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*Reifying Religion While Lost in Translation:
Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan (d.1781) on the Hindus*

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This paper examines the life and thought of one of the leading Muslim revivalist thinkers in 18th century India, Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janani (1699-1781) in an effort to understand the relationship, if any, between the structures of knowledge that informed colonial conceptions of India's religious topography and 18th century projects of intra-religious and cross-religious interpretation (such as that conducted by Jan-i Janani)? In addition, the project aims at informing the inquiry as to the extent to which the process of reification that led to the development of a unified notion of 'Hinduism' in the modern era already was underway in the works of 18th century figures such as Jan-i Janani?

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My paper is about the following question, how do we account for the problematic of translation in medieval Muslim studies of Hinduism? I approach this question by examining the life and thought of one of the leading Muslim revivalist thinkers in 18th century India, Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janān (1699-1781). More specifically, I re-consider his ideas on Hinduism in an attempt to identify ways in which he 'reifies' religion while making sense of a tradition containing symbols and categories that were drastically foreign and alien to him.

The central questions that I attempt to address are as follows: How do we characterize Jan-i-Janān's superimposition of distinctly Islamicate categories on Hindu ideas and concepts? What typologies does he employ in 'translating' one mode of religious symbols and discourses into another? And most importantly, in what ways does Jan-i-Janān's attempt at representing Indian religiosity help us think about the rules of doing comparative religion in the context of South Asia? After delineating the major aspects of Jan-i-Janān's ideas on Hindu thought and practice, I conclude that although his reading of Hinduism is highly sympathetic, he nonetheless conducts an inter-religious interpretation that treats Hindu religious categories in a highly reified and unitary fashion. Therefore, Jan-i-Janān's reading of Hinduism represents an excellent example of a cross-religious representation that is as the pun goes: 'lost in translation'.

Born in 1699, Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janān is a major figure in late *Naqshbandi* Sufism in Northern India. Educated in both the conventional and the religious sciences, Jan-i-Janān received extensive training in *Qur'anic* and *Hadith* studies from the most prominent scholars of his time. He spent most of his career in Delhi where he had established his own center of learning. In addition to training scores of disciples, Jan-i-Janān also wrote a voluminous number of letters and treatises on various aspects of Sufi psychology, metaphysics and practice. He is most well known

though for his polemical writings against the *Shiah*. In 1781, he was attacked and injured by a *Shiah* in Delhi and he died three days later.

In writing about Hinduism, Jan-i Janan was participating in a long-standing trend in Medieval Muslim thought to reflect on the religions of India in a sympathetic and scholarly fashion. The pioneer of this trend was the 11th century thinker Al-Biruni (d.1030) whose monumental work *The India* still represents one of the most informative, descriptive and detailed accounts of the religions, cultures and traditions of pre-modern India. In addition to its remarkable scope and breadth, Al-Biruni's work is also noteworthy on account of its treatment of Indian religion as a unitary and monolithic entity. As Carl Ernst has argued, "al-Biruni's perception of the "otherness" of Indian thought was not just hermeneutical clarity with regard to a pre-existing division; it was effectively the invention of the concept of a unitary Hindu religion and philosophy." Indeed, Al-Biruni's conception of a unified Indian religion is obvious from the very first paragraph of his text. As he quite trenchantly states, "Before entering on our exposition, we must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate the *essential* (italics and emphasis mine) nature of any Indian subject. For the reader must always bear in mind that the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect, many a subject appearing intricate and obscure when would be perfectly clear if there were more connections between us. The barriers which separate Muslims and Hindus rest on different causes."⁷ Al-Biruni's essentialist treatment of the Hindu 'other' seems remarkably similar to the colonial mentality towards Indian religions that came to the forefront some nine centuries later. I return to this point later on in this paper. Other notable medieval Muslim writers who partook in this trend include the Persian historian al-Gardizi who was a contemporary of Al-Biruni, the 14th century court poet in Delhi Amir Khusraw (d.1325) and the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's brother Dara Shikoh (d. 1659) in the 17th century. This list of course is only a small sample of the various medieval Muslim thinkers who engaged in the problematic of translating Hindu religious thought for their Muslim audiences. Although each of these

⁷ Embree, Ainslee T. *Alberuni's India*. P. 17.

thinkers attended to different aspects of Hinduism, and although the nature of their investigations vary considerably, we can nonetheless identify certain common theoretical and doctrinal challenges that each of these thinkers confronted while making sense of Hindu traditions and patterns of religion.

The first and the most obvious challenge is that of casting Hinduism as a monotheistic tradition that might be palatable to the Muslim sensibilities of their readers. Second is the problem posed by the question of whether Prophets were ever sent to India and what status do these Prophets hold in the Islamic tradition? And third and perhaps the trickiest task that awaits a Muslim reading of Hindu religion is that of explaining the practice of idol worship among Hindus within the bounds of Muslim norms of discursivity.

Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan tackles these challenges in a very positive albeit somewhat inaccurate sketch of Hindu thought and practice. His ideas on Hinduism are contained in a few letters (all in Persian) that he wrote to his disciples while answering their queries on the subject. Jan-i Janan declares that after much investigation and research, what one finds out from the ancient books of the natives of India is that at the birth of the human species (*noo-i-insaani*), God had sent a holy book by the name of (*bai'd*)⁸ for the correction (*islah*) of their world (*dunya*) through an angel called Brahma, who is an instrument of the creation of the world. This book is comprised of four sections and it contains injunctions on the differentiation of right from wrong (*Amr-wa-nahi*) and information about the past and the future. They have divided the ancient history of the world into four parts and each part has been given the name “jug”, and for every *jug* the correct method of practice (*tariqa-i-aml*) has been derived from each of the four branches of their holy scripture. Here, by casting Brahma as God, Jan-i Janan takes an important step in representing Hinduism as a monotheistic tradition. He goes on to unreservedly declare that all Hindu sects believe in the unity of God as the transcendent creator who creates out of nothing (*Tawhid-i-Bari-i-Ta'ala*). And they believe that the world is created. They affirm and believe in the annihilation (*fana*) of the world, in rewards and punishments for good and bad deeds, and

⁸ Persian for *Vedas*.

in resurrection (*hashar*) and accountability (*hissab*) in the hereafter. In perhaps his most generous moments of writing, Jan-i Janan renders a sweeping approval of Indic systems of knowledge by declaring that these people (the Hindus) have a commanding grasp (*yad-i-tau'la*) over the rational and traditional sciences (*uloom-i aqa'li wa naqa'li*), ascetic practices (*riyazat*), spiritual practices (*mujahidat*), and unveilings (*mukashifat*). The rules and regulations of this religion were entirely harmonious and coherent.

Jan-i Janan's imposition of his Muslim frame of reference is most apparent when he describes the Hindu 'schools of law'. According to Jan-i Janan, their (the Hindus') master-jurists (*mujtahidawn*⁹) have derived from this book six different schools of law (*mazahib*) and based on them their principles of belief (*usul-i-Aqai'd*). They have given this system the name 'dharma-shastra' meaning the 'art of the object of faith' (*fan-i-eemaniyaat*) which is the same as dialectical theology (*ilm-i-kalam*) in Islam. They have divided the human species into four different castes (*firqawn*)¹⁰ and they have derived four different orders (*maslak*) from this system. Each caste has been assigned a particular order and the foundation for applied duties (*Faroi-aamal*) is based on this system. To this system they have given the name *Karma-Shastra* meaning the art of the object of practices (*fan-i-amliyaat*) which we call juridical knowledge (*ilm-i-fiqh*).

In an obvious reference to Manu's *Varnasramadharm* system, Jan-i- Janan goes on to explain that their sages have divided human life into four different stages. The first for the acquisition of knowledge, second for the attainment of wealth, third for devotion and the correction of the soul and the fourth for complete renunciation from the world which is the most extreme form of human perfection (*Insaani-Kamal*). The state of *Nijaat-i-Kubra* (ultimate salvation) which they call *Maha-Mukti* is based on this stage. Here, it is useful to observe that Jan-i Janan's representation of the Hindu caste system not only demonstrates his awareness of the phenomenon but it also shows that during the pre-modern era, it was not uncommon or awkward for a Muslim thinker to talk about the legitimacy of the Hindu castes in

⁹ Plural of *mujtahid*.

¹⁰ Plural of *Firq*.

an open and uninhibited manner. This factor further demerits the already well-refuted conception that Islam played a decisively democratic role in India by relieving the native Hindus from the shackles of the caste system. As Jan-i Janan's discourse on the caste-system suggests, this idea of democracy is quite ill-founded and unreliable. Next, Jan-i Janan confronts the contentious issue of whether Prophets were ever sent to India.

Here, Jan-i Janan adopts a particularly bold stance by unequivocally declaring that prior to the birth of Islam, God had indeed sent Prophets to India and that their activities have been recorded in the holy books of the Indians. And from their remains (*aasar*) it also seems that they had attained the stages of perfection and completion and that the general mercy of God (*rahmat-i-aama*) did not forget the humanity of this vast landmass. Later it was known that this was a religion that had pleased God but which has now been abrogated. According to Jan-i Janan, it is famous that prior to the arrival of Muhammad, all nations in the world were sent Prophets and each nation was only obliged to follow the message of its particular Prophet and not that of any other nation. However, after the arrival of Prophet Muhammad in the 6th century, the situation changed fundamentally. After Muhammad's emergence, all Eastern and Western religions have been abrogated and until the world is extant, no one may refrain from embracing Islam.

Jan-i Janan goes on to assert that the Muslim tradition has no mention of the abrogation of any religion except those of the Jews and the Christians although there were many religions other than these that were abrogated and that took birth and then later died out. Since the arrival of the Prophet until now, 1180 years have elapsed. In this time period, whoever did not accept the message of the Prophet is an infidel but the people who pre-date the arrival of Islam are not so. On the question of the identity of the Prophets that were sent to India, Jan-i Janan quite deftly argues that the tradition is silent about the existence of most Prophets. Therefore, with respect to the Prophets of India, it is also best to remain silent. We need not believe that they were infidels and neither is it incumbent upon us to believe that they had attained salvation. In these matters, it is best to maintain a 'positive outlook' (*hasn-i-zann*) so that no hostility (*taa'sub*) is produced. Jan-i Janan further extends his argument to include

regions other than India. Even in the case of the natives of Persia or for that matter in regards to every nation that pre-dates the arrival of Prophet Muhammad and that receives no mention in the tradition, it is best to believe that their laws and traditions are consistent with the way of moderation (*maslak-i-mua'tadil*). In the absence of a definitive proof, one should never be flippant and light-hearted about the practice of charging someone with unbelief.

Next, Jan-i Janan takes on the arduous task of clarifying and defending the practice of idol worship among the Hindus. He argues that the truth about their idol worship is that above all it represents a form of meditation. This process of meditation is directed towards: 1) certain angels that exist in this world of corruption because of God's command or 2) the spirits of certain perfect individuals who exist in this world even after having abandoned their bodily forms or 3) certain living men whom the Hindus perceive as immortal like the figure of Khizr in the Muslim tradition. By concentrating their thought on these representations, they create a spiritual connection with the entities represented by them and they thus attain their material and spiritual needs. This practice is reminiscent to the practice of the Muslim Sufis who meditate upon the image of their masters (*pirs*) for purposes of spiritual healing; the only difference being that Muslims do not make a concrete representation out of their masters. But the idol-worship of the Hindus bears no resemblance to the belief systems of pre-Islamic pagans because they used to regard their idols as independent agents, effective by themselves and not as instruments of divine power. Thus, they failed to comprehend the absoluteness of God's divinity by believing that these idols are the gods of earth and that Allah is the God of heaven. According to the rules of divinity (*uhuliyyat*), this constitutes infidelity. This exposition represents an excellent demonstration of Jan-i Janan's sensitivity towards confronting the challenge of dissociating the religious practices of pre-Islamic pagans from the rituals and customs of the natives of India. In a similar light, Jan-i- Janan also casts a sympathetic light on the Hindu custom of prostrating before idols. He defends this popular Hindu practice by arguing that the prostration of the Hindus is one of respect and not that of idolatry, because in their religion, parents, masters and teachers

are greeted not with the Muslim greeting of 'salaam' but with a prostration that they call *dand'vat*. Here, it is useful to highlight that Jan-i Janan's defense of the practice of prostration among Hindus, namely that it represents 'a prostration of respect and not that of idolatry' is identical to the popular line of defense that modern-day Sufis employ while justifying the Sufi practice of bowing before the grave of a saint while paying homage at his shrine. Finally, on the Hindu belief in transmigration or metempsychosis, Jan-i Janan remains glaringly evasive by simply stating that a belief in transmigration (*tanasukh*) is not a necessary condition for one to be charged with unbelief and infidelity (*shirk*). Apart from this assertion, he says nothing else on this vital and conflicting issue.¹¹

There are several noteworthy details that emerge from Jan-i Janan's exposition of Indian religious thought. First, it is useful to take note of the generally sympathetic attitude that Jan-i- Janan adopts towards Hinduism because it radically departs from the extremely hostile position of his Naqshbandi predecessors, especially Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi in the 16th century. In this context, the key point in Jan-i- Janan's reading of Hinduism is the distinction that he makes between the Hindus who lived prior to the mission of Prophet Muhammad and those of the Islamic era. This distinction cautions us from exaggerating the sense of religious inclusiveness that we find in Jan-i- Janan's discourse. As Yohanan Friedmann has reminded us, "Mirza Mazhar's views cannot be considered as a breakthrough in the historical relationship between Islam and Hinduism. Certainly it cannot be stated without qualification that he considered the Hindus as monotheists or that he refused to declare them infidels, if this is meant to imply that their religion may legitimately co-exist with Islam and that they are therefore exempt from the obligation to embrace the only true faith."¹² Moreover, "Jan-i- Janan's admission that India, like any other country, had its Prophets in times of old, does not extenuate the guilt of those Indians who have not followed the Prophet Muhammad during the centuries

¹¹ Jan-i Janan, Mirza Mazhar. *Maqamat-i-Mazhari* (Persian). Lahore: Urdu Science Board: 1981.

¹² Friedmann, Yohanan. "Muslim Views of Indian Religions" Journal of the American Oriental Society, Volume 95, April-June 1975., P. 221.

that came after his call.”¹³ The conciliatory tone of Jan-i Janan’s discourse, his employment of inoffensive language and his generally amiable attitude towards the ancient Indians and their scriptures are noteworthy details in their own right. However, here, I want to take a slightly different line of inquiry by highlighting the ‘reification’ of religion that is inherent in Jan-i Janan’s explanatory apparatus.

Jan-i Janan’s exposition follows a constant trend of superimposing *Islamicate* categories on Hindu concepts and ideas that are quite foreign to a Muslim frame of reference. As a result, his reading of Hinduism produces a highly reified understanding of the tradition. For instance, by translating relatively flexible and fluid Hindu concepts such as *dharmashastra* and *karma shastra* into more structured and concrete Islamic ideas such as *ilm-i-kalam* (dialectical theology) and *ilm-i-fiqh* (juridical knowledge), Jan-i Janan conducts a cross-cultural reading that comprehensively fails to communicate the modalities under which these concepts operate in their respective religious domains. In effect, by ignoring the mode through which a religious concept is rendered meaningful, his method of translation falls short of conveying the modalities of these concepts in Hindu and Islamicate vocabularies. Central to this process of reification is the problematic of translation. As Walter Benjamin reminds us, “translation is ought to be celebrated as an act of transcendence that establishes a kinship between languages of thought and production. Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered as a translation of all the others. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity’.”¹⁴ When evaluated under Benjamin’s model, Jan-i Janan’s translation of Hinduism fares quite poorly because it does not represent an act of transcendence but an exercise in regulating religion into easily identifiable and ossified categories. His is not a harmonious translation, it is a violent translation. In an exact sense, we can assert that Jan-i Janan’s representation of Hinduism is symptomatic of a regulatory mechanism that can best be

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, P. 325.

described as the “religionization of religion”. Here, it is useful to remember that this condition is not limited to medieval Muslim studies of Hinduism.

In fact, this reifying process is very similar to the ways in which the South Asian encounter with colonialism a century later produced categories of practice and belief that were quite distant from their original modalities but quite consistent with modern religious sensibilities. For instance, scholars of Hinduism often point towards how a relatively fluid concept such as *dharma*, loosely meaning correct action and practice in the medieval era overtime became reified into meaning ‘religion’ in the modern sense of the term. However, as Jan-i Janan’s ossified representation of Indian religions demonstrates, this process of reification is not a colonial construct. Moreover, though one can never set aside the factor of politics, this tendency towards reifying religion can perhaps most accurately be described as an undesired possibility stemming from the broader and indeed more serious problematic of translation across cultures, time and space.

Here, I am not arguing that the reifying mechanism present in Jan-i Janan’s exposition and the unifying mode of inquiry contained in colonial understandings of Indian religion are entirely identical to each other. Certainly, with regards to these two situations, not only the politics underlying the translation but also the immediate historical context are quite different from each other. Moreover, whereas European notions of Indian religion are derived from a particular stream of post-enlightenment thinking, Jan-i Janan’s conceptions of the Hindu ‘other’ are as mentioned before a product of Islamic legal and theological categories. However, nonetheless, what these two approaches do hold in common is a movement towards a unified and monolithic understanding of Hindu thought and religion that does not account for the internal diversity or the inherent contestation over normative authority that characterizes any religious tradition. In other words, both of these interpretive paradigms work towards further congealing rather than blurring the Hindu-Muslim binary in the context of pre-modern India. Let me end with a few words on the relevance of the questions raised in this paper to broader issues of comparative studies in South Asian religions.

On the subject of medieval Muslim studies of Hinduism, Carl Ernst has argued that “there is a significant difference between medieval Islamic and modern European approaches to Indian religion and culture” Although many Muslims over the centuries engaged in detailed study of particular aspects of Indian culture, which may appear in a modern perspective as religious, there was for the most part no compelling interest among Muslims in constructing a concept of a single Indian religion, which would correspond to the modern concept of Hinduism”. For Ernst, the major exception to this rule is contained in the work of al-Biruni about whom he argues that:

al-Biruni's concept of a unified Indian religion, as a polar opposite to Islam, lay forgotten until it was resurrected in an even more radical form by European scholarship a century ago; the growth of the Muslim concept of Hindu religion took place largely without reference to al-Biruni. al-Biruni's rationalistic and reifying approach to religion, which had practically no impact on medieval Islamic thought, is much more palatable to the modern taste, and this explains his popularity today.¹⁵

The larger intellectual project that this paper is a part of is inspired by this dual set of arguments put forth by Ernst. In this context, I am most interested in achieving some clarity around the inter-relationship between the taxonomies of knowledge that governed colonial understandings of Indian religion and those that were prevalent among both Hindu and Muslim thinkers during the 18th century. In other words, the broadest question that this project revolves around is the following: what is the relationship, if any, between the structures of knowledge that informed colonial conceptions of India's religious topography and 18th century projects of intra-religious and cross-religious interpretation (such as that conducted by Jan-i Janan)? And moreover, to what extent was the process of reification that led to the development of a unified notion of ‘Hinduism’ in the modern era already underway in the works of 18th century figures such as Jan-i Janan? These questions are above the scope of this individual paper as to answer them conclusively would require an extensive analysis of a wide variety of Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit

¹⁵ Ernst, Carl.

chronicles, treatises and other sources that address these issues. However, nonetheless, Jan-i Janan's translation of Hindu thought provides us with an important part of this broader puzzle. The thrust of his translation project lies in the examination of Hindu religion from a strict prism of juridical and theological Islamicate categories. His is at once an essentialist and a legalistic translation based on a very selective and self-serving reading of Hindu ideas and thought.

It is a problem that is as applicable to contemporary studies in comparative religion as it was to Jan-i Janan's reading of Hindu thought and practice. It is a problem that is unavoidable while making sense of the 'other', the past or the 'unfamiliar. In this context, Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan's engagement with Hindu ideas and thought provides us with an excellent reminder that although translation is very important for doing religion, it is also very very tricky.

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