THE PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES OF INTER-RELIGIOUS TRANSLATION: MIRZA MAZHAR JAN-I JANAN ON THE HINDUS

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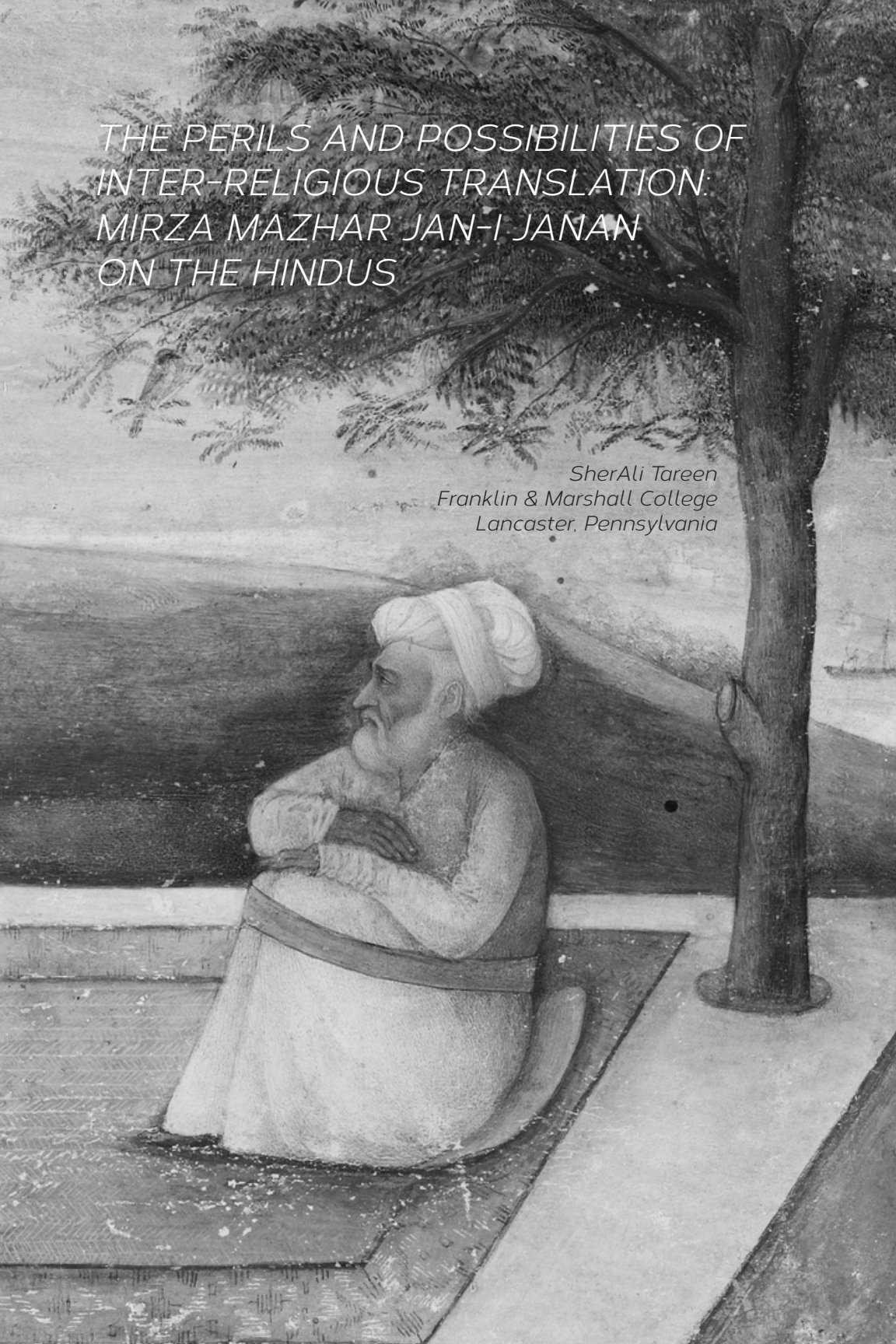

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The text translated below represents the views of a prominent eighteenth-century North Indian Muslim scholar Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan (1699-1781) on Hindu thought and practice. Primarily based in Delhi, Jan-i Janan was the leading Sufi master of the Naqshbandi order and among the most respected and influential eighteenth-century Indian Muslim scholars. His immediate master in the Naqshbandi order was the renowned Sufi Nur Muhammad Badayuni (d. 1723) who in turn traced his spiritual lineage to the preeminent late-sixteenth-/early-seventeenth-century Sufi master Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624). Another illustrious contemporary of Jan-i Janan's who was also attached to the Naqshbandi order was the legendary Muslim polymath Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762).[1]

Jan-i Janan's life corresponds with the historical trajectory of eighteenth-century India, a moment of tremendous political and social upheaval. As the political sovereignty of the Muslim elite dwindled, multiple rival claimants to power including the Sikhs, Jats, and Marathas came into central view, resulting in intensified intra-Muslim and inter-communal conflicts as well as collusions. Jan-i Janan's own father, Mirza Jan, was part of the Mughal bureaucracy serving as an officer under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The disintegration of Mughal political sovereignty must have affected members of the religious and political elite, such as Jan-i Janan, particularly abrasively. Thus, several of his writings combine a melancholic appraisal of the present with heightened alarm over the moral and political chaos that in his view had enveloped late eighteenth-century Muslim India.

Jan-i Janan wrote extensively on varied themes including Sufi thought, practice, and psychology. In addition, he was also a renowned

1 For more on the Naqshbandi order in South Asia, see Arthur Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

<< DETAIL OF "SAINTS SEATED ON A TERRACE" (CA. 1630s). IMAGE CREDIT: YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY.

Persian and Urdu poet. An important repository of his writings is preserved in a collection of his letters to disciples scattered all over India, though primarily concentrated in North India.

In one such letter, Jan-i Janan sought to translate and explain the normative traditions and doctrinal tenets of the Indian Hindu community for his Muslim disciples and for the public at large. This labor of inter-epistemic translation on Jan-i Janan's part forms the focus of the translation presented below. While originally written in Persian, the translation below is based on an Urdu translation of Jan-i Janan's essay letter on "Hinduism" contained in the book *Maqamat-i Mazhari,* an extensive intellectual biography of Jan-i Janan written by Shah Ghulam 'Ali Dihlavi (d. 1824), one of his foremost disciples and his spiritual successor in the Naqshbandi order.[2] *Maqamat-i Mazhari* is a fascinating text that, through a narrative of the history of Jan-i Janan's life, provides an intimate social, political, and religious history of eighteenth-century Muslim India more broadly.

In addition to discussing Jan-i Janan's religious thought, the political context and developments during his life, and the lives and intellectual contributions of his foremost disciples, this text also contains translations of twenty-three of Jan-i Janan's letters. These letters, usually written in response to a question from a disciple, engage multiple religious and political subjects, and at times discuss mundane matters of everyday life and the administration of the Naqshbandi order. Jan-i Janan's views on Hindus are found in letter number fourteen, entitled "A Statement on the Constitution of the Unbelievers of India" (*Kufar-i Hind ke A'yin ka Bayan*).

From the text it appears that it was composed in 1750 in response to a question by one of his disciples on the normative validity of "Hinduism" according to Islam. His translation of Hindu thought seems to have been based on his interactions with the Hindu scholarly elite in Delhi and/or on his readings of texts such as *The Laws of Manu* in

2 Shah Ghulam 'Ali Dihlavi, *Maqamat-i Mazhari: Ahval wa Malfuzat wa Maktubat-i Hazrat Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan Shahid* (Lahore: Urdu Science Board, 2001).

translation in Arabic or Persian. There is no indication of Jan-i Janan himself being well versed in Sanskrit. It should also be noted that a number of his disciples were Hindu and his Sufi lodge in Delhi remained an important center of visitation for Hindus and Muslims, both during and after his life.[3]

Some features of Jan-i Janan's exposition should be highlighted here. Overall, readers will notice that Jan-i Janan's explanation of Hindu thought and practice is very generous and sympathetic. More specifically, at the heart of his translation enterprise was the attempt to draw explicit equivalences between Hindu and Muslim scholarly categories. So we find that he translated *Dharmaśāstra* as dialectical theology or *'ilm al-kalam* and *Karmaśāstra* as jurisprudence or *fiqh*. Further, Jan-i Janan also strived to present "Hinduism" as a perfectly monotheistic tradition that contained clear doctrines regarding rewards and punishments in the hereafter, and that explicitly acknowledged the existence of prophets and angels.

He also emphatically asserted that God had indeed sent prophets to India as no part of the world had remained bereft of God's mercy. Jan-i Janan does not seem to have been interested in connecting this theological provision for the existence of prophecy in pre-Islamic India to the question of whether that qualified Hindus as protected minorities (*dhimmi*s) under Islamic law. While Jan-i Janan does not address this question directly, one can speculate that he would answer by distinguishing between the sending of prophets to a particular people and the legal status of "the people of the book." The former does not necessarily qualify a community for the latter. For all his championing of the monotheistic credentials of Hindus, it does not seem that he was willing or interested in pushing the envelope so far as to characterize them as among the "people of the book."

In a particularly fascinating move, Jan-i Janan also defended the

3 See Thomas Dahnhardt, *Change and Continuity in Indian Sufism: A Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi Branch in the Hindu Environmen*t (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2002).

practice of idol worship among Hindus by likening this practice to the Sufi ritual of meditation through the visualization of Sufi masters. He also argued that Hindu idol worship did not involve polytheism (*shirk*) because the Hindus did not understand their idols as effective and agentive in and of themselves. This clearly demonstrates his anxiety to present "Hinduism" as a monotheistic tradition, similar in its doctrinal architecture to Islam. Curiously, Jan-i Janan concluded his text with the pithy yet ambiguous remark that a "belief in transmigration (*tanasukh*) does not necessarily make one an unbeliever," thus removing the specter of unbelief from the doctrine of transmigration. It is difficult to tell from this text who or what informed Jan-i Janan's charitable attitude towards the normative legitimacy of transmigration.

But despite all his ecumenical gestures, Jan-i Janan nonetheless held on to a triumphalist narrative whereby Islam represented the most ideal and normatively coherent religion. More specifically, he argued that while the "religion" of Hindus may have been normatively valid prior to the emergence of Islam, it was abrogated as soon as the Qur'an was revealed. Therefore, those Hindus who did not accept Islam after Muhammad's arrival were unbelievers. So while allowing for some degree of hermeneutical flexibility in relation to the normative status of "Hinduism," he still maintained the overall superiority and exclusivity of Islam as the only current and normatively sanctioned religion. Therefore, it would be problematic and indeed anachronistic to read Jan-i Janan's favorable views on "Hinduism" as an example of religious pluralism and tolerance.[4]

The text translated below also represents an instructive example of an early modern project of inter-religious translation in South Asia, especially if set in comparison and contrast with later colonial regimes of translating "religion." Certainly, it is difficult not to notice features of Jan-i Janan's exposition that resemble and mirror later British colo-

4 I conduct a fuller examination of Jan-i Janan's understanding of Hinduism in my forthcoming article "Translating the 'Other': Early Modern Muslim Understandings of Hinduism" in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

nial attempts at translating varied Hindu traditions as a well-defined and fully translatable "religion" centered on a canon of certain authoritative religious texts. Much like modern approaches to categorizing religion, Jan-i Jan also conducted a rather essentialist reading of "Hinduism" whereby he choose only those aspects of "Hinduism" as objects of his translation and explanation that he saw as most closely resembling Muslim intellectual categories. Moreover, Jan-i Janan also valorized certain Hindus texts (primarily *The Laws of Manu*) as the most definitive and authoritative discursive statements on the Hindu tradition. This reductionist move seems consistent with modern Protestant modes of scripturalism that privilege text or scripture as the underlying and exclusive repository of a religion's most authentic articulation.

However, all that said, one still finds important differences between Jan-i Janan's and modern colonial translations of Hinduism. For one, in Jan-i Janan's text, one does not find the word "Hinduism" or its equivalent. Instead, he simply referred to Hindus as "the people of India" (*ahl-i hind*). While he was obviously discussing the tenets and doctrines of the Hindu community, it is still significant that he did not refer to them as followers of a distinct and fully demarcated religion called "Hinduism." That I have had to employ this category ("Hinduism") in quotations while describing Jan-i Janan's views speaks more to the terminological poverty of Euro-American discourses on religion than about his social imaginary. Further, while British colonial translations of "Hinduism" were part of a broader political project of colonialism, Jan-i Janan's translation was instead focused on the question of community: namely how should Muslims approach and understand the religious doctrines and practices of another community.[5] The political impulse or desire of imperialism does not seem to have been a facet of Jan-i Janan's calculus of translation.

The question of how Indian Muslim scholars imagined the norma-

5 Moreover, during this historical moment, the notion of a distinct religious community was much less demarcated than it was to become during the colonial period.

tive status and validity of "Hinduism" at the cusp of colonial modernity demands much further scholarly attention. This line of inquiry can prove particularly fruitful in understanding the continuities and ruptures in the conceptual landscape of religion as a category during India's transition from the precolonial to the colonial era. The text translated below provides one specific but important example of inter-religious translation that offers important insights into this larger problem-space.[6]

TRANSLATION OF THE TEXT

You [an unnamed disciple of Jan-i Janan's] had asked whether the religion of the unbelievers of India, like that of the pre-Islamic polytheists of Arabia, was absolutely invalid or whether the former used to follow a normatively valid religion that was later abrogated. And you had also inquired as to what opinion we [Indian Muslims] should hold about their ancients and religious leaders.

So, a just and sound exposition on this matter is as follows. What I have come to know from the ancient books of the people of India (*ahl-i hind*) is that at the birth of humanity God had revealed to them a book called *bayd* (Persian for Vedas) through an angel called Brahmā, who is the agent of the world's creation. This book is comprised of four sections. It contains injunctions regarding commanding good and forbidding evil (*'amr wa nahī*) and reports about the past and the future. Their master-jurists have derived six disciplines from this book. Their doctrinal foundations are based on these disciplines. To this they have given the name *Dharmaśāstra* meaning the discipline of faith (*fann-i 'imaniyyat*), which we call *'ilm-i kalam*. They have divided humanity into four divisions and assigned distinct practical duties for each of those divisions. The founda-

6 I would like to thank Dr. Carl Ernst with whom I first read this text as a first-year graduate student at Duke University some eight years ago. I should also thank the reviewers for their helpful comments and feedback, and the editors at *Sagar* for their excellent work.

tion for normative practices has been based on this system. To this they have given the name *Karmaśāstra* meaning the discipline of practices (*fann-i 'amaliyyat*) that we call jurisprudence (*'ilm-i fiqh*).

They have also divided the extensive history of the world into four divisions, And they call each of these divisions "*Jug*." And for every "*jug*" they have derived normative practices from each of the four disciplines in the Vedas. The practices of their moderns cannot be considered normative (*saqit al-i'tibar*). All of their sects are in agreement on the unity of God and they all understand the world as created by Him. Similarly, they all believe in the annihilation of the world, in rewards and punishments for human actions, and in accountability on the Day of Judgment. And they possess deep expertise in revealed and rational knowledges (*'ulum-i 'aqli wa naqli*), meditative practices (*riyazat*), spiritual strivings (*mujahadat*), gnostic knowledge (*tahqiq-i ma'arif*), and mystical unveilings (*mukashafat*). Their libraries are still well preserved.

Their rituals of idol worship do not involve polytheism. The reality of such rituals is something else. Their scholars have apportioned life into four phases. The first is for the acquisition of knowledge, second for livelihood and the rearing of children, third for the correction of practices and the purification of the soul, and fourth for the abnegation of the world; they consider the last stage to be the pinnacle of human perfections. Ultimate salvation (*nijat-i kubra*), what they call *mahāmukt*, is based on this last stage of life. The rules and regulations of this religion have complete harmony and order (*mukammal nazm o nasq*).

This used to be a normatively accepted religion. But it has now been abrogated. Many religious traditions other than Judaism and Christianity were abrogated or were born and later died out, even though the Shari'a only mentions those two. According to the Qur'an, "There is no community to which a warner has not been sent" (*wa inn min ummatin khala fi-ha nazir*).[7] And in another verse it is said, "Every

7 Qur'an: 35:24.

community has been sent a messenger" (*wa li kulli ummatin rasul*).[8]

And there are also several other verses concerning the sending of prophets. Prophets and messengers of God were indeed sent to India. Their conditions are recorded in the books [of the Hindus] and from their traditions it also seems that their prophets had attained the station of perfection. The capacious mercy of God did not forget the humanity of this vast landmass. It is well-known that prior to the arrival of Muhammad, every community (*qawm*) was sent prophets. Moreover, every community was obligated to follow its own prophet sent to them and not any other.

After the appearance of our Prophet [Muhammad], who is the seal of all messengers and who represents the Prophet for all of humanity, his religion [Islam] has abrogated all religions of the West and the East. And as long as the world exists, no one can dare disobey the Prophet. From the time of the Prophet's arrival until now, 1180 years have elapsed. In this time period, whoever did not embrace him [and his religion] is an unbeliever. But people who lived prior to the birth of Islam are not so. As it is said in the normative traditions of Islam, "[from among the previous Prophets], there are some about whom we have told you and there are some about whom we have not told you (*min-hum man qasasna 'alayka wa min-hum man lam naqsus 'alayka*)."

Therefore, we come to know that the Muslim tradition does not reveal the identity of several prophets. Hence, with regards to the prophets of India, it is also best for us to adopt silence. Regarding the followers of such prophets, we need not believe that they are guilty of unbelief and hence liable to be killed nor is it obligatory for us to believe in their salvation. We should simply maintain a positive outlook (*husn-i zann*) so that no dissension (*ta'assub*) is generated. Similarly, with respect to the people of Persia or with respect to people of all countries who preceded Muhammad and about whom the normative sources of Islam provide no explicit judgment, it is best to believe that

8 Qur'an: 10:47.

their laws and traditions were amenable to the path of justice. One should never take lightly charging someone else with unbelief in the absence of an absolutely categorical textual proof (*qat'i dalil*).

And the truth of their idol worship is this: they make idols of certain figures on whom they focus their attention as a form of meditation. Such figures can include angels that through God's command are able to act in this world of existence and corruption, the souls of certain perfect people that, even after being separated from the body, are able to act in this world, or people whom they regard as immortal just as we understand Prophet Khidr to be immortal. Through such focused meditation, they are able to establish a spiritual connection with the object/figure represented by the idol. And on the basis of this connection, they seek to fulfill their worldly and salvational needs. This practice of meditation resembles the common practice of the Sufis who, as part of their meditation, visualize their masters, and by doing so, benefit from the master's emanation (*fayzyab*). The only difference is that Sufis do not make an idol of their masters.

But the practice of idol worship [among the Hindus] is completely unrelated to the doctrinal tenets of the pre-Islamic unbelievers of Arabia. This is so because the pre-Islamic Arabs used to regard their idols as effective and agentive (*mu'assar wa mutasarraf*) in and of themselves and not as instruments (*alih*) of God's actions. They used to regard their idols as Gods of the earth and God as the God of the heaven; this represents polytheism.

The prostration of the Hindus is a prostration of reverence (*sajda-yi tahiyyat*) and not one of submission or devotion (*ubudiyyat*). Because according to their customs, one shows one's respect for parents, elders, and teachers not by saying *Salam* but by prostrating before them. They call this prostration "*dandvat*." And believing in transmigration (*tanasukh*) does not necessarily make one an unbeliever. Peace (*Wassalam*).