

Christianity in the Court of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605AD)

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to highlight the religious freedom vested to the Christians in the kingdom of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605AD) and his cordial relationship with the Jesuit Missionaries in the Mughal Court. Three Jesuit Missions were warmly received and welcomed by Akbar during the second half of his reign. These Missions arrived from Goa in 1579, 1591, 1594 and remained in the Mughal court till the death of Akbar in 1605AD. Accounts of these Jesuit Missions, their activities in the Mughal Court and efforts to convert Akbar into Christianity are also the focus of this article. Akbar was the first ruler of India who officially adopted the policy of religious tolerance and principles of Sulah-i-Kul (Universal Peace) for all. Akbar's interest in Christianity its religious philosophy and respect for Jesus and Mary is also mentioned in this article.

Key Words: Akbar, Christianity, Jesuit, Missions, Mughal, Religion, Tolerance.

Introduction

The long reign of Mughal Emperor Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, which lasted from 1556 to 1605 is considered as a glorious age of Indian history especially during the Mughal Empire. It was the dawn of the Mughal splendor which came to an end due to the disastrous wars fought in the south by Aurangzeb (Poole, 1980). When Akbar succeeded in 1556, he was only thirteen. He had a tolerant religious nature and a deep inquisitive mind. He unlike his grandfather Babur, loved adventure and was prepared to plunge into new experiments in government. Besides, he possessed an intensely religious nature and a profoundly inquisitive mind. This combination prevented him from becoming a fanatic (Sharma, 1975). Akbar was born and brought up in comparatively liberal surroundings. Humayun's foremost noble and Akbar's regent, Bairam Khan, was a Shi'a, and, therefore, for some of the Muslims in India, a heretic. Abdul Latif who was Akbar's tutor during his early age, was a liberal minded person in his religious views. He was so liberal in his views that among Sunnis he acquired the reputation of being a Shi'a and among Shi'as that of being a Sunni (Abu-l-Fazal). Bairam Khan further used his power as regent to appoint Shaikh Gadai, a Shi'a the *Sadr-ul-Sadur* of the Empire (Ahmad, 1973). Humayun in his own days, as the emperor of India, had

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been suspected of being a Shi'a. Thus the inherited tradition, early teachers and surrounding environment had a great influence on Akbar's beliefs and views, which in future inclined towards the side of religious tolerance and liberalism.

Basically Akbar was immensely affected by religious and non-religious influences of his time. Sixteenth century witnessed an age of religious renaissance in India. There was the revival of Bhakti movement. The great teachers of the age, like Ramanand, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir and Ramanuja, preached the unity of God. They denounced idol worship and caste system and advocated a new cult based on the unity of God and brotherhood of man. They stressed that the barriers of caste and creed should be removed and emphasized the highest principles of conduct, moral and ethical. Thus Akbar found himself a creature of his age (Kohli, 1949).

When Akbar was trying to introduce his policy of *Sulh-i-Kul*, or universal tolerance in India, at the same time most of Catholic Europe was given over to the Inquisition, and in Rome Giordano Bruno was being burnt for heresy at the stake in the Campo dei Fiori, in India the sixteenth Century Mughal Emperor, Akbar issued an order that "no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him" (Fischer, 2007). Even during that time the Portuguese in India were also hated by the people due to their cruel behavior especially in religious matters. Portuguese introduced Inquisition in Goa in 1560. By the 1580s, Zain al-Din Mabari was writing at length about the "infamous deeds" of the Portuguese which had brought ruin upon Malabari society-the burning of cities and mosques, the interruption of the *hajj* and killing of nobles and learned men. His response was to inspire the Muslims of Malabar to launch a "*Jihad*" against these "vile and disgusting infidels" (Dale, 1980).

Till the end of 1570's the evolution of Akbar's religious thoughts were at the critical point. Why this crisis arrived could be attributed to several factors. Badauni attributes it to Akbar's increasing irritation with the theologians, the influence upon him of his Rajput queens and of Birbal, and the pantheistic and heterodox ideas insinuated into his mind by Shaikh Mubarak, his son Abul Fazal and others. But there was a special psychological dimension to this crisis as well, which cannot be lost sight of. This was a factor too that made the crisis especially severe for Akbar (Ali, 2006).

In 1575 Akbar constructed *Ibadatkhana*, a magnificent building at Fatehpur Sikri. In the early years only the various sects of Islam were allowed to hold debates such as the *Sheikhs* and *Saiyids*, the *ulemas* and the *Amirs* but later on the learned professors of every community were given admittance irrespective of their caste, creed or religion. In fact it became a hall of Parliament of universal religion. The Muslims, lawyers, the Jews, the Buddhists, the Hindus, Parsis and Christians were all represented. On every Thursday night debates were held and usually there prevailed a spirit of antagonism and rivalry between the different sects. Sheikh Abdul Nabi and Sheikh Makhdum-ul-Mulk were the leaders of the orthodox party, while the Sheikh Mubarak and his two sons represented the liberal ones (Kohli,

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1949). The Shias attacked the Sunnis and the Sunnis reacted with equal vigor. Each party called the other heretic and denounced its principles whether right or wrong. Badauni lamented, that *ulema* could not agree on anything (Badauni, 1973).

While describing the construction of the famous '*Ibadat Khana*' at Fatehpur Sikri in 983H/1575-76AD, Badauni tells us that since Akbar had won so many victories and the empire had so greatly expanded, he was increasingly affected by a sense of gratitude to God: Respect for the Real Benefactor established itself in his heart, and in order to render thanks to those acts of assistance, by way of humility and sincerity he used to sit in early mornings on an old stone in an old cell, near the Imperial Palaces, but away on one side from habitation, when he used to become engrossed in meditation (Badauni, 1973).

It was probably here, in the realm of relations between political sovereignty and theological law, that the contradiction germinated which later on led to a complete reformulation of Akbar's religious views. Due to the presence of the Persian nobles in the Mughal court the traditions of *Safavid* Iran had its cultural and political effects in Akbar's court also. The *Safavid*, exercised considerable influence on the mind and manners of Akbar's Court. The *Safavid* Shah was a religious figure also, thus it was the natural desire of Akbar to attain such a high religious status within the framework of the Sunni Islam. It was obviously with this view that *Ibadat Khana* discussions of different theologians' were initiated in 1575. Akbar hoped to implement what theologians told him, and, in return secure from the later, recognition of his own supreme position. (Ali, 2006).

But, as Badauni lamented, the theologians could not agree on anything, while, to their credit, on some matters like the number of lawful wives, they could not reconcile Akbar's own practice with any reading of the Quranic injunctions. Akbar persuaded majority of the *ulema* in 1579 to sign (*Mahzar*) a statement of testimony to accept that the king (Akbar) hold a supreme religious authority in case any religious controversy among the *ulema* of different sects. The text has fortunately been preserved for us in the *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* of Nizamuddin Ahmad (Ahmad, 1973) and the *Muntakhabat Tawarikh* of Abdul Qadir Badauni (Badauni, 1973). The statement admits that the position of a just king (Sultan-i-Adil) is above that of a *mujtahid* (interpreter of law): that Akbar was such a Sultan-i-Adil and that Akbar, therefore, could (a) accept any of the existing divergent authoritative interpretations of *mujtahids*, (b) give his own opinion on any matter, provided it did not violate the *nas* (Holy Quran). All the leading theologians at the Court signed, but we can see now that the *mahzar* did not ultimately meet Akbar's ambitions: Abul Fazal in his Akbarnama passes it by very casually (Abul Fazal). Akbar's immediate attempt to take it seriously, and to abide by his new gained religious status among Muslims by giving a Friday sermon, failed to enthuse either himself, or, apparently his audience (Ahmad, 1973, Badauni, (1973). The authority assigned to him was of marginal import, and yet a novelty considered dangerous in its implications by traditional Muslims.

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In the beginning it was Akbar's curiosity to know about the other religions but after the *mahzar* (Infallibility Decree) in 1579 he began to strengthening his own position politically and religiously within the confined structure of the traditional Islam. From 1580-81, Akbar began to alienate himself from the traditions of the orthodox Islam and this ushered a new era in which he began to express his own religious views more openly (Ali, 2006).

Dissatisfied with tradition and authority, Akbar prescribed human reason as the sole basis of religion and bestowed complete religious freedom to the followers of any religion and creed in his empire. He was grieved to see narrow minded religious zealots preaching hatred against one another. To strengthen the political control of his empire and to avoid any religious disorder, he made an attempt to bring about a synthesis of various religions known to him, and styled it *Tohid-i-Illahi* or Divine Monotheism. It was a socio-religious order or brotherhood, designed to cement diverse communities in the land. It was based on the principle of universal toleration (*Sulah-i-Kul*) and comprised good points of all the religions, investigated by the emperor himself. The unity of God was its focal point and the important injunctions and religious doctrines of the Jain, Parsee and Hinduism had key place in it (Srivastava, 1957).

According to Badayuni and the Jesuit writer Bartoli, Akbar after his return from Kabul campaign, convened in 1582 a counsel of his principal courtiers and officers and formally promulgated the *Din-i-Illahi*. Sir T.W. Haig says, "It was now, in the rainy season of 1582, that Akbar took advantage of the presence of the provincial governors at Court to promulgate his new religion, the *Din-i-Illahi* or "Divine Faith" (Haig, 1957).

During the last 25 years of his rule, Akbar not only introduced the policy of religious tolerance for all the religions, as it is mentioned above but he also tried to make peace and avoid any Shia-Sunni conflict in his empire till his death in 1605AD. The author of the seventeenth-century encyclopedic work on religions, the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, made a striking observation when he traced Akbar's policy of religious toleration to the need of keeping within his nobility men of all Creeds and faith (Mazhar, 1809).

English poet Tennyson has finely expressed Akbar's dream of a pure and universal faith.

*I can but lift the torch
Of reason in the dusky cave of life,
And gaze on this great miracle, the world,
Adoring that who made, and makes, and is,
And is not, what I gaze on-all else Form,
Ritual, varying with the tribes of men,.*

It was Akbar's credit to make Mughal Empire as a neutral power to avoid the controversies of Islam within its own sphere (Ali, 2006).

The Portuguese was the first European power with whom the emperor came into contact. The Portuguese were the Catholic, so the Muslims of India

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encountered this version of Christianity in the beginning. They had strongly established themselves on the western coast of India, for purpose of trade and commerce, and had built their fortified settlements at Goa, Bassein Daman and Diu. They had the monopoly of the traffic of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, and carried the pilgrims to Mecca. Muslims were not allowed to travel by sea unless they had a passport from the Portuguese (Foster, 1978). Akbar was first introduced by the practice of Christian monogamy by a Portuguese Christian trader of Bengal who arrived in the court of Akbar's on 21 June 1578. His name was Prtb Tar and he was accompanied with his wife Fashurna. He also explained Akbar about the about the orders of clergy in the Christianity. But the appreciation of the Christianity started in the Mughal court when in 1580, after the arrival of the first Jesuits Mission from Goa (Ali, 2006).

In 1579 Akbar sent a letter to the Archbishop of Goa asking him to send learned priests of his faith to acquaint him with the principles of Christianity. The letter is given by Sir Edward Maclagan (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). The matter was laid down before the council of Bishops and the Portuguese nobles and lawyers. It was argued that a *Musalman* should not be trusted. But the Archbishop with his council of Bishops decided that the invitation should be accepted at all costs. The aim of the Jesuits was the glory of the 'Church'. They were eager to convert the people of 'Mogor' to Christianity and it was hoped that this object might be achieved through the medium of the conversion of the king (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). All the efforts of the mission were therefore, at first concentrated on the king himself. Royal converts were not unknown in the Indian. A near relation of the Sultan of Bijapur had been baptized at Goa so the Jesuits were very hopeful for the success of this mission (E. D. Maclagan, 1932).

The first mission was sent on November 17, 1579 which consisted of Father Rudolf Acquaviva, Antony Monserrate, and Francis Henriquez, of these Henriquez was Persian by origin, a native of Ormuz and a convert from Islam, who was intended to help as interpreter to the mission (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). On their arrival at the Mughal court, the missionaries were accorded a warm reception by the emperor. Abul Fazal and Hakim Ali Gilani were instructed to look after the comforts of the guests (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). The mission came to Akbar's Court at the time of great interest in the development of his religious policy (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). Badauni tells us about the Jesuits in the Akbar's court ('Abdul-Qādir). Abul Fazal, according to Badauni was favourably impressed by the attitude of the Fathers (S. E. Maclagan, 2014). Father Rudolf had studied Quran in a translation (S. E. Maclagan, 2014).

As far as the king himself was concerned, the reception accorded to the mission was as cordial as could be desired and on their arrival they were offered large sums of money but they refused (Du Jarric, 1926). They were given food from the royal table (S. E. Maclagan, 2014). Father brought with them a copy of the Holy Bible written in four languages, which consisted of seven volumes as present for the emperor, which he received with a great delight. Father Monserrate mentions in his commentaries that the emperor kissed the Bible and placed it on

his head (Du Jarric, 1926). The first topic of debate between the Jesuit Missionaries and the Muslim *Ulema* in the *Ibadatkhana* was about the authenticity and authority of the Holy Bible (Felix, 1916). Father Monserrate joined the mission few days later and took part in a debate which was on the life and teaching of Muhammad (P.B.U.H), compared with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ (Felix, 1916).

Akbar visited the crib erected by the fathers for the Christmas of 1580 and he sent his sons also to see it (E.D.Maclagan, 1932). Prince Murad was given under the tutorship of Father Monserrate to instruct him good morals of the Christianity and the Portuguese language (E.D.Maclagan, 1932). The king gave the Fathers full liberty to preach and make conversions (E.D.Maclagan, 1932). When a Portuguese died at the Court the emperor allowed him to be buried with all publicity, a large procession marching through the town with Crucifixes and lighted tappers (Du Jarric, 1926). Monserrate was with the army when Akbar marched towards Kabul and during this, Akbar did not fear to honour and kiss publicly the image of Christ (E.D.Maclagan, 1932). On the contrary in the debates of the *Ibadat Khana* where the Christian priests used blasphemous language about the Prophet and Islam, Akbar intervened to stop the trend of discussion and warned them against excessive violence of language (Du Jarric, 1926).

In April 1582 an Embassy was sent with a letter to King Philip II of Spain in which Akbar stated his conviction to learn the truth in religious matters (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). The whole efforts of the missionaries were concentrated on the emperor to convert him to Christianity. Akbar also showed every courtesy to their religion, but when the missionaries asked him to become a convert, he was quite indifferent (Foster, 1978). In 1582 when Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu, and his aunt Gulbadan Begum returned from pilgrimage, the opposition stiffened all the more (Du Jarric, 1926). This mission proved a failure in achieving its goals.

In 1590 the emperor sent Leo Greman as his Christian envoy to the Provincial at Goa to send learned priest of Christian law to acquaint him with the principles of their religion. The Fathers accepted the invitation with great pleasure and sent two Portuguese missionaries, Father Edward Leiton and Christopho-di-Vega, in 1591. Akbar received the Jesuits with great kindness, and they were given separate apartments near the palace (Du Jarric, 1926). In 1590 the Christians at the court celebrated the fast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Akbar hearing of it wished to join in the ceremony and paid special respect to the picture of the Blessed Virgin (Felix, 1916). A school was started under the directions of the Jesuits, where the two princes, Murad and Daniyal, and the sons of the other court nobles were taught Portuguese language, and the principles of Christian religion (Du Jarric, 1926). But the Fathers however, found themselves strongly opposed by a faction at the Court and soon perceived that the king had no intention of becoming a Christian (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). According to V.A. Smith we have no authentic print record to explain why this Mission was called back to Goa in 1592. It seems that the selected fathers were not suitable for the mission of spreading Christianity and their task to convert the king into the Christianity or they might have been not so hopeful for the assigned task. It seems that the second

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Mission like the first one ended in failure (Pragati Sen, Comprehensive Essay on the Reforms Made by Akbar).

Before the arrival of third Jesuits mission an English traveller, Ralph Fitch, came to India in 1583. Akbar's policy of religious tolerance is also mentioned by him in his book. Finch writes "In India traders of all nations were freely admitted; and in religious matters toleration was more consistently practiced than in any European country at the period" (Foster, 1978). Finch praises Agra and Fatehpur and says, "Agra and Fatehpur are two very great cities, either of them much greater than London and very populous" (Foster, 1978). Finch also compares the behavior of Chinese rulers with Mughal Emperors and says in Canton foreigners were not allowed to live in the city and they did not trust the strangers (Foster, 1978). Father Monserrate who seems to be biased and prejudiced in his writings praises the policy of religious toleration of Akbar. As he noted, "a spirit of toleration replaced the earlier habit of temple destruction, the dialogue between the rival religions reached its climax, the two cultures finally fused into one and flowered into a civilization of breathtaking beauty and perfection (Fischer, 2007). Monserrate also praises the city of Lahore, "this city is second to none either in Asia or in Europe, with regard to size, population, and wealth" (Fischer, 2007).

In 1594 Akbar sent another envoy, to the Provincial viceroy at Goa, asking him to send another mission to acquaint him in the doctrines of Christianity. At first they were rather hesitant in accepting the invitation as they knew the fate of two previous missions but afterwards the viceroy finally decided to send the mission in the hope of obtaining "good results not merely of a religious but also of a political character" (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). Father Jerome Xavier, the leader of the mission, and his two companions, Father Ammanuel Pinherio and brother Benedict-de-Goes, were sent in 1594 via Daman.

From the letters of the Fathers we learn that at Cambay the mission met Akbar's second son, Sultan Murad, formerly Monserrate's pupil, he accorded the Fathers a brief but favorable audience in the citadel on Christmas eve (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). Abul Fazal writes about the arrival of third mission in the court of Akbar in his *Akbarnama* (Abu-al-Fazal). For the whole period 1595-1605AD, we get little or no help from Indian sources as Badaoni's narratives ends in 1595 and the *Akbarnama* of Abul Fazal which records events up to 1602, has little more to say on Akbar's contact with Christianity (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). The mission arrived at Akbar's Court on May 5, 1595, and Father Jerome Xavier, was in attendance on Akbar for practically the whole period until Akbar's death.

The mission was honorably received at Lahore with much pomp and in a kindly spirit (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). In one of his letters Father Pinherio writes: "Both emperor and Prince (Salim) favored us and treated us with much kindness, and I observed that he paid to none of his own people as much attention as he paid to us, for he desired us to sit in turn upon the cushion on which he had and the prince alone are allowed to sit"(Du Jarric, 1926). He provided them a convenient residence and showed reverence to their pictures (Du Jarric, 1926). Akbar showed

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the Fathers his collection of European books and handed it over to them for their own use (Du Jarric, 1926). The missionaries were allowed to build a Church at Cambay (Felix, 1916). Emperor allowed them to start a school which was attended by the sons of some of the princes and those of the Chief of Badakhshan (Du Jarric, 1926). The emperor himself listened with great attention to their discussions on principles of their religion. Candles were burnt in honour of Christ and Virgin Mary (Du Jarric, 1926).

Permission was granted to open a Church in Lahore in 1597 (Du Jarric, 1926). Akbar disputed with Father Xavier regarding the possibilities of God having a son (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). Prince Saleem became the firm friend and protector of the mission (Du Jarric, 1926). When Father Xavier asked Akbar to become a Christian, he refused politely. This happened in July 15, 1599 (Du Jarric, 1926). In 1601 Akbar ordered and permitted such of his subjects as desired to embrace Christianity to do so without any hindrance (Du Jarric, 1926). Akbar accepted with much delight a book of Father Xavier's composition describing the life, miracles, and doctrine of Christ (Du Jarric, 1926). In year 1600, 106 peoples were converted to Christianity. Fifty Portuguese captives who were well treated ultimately freed on the request of Jesuit Fathers (Du Jarric, 1926). Even Akbar asked for Jesuit Fathers when he smoked first time in the Court (E. D. Maclagan, 1932).

But the Jesuits were greatly disillusioned about Akbar's faith in their religion (E. D. Maclagan, 1932). His attitude towards them made them feel exasperated later on. The hostility the Muslim nobles and the intrigues of other European nationals at the court, made the stay of missionaries a difficult and unpleasant one. The third mission too failed without securing its cherished good of converting the emperor (Kohli, 1949). Due to this reason Jesuits were greatly prejudiced in their views about the emperor and most of their accounts were written in spirit of hostility. Their writings have not been supported by any contemporary historian except Badauni (Kohli, 1949).

English merchant and traveller John Mildenhall who visited India during last years of Akbar (1599-1606AD) praises the Akbar's policy of religious tolerance. He came to Lahore in 1603 and met with the emperor. He writes: "I was very well met and house with all things necessary was appointed for me by the king" (Foster, 1978). He writes about his meeting with Akbar: "I made him answer that his greatness and renowned kindness into Christians was so much blessed through the world that it was come into furthest parts of the western Ocean and arrived in the court of our Queen of England Most Excellent Majestic, so her subjects also might have the same, with the like favours" (Foster, 1978). John Middenhall also tells us about the three Jesuits, those were living with honour, two in Agra and one in Lahore (Foster, 1978). The light of these accounts we can say that the policy of religious tolerance was adopted for all even for foreigners.

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It is worth mentioning that during the 16th century, Europe was divided into strife of warring sects and the people of different European countries were facing inquisition and executing each other for the sake of religion (Sharma, 1975). The Contemporary of Akbar, Henry VIII changed his creed to change his spouse (Catherine of Aragon) and enforced on people the act of supremacy and uniformity. In crookedness and hypocrisy Elizabeth-I had no rival in the whole of Europe and at least Akbar stood far above these 'virtues' (Kohli, 1949).

Conclusion

The conclusion which emerges on the basis of this study is that the boast for the Mughal Emperor implicit in these pages is not empty one. The Mughal Emperors shine by contrast with their despotic contemporaries due to the adoption of the policy of religious toleration. This credit goes to Akbar who first of all realized the fact that narrow mindedness and vast empire could not go side by side. In the light of European travel accounts and Jesuits' letters we can say that Akbar took step which could later on be invoked by India's modern national builders is not only a tribute to the breadth of his vision, but also an illustration of the way in which historical process occur achieving ends which in earlier times would have been only dimly grasped, or would perhaps have remained totally undiscerned.

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