Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia


The essays in this collection were first presented at a conference organized at Duke University in 1995. Only a few years earlier, in December 1992, the Baburi Masjid of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, India, had been destroyed by Hindu nationalists who claimed that the mosque had stood on the site of the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama and therefore it was a Hindu sacred site they had to reclaim. This event, and the rise of Hindu nationalism that it so powerfully symbolized, form the backdrop to this rich and stimulating volume. The contributors seek to examine various facets of the context as well as the practices and processes that informed the articulation of religious identities in pre-colonial India. What emerges from these essays is, in each case, a complex and nuanced picture of overlapping identities and communities, which is a far cry from the blinding clarity that contemporary religious nationalists have tried to impose on the history of pre-modern India.

Borrowing a term coined by historian Marshall Hodgson, the editors of this volume—David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence—characterize pre-colonial South Asia as part of the ‘Islamicate’ world, that is, of a cultural and political framework marked by a broad diffusion of institutions, styles, and norms associated in some fashion with Muslim polities and societies. But while the overall framework was Islamicate, the manner in which religious identities were actually defined or expressed remained fluid, shaped as much by broad cultural and religious norms as by local politics, the peculiarities of time and socio-economic class, and not least by literary genre. The elusive Satya Pir, examined in this volume by Tony Stewart, was as crucial to those Hindus of Bengal who found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy as he was to similarly disprivileged Bengali Muslims in confronting the daily crises of their lives: the former revered him as a god, the latter as a saint, but his role in their lives was broadly comparable. A seventeenth-century Tamil life of the Prophet, studied here by Vasudha Narayanan, had for its part as little difficulty imagining the Prophet in Tamilnadu, rather than in Arabia, as it did in adapting the genre of the Tamil epic poem for the purpose. It might be tempting to characterize such indeterminacy of boundaries as ‘syncretism’. But, as Tony Stewart argues, the syncretist approach assumes that the religious traditions from which particular ideas or practices are derived themselves exist as discrete and fixed entities, and that any shared form in which such elements might find expression is something ‘unnatural’ and illegitimate. A more fruitful approach, Stewart suggests, is to ‘begin not with timeless religious categories but with context. What is important about Satya Pir ... is that he deals with pragmatic concerns of survival—not overt ideology, theology, or ritual; people accept that he wields a power to make their lives better and that is good no matter how it is labeled’ (p. 23).
Stewart’s approach does not deny differences between and among religious traditions, of course, but only that such differences are necessarily the defining or overarching characteristic of people’s lives everywhere or at all times.

That considerable difference did, in fact, separate pre-modern Hindus and Muslims in many respects is amply recognized in this volume. As Catherine Asher shows in examining the distinctive architectural forms favoured by Hindus and Muslims for their sacred edifices, the mosque has typically tended to be a very public and conspicuous structure, and this is as true of cities dominated by Muslims as it is of those in which they constituted a small numerical presence. This contrasts strikingly with the ‘low visibility’ of medieval Hindu temples, even for times and places where the Hindus were neither economically weak nor politically subservient. While Asher offers no convincing explanation for this difference, her demonstration that it has long separated Muslim and Hindu sacred structures points to how relatively stable Islamicate practices have interacted with local resources and facets of culture to create meaning and shape religious identities in South Asia.

Yet, how even the overarching cultural and religious frameworks conditioned the actions and attitudes of pre-modern Hindus and Muslims often diverges considerably from what modern nationalist narratives lead one to imagine. Carl Ernst demonstrates in his contribution to this volume that, far from condoning the desecration of Hindu religious structures, Muslims like Rafi’ al-Din Shirāzī, the sixteenth-century historian of Bijapur, were in fact ardent admirers of the magnificent Ellora cave temples. To Shirāzī, the Ellora temples signified, above all, the grandeur of the powerful kings who had built them; and it is the aesthetic and political significance of these structures, not any theological lessons on idolatry and iconoclasm, that stands out in his admiring account of them. That Muslim rulers did destroy a number of Hindu temples is well attested, though medieval chroniclers had propagandistic reasons for exaggerating the frequency of such occasions. Yet the issue is not only the evidence of temple desecration itself but, more importantly, of how to interpret it. If temples are seen as symbols of royal power, then instances of temple destruction assume a meaning very different than they would if we refuse to look beyond Islam’s monotheistic, iconoclastic teachings. As Richard Eaton argues in a comprehensive study of the subject in this volume, the desecration of temples by Muslim conquerors often marked a symbolic destruction or appropriation of the polity associated with those temples. Temple desecration expresses, in such contexts, not an atavistic Islamic iconoclasm but a facet of medieval state-building, and it is from this perspective that we can account not just for instances of temple desecration by Muslims but also for similar acts by Hindu kings. This argument leads one to expect that mosques in the realm of defeated Muslim kings would have had a similar fate at the hands of Hindu and Muslim conquerors. Eaton argues, however, that mosques were generally spared, because ‘all actors, rulers and ruled alike, seem to have recognized that the deity worshipped in mosques or shrines had [unlike many a temple]
no personal connection with a Muslim monarch’ (p. 267). This is a valid point, though it does not necessarily follow that in contrast to the royal temples, ‘mosques in Mughal India ... [were] ... politically inactive’ (p. 267). While Eaton himself notes a few instances of mosque desecration at the hands of non-Muslims, it is worth pointing out that instances of mosques being destroyed by Muslims are also attested elsewhere in Islamic history. One episode goes back to the life of the Prophet himself, when the Dirrār (‘opposition’) mosque, which had been built by Madinan ‘hypocrites’, was destroyed on his orders. Similarly, in 925 CE, a major Shi‘i mosque was destroyed by order of the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–32) because those congregating there were alleged to be hostile to the caliph and to have ties with the Ismā‘īlīs (see Ibn al-Jawzi, al-Muntazam fi tawārikh al-muluk wa‘l-imam, ed. Suhayl Zakkar (Beirut: Dar al-fikr, 1995), 8: 65 f. On the episode and traditions involving the Dirrār mosque in Medina, see Michael Lecker, Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 74–153. Such mosques were far from being ‘politically inactive’, or at least were not perceived to be so. But while Eaton’s argument needs to be modified on this point, his overall thesis is in fact corroborated rather than undermined by such evidence.

A major contribution of this volume as a whole lies in its detailed and variegated demonstration of the complexity of the Islamicate experience in India. This complexity owed itself, in no small measure, to the continuous interaction between the local peculiarities of the Indian context on the one hand, and the larger frameworks, institutions, and traditions of the greater Muslim world on the other. Identifying the provenance of particular ideas in, or ‘influences’ on, Islamicate South Asia is thus no easy matter. The strong opposition expressed by the Naqshbandi Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) to employment of Hindus in the Mughal state, and his advocacy of harsh discriminatory policies towards them, is often imputed to his Naqshbandī outlook; the latter is traced to Central Asian—hence ‘foreign’—roots, and is contrasted with the more tolerant attitudes of the indigenous Chishtī Sufis. Yet, as David Damrel shows, this interpretation of the ‘Naqshbandī reaction’ is predicated on too monolithic a view not only of the Naqshbandī but also of the Chishtī Sufi orders, and of what the foreign roots of one and the indigenous origins of the other mean for their career or interaction in India. As Damrel notes, such simplistic views also make it easy for us to miss the innovative ways in which Sirhindī and his followers combined and developed ideas of diverse provenance to fashion something new and distinctive in the Indian context.

The Indian imprint on Sufi modes of discourse is further illustrated in a seminal essay by Bruce Lawrence and Marcia Hermansen on Sufi biographical dictionaries. As it developed in India, the genre of the tazkira—or ‘memorative communications’, as the authors characterize it—served not only to preserve the memory of the Sufi masters and to construct and validate all-important genealogies of spiritual descent. Such works were also meant to assert the ties of these masters with particular urban locales, thereby laying
‘claim to a Muslim space in South Asia. They did so by Islamicizing the soil, by creating a “new” home, by configuring “new” spiritual and intellectual centers, and also by laying out “new” circuits of pilgrimage’ (p. 168). Yet precisely what the Islamicizing of this new home meant was, of course, anything but clear. Some of the contestation on this matter is brought out by Derryl MacLean as he examines the debates between a leader of the Mahdavı¯s, a millenial movement in Mughal India, and the court-sponsored religious scholars. It is further elucidated by Muzaffar Alam’s groundbreaking demonstration of how even a concept as central to Islam as the Sharı¯a was itself open to rival constructions. Alam identifies two broad senses of the Sharı¯a in the political culture of Mughal India, with reference to two distinct kinds of literature in which this term occurs. The Sharı¯a of the Muslim jurists is quite different, he argues, from that in the writings of the political philosophers and those concerned with ethical norms (akhlāq). To the jurists, the Sharı¯a was a set of fixed rules grounded in the foundational religious sources. Such rules formed the criteria according to which political and other behaviour was evaluated as orthodox or deviant, just as they were the basis on which sharp distinctions between Islamic and non-Islamic ideas could be drawn or sustained. In the philosophical and ethical traditions, on the other hand, the Sharı¯a signified governance according to the norms of moderation and justice, political accommodation, and pragmatic balancing of the interests of different political communities; in this conception of the Sharı¯a, ideas of an Islamic and a pre- (or non-)Islamic provenance were often seamlessly brought together, as were local usages and customs.

Alam’s analysis has the great merit of showing that the Sharı¯a meant more than what the jurists said it did (see also Muzaffar Alam, ‘Akhlāqi Norms and Mughal Governance’, in Muzaffar Alam, et al. (eds.) The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies (Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 67–95), and that the Mughal state was in fact based on the akhlāq tradition of understanding the Sharı¯a much more than it was on juristic constructions. Yet despite his caveats, his argument seems to assume that the juristic understandings of what the Sharı¯a meant or demanded in any given circumstance were themselves largely monolithic. Many jurists may indeed have held precisely the sort of views of the Sharı¯a, and what it required of Muslim emperors, that Alam suggests. But whether the jurists’ Sharı¯a necessarily connoted a single and fixed set of norms in the Islamicate world of Mughal South Asia needs to be demonstrated rather than merely assumed. At the very least, one would like to see as careful an examination of the juristic discourses on the Sharı¯a as Alam offers of the understandings of the Indian political thinkers (and of their Iranian and other predecessors). Even so, future studies of the conceptions of the Sharı¯a in South Asian Islam would have to take careful account of Alam’s provocative argument.

In their range and sophistication, the essays in this volume collectively constitute a major contribution to the study of Islam in pre-colonial South Asia. But the significance of this volume goes well beyond South Asian studies. The evolution of Islamicate institutions and discourses in India, in
interaction with rival Muslim and non-Muslim identities and in dialogue with local and universal Islamicate traditions, has much by way of comparative interest to offer to scholars and students of other pre-modern Muslim societies. This volume also suggests new ways of understanding how religious identities were articulated and negotiated in pre-modern societies, even as it provides rich resources with which to compare such processes in the modern world.

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The Sultan of Vezirs: The Life and Times of the Ottoman Grand Vezir Mahmud Pasha Angelović (1453–1474)


One of the many lacunae in the modern historiography of the Ottoman Empire is a series of biographies of the Empire’s leading statesmen. It is clear that the political structure of the Empire depended on personal rather than institutional links, and that to understand how Ottoman politics worked, we need to know the identities and backgrounds of the participants. At present such studies hardly exist, and Dr Stavrides’s book is for this reason extremely welcome, the more so as it deals with the career of Mahmud Pasha, who was for twenty years between 1454 and his execution in 1474 a dominant figure in Ottoman politics, and the outstanding statesman of the reign of Mehmed II (1451–81).

For the Ottoman historian, however, biography presents a problem. Even in better-documented periods than the fifteenth century, biographical materials are scarce and fragmentary. Furthermore, literary ‘biographies’ or rather ‘biographical notices’ usually conform to stereotypes, simply recording anecdotes to illustrate their subjects’ conventional virtues. Writings by the subjects themselves, as Stavrides’s discussion of Mahmud Pasha’s poetry well illustrates, also tend to conform to stereotypical patterns, making it difficult to detect anything relevant to the life of the individual. On the topic of Mahmud Pasha’s poetry, I would tend to be even more pessimistic than Stavrides in finding in it veiled references to Mahmud Pasha’s delicate situation at the Sultan’s court. The writings by people who knew the subject well are again disappointing. This is particularly frustrating in the case of Mahmud Pasha. The historian Tursun Bey was for many years in his service but, again, what he has to say about Mahmud Pasha’s personality or motivation belongs more to the realm of panegyric than biography. These are problems that Stavrides takes fully into account in his admirably balanced discussions of Tursun Bey’s History. Official documents from Mahmud Pasha’s time are rare. Furthermore Ottoman documents, especially decrees, were usually issued in the name of the Sultan even if, in reality, they embodied the decisions of the Sultan’s ministers or others. This is one