding pleasure in philosophical and religious deliberations, with a tendency to mysticism, whose great desire was to find a religious system that would satisfy all aspects of his expectations. Akbar was also undoubtedly a brilliant and skilful politician, and as such he understood well that the reign of his dynasty might last only as long as it was widely accepted by those over whom he reined. Even though conversions to Islam were relatively common after the arrival of Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent, still there was no doubt that the old religions did not disappear, and that not all the people of India would adopt Islam. Akbar knew that there must be some concessions in such areas as religion, language or customs, to ensure peace in the country.

Akbar undertook a whole range of actions that were supposed to prove that he wanted to be a ruler and protector of all citizens of his realm, regardless of the religions they professed. Among other things, in 1564 he abolished *jizya* – a poll tax levied on non-Muslims, which in a sense resulted that only Muslims were full citizens of the empire while the rest of the society was merely tolerated – provided, however, that they humbly endured the condition of being subjected. Consequently, Hindus and Muslims could feel to be equal sharers in a common citizenship for the first time. Another restriction revoked by Akbar was a ban on erecting temples in honour of various gods. Therefore, Hindu places of worship began to rise again from the ground in the entire country. Later this privilege was also extended to Christians, which allowed the erecting of churches in Lāhaur (1597) and Āgrā (1598/1599).

There is no doubt that these decisions were dictated by Akbar's political considerations and principles of his domestic policy, the basic guideline of which was “peace with all” (*ṣulḥ-i kull*). One objective of such actions was to provide all his subjects with the equal status and rights; the other intention was to limit the influence of a strong faction of the orthodox Muslim clergy (*‘ulamā*) at the court. But surely neither of them would have been possible if the emperor had been lacking innate tolerance and a syncretic way of thinking.

In the beginning of 1575, Akbar ordered the erection of a spacious, elegant structure “consisting of four halls, near the new palace in Fatḥpūr”⁶ in his newly

Jesuit sources regarding the Akbar's times: *Letters from the Mughal Court: the first Jesuit mission to Akbar (1580–1583)*, edited and introduced by John Correia-Afonso (1980), who examines the letters of the first Jesuit Mission at Fatḥpūr Sīkrī and Āgrā; *The commentary of Father Monserrate, S.J., on his journey to the court of Akbar*, translated from the original Latin by J. S. Hoyland and annotated by S. N. Banjeree (1922) – cf. footnote 19; and *Akbar and the Jesuits: an account of the Jesuit missions to the court of Akbar* by Pierre Du Jarric (1926, repr. in 2005), reproducing or recapitulating the most valuable missionaries' letters written prior to 1610.

⁶ *Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 198.

built capital of Fathpūr Sīkrī.⁷ The structure, known as ‘Ibādat xāna (“House of Worship”), was to function as a hall for religious and philosophical debates that took place each Thursday evening. Various Muslim scholars and learned men: pious *šaiḫ*-s, orthodox *‘ulamā*-s and dignified *saiyid*-s, representing different schools of Islam, as well as the nobles of the court, were invited to take part in the debates and discuss important questions of law and faith.⁸ But very soon it appeared that the participants of these meetings failed to reach agreement either on issues of fundamental importance or in minor cases and their mutual aggression caused the palace guard to intervene a few times. “Akbar was [...] fairly disgusted [...] he never pardoned pride and conceit in a man, and of all kinds of conceit, the conceit of learning was most hateful to him”⁹ and finally, disappointed, he suspended the debates.

Akbar’s dissatisfaction with the *‘ulamā*-s led him to the decision which eventually was to break their power up. In September 1579, a document known as the *maḥzar* was announced and signed by the leading *‘ulamā*-s (although against their will¹⁰). According to this decree Akbar put himself in a position of the *Imām-i Ādil*, “equitable leader,” the highest legal authority in the realm and supreme arbiter in all disputes.¹¹ His verdicts – both religious and secular – were to be final, with no possibility of appeal; he also had the privilege of final interpretation of legal provisions contained in the Qurān (which still remained the highest legal and religious authority in the empire).¹² Soon after the proclamation

⁷ The exact location of the structure is not known since no building suiting the description given by Badā’ūnī or Abu ’l-Faḏl has remained at Fathpūr. The specification left by the chroniclers clearly indicates some building resembling Dīvan-i-‘ām, enclosing a great quadrangle. Cf. Havell 1904 (Part Sixteen: Fatehpur Sikri, footnote 16): <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/richett/00artlinks/agra_havell/16fatahpursikri.html>

⁸ Badā’ūnī describes these initial meetings in the following way: “...every Thursday evening he [Akbar] invited Sayyids, Shaikhs, Ulamā, and Amirs. But ill-feeling arose in the company about the seats and order of precedence, so His Majesty ordered that the Amirs should sit on the east side, the Sayyids on the west, the Ulamā on the south, and the Shaikhs on the north. His Majesty would go from time to time to these various parties, and converse with them, and ascertain their thoughts...” (*Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 202).

⁹ Badā’ūnī’s *Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 202, quoted in the *Ā’in-i Akbarī* in translation of H. Blochmann; cf. *Ā’in-i Akbarī* I: 180.

¹⁰ *Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 272.

¹¹ The text of the *maḥzar* is quoted by Badā’ūnī (*Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 271–272). Cf. also Frykenberg 2008: 168, Smith 1919: 178–181, Rizvi 1975: 141–160.

¹² “... should therefore in future a religious question come up, regarding which of the opinions of the Muḥtahids [jurist; the highest authority in jurisprudence – AKF] are at variance, and His Majesty in his penetrating understanding and clear wisdom be inclined to adopt, for the benefit of the nation, and as a political expedient, any of the conflicting opinions, which exist on that point, and issue a decree to that effect, we do hereby agree that such a decree shall be binding on us and on the whole nation. [...] should His Majesty think fit to issue a new order, we and the nation shall likewise be bound by it, provided always that such order be not only

of the *maḥzar* the religious debates in ‘Ibādat xāna were resumed, but now also the representatives of other religions were invited to take part in them and the scope of the disputes was extended to include views and dogmas of religious systems different from Islam. Furthermore, Akbar’s interest in other religions was not a new phenomenon – for quite a long time he was studying the secrets of the Zoroastrians, and even observed some of their rituals; he was also vividly interested in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity.¹³

Akbar’s first encounter with Christianity might have been in 1576. The apparently insignificant news about two Christian missionaries’ arrival in Bengal reached the emperor. Refusing them absolution, they severely reproved some Portuguese merchants who were accused of defrauding the Mughal state treasury by not paying the required taxes.¹⁴ The emperor was very impressed, both because of the nature of the Christian priests and the dogmas of their religion, which he considered exceptionally valuable since it condemned categorically any dishonesty – even in relation to a foreign government.

Wishing to learn more about the Christian doctrine, Akbar invited Father Julian Pereira, the then Vicar-General in Bengal, to his court. Yet, the pious but poorly educated clergyman was not able to satisfy the emperor’s curiosity. Similarly, neither Pietro Tavāres, a Portuguese officer in his service and the commandant of the port of Hugli, nor Antonio Cabral sent to his court as an ambassador of the Portuguese Viceroy Dom Diogo de Meneses, could authoritatively give further details about the more profound matters of the faith, even though they were able to provide the emperor with a considerable amount of information concerning Christian manners and customs. In this situation Akbar decided to seek the assistance of the Portuguese Catholic mission that had been residing in Goa for the last several decades. In December 1578, Akbar sent a following letter to the authorities in Goa:

The commandment of Zelaldinus the Great, King by God constituted. Know, o chief Fathers of the Order of St. Paul,¹⁵ that we are very well disposed unto you. We are sending unto

in accordance with some verse of the Qur’ān, but also of real benefit to the nation; and further, that any opposition on the part of his subjects to such an order passed by His Majesty shall involve damnation in the world to come, and loss of property and religious privileges in this...” (*Muntaxab al-tavārīx* II: 271–272).

¹³ More on Akbar’s attitude towards other religions cf., e.g., Nizami 1989; Rizvi 1975.

¹⁴ The occurrence was described by John Correia-Afonso in the Introduction to his book and the names of the two missionaries can also be found there – Anthony Vaz and Peter Dias. Cf. Correia-Afonso 1980: 5.

¹⁵ The Jesuit Fathers at Goa were known as Paulists on account of the College of St. Paul, which gave rise to this name. The college – primarily an ordinary lay seminary – was converted into a Jesuit institution by St. Francis Xavier. Many Jesuit priests were trained there and the college was seen by the Fathers of the Society as their Indian *Alma Mater*. Cf. Du Jarric 2004: 107 (note 8).

you Ebadulla,¹⁶ our envoy, and Dominicus Petricus,¹⁷ that they may communicate to you in our own words our desire that two learned priests should be sent unto us, to bring the chief books of the Law and the Gospel in order that we may learn the Law and its full meaning and perfect truths in every respect. For I earnestly desire thoroughly to learn that Law. Let them not hesitate, therefore, to set out with the same envoys when they leave Goa on the return journey; and let them bring the books of the Law with them. Let the priests understand that I shall receive them with all possible kindness and honour. Their arrival will be a great delight to me: and when I have learnt what I long to know about the law and its perfection and the salvation it offers, they shall be allowed to return as soon as they like. I shall send them back again dignified with very many honours and gifts. Let them have no fear in coming. For I take them under my own protection and guarantee. Farewell!¹⁸

The legation reached Goa in September 1579 and was welcomed according to the state ceremony usually reserved for the arrival of a new Portuguese Viceroy. The emperor's invitation aroused great enthusiasm and high hopes among missionaries who for many years tried to find a way of preaching God's word in the Mughal's empire without any success. The prospect of winning such a powerful ruler and such a vast country for the glory of the Church and the benefits of the Portuguese was worth taking any risks. Despite the initial resistance from the Viceroy it was decided in November that a mission consisting of three carefully selected priests would be sent to the court of the Great Mughal. These priests were: Rudolf Aquaviva, aged 29, the head of the mission, coming from an aristocratic family from Naples, an intellectual and expert in philosophy who spoke the local languages (Konkani, and later also Persian); Antonio Monserrate, a Catalan aged 41, as Aquaviva's deputy and chronicler of the expedition,¹⁹ and François Henriqués, a Muslim convert of Persian origin, coming from Ormuz, who was to act as an interpreter and assistant to the mission.

After a tiring and dangerous journey, which lasted over three months, the missionaries reached Fathpūr Sīkrī on 28 February 1580. Akbar was waiting

¹⁶ It was most probably Sayyid 'Abdallāh, one of Akbar's officers, mentioned by Abu 'l-Fazl among the commanders of the seven hundred (no. 189), cf. *Ā'in-i Akbarī* I: 518.

¹⁷ Dominic Perez was an Armenian Christian at the Akbar's court, married to an Indian wife. He served as an interpreter of the Akbar's embassies to Goa in 1578 and 1594. Cf. Monserrate 1922: 2 (footnote 2) and Du Jarric 2004: 107 (note 9).

¹⁸ The text of the letter is cited here after Monserrate 1922: 2. Its slightly different English versions were also published in, e.g., Smith 1919: 169; Du Jarric 2004: 9; Correia-Afonso 1980: 6.

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning here that the chronicles of Antonio Monserrate titled *Mongolicae Legationis Commentarius*, discovered in 1906 and published in 1922 in English translation as *The Commentary of Father Monserrate S.J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, have a unique historical importance being the earliest, from the times of Vasco da Gama, European report concerning North India. Monserrate described – among other things – the details of a successful campaign run by Akbar in 1581 against his rebellious half-brother Mirzā Ḥakīm, governor of Kābul. He also included a map of North India prepared on the basis of his astronomical observations, which has been the oldest European map of India since the times of Ptolemy and Eratosthenes.

for them with great anticipation, and as soon as they had arrived, they were taken before the emperor and stayed with him till late in the night, answering his questions about the Christian faith. Akbar's sons, aged from 8 to 11, as well as he, wore Portuguese clothes: scarlet cloaks with golden fastenings and Portuguese hats – which the emperor used to wear to please his guests. He also presented the Jesuits with considerable amount of gold, but the Fathers, bound by the vow of poverty, refused the gift and “[n]othing that he could say would persuade them to accept the present.”²⁰ This aroused the emperor's immense surprise because at that time offering money and accepting gifts of this type was a universally recognised custom.

The following day the missionaries were again received by Akbar in a private audience, and a few days later (on 3 March) they presented to him a beautifully bound copy of *Biblia Regia* (also known as Plantin Polyglot), in eight volumes, commissioned by Philip II, the King of Spain, and printed in Antwerp by Christopher Plantin between 1569 and 1572.²¹ With immense astonishment the missionaries observed that Akbar “received these holy books with great reverence, taking each into his hand one after the other and kissing it, after which he placed it on his head, which, amongst these people, signifies honour and respect. He acted thus in the presence of all his courtiers and captains, the greater part of whom were Mahometans. Afterwards he inquired which of these books contained the Gospels; and when it was pointed out to him, he looked at it very intently, kissed it a second time, and placed it as before on his head. He then gave orders to his attendants that the books were to be conveyed to his own apartment, and ordered a rich cabinet to be made for their reception.”²² He also ordered the court artists to produce a golden reliquary and make copies of portraits of Christ the Saviour of the world and Virgin Mary his holy Mother, which the Jesuits brought with them.²³

²⁰ Monserrate 1922: 28. And du Jarric adds: “As for their livelihood, for which the King urged them to accept what he offered them, they said that it was sufficient happiness for them to enjoy his favour, and that they trusted to God to supply their daily needs. The King was much impressed by their refusal of the money, and for a long time could talk to his courtiers of nothing else” (Du Jarric 2004: 10).

²¹ Fifteen years later, in 1595, Akbar offered this Polyglota, together with other European books that he had in his library, to the Jesuit priests of the third mission sent from Goa. Among the donated volumes there were “different Bibles and concordances, the *Summa theologiae* and other works of Thomas Aquinas, surely in Latin, works of Domingo de Soto, of Antonio Forciglione, *Historia Pontificalis* [of John of Salisbury – AKF], *Chronicles of St. Francis*, *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* and *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius” (Fernando & Gispert-Sauch 2004: 137). All these books Akbar had in his possession as a result of his interactions with the Europeans and they prove how rich and well equipped his library was. More on Akbar's library see also Du Jarric 2004: 31, 117.

²² Du Jarric 2004: 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The chapel was built in the palace and one of Akbar's sons, Murād, then a boy of ten, was entrusted to Father Monserrate to study the Portuguese language and the principles of Christian ethics.²⁴ The priests were allowed to preach and convert freely in the whole city, and they could perform publicly their religious services, which was in opposition to the principles of Islam. When a certain Portuguese had died at a court, Akbar acceded to organise “a public funeral with Christian rites, that is to say, with lighted candles, and preceded by the cross.”²⁵ The Jesuits enjoyed unlimited, continuous access to the emperor,²⁶ and were also regular participants in the religious debates in ‘Ibādat xāna as well as in those conducted outside the court, during the military or hunting expeditions.

There is no doubt that the Jesuit missionaries were amazed by the tolerance of the Mughal ruler – they were coming, after all, from Europe, dominated at that time by the raging Inquisition, tracking down and persecuting heretics, where the sovereigns imposed their own religion on their subjects according to the principle *Cuius regio, eius religio*. The missionaries took it for granted that Akbar was close to reject Islam totally and become a Christian. This erroneous belief was surely strengthened by the reports of Badā' ūnī, who described the terrible relationship that prevailed between the ruler and the Philistine orthodox Muslim clergy. For the conservative historian it was one of the proofs of the emperor's anti-Islamic attitude.²⁷ Thus the Fathers were truly disappointed when

²⁴ Father Monserrate praised the young prince to be “an ideal pupil as regards natural ability, good conduct and intellectual capacity. In all these respects it would have been hard to find any Christian youth, let alone a prince, surpassing him” (Monserrate 1922: 52).

²⁵ Du Jarric 2004: 15. The funeral procession that passed through the city of Faṭhpūr Sīkrī aroused great curiosity among its inhabitants: “the infidels, [...] were strongly impressed by reverent respect shown by the Portuguese towards their dead; and many even of the Saracens uttered prayers for the deceased, and offered to assist in the interment” (Ibid.).

²⁶ It happened quite often that Akbar conducted long night-time conversations with the Jesuits in the privacy of his own throne-room; in one of his letters to Father Vincente, dated 24 July 1582, Rudolf Aquaviva writes that such discussions occurred “at least once a week, till midnight and at times beyond that” (Correia-Afonso 2003: 110).

²⁷ Badā' ūnī charges Akbar with rejecting “the Resurrection, and Judgment, and other details and traditions, of which the Prophet was the repository” (*Muntaxab al-tavāriḫ* II: 256). He states that “after five or six years not a trace of Islām was left in him [Akbar]: and every thing was turned topsy turvy” (Ibid., 255), and admits openly that “His Majesty firmly believed in the truth of the Christian religion, and wishing to spread the doctrines of Jesus, ordered Prince Murād to take a few lessons in Christianity under good auspices, and charged Abul-fazl to translate the Gospel. Instead of the usual *Bismillāh-irraḥmān-irraḥīm* the following line was used: *Ai nāmi vey Gesu Christu*, that is «O thou, whose name is merciful and very bountiful»” (Ibid., 260). Badā' ūnī accuses the Fathers “those accursed men”, and other “persons of novel and whimsical opinions, in accordance with their pernicious ideas, and vain doubts” (Ibid., 255) of causing this disastrous situation. The Christian missionaries make the same statement, “And yet one does not know for certain what law he follows; for though he is certainly not a Mahometan as his actions show plainly enough...” (Du Jarric 2004: 34).

it finally turned out that the earnest desire to find spiritual truth, so characteristic of Akbar, was caused by his inclinations towards mysticism rather than his sincere desire of conversion, even though some of his deeds might have created such an impression.²⁸

On the other hand, the behaviour of the Jesuits was uncompromising, even fanatical, and many a time it was only the authority of the emperor that saved their lives. The priests broke the rules of court etiquette repeatedly and spoke in a derogatory manner about Islam and its prophet. Their presence at the court and Akbar's explicit favours intensified discontent and the hostile attitude among the courtiers – especially those connected with the conservative Muslim faction. During the debates the dispute concerning the superiority of the Bible over the Qur'ān and *vice versa* returned over and over again. The ordeal by fire was even proposed as a means of proving the trueness of the claims of both parties,²⁹ but eventually it never took place. For the Jesuits the unsolvable problem was polygamy – unacceptable for them but at the same time impossible to be given up by Akbar. The emperor could not and did not want to reject the practice of having many wives for purely political reasons – the alliances established by marrying women from powerful families who were mostly daughters of the mighty local rulers. Polygamy was one of the pillars of the imperial policy of expansion and uniting Indian territories under the Mughal rule. Moreover, the missionaries were unable to come to terms with the fact that Akbar allowed his subjects to enjoy complete freedom of religion and consequently, “cared little that in allowing every one to follow his own religion he was in reality violating all religions”³⁰ – as Father Monserrate commented.

²⁸ Akbar occasionally took part in Christian services kneeling bareheaded; he prostrated himself before the image of the Saviour or even kissed an icon of Jesus on a public occasion. Cf. Correia-Afonso 1980: 138, 176.

²⁹ Both Badā'ūnī and Abu 'l-Faḥr mention these events though their reports differ when it comes to indicating which of the parties proposed the ordeal by fire. According to Badā'ūnī it was Qutb-ud-dīn of Jalesar, regarded as a holy man (*majzūb*), intoxicated (*xarābī*) with the Divine Love, who “brought [...] to a conference with some Christian priests, and philosophers, and great law-authorities of the age, after a discussion [...] exclaimed: «Let us make a peat fire, and in the presence of His Majesty we will pass through it, and whichever gets safely through it, will prove thereby the truth of his religion.» The fire was made. The Shaikh pulled one of the Christian priests by the coat, and said to him: «Come on, in the name of God!» But none of the priests had the courage to go” (*Muntaxab al-tavārīḫ* II: 299). Abu 'l-Faḥr relates however: “The Padre [Rudolf – AKF] quietly and with an air of conviction said: «Alas, that such things should be thought to be true! In fact, if this faction has such an opinion of our Book, and regard the *Furqān* (Qoran) as the pure Word of God, it is proper that a heaped fire be lighted. We shall take the Gospels in our hands, and the 'Ulamā of that faith shall take their book, and together we shall enter that testing-place of truth. The escape of any one will be a sign of his truthfulness»” (*Akbarnāma* III: 369). Cf. also Monserrate 1922: 39–43; Rizvi 1975: 133 ff.; Nizami 1989: 200–201.

³⁰ Monserrate 1922: 142.

Although his attitude towards the Christian missionaries was very positive, even cordial,³¹ Akbar did not stop taking more or less ambiguous attempts to remove the Portuguese from the territories occupied by them on the Western coast. The main goal was to regain from the foreign hands the harbours of Diu and Daman, which was justified by the necessity of providing Indian Muslims with the possibility of setting off to Hijāz without additional troubles caused by the Portuguese authorities. However, military actions taken during the years 1580–1583 did not bring any results, and finally Akbar gave up these plans, probably having realised that it was impossible to deal effectively with the Portuguese naval power without strong fleet, which the Mughals did not have.

However, the Jesuits learned about the actions taken by Akbar against the Portuguese, and acknowledged them to be deceitful and ambiguous. They also abandoned hope that they would manage to persuade Akbar to accept Christianity and succeed in changing him into “Asian Constantine the Great,” especially that the emperor started to reveal his increasingly stronger tendency to religious syncretism.³² Their observations and rather unfavourable impressions of the prospects of the mission were reported to the provincial in Goa, who summoned them to return if only they decided that there were no chances for any positive results of their staying at Akbar’s court. The first who returned to Goa, already in 1581, before the termination of the mission, was Father Henriqués. A year later

³¹ A description of Akbar’s friendly, even a familiar, attitude towards the Jesuits can be found e.g. in Monserrate’s *Commentary*, cf. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

³² Monserrate emphasises Akbar’s eclecticism, quoting his words with which he concluded one of the religious debates: “I perceive that there are varying customs and beliefs of varying religious paths. For the teachings of the Hindus, the Musalmans, the Jazdini [Zoroastrians – AKF], the Jews and the Christians are all different. [...] Wherefore I desire that on appointed days the books of all the religious laws be brought forward, and that the doctors meet together and hold discussions, so that I may hear them, and that each one may determine which is the truest and mightiest religion” (*Ibid.*, 182). He further states that “... the priests began to suspect that he was intending to found a new religion with matter taken from all the existing systems” (*Ibid.*, 184). This opinion, shared also by Badā’ūnī, who charged Akbar with apostasy and read his intentions as a sign that he had abandoned Islam, was then vastly repeated by the historians in reference to *Tauḥīd-i ilāhī* (Divine Unity), the circle of scholars and followers, which Akbar initiated in 1582. *Tauḥīd-i ilāhī*, called by Pirbhai a kind of “theosophical society” resembling a Šūfī order but incorporating some rites more usually related to Hinduism, like vegetarianism or cremation (cf. Pirbhai 2009: 82), has been widely regarded as Akbar’s attempt to construct a new religion for all his Indian subjects. However, the idea of the Divine Unity, even though built on Akbar’s strong faith in monotheism and Šūfī beliefs concerning the communion with God (*tauḥīd* – ‘declaring God to be one alone,’ ‘believing in the unity of God’), also had a strong political motivation. Akbar was trying to shape his state and its ruling class on the basis of such principles as liberation, tolerance, justice and equal treatment to all faiths. This was a goal which neither Christian missionaries nor narrow-minded Muslim ‘*ulamā* such as Badā’ūnī could realise or support. *Tauḥīd-i ilāhī* helped Akbar to create a tradition of absolute loyalty to the Mughal throne which became his legacy to his successors. More on religious and political aspects of *Tauḥīd-i ilāhī* cf. Pirbhai 2009: pass.; Chandra 1993: 177–183.

Antonio Monserrate left the court but he was delegated by Akbar to become one of the members of the planned Mughal legation to the king of Spain. Monserrate was equipped with a written request to send another Christian in his place as well as more books concerning Christianity. However, the embassy to Spain never came to fruition and Monserrate stayed in Goa. The last member and leader of the mission Rudolf Aquaviva remained at the court for another year, and eventually, he took leave of Akbar in February 1583, with great and mutual regret. The emperor and the missionary, who befriended each other during those three years, were never to meet again – Aquaviva was martyred a few weeks after his return to Goa.

Thus the first Christian mission to the Mughal empire ended up in an apparent failure. Monserrate summarised it with disappointment, “Hence we may justly suspect that Zelaldinus had been led to summon the Christian priests not by any divine prompting but by curiosity and to ardent an interest in hearing new things, or perhaps by a desire to attempt the destruction of men’s souls in some novel fashion. For if this enterprise had been of God, it could have been hindered by no hardship or obstacles. Since it was not of God, it collapsed of itself, in spite of the King’s obstinacy.”³³

But was the failure of the mission really so complete? In fact, seven years later Akbar sent another written request to the authorities in Goa, asking again for sending Christian priests to his court. The letter, obviously dictated by the emperor himself, may indicate that in the year 1590 Akbar may have had some thoughts of accepting Christian faith.³⁴ We can read there the following passages: “I have knowledge of all the faiths of the world, both of those of the Gentile³⁵ of various sorts, and the law of Mahomet, excepting only that of Jesus-Christ which is the law of God, and as such is accepted and followed by many. [...] Fathers [...] may dispute with my doctors, and [...] I, by comparing the knowledge and other qualities displayed on either side, may be able to see the superiority of the Fathers over my own learned men, whom we call Caziques, and who by this means may be taught to know the truth [...]”³⁶ And the document which Akbar sent to the governors of the provinces in order to ensure a safe journey of the Jesuits from Goa to Lāhaur, says again: “I hope, [...] to ensure the despatch of certain other Fathers whom I have invited to come to me from Goa, and through whose holy doctrine I hope to be restored from

³³ Monserrate 1922: 192.

³⁴ Cf. Smith 1919: 249.

³⁵ Gentile(s) is a word of Latin origin, usually employed in the plural, designating primarily in the English versions of both Testaments the nations distinct from the Jewish people. Since the spread of Christianity the word Gentiles designates, in theological parlance, those who are neither Jews nor Christians (i.e., they do not worship the true God). Cf. Gigot 1909: <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06422a.htm>>.

³⁶ Du Jarric 2005: 24.

death to life, even as their master, Jesus-Christ, who came down from heaven to earth, raised many from the dead, and gave them new life.”³⁷

In response to Akbar’s request, and in hope of his prospective conversion, a mission consisting of two Jesuit priests³⁸ and a lay brother was sent from Goa and reached Lāhaur in 1591. But very soon it appeared that in fact, the emperor did not intend to adopt Christianity. It is highly probable that his declarations suggesting his devotion to Christianity were never truly sincere. He might have valued Christian dogmas above those of other religions. However, he never declared openly any desire to be baptized nor admitted publicly that he was a follower of Christ. The second mission failed very soon, which was most likely caused by the strong resistance of the influential members of the royal court. The partakers of the expedition returned to Goa after several months.

However, despite the absence of Christian missionaries in the immediate vicinity of Akbar his tolerant attitude towards Christianity – as well as towards other religions – was constant and strong. A *farmān* (decree) issued in 1603 guaranteed the right of Christians to preach and carry out conversions as well as to erect churches not only in Āgrā and Lāhaur but also in Bombay and Ṭhaṭṭa. Akbar’s three grandsons – offspring of his youngest son Dāniyāl who died in 1604 – were even baptized although they converted back to Islam soon. Yet, it was in all probability a purely political ploy, designed to eliminate these three grandsons from fight for succession after Akbar’s death.

The third and last time Akbar renewed his wish to investigate the secrets of faith in Christ in 1594 when he sent a request to the Portuguese Viceroy in Goa asking him to delegate priests to his court. Having experienced two earlier unsuccessful missions, the Jesuits were rather reluctant to send another expedition, but the secular authorities of the colony – definitely for political reasons – insisted on meeting the demands of the Great Mughal. The General of the Order in Rome also favoured the idea strongly. The grand-nephew of St. Francis Xavier, known as Jerome Xavier of Navarra, was appointed to head the mission.³⁹ This time the Fathers were luckier: the Jesuit mission lasted at the Mughal court throughout the next two centuries. Naturally, its character transformed over time and the prosperity of the mission also changed continually, depending on who sat on the imperial throne. Finally, the attempts to convert the Mughal emperor to Christianity were abandoned; the primary task of the missionaries was to take spiritual care and to support the Christians gathered around the Mughal court. Jerome Xavier, who possessed fairly good knowledge of the Persian language, was the author of several books devoted to various

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁸ Father Edward Leioton (Leitanus) and Father Christopher di Vega.

³⁹ Two other priests were sent to assist him: Father Emmanuel Pinheiro, a Portuguese, and Brother coadjutor Benedict de Goes.

aspects of Christianity. The Jesuits studied geography and astronomy, and conducted research work in the observatories in Delhi and Jaipur.

One of the probable reasons why Akbar required constant presence of Jesuits at his court was their unexpected impact on the cultural and artistic life of the milieu in Delhi and Āgrā. The existence of the mission provided a supply of books, often richly illustrated, as well as of European paintings or their reproductions. The Europeans, who arrived in the Mughal India in the first half of the 17th century, were amazed to see numerous examples of murals featuring Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin and Catholic saints, on the walls of palaces and mausoleums. Christian motives were also employed in miniature painting, jewellery and sculpture.

In the declining years of Akbar's reign, political tension between the Portuguese colonial authorities and the Mughals was growing and this situation inevitably affected the presence of Christian mission at his court to some extent. Akbar was an excellent and shrewd politician. He treated his Christian guests with great reverence and fondness as well as maintained friendly contacts with the authorities in Goa, but his real intentions towards the Portuguese were not friendly. In vain did he try to conceal this fact from Fr Aquaviva and Fr Monserrate during the first mission, but nearly twenty years later, he declared his attitude openly. His friendly legations, sent avowedly with the innocent goals of attaining religious instructions and purchasing European wares, had baleful political intentions at the same time and were used as means of espionage. On the other hand, the Jesuit fathers, especially those who came with the third mission, although deeply religious and very enthusiastic about their missionary work and their service to the Church, tried to serve the interests of their homelands. Undoubtedly, they were perceived by their superiors as some kind of Portuguese or Spanish agents who had to play certain political roles.

Despite the constant friendliness of the emperor himself, the missionaries experienced overt hostility at his court, which on the one side, was traditionally exposed by the conservative Muslim nobles, and on the other hand, fuelled by the machinations of other Europeans, who began arriving in increasing numbers to the realm of the Great Mughal. Consequently, the unique position which they enjoyed, practically having a monopoly on contacts with Akbar, was weakened so significantly that when in October 1605 the emperor was lying on his deathbed, the Jesuits were not allowed to assist at his side. The 63-year-old emperor "died as he had lived; for, as none knew what law he followed in his lifetime, so none knew that in which he died"⁴⁰ – du Jarric commented. "Some wished to pray for him in the Saracen manner; others did not dare to; and in the end neither Saracens, nor Gentiles, nor Christians would claim him as theirs,

⁴⁰ Du Jarric 2005: 97.

so that he had the prayers of none.”⁴¹ His impressive, monumental mausoleum in Sikandrā, which he designed for himself while still alive, is the last proof of his syncretic way of thinking, combining elements of all three architectural styles: Muslim, Hindu and Christian.

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⁴¹ Ibid., 100.

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