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Citation

Gommans, J. J. L., & Huseini, S. R. (2024). New dawn in Mughal India: longue durée Neoplatonism in the making of Akbar's sun project. *Journal Of The Royal Asiatic Society*, 34(2), 455-476. doi:10.1017/S1356186323000664

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



ARTICLE

New dawn in Mughal India: *longue durée* Neoplatonism in the making of Akbar's sun project

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the *longue durée* philosophical background of Mughal Emperor Akbar's sun worship. Although Akbar's sun project may have been triggered by contemporary Hindu and Zoroastrian ideas and practices, we argue that Akbar's Neoplatonic advisers reframed it as a universal cosmotheistic tradition that, at the start of the new millennium, served as the perfect all-inclusive imperial ideology of Akbar's new world order. The astonishing parallels with the much earlier Neoplatonic sun cult of Roman Emperor Julian demonstrate that, although having characteristic of its own, Akbar's sun project was not that unique and should be seen as a fascinating late example of a so-far completely forgotten ancient Neoplatonic legacy of seeing the philosopher king, via the Sun, via illumination, connected to the One.

Keywords: Akbar; Julian the Apostate; Mughals; Neoplatonism; sun worship

Due to the benedictions of the guiding utterances of this king of the knowers of God and this sovereign of those who follow guidance, dawn has arrived after the dark night of blind imitation (*taqlīd*), and the light of the morning of discernment began to appear. (Abu Fazl¹)

Introduction

During the first week of Nauruz 988/1580, Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1602) publicly prostrated before the Sun (*sajda-yi 'alāniya*). Every day of that week, Akbar dressed in the colours in accordance with the regent-planet of the day and recited the prayers related to the possession of the Sun (*du'ā-yi taskhīr-i āftāb*). He held his ears with his hands, turned around, and hit his temples with his fists. After finishing this ritual, Akbar went to the window (*jharukha*) and showed himself to the crowds (*izdihām-i 'aẓīm*) who tried to get an auspicious glimpse of him. Many of them prostrated before him, recited prayers, broke their fasting, and asked the king to fulfil their wishes and heal the sick.²

¹ H. Kovacs (transl.), 'The preface of the *Razmnāma*', in *Translation and State: The Mahābhārata at the Mughal Court*, (ed.) M. Willis (Berlin/Boston, 2022), p. 93.

² 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, (eds.) W. N. Lees and Munshi Ahmad 'Ali, introduction by Ja'far Subhani, three vols. (Tehran, 1380/2002), 2, pp. 181–227.

This is what the courtly imam and scholar ‘Abd al-Qadir Bada’uni (d. 1615) recorded in his *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (*Selection of Histories*), written in 1004/1595, showing himself to be deeply concerned about his great Muslim patron adopting these rituals spurred on by Hindu advisers. In this article, we will re-evaluate Akbar’s sun worship by revisiting Bada’uni’s interpretation of it as a Hindu cult. Others have pointed out that Akbar’s sun cult was an eclectic mixture of Indic, Persian-Zoroastrian, Jain, and Sufi elements—a typical case of ‘Mughal arbitrary cosmopolitan syncretism’, still very much in continuation of the occult cosmological interests of his Timurid forbears. Through them, Akbar could trace his genealogy back to the mythical Mongol Princess Alanquwa, who had been impregnated with a ray of divine light that continued to bestow the Mughal Dynasty with God’s special favour.³ This raises the following questions about the novelty and the origins of Akbar’s sun project: How unique was it and was it primarily a continuation of Timurid cosmological fascination, an adoption of Hindu and/or other non-Muslim ideas, or perhaps an eclectic or hybrid combination of all these elements?

In this article, we will argue that, from a short-term perspective, Akbar’s sun worship indeed added something new to the cosmological worldview of his forbears. We will also argue, though, that, from a *longue durée* perspective, Akbar’s project should be seen as its latest extension and, as such, part of a highly malleable Neoplatonic tradition of light-and-sun worship going back to Late Antiquity, when it continued under Islamic guise, to receive further stimulus under the Mongols and the Timurids, reaching its high-point in India under the Mughals.⁴ As we will see, it was a very small elite of perhaps a dozen Neoplatonic intellectuals surrounding Emperor Akbar, who effectively managed to ideologically amalgamate the various religious and philosophical elements of the cult into one universalist whole that was entirely their own and also conveniently suited the political demands of Akbar’s new empire.

Hence, following the account of Bada’uni, the first part of the article will revisit the millennial anxiety of the Mughal court in which the sun project emerged. In the second part, we will meet some of our Neoplatonists at work as authors of Akbar’s millennial history, the *Tarikh-i Alfī*. Their world-historical explorations in the *Alfī* matured in a collection of philosophical short poems devoted to the Sun, the *Kitab-i Rubā’iyat*, written by another member of that circle, the distinguished poet laureate Faizi (d. 1595). To further amplify the Neoplatonic ancestry of the Mughal sun project, the third part of the article will investigate its parallels with that other famous imperial sun project, equally inspired by Neoplatonic thought and practice—that of Roman Emperor Julian (r. 361–63). By

³ The term is Koch’s: E. Koch, *The Planetary King: Humayun Padshah, Inventor and Visionary on the Mughal Throne* (Ahmedabad, 2022), p. 187. The literature on Akbar’s sun worship is vast but scattered in studies that focus on different or wider topics. Apart from Koch, the most informative recent studies include A. A. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York, 2012) and, specifically for Akbar’s sun cult, see A. Truschke, ‘Translating the solar cosmology of sacred kingship’, *The Medieval History Journal* 19 (2016), pp. 136–141. For the Mughal interest in cosmology, see in particular the works of Eva Orthmann, who, like Koch, stresses the importance of Humayun for laying the groundwork for Akbar’s imperial cult (see in particular E. Orthmann, ‘Court culture and cosmology in the Mughal empire: Humāyūn and the foundation of the Dīn-i ilāhī’, in *Court Culture in the Muslim World: Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries*, (eds.) A. Fuess and J. P. Hartung (London, 2011), pp. 202–220). These works are part of an ongoing occult turn in Persianate studies more generally, as can be gleaned from the many works of Matthew Melvin-Koushki (see, for example, M. Melvin-Koushki, ‘How to Rule the World: occult-scientific manuals of the early modern Persian cosmopolis’, *Journal of Persianate Studies* 11 (2018), pp. 140–154). Another wonderful recent example of this occult turn, moving from premodern West to modern South Asia, is T. Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvellous Book that Travelled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA, 2023).

⁴ Of course, using the term ‘*longue durée*’ refers to Braudel’s ecological use of it, but here we would like to suggest that intellectual history also has relatively unbroken, slowly emerging formations that can be studied over extended periods of time.

taking this tripartite approach, we hope not only to provide a new and more emic interpretation of Akbar's sun worship, but also to demonstrate that Akbar's new empire should not only be seen as an Islamic compromise with Hinduism, nor as an early modern step towards secularism, but primarily as a late, Mughal renaissance of a much older Hellenic tradition of universal philosopher kings.⁵

Akbar the apostate

Due to its circular life-giving omnipresence, the Sun appeals to all mortals. Hence, almost every religious tradition has a rich conceptual apparatus to associate the Sun with the divine through direct or indirect veneration. Like the universal sciences such as astronomy (being everywhere) and mathematics (being nowhere), reflections about the Sun and its light offer an opportunity to truly speak across religions. Having said that, the very universality of sun symbolism almost invalidates any serious scholarly attempt to detect cross-cultural influences. For example, almost every imperial tradition has analogies that link the Sun's central position with that of the king, the Sun's light with his rule, and the rising and setting of the Sun with the rise and decline of empires.⁶ Perhaps not as widespread as these analogies and metaphors is the actual belief in cosmological correspondences, but even that was fairly mainstream at the Islamic courts, in particular at the Timurid courts that preceded those of the Mughals. Much less common, though, was worship of the Sun, either directly as a deity of its own or indirectly by somehow sharing in its divine radiation. So, although the Sun as a cosmological analogy and/or metaphor is all over the place, more exceptional is the phenomenon in which one truly worships the Sun as part of a divinely animated cosmos, producing a religious cult that is not based on revelation, but on nature—thus, a very inclusive, universal cult that the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann has persuasively coined as cosmotheism.⁷ So, while ignoring the wider usage of Sun-related symbolism, it is only this cosmotheistic dimension of Akbar's sun worship that we will explore further by addressing the following questions: Which earlier or contemporary traditions of sun worship contributed to it and what exactly was worshipped, why, how, and also when and where?

To start with the latter two questions, it was at Fatehpur Sikri, at Nauruz 988/1580, that Akbar, for the first time, publicly prostrated before the Sun. It was the result of a slow and difficult process that took at least two years. The earliest discussions about worshipping the Sun can be traced to 986/1578. Bada'uni mentions that Akbar's interest in it was the consequence of the emperor's contact with Hindu scholars, but it had been his adviser, Raja Birbar (d. 1586), in particular who had convinced Akbar to start this pagan madness. Before Akbar bestowed the title 'Raja Birbar' on him, Brahma Das was a scholar associated with the Vaishnava School of Vallabhacharya who lived in Kalpi, a district near the Yamuna River. He joined Akbar at the beginning of his reign and soon became one of

⁵ As such, this is our third article to make that argument; see our earlier 'Neoplatonic kingship in the Islamic world: Akbar's millennial history', in *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence*, (eds.) A. A. Moin and A. Strathern (New York, 2022), pp. 192–222; and 'Neoplatonism and the Pax Mongolica in the making of *Ṣulḥ-i Kull*: a view from Akbar's millennial history', *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (2022), pp. 870–901. For some reflections on the global dimension of such a renaissance, see J. Gommans, 'The Neoplatonic renaissance from the Thames to the Ganges', in *India after World History: Literature, Comparison, and Approaches to Globalization*, (ed.) N. Bose (Leiden, 2022), pp. 170–200. For a thorough discussion of Akbar's political ideology, more generally, see S. A. A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign with Special Reference to Abu'l Fazl, 1556–1605* (New Delhi, 1975); and H. Franke, *Akbar und Ḡahāngir: Untersuchungen zur politischen und religiösen Legitimation in Text und Bild* (Hamburg, 2005).

⁶ See, for example, E. Kantorowicz, 'Oriens Augusti: Lever du Roi', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963), pp. 117–177.

⁷ J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge MA/London, 1997).

his main companions.⁸ According to Bada'uni, Birbar had a great influence on Akbar and argued that the Sun is the perfect manifestation (*muḡhir-i tāmm*), the life of all beings depends on its light, and thus it has the merit (*lāyiq*) of devotion. To the abhorrence of the conservative Muslim Bada'uni, Birbar even advocated some further Brahmanisation by suggesting that, in prayer, 'the face should be turned towards the rising and not towards the setting sun (i.e. Mecca)' and that man should venerate all natural objects, even down to cows and their dung, and, by doing this, Akbar should adopt the sectarian mark and Brahmanical thread.⁹

This idea that Akbar's sun project was the adoption of a Brahmanical idea is also suggested by two Indic sources. One is the so-called *Parasiprakasha*—a bilingual lexicon in Sanskrit and Persian, written by Krishnadasa and dedicated to Akbar. Krishnadasa was a member of the caste of Maga Brahmins, or 'Magician' Brahmins—one of the few remaining Hindu groups that were specifically devoted to the sun god Surya. Hence, not surprisingly, that work starts with a salutation to the Sun (*srisuryaya namo*), to be followed in the first chapter by an account of the Persian names for the Sun.¹⁰ The second Indic reference is to the Jain thinker Siddhicandra, who narrates the story of Akbar reciting 1,000 Sanskrit names of the Sun in his *Bhanucandraganicarita* (*Acts of Bhanucandra*)—a history of Jain encounters with the Mughals. However, as pointed out by Truschke, despite such sources, there seems to have been no living practice of solar veneration among Hindu kings at that time.¹¹ Following that observation, it would be difficult to argue that Akbar embraced the sun cult as a compromise with his numerous Hindu vassals. At the same time, there may have been a great deal of Persianate–Indic commensurability regarding kings being seen as descendants of the Sun. But, as also rightly argued by Truschke, in the case of Akbar's Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, it was actually the Persianate–Illuminationist idea of divine light that was imposed on Hindu notions of the *suryavamsa*, and not the other way around.¹²

It should be stressed here that Bada'uni not only blamed the Brahmins for taking Akbar away from Islam. He also mentions the Zoroastrians for pushing their fire worship by linking it to the cult of the Kayanians, the ancient Persian kings. Indeed, it seems that Akbar gave in to them and integrated the fire ritual into his sun project, as fire 'was one of the signs of God, and one light from His lights'. Later, Abul Fazl, Akbar's historian and main adviser, rationalised it by sharing the story of the fourteenth-century Shaykh Sharaf al-Din, who had said: 'What can be done with a man who is not satisfied with a lamp when the Sun is down. Every flame is derived from the fountain of divine light and bears the impression of its holy essence.'¹³

We should also keep in mind that, at this very time (1578), Akbar invited the Jesuits to join the courtly religious discussions in his recently (1575) established Ibadat Khana. In the discussions with them, Akbar realised that the pope was their highest religious

⁸ P. P. Sinha, *Raja Birbal: Life and Times* (Patna, 1980), p. 95.

⁹ Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2, p. 181.

¹⁰ G. Grobbel, *Der Dichter Faiḏī und die Religion Akbars* (Berlin, 2001), p. 62; Truschke, 'Translating the solar cosmology', pp. 137–138.

¹¹ This is contradicted, however, by Franke, who refers to the sun cult of the Sisodia Rajputs of Mewar (Franke, *Akbar*, p. 231). Although Abul Fazl seems impressed by the thirteenth-century sun temple in Konarak in Orissa (see Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, (ed.) H. Blochmann (Calcutta, 1872), 1, pp. 392–393), it is not clear from his description to what extent it still was a popular cult at that time. McKim Malville is also stressing its decline from the thirteenth century onward (J. McKim Malville, 'The rise and fall of the sun temple of Konarak: the temple versus the solar orb', in *World Archaeoastronomy*, (ed.) A. F. Aveni (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 377–388.

¹² Truschke, 'Translating the solar cosmology', pp. 139–140.

¹³ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, 1, pp. 50–51. This nicely corresponds with the Neoplatonic idea (Proclus) that fire is seen as a constituent of the sun (R. M. van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden, 2001), p. 153).

authority (*mujtahid-i kāmīl*) and, as such, could change any religious law if needed and even kings could not object to him.¹⁴ Akbar seems to have adopted this papal model when announcing the famous decree or Mahzar of 1579, which made him the final authority on the interpretation of the law. Although he still had to operate within the constraints of Islam, it shows that Akbar attempted to emancipate himself from the jurists and, as such, it opened the gate for innovations such as his sun project in the following year. Of course, for Badaʿuni, all this was way beyond Islam: ‘Every precept which was enjoined by the doctors of other religions he treated as manifest and decisive, in contradiction to this religion of ours.’¹⁵ In his *Najat al-Rashid* (*Salvation of the Rightly Guided*), Badaʿuni further criticised sun worship more generally but remained silent about Akbar or the Brahmins. He now used Qurʾānic verses (41:37) to reject both fire and sun worship. Having fixed movements, the Sun and the Moon are created, and hence it would be damaging and a disgrace to worship them. It would be better to worship the god who had created them.¹⁶ Anyway, what seems very clear is that, in Badaʿuni’s private view, Akbar had definitely crossed a line and had turned into an apostate.

Of course, in terms of attributing Akbar’s sun project to pagan sources, Badaʿuni’s polemical comment is a problematic source. It is likely that he deliberately misattributed the emperor’s turn to the Sun to Hindu influences to malign him in the eyes of his Muslim followers. We also cannot take the Indic sources at face value because every religious community that came into contact with Akbar, including the Jesuits for a time, claimed that they had managed to influence or even convert the emperor. At this point, it is important to stress that, for somebody like Abul Fazl, all this was not about Hinduism affecting the emperor, but about the emperor universalising Hinduism. This also becomes clear by the way in which Abul Fazl describes Hindus: ‘In all their ceremonial observances and usage they even implore the favour of the world-illuminating sun (*āftāb-i ʿālam afrūz*) and regard the pure essence of the Supreme Being as transcending the idea of power in operation.’ In describing the Hindu conception of creation, he takes the Surya-Siddhanta as the most authentic tradition, in which the origin of creation derives from the Sun, with the latter sending his son to the great demon Maya, to illuminate the world.¹⁷

On raising ceremonial practices, what do we know about the actual rituals surrounding Akbar’s sun worship? If we follow Badaʿuni again, in a report related to the Nauruz of the year 991/1583, he mentions that Akbar prayed to the Sun (*ʿibādat-i āftāb*) four times a day (at sunrise, noon, evening, and midnight) and recited 1,001 Sanskrit names of the Sun in devotion (*hūzūr-i dil*). Apart from the ritual with which we opened our article, it should be noted that sun worship also involved a revival of Nauruz. Although Nauruz was celebrated by most Persianate rulers, it had now also become the official start of the imperial year which. This would lead in 1584 to the official introduction of the solar year, the *Tārīkh-i Ilāhī* (9 Rabi I, 992), to start at the Nauruz that was nearest to the accession of Akbar, which was 21 March 1556 (9 Jumada I, 963). Celebrating Nauruz recalls the importance of the Sun in the Iranian tradition. The *Nauruznama*, attributed to the eleventh-century Persian philosopher ʿUmar Khayyam, mentions that God created the Sun, and nurtured the Earth and the sky by it (*parwarish dād*). People look at the Sun with respect and veneration (*jalāl wa taʿzīm*) because it is a light from the lights of God and He favoured the Sun more than anything else. Anyone who respects the Sun also respects God.¹⁸

¹⁴ Badaʿuni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2, p. 180.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁶ ʿAbd al-Qadir Badayuni, *Najat al-Rashid*, ed. Sayyid Moin al-Haqq (Lahore, 1972), pp. 45–48; for further details, see A. Moin, ‘Challenging the Mughal emperor: the Islamic millennium according to ʿAbd al-Qadir Badayuni’, in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, (ed.) B. D. Metcalf (Princeton, 2009), pp. 390–402.

¹⁷ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, 2, pp. 4–8.

¹⁸ ʿUmar Khayyam, *Nauruznama*, (ed.) M. Minawi (Tehran, 1385/2007), p. 3.

In understanding Akbar's sun project, it is important to measure the degree to which Akbar really introduced something new. As mentioned already, Akbar stood at the end of a long Timurid tradition of cosmological imagination that goes back even further to the days of the Baghdad translation movement, which had already brought together Greek, Indian, and Persian cosmological ideas, much of which culminated in the ideological laboratory of the so-called *Ikhwan al-Safa*, or Brethren of Purity. The amalgamation process of these ideas conditioned a revival of one particular element of the mixture—Neoplatonism, which provided the most flexible toolset available for ideological assimilation and unification, also deeply affecting the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi.¹⁹ Obviously, Neoplatonism itself changed as a result of this process, undergoing a massive revival under Mongol patronage during the long thirteenth century. Whereas, under the Fatimids, the Brethren had to operate secretly and anonymously, under the Ilkhans, their later Neoplatonist colleagues gained the spotlight as eminent intellectuals. Often under the guise of prediluvian, ancient wisdom, the likes of Baba Afzaladdin Kashani, Nasir al-Din Tusi, Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi, and Mahmud Shabistari managed to translate and popularise Hermetic and Sufi Neoplatonism into the wider Persianate world.²⁰

Hence, the cosmological vision of Timurid rulers such as Iskandar sultan (1384–1415) and Akbar's father, Humayun (1508–56), should be seen in that long Neoplatonic tradition that looked towards the cosmos through emanations and correspondences. In the medieval Islamic world, the structure of Heaven inherited from both Aristotelian and Ptolemaic systems was enriched with elements of Neoplatonic philosophies, which explains why Heaven progressively became the reflection of the terrestrial world. All this was accommodated into Islamic cosmology in which the Sun holds the first rank but remains subordinated to God. The Sun's light emanates from God's own throne. So God placed the Sun at the centre of the universe in order to transmit the influx of the divine spirit (*al-rūh*) to men. From this Neoplatonic perspective, the Sun animates and redistributes the influx because, among the planets, the Sun embodies the astrological active intelligence. Thus, according to the theory of correspondences between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, the Sun patronises kings and symbolises good government and legitimate power.²¹

On a more abstract level, Neoplatonists who venerated the Sun also venerated light, which fitted even better with their monist longings to square the existence of a single divine principle with a multiplicity of divine forces spread throughout the world. Here, they still followed the idea of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, who argued that, because it ultimately emerged from a single source of illumination, divine light remained unified, even as it seemed to be dispersed infinitely throughout the cosmos. In this way, one could defend a metaphysics in which divinity was simultaneously transcendent and yet omnipresent, remotely pure and yet intimately involved with the material world.²² Just before the Mongol conquest of Iran, this Neoplatonic theory of light was elaborated upon by the Persian philosopher Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1191) and his Philosophy

¹⁹ M. Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in Al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-'Arabi and the Ismā'īlī Tradition* (Leiden, 2014); and G. de Callatay, 'Brethren of purity', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, (ed.) K. Fleet et al., http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/2048/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_25372 (accessed 12 March 2021).

²⁰ K. van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 219–232. See also C. B. Pye, 'The Sufi method behind the Mughal 'peace with all' religions: a study of Ibn 'Arabi's "ṭahqīq" in Abu al-Fazl Preface to the Razmnāma', *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (2022), pp. 902–923.

²¹ A. Caiozzo, 'The horoscope of Iskandar Sultān as a cosmological vision in the Islamic world', in *Horoscopes and Public Spheres: Essays on the History of Astrology*, (eds.) G. Oestman, H. D. Rutkin, and K. von Stuckrad (Berlin, 2005), pp. 129–130. Caiozzo also mentions Hermetic elements next to Neoplatonism, which in our view is better seen as part of the Neoplatonic tradition, but that is indeed a matter of definition.

²² S. I. Johnston, 'Fiat lux, fiat ritus: divine light and the late antique defense of ritual', in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, (ed.) M. T. Kapstein (Chicago/London, 2004), pp. 5–25 (10).

of Illumination (*Ishraqi*). For our present purpose, it is important to point out that he developed a political Science of Lights (*‘ilm al-anwār*) in which he proposed a new political order to be ruled by an enlightened philosopher king, whose sign of authority was described in terms of a manifest, radiating divine light named *farrah-yi izarī* that recalled the divine aura of the ancient kings of Persian mythology.²³

Iamblichus’s well-known practice of theurgy—that is, evoking the divine through ritual—also remained alive and kicking under Islam and, as mentioned already, experienced an upsurge after the Mongol conquests as part of a much wider renaissance of the occult sciences under the Ilkhanid and Timurid rulers. Part and parcel of this longer-term theurgic legacy were rituals and prayers that attempted to subjugate (*taskhīr*) celestial spirits, the Sun being one of them, in order to receive worldly power. Within the Islamic world, Astral magic (*hīmīyā*), ‘the science of harnessing the power of the planets’, gained new momentum due to the spread of grimoires such as *Sirr al-Makṭum* of Fakhr al-Din Razi (1149–1210), which became popular in both the Safavid and Mughal empires.²⁴ In the latter case, it developed in intimate dialogue with highly commensurable Indic practices of planetary divination. An important case in point is the eclectic work of the Indian Shattari-Sufi Muhammad Ghauth Gwaliyari (1502–63), all the more so because he was so close to Mughal Emperor Humayun and even attempted to enrol the young Akbar as his disciple.²⁵ Clearly, these ideas on sun divination must have been within easy reach of the Mughal court.

From this deeper Neoplatonic perspective, it seems that there was not much that was new under the Sun during Akbar’s reign. In a way, Akbar simply continued the cosmotheistic tradition of his ancestors. However, while he continued to favour the idea of cosmological correspondences, he actually came closer to the Neoplatonic–Ishraqi ideal by also propagating the idea of *farrah-yi izarī* and by linking that to Sun divination. According to Bada’uni, Hindus had taught him to mutter spells ‘for the purpose of subduing the sun to his wishes’.²⁶ Although Bada’uni saw Akbar’s direct devotion to the Sun as an adoption of ‘pagan’ traditions, he also implicitly suggests that there were also other forces around that pushed Akbar in this direction. Thus, he observed that philosophers and learned persons who were close to Akbar (*ḥukamā’ wa fuṣalā-yi muqarrab*) made an argument that the Sun should be seen as the Great Luminous Being (*nayyir-i a’zam*) that benefits the whole world, that the Sun is the patron (*murabbi*) of the kings, and that the kings are its viceregents (*murawwij*).²⁷ Indeed, the Persian *nayyir-i a’zam* is very much the term repeatedly used by both Abul Fazl and Faizi, going back to the earlier Timurids and further back to Ishraqi philosophy.²⁸ This raises the important question:

²³ H. Ziai, ‘Suhrawardi on knowledge and the experience of light’, in *Presence of Light*, (ed.) Kapstein, pp. 25–45. See also H. Ziai, ‘The source and nature of authority: illuminationist political doctrine’, in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, (ed.) C. Butterworth (Cambridge, MA, 1991), pp. 314–384. The term also appears in the eleventh-century mirrors-for-princes of Nizam al-Mulk and Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (Franke, *Akbar*, p. 213).

²⁴ M. Subtelny, ‘Kāshifi’s *Asrar-i qāsimī*: a late Timurid manual of the occult sciences and its Safavid afterlife’, in *Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, (eds.) L. Saif et al. (Leiden, 2021), pp. 267–313.

²⁵ C. W. Ernst, ‘Bahr al-hayāt’, in *Perso-Indica: An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, (eds.) F. Speziale and C. W. Ernst, http://www.perso-indica.net/work/bahr_al-hayat (accessed 11 July 2023). Muhammad Gwaliyari’s most influential work is the *Jawahir-i Khamsa* (*The Five Jewels*)—a compilation of Sufi practices that includes a section on sun divination. His involvement with the Indic traditions shows up clearly in his *Bahr al-Hayat* (*Ocean of Life*)—a greatly expanded translation of the *Amrtakunda* (*Pool of Nectar*) in which yoga practices become clothed in a sophisticated Neoplatonic Sufi theory.

²⁶ Bada’uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2, p. 181.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁸ Grobbel, *Der Dichter Faiḏī*, p. 53. In *Parasiprakasha*, the term is also mentioned as one of the three Persian terms for Shri Surya. Suhrawardi refers to it in his discussion on light of lights (*nūr al-anwār*). He mentions

Apart from his Hindu and Zoroastrian advisers, who else was there to have an impact on the emergence of Akbar's sun project?

Millennial wisdom and Akbar the trailblazer

The moment at which Akbar started to conceive that his sun project was an ominous one occurred in November 1577 when a comet was seen in the sky: What would it mean for the fate of the emperors? In Iran, the comet was linked to the death of Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–76). Although Akbar continued his rule, he became increasingly mesmerised by cosmological calculations that could impact his reign. This was stimulated by the arrival of a group of Iranian immigrants called Nuqtawis. These were members of an originally Hurufi sect that combined witticism and broad-mindedness with a deep knowledge of the occult meaning behind letters, numbers, and other cosmic signs. Increasingly persecuted in Safavid Iran, some of them moved to India, with many of them finding asylum at Akbar's court. The subsequent prominence of the Nuqtawis at the Mughal court in the 1580s is illustrated by the official Safavid chronicle of Iskandar Beg Munshi, who even labels Abul Fazl a Nuqtawi who, with 'his absurd words made the king a drinker from many sources of truth leading him astray from the right path of the Islamic law'.²⁹ Although we should be wary of taking the Iranian munshi's judgement for granted, it does raise the intriguing question of the extent to which Abul Fazl was indeed influenced by Nuqtawi ideas and to what degree the Nuqtawis themselves were behind the millennial craze that suddenly surrounded the Mughal court. One figure who became very influential during those days was the Iranian immigrant, Hakim Abul Fath Gilani, who had close Nuqtawi connections and, after his arrival in 1575, became an intimate adviser to the emperor and very good friends with both Abul Fazl and his brother, Faizi.³⁰

In due course, the increasing millennial craze at court led to a very ambitious historical project that involved the writing of two chronicles: a brand-new world history, called the *Tarikh-i Alfi*, and a history of Akbar, called the *Akbar Nama*. Quite tellingly, the former was launched in 990 (1582), which was the year in which a king would come to eradicate falsehood, according to the Nuqtawi sage, Sharif Amuli. Using his Hurufi skills, following the lettrist system of Abjad, it was indeed Akbar whose name represented that ominous year, and all this happened just at the moment at which astrologers also announced the occurrence of the so-called *qiran*—the auspicious conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.³¹

that the Great Luminous Being is the source of visible radiation (*al-shu'ā' al-maḥsūs*) and, as long as it exists, the radiation continues (Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, (ed.) In'am Haydura (Dar al-M'arif al-Hikmiyya, 1430/2010), p. 104). The term is frequently used in Timurid works when the Sun is used to describe the king. The late Timurid historian Khwandamir (d. 1537) compares Humayun with the Sun. He uses *nayyir* to describe Humayun (*nayyir-i jamālat*) and mentions that the divine light radiates from the king's face, and that is the reason why people cannot stare at him (Khwandamir, *Qanun-i Humayuni*, (ed.) Hidayat Hosain (Calcutta, 1940), pp. 29, 100, 113).

²⁹ In Iskandar Beg's words: *in madhab rā dāsht wa u pādshāh rā bā kalamāt-i wāhiya wasī' al-mashrab sākhta az jāda-yi shari'at mūnharif sākhta būd*. To support his claim, Iskandar Beg refers to the letters sent by Abul Fazl to Mir Sayyid Ahmad Kashi: Iskandar Beg Munshi, *Tarikh-i Alamara*, (ed.) Iraj Afshar (Tehran, 1382/2003), 2, p. 749. Cf. Karim Najafi Barzegar, 'The Nuqtawi movement and the question of its exodus during Safavid period (sixteenth century AD): a historical survey', *Indian Historical Survey* 40 (2013), p. 54.

³⁰ Gommans and Huseini, 'Neoplatonism and the Pax Mongolica', p. 206; Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 3, p. 115.

³¹ Actually, happening a year later: 10 Rabi II 991, i.e. 3 May 1583. It seems that Nuqtawi thought was also influenced by the esoteric world vision of the eleventh-century Ismaili poet Nasir Khusraw, who, in his *Kitab Jami' al-Hikmatain* (*The Book Combining Two Wisdoms*) likened the cosmos to a body in which the flaming ball of

The prime investigator of the history project was Abul Fazl, who wrote the second chronicle himself, have coordinated the first one. The millennial world history covers the story of the first Islamic millennium based on a vast range of Arabic and Persian sources, and attempts to understand the reasons behind the rise and fall of kings. Unlike any other Mughal history, the *Tarikh-i Alfi* includes extensive philosophical discussions, including one on sun worship, to which we will return soon. The authors who were assigned to write the chronicle had diverse intellectual backgrounds.³² Apart from Bada'uni, whom we met previously as Akbar's conservative critic, most of the authors can be associated in one way or another with the long Neoplatonic philosophical tradition, as discussed in the previous paragraph. Indeed, at least three of them can be linked to the Ishraqi or Illuminationist school through the important figure of Shaykh Mubarak Nagori (d. 1592), who happened to be not only Abul Fazl's father, but also the venerated teacher of at least two other authors: Naqib Khan and Bada'uni. Crucially, though, Shaykh Mubarak himself studied Ishraqi philosophy in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) under Kazeruni, with the latter even adopting him as his son. Later on, in Agra, the Shaykh married into the family of Rafi-al Din Safavi, further strengthening the bond between the Mubarak family and the Ishraqi school. Probably the greatest Ishraqi scholar amongst them was another Iranian immigrant, Shah Fath Allah Shirazi (d. 1587), who was also the mastermind behind the introduction of the solar era.³³

The *Alfi* is the only imperial Mughal history that offers an extensive discussion on sun worship. Earlier at the court, the teenager Akbar had commissioned the *Hamza Nama*—a heavily illustrated work about the adventures of Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet, in which sun worship is still associated with the villain, the heathen king Malik Iraj.³⁴ The *Akbar Nama* is full of light and illumination metaphors, but references to Akbar's sun worship are few. It does discuss, however, the Egyptian Enoch, also known as Idris and Hermes Trismegistus, as one of the 52 wise men who anticipated the wisdom of Akbar. Indeed, Enoch shows up as an avid sun-worshipper who renewed the law and introduced astronomy, writing, spinning, weaving, and sewing.³⁵ Apart from this sole reference in the text,

the Sun is the spirit (*rūh*) that animates it (A. Hunsberger, 'The esoteric world vision of Nasir Khusraw', *Sacred Web* 9 (2002), pp. 89–100). It is possible that Nasir Khusraw's idea about the world as a tree to be planted in the garden of the Religion of Truth (*din-i haqq*) also had an impact on the column-tree structure of the Diwan-i Khass building in Fatehpur Sikri.

³² The original committee of authors comprised seven members. There were four scholars from Iran: Naqib Khan (d. after 1610), Shah Fath Allah Shirazi (d. 1587), Hakim 'Ali Gilani (d. 1619), and Hakim Humam Gilani (d. 1595), the latter being the brother of Abul Fath Gilani. From heart, there was Nizam al-Din Ahmad Haravi (d. 1594), whose family had been loyal supporters of the earlier Timurid rulers. The other two were Indian-born Muslims: 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni (d. 1615) and Haji Ibrahim Sarhindi (d. 1584). Later, the emperor appointed Mulla Ahmad to continue the book. When Mulla Ahmad was assassinated in Lahore, Akbar commissioned Ja'far Beg to complete the work. For further details, see Gommans and Huseini, 'Neoplatonic kingship', pp. 202–204.

³³ The Neoplatonic turn of 1582 was also stimulated by the flight of Shirazi scholars from Bijapur—amongst them Shah Fath Allah himself—after the death of 'Ali 'Adil Shah. Indeed, the remarkable parallels between the latter and Akbar's courtly cult require further investigation (see also E. J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* (Cambridge, 2019)). Catharine B. Asher claims that Akbar's political ideology is entirely inspired by Suhrawardi's Illuminationism in 'A ray from the Sun: Mughal ideology and the visual construction of the divine', in *Presence of Light*, (ed.) Kapstein, pp. 161–195. Our argument is slightly different: we are not sure whether Illuminationism in all its philosophical details really fits the Akbari picture, but rather assume that both Illuminationism and Akbar's sun project are part of a long Neoplatonic philosophical tradition that continuously produces variations on a same, recognisable tune.

³⁴ Franke, *Akbar*, pp. 199–200, 206. The illustration for the *Hamza Nama* (1557–72) is in the Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna.

³⁵ Abul Fazl, *The History of Akbar*, (ed. and trans.) W. M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA/London, 2017), 1, pp. 185–187.

there is only one illustration that unequivocally depicts Akbar standing to worship the Sun after an important military victory.³⁶ In Akbar's copy of Rashid al-Din's thirteenth-century world history, we find an illustration from *circa* 1595 in which Moses seems to lead his people towards the venerated Sun at the moment at which the Egyptian army is drawn into the Red Sea.³⁷ Abul Fazl's *Akbar Nama*, that is the *Ain*, refers only once to Akbar's sun cult:

A special grace proceeds from the sun in favour of kings, and for this reason they pray and consider it a worship of the Almighty; but the shortsighted are thereby scandalized. How can the common people possessed only with the desire of gain, look with respect upon sordid men of wealth. From ignorance these fail in reverence to this fountain of light, and reproach him who prays to it. If their understanding were not at fault, how could they forget the Surah beginning 'By the sun'.³⁸

The relative silence in the *Akbar Nama* is intriguing. It suggests that Akbar lost interest in the sun project, or perhaps somehow found it embarrassing, when the *Akbar Nama* was undergoing its final editing sometime during the last years of the sixteenth century.³⁹ Indeed, the citation above suggests that there was increasing criticism from conservative jurists, to be countered by reference to the Qur'an itself. Nevertheless, Akbar's son and successor, Jahangir, appears to have taken up his father's cult again, most conspicuously in his zodiacal coins and his dream paintings showing Jahangir with an enormous Sun and crescent Moon surrounding his head.⁴⁰ It seems that it was only under Shah Jahan that sun worship as such was no longer acceptable, even for the more lenient Sufi Muslims.⁴¹ Nevertheless, sun symbolism and *taskhīr* continued to be important until and even after the end of the Mughal empire.

Coming back to the *Alfi*, it too gives only a few examples of rulers who venerated the Sun. The only Mongol ruler that is mentioned is Qaidu (*circa* 1230–1301), the grandson of

³⁶ This illustration is in the *Akbar Nama*, which is in the Chester Beatty Library, produced in 1603–05 by Sanwlah, depicting Akbar on the banks of the Ganges giving thanks for the defeat of 'Ali Quli Khan in 1567. Although the text informs us that Akbar 'dismounted and placed his forehead on the ground in thanksgiving' (Abul Fazl, *History of Akbar*, 4, pp. 280–281), the illustration has him praying towards the Sun. For another rare illustration of Akbar's worshipping the Sun, see the Singapore Asian Civilisation Museum: Accession Number: 2012-00166, <https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1263871> (accessed 11 July 2023).

³⁷ Franke, *Akbar*, pp. 199–200, 206. Although not clear, it is possible that this illustration comes from the manuscript produced at Akbar's court in 1595–96, sometimes also called the *Chingiznama*, as it covers parts 1 and 2 of Rashid al-Din's first volume, and is now in the Gulistan Library, Tehran. Regardless, sun worship is mentioned neither in Rashid al-Din's original text nor in this later Mughal version. For a discussion of the prominent role of Moses in Rashid al-Din, see R. Hillenbrand, 'Holy figures portrayed in the Edinburgh fragment of Rashid al-Din's *World History*', *Iranian Studies* 50, 6 (2017), pp. 843–871. It will be interesting to compare the Mughal illustrations of Rashid al-Din's work with the earlier Ilkhanid versions (see also Y. Rice, 'Mughal interventions in the Ramfur Jāmi' al-tavārikh', *Ars Orientalis* 12 (2012), pp. 150–165).

³⁸ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, 2, p. 235.

³⁹ This concurs with a report from Bada'uni. The last time he refers to Akbar's sun veneration is 1004/1596 (Bada'uni *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2, p. 283).

⁴⁰ Jahangir also continued to refer to the Sun as *hazrat nayyir-i a'zam*. For Jahangir coins, see R. B. Whitehead, 'The portrait medals and zodiacal coins of the Emperor Jahangir. II: the zodiacal coins', *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, Fifth Series, 11.42 (1931), pp. 91–130. For the dream paintings, see Y. Rice, 'Moonlight empire: lunar imagery in Mughal India', in *The Moon, A Voyage through Time*, (ed.) C. Gruber (Toronto, 2019), pp. 56–62.

⁴¹ M. Alam, 'The debate within: a Sufi critique of religious law, Tasawwuf and politics in Mughal India', *South Asian History and Culture*, 2.2 (2011), p. 149. For Jahangir more generally, see Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, pp. 170–210.

the Mongol khagan Ögedei, who is described as the one who knelt three times before the Sun (*nayyir-i a'zam*).⁴² Interestingly, both the *Alfi* and Rashid al-Din fail to reproduce the story in the Mongol *Secret History* in which Chinggis Khan climbs mount Burqan Qaldun to worship the Sun.⁴³ More important than individual cases, though, the *Alfi* provides a lengthy philosophical elaboration of sun worship and discusses the topic in connection with the transmigration of the soul (*tanāsukh*). The *Alfi* first explains the reasons behind *tanāsukh* and its necessity for the soul's perfection. It combines various arguments from Greek, Indic, Persian, Islamic, and Ishraqi perspectives on the broad acceptance of *tanāsukh*. It then connects Indic to Greek philosophy and concludes that believers of *tanāsukh* in India also venerated the Sun. Hence, the discussion of sun worship does not deal with Akbar's own ideas and practices that had started at that time, but instead offers a historical overview of previous cults as based on the following five sources:

1. The *Maqṣad-i Aqsa* (*Far Destination*), written by the thirteenth-century Sufi author, 'Aziz al-Din b. Muhammad al-Nasafi, who is well known for his work on the Perfect Man (*insān-i kāmīl*) as derived from the theories of Ibn 'Arabi.⁴⁴ The *Maqṣad* is a philosophical work that mostly speaks about the relationships of human beings with God, self-consciousness, and the purification of the soul. His sympathies lie with the so-called *ahl-i waḥdat*, who represent the ontological position that all existence is single and that this is the existence of God.⁴⁵ The *Maqṣad* offers a long discussion about the concept of light and connects Islamic, Greek, and Indic views.⁴⁶
2. The *Akhbar al-Umam* (*Stories Concerning Communities*), attributed to the ninth-century astrologer Mashallah Misri.⁴⁷ His actual name was Mashallah b. Athari and he was a Jewish astrologer who lived in the early Abbasid period. His known list of books does not mention *Akhbar al-Umam*. Possibly the *Alfi* refers to *Al-Duwal wa al-Milal* (*The Governments and Systems of Thoughts*) or maybe this book was known as *Akhbar al-Umam* by the Mughal historians.
3. The *Milal wa al-Nihal* (*The Book of Sects and Systems of Thoughts*), written by the famous twelfth-century scholar Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani. It offers a detailed description of Indic religious traditions, including sun worship, based on various sources.

⁴² Qadi Ahmad Thattavi and Asaf Khan Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi: Tarikh-i Hazar Sala-yi Islam*, (ed.) Ghulam Reza Tabatabai Majd (Tehran, 1382/2002), 7, 4325. This is not mentioned in Rashid al-Din's world history.

⁴³ The full text is rather ambivalent about the centrality of the Sun compared with the mountain: 'But I was greatly frightened. Every morning I will sacrifice to Burqan Qaldun, every day I will pray to it: the offspring of my offspring shall be mindful of this and do likewise! He spoke and facing the sun, hung his belt around his neck, put his hat over his hand, beat his breast with his fist, and nine times kneeling down towards the sun, he offered a libation and a prayer' (*The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, (trans.) I. de Rachewiltz (Leiden, 2006), p. 33).

⁴⁴ 'Aziz al-Din b. Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil*, 3rd edn, (ed.) M. Molé, (trans.) Sayyid Ziya' al-Din Dihshiri, introduced by H. Corbin (Tehran, 1993). For the original publication, see Azizoddin Nasafi, *Le Livre de l'Homme Parfait* (*Kitāb Insān al-Kāmil*): Recueil de traités de soufisme en person publiés avec une introduction — Bibliothèque Iranienne 11 (Paris, 1962).

⁴⁵ L. Ridgeon, "'Aziz al-Dīn al-Nasafī", in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd edn, <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/aziz-al-din-al-nasafi> (accessed 30 May 2023).

⁴⁶ Nasafi, *Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil*, pp. 282–90, 'Aziz al-Din b. Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Maqṣad-i Aqsa*, in *Ganjina-yi 'Irfan*, (ed.) H. Rabbani, from the lithograph edn 1885 (Tehran, 1973).

⁴⁷ Mashallah Misri is a corrupted form of Mashallah b. Athari. For his biography, see Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist* (Beirut, 1978), p. 382.

4. The *Taskhir al-Kawakib* (*Possession of Stars*), attributed to the famous ninth-century astrologer Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi (d. 866). It is another title that we could not link to the known lists of works by this author.⁴⁸ In any case, it has valuable information about sun rituals.
5. The *Tasbihat al-Kawakib* (*Prayers to the Stars*), written by the twelfth-century author Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1191). As mentioned already, Suhrawardi is known for his Philosophy of Illumination. Although this source is mentioned in the *Alfi*'s list, there seem to be no direct citations coming from this work, which may indicate more general inspiration.

The list once again demonstrates how Akbar could draw inspiration from an existing tradition of Arabic and Persianised Neoplatonic texts. The *Tarikh-i Alfi* sets the discussion about sun worship in the narrative related to the death of the third caliph, 'Uthman b. 'Affan (r. 644–55). After explaining the caliph's tragic death, it suddenly refers to the *Maqṣad-i Aqsa* to open the discussion about sun worship. According to the *Maqṣad*, the caliph 'Uthman sent his forces to Yemen to destroy *qaṣar ghumdān*—a temple built by sixth-century Himyarite King Sayf b. Dhi Yazan.⁴⁹ The temple had 180 windows for observing the sunlight and pilgrims visited the place to make a circumambulation (*ṭawāf mikardand*).⁵⁰ The *Alfi* provides further details about the temple from the *Akhbar al-Umam*. It mentions that this temple was called *haykal al-shams* (the sun temple). It was built by Sayf because he followed some prophets (*anbiyā'*) who prayed towards the Sun (*qibla-yi 'ibādat-i īshān*). Every day, Sayf stood in front of a window, prostrated (*sajda*) before the Sun, reciting the following appraisal (*tasbiḥ*):⁵¹

*mā aḥsanaka wa mā abhāka, wa mā anwaraka, lā taghdiru al-abṣāru an taltadhdha bi al-naẓara ilayka, fa in kunta al-nūr al-awwal falaka al-ḥamdu wa al-tasbiḥ, wa iyyāka naṭlubu, wa ilayka nas'ā, linudrika al-tamakkana ilayka bi qurbika, wa nanẓuru ilā ibdā'ika al-a'lā, wa in kāna fawqaka nūrun ākharu wa anta ma'lūlun laḥū fahādhā al-tasbiḥu wa hādhā al-tamjīd laḥū, wa innamā sa'aynā wa taraknā jamī'a lahdhdhāti al-ālam linaṣīra mithlaka, wa nalḥhaqa bi 'ālimaka wa nattaṣila bi maskanika, wa idhā kunta ma'lūlan ma'a hādhā al-bihā'i wa al-jalāl, fakum yakūnu bihā'u al-illati wa jalālulhā wa majduhā wa kamāluhā, fahaqqa li kulli ṭālibin an yahjir al-ladhdhāti, fayazfir bi jiwāri qurbhi wa yadkhula fi ghubāri jūndihi wa ḥizbihi.*⁵²

What a beauty is this? What an honour and glory are these? What kind of light is this that no one dares staring at you? If, you are the first light then praise be to you. We look for you and attempt to reach near you, and we look at your supreme creativity (*ibdā'ik al-a'lā*). But if there is a light higher than you and superior to you, and you are created by that, then, this praise and glorification go to that light. And we try and leave all worldly pleasures to become like you, join your world and reach your place (*nattaṣila bi maskanika*). And if you are a created one (*ma'lūl*) with all these values and glories, then how would be the creator's glory, greatness a perfection? Hence, everyone has the right to leave all worldly pleasures to be able to join that [light] and enters its party.⁵³

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 386–387.

⁴⁹ See H. Blatherwick, *Prophets, Gods and Kings in Sirat Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan* (Leiden, 2016).

⁵⁰ Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1, p. 253.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252–253; the *Tarikh*'s description of the temple, its builder, and its demolisher is totally different from the tenth-century narratives. See Abi Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Hamadani, *Kitab al-Iklil*, 10 vols, (ed.) Instas Mary al-Karmali al-Baghdadi (Baghdad, 1931), 8: 5–28.

⁵² Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1, p. 253.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

In true Neoplatonic mode, the text suggests that one should first develop a state of world-renouncing self-awareness before being able to give praise, to receive, and to share in, the divine light that, via the Sun, originates from the first light (*nūr al-awwal*).

In a further elaboration on non-Islamic sun worship, the *Alfi* connects it to old Indic practice. Building upon Shahrīstānī, it not only provides accounts of Indians' praying to the Sun, but also observes that both Aristotle and Suhrawardī knew about such prayers.⁵⁴ The Greek connection receives further detail when the text refers to Qalanus (Flavius)—a pupil of Pythagoras, who brought wisdom (*ḥikmat*) to India.⁵⁵ Apart from Qalanus, there is his student Barjamis, who learned Pythagorean philosophy and spread it further among his Indian fellows. Remarkably, it was thanks to these Pythagorean teachings that Indians started to believe that God is pure light (*nūr-i maḥẓ*) but appeared in human form and that only those who are worthy and have merit (*ahliyyat wa istiḥqāq*) can really see Him. They also believed that human beings are enslaved by worldly temptations. Mortals cannot liberate themselves unless they fight these temptations consisting of pleasures, ego, greed, and immorality.⁵⁶

Continuing the Hellenic narrative of Shahrīstānī, the *Alfi* refers to how Alexander met the followers of this idea during his Indian campaign. He killed some of them but regretted it as soon as he saw that their dead bodies were so pure and clean (*liṭāfat wa ṣafā*) that they looked like fish coming out of the water. Interestingly, after reiterating that these people worshipped the Sun, the *Alfi* offers a Persian translation of the same Arabic prayer as mentioned earlier but uses terminology of its own. For example, when the Arabic text is saying 'we try and leave all worldly pleasures to become like you, join your world and reach your place', the Persian translation renders it as 'we should not try to leave the worldly pleasures unless our essences (*zawāt*; sing., *zāt*) find the capacity (*istiḍād*) to receive your emanations (*ḥayaḍān*; sing., *ḥayḍ*)'.⁵⁷ The translation suggests the imposition of a Neoplatonic metaphysical idiom on an already-existing solar cult, either at the time of the conception of the *Alfi* or earlier.⁵⁸ What is definitively relevant for this point of time is the fact that its Neoplatonist authors hammered home the point that the Hindu ideas of sun worship, which, according to Bada'uni, may have influenced

⁵⁴ The current edition calls him Shaykh Baha al-Din, which is a mistake for Shaykh Shahab al-Din (Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1: p. 253). The *Alfi*'s reference to Shahrīstānī is correct as the same Arabic text is given in al-Shahrīstānī's *Milal wa al-Nihal* (see Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrīstānī, *Milal wa al-Nihal*, (ed.) Ahmad Fahmī Muhammad (Beirut, 1413/1992), p. 732). Although the *Alfi* copied the Arabic text from Shahrīstānī, it is attributed to Mashallah Misri. The *Alfi* ignores Shahrīstānī's narrative in which he said that *qaṣr ghumdān* in Yemen was built by Zāhhak, the mythical Persian king, to venerate not the Sun, but Venus (*zuhra*). It also neglects Shahrīstānī's reports about the sun temple in Farghana and the debate about whether the Ka'ba was the Venus temple or not.

⁵⁵ As in the case of Plato, the influence of Pythagoras on the Islamic world was substantial, but we should keep in mind that, thanks to the interpretations of Porphyry, Iamblichus, and many others, both came to represent heavily Neoplatonised labels and, as such, the modern category of (Neo-) Pythagoreanism refers to the arithmetic, geometric, and also musical dimensions within Neoplatonism.

⁵⁶ Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1, p. 380. The Arabic text adds that, if God does not appear in that form, then no one is able to look at him (*wa idhā lam yulbishu lam yaḡhdīr aḡadan 'alā al-naẓara ilayhi*) (al-Shahrīstānī, *Milal wa al-Nihal*, p. 731); a similar idea about the Brahmin's belief of God as pure light is mentioned by the fifth/eleventh-century al-Bakrī. See Abi 'Ubayd 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Bakrī, *Al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik*, (ed.) J. Talaba (Beirut, 1424/2003), 1, p. 182.

⁵⁷ In Persian: *wa mā sa'y dar tark-i liḡhāt-i 'ālam namikunīm illā ba wāṣīta-yi ānki zawāt-i mā rā istiḍād-i ghabūl-i ḡayazān-i tu paydā shawad* (Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1, p. 253).

⁵⁸ So far, we could not bring home an older origin of the Persian translation.

Akbar, were not Hindu at all, but actually derived from the Greeks and, as such, were an integral part of ancient wisdom going back to the Egyptians.⁵⁹

After this story, the *Alfi* continues to discuss ritual. On the authority of al-Balkhi, it mentions that the worshipper should wear royal dress, such as cloths embroidered with gold, to stand before the Sun in the morning. He should use a golden burner to burn incense made of saffron (*zaʿfarān*), pomegranate flower (*gulnār*), gum of quince (*mīʿa*), frankincense (*lubān*), lac (*lak*), sandalwood (*ʿūd*), and berry (*mawīzaj*). All these materials should be ground up and mixed with cow's milk. Then, they should be burnt on tamarisk's coal (*angisht-i ʿarfā*) placed in the golden incense burner.⁶⁰ While the incense is burning, he should recite the following appraisal to the Sun:

*ayyuha al-saʿīd, wa al-nūr al-ṣāfi wa al-ḍawʿu al-wāfi, wa al-kawkabu al-ẓāhiru al-kabīr wa al-miṣbāḥu al-ẓāhiru al-munīr, wa ṣāhibu ishrāq al-ẓulumāt, wa mudabbiru umūri ʿālam al-kāʾināt, wa al-sultān al-nātiq wa al-walī al-ṣādiq, wa malik al-kawākib, wa munīruhā wa mudabbiruhā wa musīruhā wa amīruhā wa ḥākimuhā wa kafīluhā, wa ṣāhibu al-dhahab wa al-naḥāyis, wa maʿdan al-khayrāt wa kathīru al-mawhibāt, fa anta sultānu al-ʿālam al-aflāk, wa raʾisu al-mutaḥayyirāt, li innahā minka taktasibu al-nūr wa al-quwwa, fa idhā baʿudat minka saʿadat wa idhā ṣārat muqarinatan laka ihtaraqta, fahunna yaʿishna bi muwāṣilatika wa yafrāhna bi nazarika, laka al-sharafu wa al-faḍlu wa laka al-ʿizzu li annaka al-aṣl, wa anta sāyisi umūrihā wa sultāni jumhūrihā, anta al-maliku wa humu al-khuddām, wa anta al-sayyidu wa humu al-aʿwān, in naẓrta ilayhim saʿadū wa in aʿraqta ʿanhum intaḥasū, qudratuka lā yuḥāṭ wa ʿilmuka lā yuḥṣā wa kalimatuka lā tudrā, fa la al-kahanatu fahamū jamālaka wa la al-ʿqalāʿu adrakū kamāla bahjatika wa la al-ʿulamāʿu ʿarafū ḥusna nūrika wa malāḥata shuʿāʾika, asʿaluka bi ḥaqqi man aʿṭaka ḥādhihi al-maḥāsin wa ḥaḍḍaka bi ḥādhihi al-faḍāʾil an tahat lī kadhā wa kadhā.*⁶¹

O fortunate, o pure light and the prefect shining, o great and dominant star, the lightening lamp [of the celestial orbit], the illuminator (*ṣāhibu ishrāq*) in the darkness, the regulator of the affairs of the universe. O perspicuous king (*al-sultān al-nātiq*) and truthful guardian. [You are the] king of the stars (*malik al-kawākib*) who gives light to them, guides them on their ways, rules over them and secures them. [O you are] the

⁵⁹ Although thus the *Alfi* suggests a Greek origin of Indian philosophy and in particular of Indian sun worship, it does not explain whether the Greeks had any ritual to venerate the Sun. Likewise, it does not explain the Indians' understanding of the Sun and the reasons behind their sun-worshipping. It is not for the shortage of information, since Shahristani has full details on it. In his *Milal wa al-Nihal*, Shahristani argues that the Arabs and Indians were similar in terms of religion (*yataqārrabān ʿalā madhhabin wāḥid*). They both looked at the effects of things (*khawāṣ al-ashyāʾ*) and not their forms. He adds that there was a group of Indian people who believed in the impact of the planets and stars. Their thinking was like that of the Sabians (a religious group that flourished in Harran) except that they did not believe in the divinity of the stars. The Indians assumed that the Sun is an angel (*malak*) who has sense and reason/intellect (*laha nafsun wa ʿqal*). The Sun is the king of the celestial orbits (*malik al-falāk*) and all other planets take their lights from the Sun. Similarly, the evolution of the world's creatures is related to the Sun. Thus, the Sun deserves veneration, prostration, perfuming, and prayer (*al-taʿzīm, al-sujūd, al-tabkhīr wa al-duʿā*). Shahristani adds that Indians build a temple in which they place a statue who holds a red gem. They pray there three times a day before that statue. People fast when they visit the temple and bring the sick to the temple for healing. Shahristani calls the followers of this tradition *aditya-kiniyya*, without any explanations about their location or socio-political situation (al-Shahristani, *Milal wa al-Nihal*, p. 723). A similar discussion is given in al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*. Before Shahristani and al-Biruni, the main source of information about Indian religions in Arabic was the *Milal al-Hind wa Adyaniha*. This book was commissioned by Yahya b. Khalid al-Barmaki (d. 806) in the eighth century (Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, p. 488).

⁶⁰ Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1, p. 383; for details about the *ʿarfā* and *lubān* tree, see Zakariyya b. Muhammad b. Mahmud al-Kufi al-Qazvini, *Ajaʿib al-Makhlūqat wa Gharaʿib al-Maujudat* (Beirut, 1421/2000), pp. 216, 221.

⁶¹ Thattavi and Qazvini, *Tarikh-i Alfi*, 1, pp. 382–383.

possessor of gold (*ṣāḥib al-dhahab*) and precious things, the mine of good things (*khayrāt*), and the owner of plenty of gifts. So, you are the sovereign of the celestial orbits, and the chief of the five planets (*al-mutaḥayyirāt*).⁶² They receive their lights and power from you. If these planets stand far from you, then they remain shiny and lucky, but if they come closer to you then they will be burnt (*iḥtaraqta*). Thus, their life depends on their relationship with you and enjoy looking at you (*yafrāḥna bi naẓarika*). You have the honour, the excellence, and the glory because you are the origin (*al-aṣl*).⁶³ You are the decisionmaker (*sāyis*) and the authority over all of them. You are the king, and they are your servants. You are the leader, and they are your supporters (*al-aʿwān*). If you look at them, then they take your sight as fortune, and if you turn your face from them, then they will be unlucky. Your power is limitless (*lā yuḥāṭ*), your knowledge has no boundary, and your words are not understandable [by us]. The priests (*kahana*) did not realise your beauty (*jamālaka*), the people of reasons/intellectuals (*al-ʿuqalā*) did not understand your perfect splendour (*kamāla bahjatika*), and the scholars (*al-ʿulamāʾ*) did not recognise the greatness of your light and loveliness of your radiation (*shuʿāʾika*). I ask you, for the sake of the One [creator] who gifted you all these merits (*al-mahāsin*) and favoured you [by giving you all these qualities]- to give me this and that [and fulfil my wishes].⁶⁴

The final sentence here is quite crucial and once again makes the point that, although the Sun deserves to be worshipped, it derives its divinity from an even higher source. After giving the Persian translation—very much in the same manner as that of the previous prayer—the *Alfi* ends the discussion here and moves on to the discussion about soul transmigration.

Although the *Alfi* does not directly refer to Akbar's sun project, it does implicitly relate to it by studying its historical antecedents, thereby giving it both further theoretical clarification as well as legitimisation. Indeed, the perennial Neoplatonic frame distances the project from any contemporary Hindu associations and thus, quite conveniently, also from the Islamic criticism expressed against it by the likes of Bada'uni.

The one and only contemporary source that deals specifically with Akbar's sun worship is the so-called *Kitab-i Rubaʿiyat* (called *Zarra*, referring to sun dust or a mote in a sun-beam) by Akbar's court poet, Faizi.⁶⁵ We must read it as a poetic companion to the *Alfi*'s historical approach, coming from an author who was close to the core of the group that also authored the *Alfi*. Indeed, very much like his famous brother, Abul Fazl, Faizi was raised by his father, Shaykh Mubarak Nagori, in a wide array of fields, including traditional theology, philosophy, astronomy, music, and medicine. Like his brother, Faizi had been a major force behind the 1579 Mahzar and the revolutionary ideological developments at Akbar's court that followed. As such he was very much part of that same circle of avant-garde Neoplatonic thinkers who, partly through their involvement in Akbar's history and translation projects, were able to co-design Akbar's new ideology of *ṣulḥ-i kull*, or Peace for All.⁶⁶

⁶² The Persian translation gives *khamṣa-yi mutaḥayyira*, which refers to Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn (*ibid.*, p. 382).

⁶³ In the Persian translation, it is *aṣl-i hama*, meaning 'origin of all' (*ibid.*, p. 382).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 383–384. Since the *Taskhir al-Kawakib* is not mentioned among his works, the *Alfi*'s attribution of this prayer to al-Balkhi seems doubtful.

⁶⁵ The next paragraph builds heavily on the neglected, yet very important work of Gerald Grobbel, *Der Dichter Faiḏi*.

⁶⁶ Faizi's closeness to this group also shows in the fact that he wrote poems upon the deaths of Ahmad Thattavi, Fath Allah Shirazi, and Abul Fath Gilani.

Probably composed in the late 1580s or early 1590s, Faizi's *Ruba'iyat* offers 393 quatrains that quite systematically discuss Akbar's sun project. In between a description of the Sun's blessed rise and its sinister setting, we find a variety of appraisals of the Sun, its wisdom, its devotion, and its devotees. The whole piece ends with an appraisal of the emperor and a note on the book itself. Interestingly, the preface promises the reader 1,001 poems about the Sun, which probably alludes to the 1,000 Sanskrit names for the Sun that Akbar had supposedly learned from Bhanucandra (see above), but could also refer to the so-called *Hazar Shu'a*, (*Thousand Rays*) mentioned by Bada'uni—a work of 1,000 short poems (*qit'a*) on the veneration of the Sun, written by one Mulla Shiri and offered to Akbar in 1583.⁶⁷

Although clearly building on earlier Neoplatonic philosophies of light, Faizi's work on sun worship seems fairly unique in the Persian literary tradition. The work starts with the *Allahu Akbar* formula, which, from 1584, spread as an alternative to the traditional Islamic basmala. It expressed the Neoplatonic idea that, following Faizi's own words, God is unattainably hidden in eternity, beyond all Being, that His light is too high for viewing. But, as Allah is unseeable, the Sun and, lower down the hierarchy, Akbar himself provide an intermediate window to Him. Building on the Neoplatonist ideas of Suhrawardi and others, Faizi makes it very clear that sun worship is not worshipping the Sun as God, but worshipping God *through* the Sun. Hence, *Allahu Akbar* should be read not as Akbar is God (as is often assumed), but as God *through* Akbar. Indeed, it was Akbar's firm cosmotheistic belief in natural universality through the Sun that utterly demolished the boundaries of untranslatability erected by monotheism through revelation.⁶⁸

For Faizi, the Sun is represented as mirroring God's beauty and God's light.⁶⁹ Even more so than the Sun, it is the light that should determine the direction of our prayers as a new Ka'ba.⁷⁰ What is more, for Faizi the Sun is the first emanation (*ḥayd*), becoming the reason (*ʿaql*) that generates all that is on Earth: the eye, the heart, the body, and the spirit; fire, air, water, and earth; its tiniest part is a mote in a sunbeam that shares in the Sun's emanation. Devotion means opening up for this emanation, in particular during sunrise and what can be considered the year's sunrise: Nauruz. The role of the king was that of the one and only trailblazer (*rāhnumān*) to God: there is just one Sun, one God, one king; indeed, knowing Akbar is knowing God (*Akbar bishinās tā khudā bishināsī*).⁷¹ Upon reading the text, one can share in Faizi's thrill when he detected the identical numeric *abjad* value of *āftāb* (the Sun) and Akbar.⁷² Clearly, what is suggested in all these poems is that, since Akbar was directly linked to God via the Sun, he could claim an autonomous and universal position above all other prophets, conveniently leaving open the issue of whether that latter category would also include *the* Prophet. Quite tellingly, in a pun directed towards those Islamic rulers who call themselves 'the shadow of god', Abul Fazl makes it clear that Akbar is quite different:

Realize that a king who is a guide on the path to God with his mind is not away from God for a moment.

⁶⁷ Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2, pp. 225, 234. Unfortunately, the work seems not extant.

⁶⁸ Wording inspired by Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, pp. 54–55.

⁶⁹ Grobbel, *Der Dichter Faizī*, pp. 137 (no. 181), 154 (no. 260).

⁷⁰ In 995/1587, Akbar ordered all dead bodies to be buried towards the east. This was against Islamic practice that the face of the dead should be put towards the *qibla*. Akbar personally observed this practice of facing the east when he slept. Then, in 1002/1594, Akbar issued a new order according to which dead bodies should be kept for a while towards the Sun and then buried. That would allow the sunlight to reach the dead body to remove its sins (Bada'uni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 2, pp. 249, 273).

⁷¹ Grobbel, *Der Dichter Faizī*, pp. 166–167 (resp. nos 311, 313).

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

Although he is called the Shadow of God, we do not call him a shadow, for he is the Light of God!⁷³

For the likes of Badaʿuni, though, it must have been just one more affront by a ruler who clearly had become an apostate. This immediately brings to mind that other apostate emperor who introduced a Neoplatonic sun project, albeit 12 centuries earlier.

Julian the Apostate

Akbar's ideological message as emperor of the Mughal empire bears some remarkable similarities with that of Julian as emperor of the Roman empire (361–63), who had reigned more than a millennium earlier.⁷⁴ Far from being strange, the parallels derive from a common Neoplatonic philosophy applied to similar political conditions. Interestingly, both Akbar and Julian are considered somewhat exceptional rulers who are mostly studied *sui generis*, as apostates against the then dominant religious tradition of Islam and Christianity, respectively. As we have seen in the case of Akbar's political ideology, and his sun project in particular, these were built on a long legacy of Neoplatonic thinking within the Islamic world. Hence, this links Akbar almost automatically to Julian: the most famous of Neoplatonic rulers who was primarily inspired by the ideas and practices of the philosophers Iamblichus (circa 250–circa 330) and his personal guru Maximus of Ephesus (circa 310–circa 373). Referring to the common political circumstances of their reign, both were trying to rule a vast, extremely diverse empire by concocting a universal philosophical reinterpretation of existing religious traditions through Neoplatonic wisdom in which all the gods share in the divine. Despite these similarities, we should keep in mind that, for Julian, Christianity was a recently adopted imperial religion that had yet to be fully established in the empire whereas, for Akbar, Islam was the tradition that had 1,000 years of momentum and prestige behind it. As a result, the charge of apostasy against Akbar had a much sharper sting than that against Julian. Besides, Julian and Akbar had quite different personalities: the first was highly educated and intellectually inclined, whereas the latter could barely read and write. Nevertheless, both Julian and Akbar had a deep personal interest in mysticism and ritual, and, as such, they could both build upon a well-established Neoplatonic tradition.

Elaborating on the not-so-strange Neoplatonic parallels between Akbar and Julian, we can perceive a common philosophical curiosity and an enormous keenness to engage in religious debate. Both saw themselves as reincarnations of Alexander the Great—as philosopher kings who mediated between the spiritual and material worlds. Like Akbar through his Mahzar, Julian was *pontifex maximus*—that is, standing above the religious establishment of jurists and priests. As in the case of Akbar's *farr*, Julian had recognised in himself a hidden spark of divination, which, in his case, had shown him the beauty of philosophy. Hence, Julian as philosopher could use certain theurgic rites to achieve enlightenment, elevation of the soul, and a mystical union with the One, also the Good. As king, though, he knew that he should use his new wisdom altruistically for those below, very much like the wise man in Plato's *Timaeus* who desired to do good after

⁷³ Abul Fazl, *History of Akbar*, 5, pp. 706–707; see also Franke, *Akbar*, p. 221.

⁷⁴ The literature on Julian is vast. Still a classic is J. Bidez, *La vie de l'Empereur Julien* (Paris, 1930). For a recent survey, see S. Rebenich and U. Wiemer, 'Introduction: approaching Julian', in *A Companion to Julian the Apostate*, (eds.) H. U. Wiemer and S. Rebenich (Leiden, 2020), pp. 1–37. For a brilliant revisionist overview of Neoplatonic politics in Late Antiquity more generally, see D. J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2003).

his vision of the Good in the form of the Demiurge.⁷⁵ Through myths, Julian presented himself as a descendant of Zeus-Helios who had received ‘the hidden spark’, very much like the mythical founder of the dynasty, Claudius Gothicus, himself a devotee of the sun god Helios. The myth revealed Julian’s true nature as a divinely generated philosopher entrusted with the mandate to lead the *oikumenē* back to its divine creator.⁷⁶ So much for some of the most eye-catching Neoplatonic parallels between Akbar and Julian. But what about these similarities if we zoom in further on the peculiarities of Julian’s sun project? To do so, we will primarily follow Susanna Elm’s recent analysis of the creative way in which Julian reinterpreted two already-existing religiously festivals: those of the mother goddess Cybele and the sun god Helios.⁷⁷

At the spring equinox of 362, Julian reinvigorated the old cult of the Mother of the Gods by writing the *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*. This was a deeply philosophical reinterpretation in which the Mother of the Gods had fallen in love with the shepherd Attis. When Attis fell in love with a nymph, the Mother of the Gods retaliated by having him castrate himself. When Attis passed away, she resurrected him and thus allowed him to return to the divine realm. Hence, Attis came to serve as a mediator between the divine and the material realms. According to Julian, the act of creating material forms, including the stars and the galaxy, belonged to the visible sun god Helios. For Julian, Attis represented the active rays of Helios descending towards that galaxy from the One, alias the Mother of the Gods, when falling in love with the nymph. His castration marked both the lowest point of his descent and the point of his ascent back to Her, all the while remaining divine.

Julian’s cosmology followed Iamblichus: the man whom he considered to be superior to all those of his time, the third after Pythagoras and Plato. The ‘divine’ philosopher himself hailed from a very influential Syrian family—the Sampsigeramids of Emesa, who, one century earlier, had gained access to the imperial throne with Elagabalus (r. 218–22), who had earlier introduced the sun cult of his Syrian home to Rome. As a true assimilator, Iamblichus had brought Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras under one Platonic umbrella that accommodated not only Hellenic gods such as Orpheus and Zeus, but also the Egyptian and Chaldaic traditions as represented in the Hermetic books and the *Chaldaean Oracles*, respectively. The latter became a kind of Neoplatonic New Testament that supported the shift of Neoplatonism towards the religion and theology that proved crucial for the later development of its thinking in both the Latin West and the Islamic East.⁷⁸

One of Iamblichus’s most important theological contributions was that he lessened the ontological divide between the spiritual and the material worlds by dividing the divine Intellect (*Nous*) itself into three parts: the highest part of the Intellect was identical to

⁷⁵ S. Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley, 2012), p. 104.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116; D. N. Greenwood, ‘Crafting divine personae in Julian’s Oration 7’, *Classical Philology* 109 (2014), pp. 140–149.

⁷⁷ Elm, *Sons of Hellenism*, pp. 88–143, 286–300. That Julian twisted already-existing festivals is stressed by W. Liebeschuetz, *East and West in Late Antiquity: Invasion, Settlement, Ethnogenesis and Conflict of Religion* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 325–340. Two other major studies on Julian’s sun project include W. Fauth, *Helios Megistos: Zur synkretischen Theologie der Spätantike* (Leiden, 1995); and M. Schramm, *Sonne, Kosmos, Rom: Kaiser Julian, Hymnos auf den König Helios* (Tübingen, 2022).

⁷⁸ R. Chiaradonna and A. Lecerf, ‘Iamblichus’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2019 edn, (ed.) E. N. Zaita, <https://plato.stanford.edu/Archives/fall2022/entries/iamblichus> (accessed on 30 May 2023). For the Neoplatonic continuities between Late Antiquity and the Islamic world, see O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, pp. 185–198; S. Swain, *Themistius, Julian, and Greek Political Theory under Rome: Texts, Translations, and Studies of Four Key Works* (Cambridge, 2013); and G. Fowden, ‘Pseudo-Aristotelian politics and theology in universal Islam’, in *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, (ed.) P. F. Bang and D. Kolodziejczyk (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 130–148.

the One, the middle part was the same as Helios or the Sun, and the lowest part of the Intellect was identical to the visible Sun: representing Helios's presence in the material world.⁷⁹ All mankind is born from Helios and is nourished by Helios. He frees man's soul from the body and guides it towards the divine. Attis represented the creative force of Helios—'the essence of the generative and creative Intellect' who 'through his excessive fecundity descends from the highest spheres past the stars down to the earth'.⁸⁰ All in all, we can say that, with his *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*, Julian offered a new Neoplatonic myth about the generation of this material world of ours and of mankind itself.⁸¹

Nine months later, at around the time of the winter solstice, Julian decided to revive another old festival; this time, it was one in which he could elaborate on his own special relationship with his spiritual father, Zeus-Helios. In his *Hymn to King Helios*, Julian reiterates that Helios is the mediator—the Mean, the Nexus, 'the Middle of the Middle'—between transcendent and visible realities. Emanating from the One, Helios is the Demiurge of the universe and the father of all men. In analogy with this triadic model, Julian presented a downward extension of (1) the king of all at the centre of *kosmos noetos* to (2) king Helios at the centre of *kosmos noeros* to (3) the visible Sun in the *kosmos aisthetos* to the emperor surrounded by his officials.⁸² Basically, all this followed Plato's *Republic* (508b) in which the Sun is 'the offspring of the Good, which the Good generated in analogy to itself, so that what the Good is in the Intelligible World in relation to the Intellect and the objects it conceives, the sun is in the Visible/Material World in relation to sight and what is seen'. So, just as the One contains in itself abstract and transcendental thought but also produces the whole beautiful cosmos in eternity and perpetuity, so the visible Sun unites the visible and sensible worlds.⁸³ By creatively using Plato and Iamblichus, Julian was able to construct a universal political theory of kingship in which the prime Roman imperial traditions, including that of the Sol Invictus of his pagan predecessors, were also seen as Greek in origin and constitution, and as such were incorporated under the umbrella of Helios, who was the origin and destination of all creation. As brilliantly formulated by Elm: 'the sun, eternal, victorious, invincible, guaranteed the security of the *res publica*; endowed with providence, it was beneficent, bestowing felicitous times on all, illuminating everything with its light and wisdom, and uniting all into one'.⁸⁴

Despite the specific temporal and spatial coordinates of Julian's Roman sun project, we can clearly perceive the overall Neoplatonic similarities with the Mughal one under Akbar. Crucial in all this is the layered cosmology behind the worship of the Sun and its light as a pathway, via the worlds of the Intellect and/or the Soul ascending to the

⁷⁹ It should be noted here that Julian's two hymns were written in some haste and through the memory/the inspiration of Iamblichus's work: the *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods* was written in one night, the *Hymn to Helios* in three nights. So, although Julian follows Iamblichus in creating more than just one transcendent realm, that is the *kosmos noetos* and the *kosmos noeros*, he seems to dispense entirely with Iamblichus's *Sphere of the Soul*. Also distinct from Iamblichus (and Plotinus) is that Julian's First Principle is part of the highest realm and that Julian makes too much of Helios at the centre of all this (J. Dillon, 'The theology of Julian's Hymn to King Helios', *Itaca: Quaderns Catalans de Cultura Clàssica* 14–15 (1998–99), pp. 103–115; H.-G. Nesselrath, 'Julian's philosophical writings', in *Companion to Julian the Apostate*, (eds.) Wiemer and Rebenich, pp. 38–63). For other studies on Iamblichus's influence on Julian, see J. Bouffartigue, *L'empereur Julien et la culture de son temps* (Paris, 1992); and I. Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late-Antiquity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition* (Gottingen, 2013).

⁸⁰ Elm, *Sons of Hellenism*, pp. 126–131; inverted commas indicate Julian's words.

⁸¹ Liebeschuetz, *East and West in Late Antiquity*, p. 328.

⁸² Nesselrath, 'Julian's philosophical writings', pp. 60–61.

⁸³ Elm, *Sons of Hellenism*, pp. 286–300.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

One. In both cases, there is the enlightened emperor as the earthly mediator to bring happiness to humanity as a whole. To use again the words of Elm about Julian:

Good rule and good rulers emanated, through divine intermediaries, from the Highest One that is Goodness itself, whose exemplary virtues—justice, benevolence, mildness, clemency, and self-control—rulers must imitate. This is why the best rulers are philosophers: because closer to the divine, they are better able to practice those virtues and thus guide human souls back to their divine source, Zeus-Helios and the Highest One.⁸⁵

Also typical for both cases is that there may have been other sources of inspiration, but these were conveniently incorporated as part of an ancient wisdom that, through the capable hands of various generations of Neoplatonist intellectuals, could even be traced to as far back as antediluvian times of pharaonic kingship and the great magus Hermes Trismegistus.⁸⁶

Perhaps more so than Akbar, and in contradiction with his Neoplatonist masters, Julian, with his solar enthusiasm, makes the sun god Helios the central divinity. This is exemplified in Julian's final prayer to the Mother of the Gods in which he asks Helios to give guidance and good fortune to his people, his empire, and himself:

Do you grant to all men happiness, and the highest happiness of all, the knowledge of the gods; and grant to the Roman people in general that they may cleanse themselves of the stain of impiety And help them to guide their empire for many thousand years! And for myself, grant me as a fruit of my worship of thee that I may have true knowledge in the doctrines about the gods. Make me perfect in theurgy. And... in the affairs of the state and the army, grant me virtue and good fortune, and that the close of my life may be painless and glorious, in the good hope that it is to you, the gods, that I journey. (Or. 5 180b–c).⁸⁷

Even in this prayer in which Helios indeed seems to be centre stage, it is clear that happiness for all comes ultimately through the guidance of Helios, from the knowledge of the gods. Julian's prayer is another illustration of the religious turn that Neoplatonism had taken under the influence of Iamblichus. We should not forget, though, that, even for the more sober Plotinus, a form of contemplative praying to the Sun was advisable. For him, too, the Sun was the visible manifestation of spiritual reality as well as the deepest

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 332–333.

⁸⁶ See primarily Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, and, most recently, J. Assmann, 'Pharaonic kingship and its biblical deconstruction', in *Sacred Kingship in World History*, (eds.) Moin and Strathern, pp. 94–110. Interestingly, as the Indian Neoplatonists created a Greek origin of sun worship, authors in Late Antiquity tended to see India (Philostratus) and also Ethiopia (Heliodorus) as idealised solar states closest to the Sun (J. R. Morgan, 'The Emesan connection: Philostratus and Heliodorus', in *Theios Sophistēs: Essays on Flavius Philostratus' Vita Apolloni*, (eds.) K. Demoen and D. Praet (Leiden, 2009), pp. 263–281). For possible Egyptian sources of inspiration for Julian's sun project, see, for example, D. C. Clark, 'Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic theology in *De Mysteriis*', *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008), pp. 164–205; and F. Lauritzen, 'Constantine the Great as Ra the Egyptian sun-king in Julian's *Hymn to Helios Basileus*', *Revue des Études Tardo-Antiques* 10 (2020–21), pp. 169–191. For obvious Mithraic links, see P. Athanassiadi, 'A contribution to Mithraic theology: the Emperor Julian's *Hymn to King Helios*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 28 (1977), pp. 360–371. Linkages to the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus are explored by John Hilton, who describes Julian's universalism as 'universal apartheid' (see J. Hilton, 'Nomos, Physis, and ethnicity in the Emperor Julian's interpretation of the Tower of Babel Story', *Classical World* 111 (2018), pp. 525–547; and J. Hilton, 'Was the Emperor Julian a reader of the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus?', *TAPA* 151 (2021), pp. 195–417).

⁸⁷ Liebeschuetz, *East and West in Late Antiquity*, p. 340.

self of the one who prays. It was a longing for union with the divine: a combination of aesthetic perception, reverential feeling, visualisation, and inwardisation of attention.⁸⁸ As for the divine, in *The Enneads*, Plotinus writes:

One must not chase after it, but wait quietly till it appears, preparing oneself to contemplate it, as the eye awaits the rising of the sun; and the sun rising over the horizon (from 'Ocean', the poets say) gives itself to the eyes to see. But from where will he of whom this sun is an image rise? What is the horizon which he will mount above when he appears.⁸⁹

Plotinus makes the striking statement that the Sun is the image of the One: it is the One's own image, manifesting something of its power: goodness and unity, thus making it a fit object for reverential contemplation. Indeed, like Akbar and Julian, Plotinus refers to the visible Sun as God, or rather the visual, natural statue (*agalma*) of God: it has a divine soul, a divine Intellect, and is itself ever in contemplation of the One.⁹⁰ In another passage of *The Enneads*, Plotinus asks us to imagine a soul pouring life and light into the cosmos in the same way as the Sun illumines and tinges with gold a dark cloud. In the words of Michael Wakoff: 'Plotinus asks us to visualize a cosmic sunrise, a contemplation of dawn, indeed, the cosmic dawn, when the universe is born, the archetype of all our terrestrial dawns.'⁹¹

If Julian's sun worship was already a typically Hellenistic amalgamation of a wide variety of ideas, then it was one century later that another Neoplatonist, Proclus (412–85), offered a similarly assimilative view on the topic with echoes of Plato, Plotinus, the *Chaldaean Oracles*, and particularly Iamblichus—and now also Julian. Very much like Faizi in the context of his Islamic milieu, Proclus had to defend the superiority of the Hellenic traditions of wisdom in a society dominated by Christianity. In order to do so, Proclus continued Iamblichus's and Julian's systematisations of the ancient religious revelations with the philosophical tradition of Pythagoras and Plato. It was Proclus who played a crucial role in the transmission of Neoplatonic philosophy from antiquity to both the Christian Middle Ages and the Islamic world.⁹² In the latter case, this is particularly

⁸⁸ M. Wakoff, 'Awaiting the Sun: a Plotinian form of contemplative prayer', in *Platonic Theories of Prayer*, (eds.) J. Dillon and A. Timotin (Leiden, 2016), pp. 73–87, at pp. 76–77.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79; Plotinus, *The Enneads* V 5 [32] 8.3–9. Although this specific fragment was not translated into the Arabic Plotinus, comprising (a) *Theology of Aristotle*, (b) *Sayings of the Greek Sage*, and (c) *Epistles on the Divine Science*. Nonetheless, the Arabic Plotinus has numerous references to light (mostly rays/radiance that radiates from higher to lower layers of existence including specific enlightened human beings) and, albeit to a lesser extent, also to the Sun. Apart from the previous references, an important passage regarding light and the Sun is in the *Sayings*, which gives an Arabic rendering of Plotinus, *The Enneads* V 6: 4.14–22 (see 'A. R. Badawi (ed.), *Al-Aflatuniyya al-Muadatha 'inda'l-'Arab* (Cairo, 1955), p. 186: 2–9): 'The Pure One resembles the light. The second one which is referred to some other thing resembles the sun. The third thing resembles the moon which receives its light from the sun. In the soul there is an acquired intellect which illuminates it through its light and causes it to become intellectual' (translated by G. Lewis in *Plotini Opera*, Vol. 2: *Enneads IV–V*, (eds.) P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer (Paris, 1959), p. 367).

⁹⁰ Wakoff, 'Awaiting the Sun', pp. 83–85.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81; based on Plotinus, *The Enneads* V 1 [10] 2.17–23 (translated into Arabic in the *Sayings*; see Badawi, *Al-Aflatuniyya*, p. 108: 5–17).

⁹² C. Helmig and C. Steel, 'Proclus', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2021 edn, (ed.) E. N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/proclus/> (accessed 12 July 2023). Although we have some good studies on the Arabic Proclus—we know that his *Elements of Theology* was partly translated into Arabic—it is still difficult to really pinpoint his influence through text. As in the case of the other so-called founders of Neoplatonism, his influence is at least strongly suggested by his prominent position in Late-Antiquity philosophy, in both Athens and Alexandria.

shown in the way in which Proclus and the later Neoplatonists in the Islamic world after him agree on the cosmic centrality of the Sun. They would all agree that it is the light of the Sun that creates order and harmony in the universe, and, at the same time, elevates all things back to their origin: the Demiurgic *Nous* or Intellect.⁹³ Both Julian and Akbar could only but have wholeheartedly agreed!

Conclusion

Although Akbar's sun project may have been triggered by contemporary Hindu and Zoroastrian ideas and practices, our overall argument is that Akbar's Neoplatonic advisers reframed it as perennial and universal cosmotheism. As such, it served as the perfect all-inclusive ideology of Akbar's new world order. The strange parallels with the much earlier Neoplatonic sun cult of Roman Emperor Julian demonstrates that, although having characteristics of its own, Akbar's sun project was not that unique and should also be seen as a fascinating late example of a long *durée* Neoplatonic legacy. It is Neoplatonic because it builds on the Neoplatonic cosmology of emanations in which the Sun takes a central hegemonic position in the universe, its light creating order and harmony. Besides, the Sun serves as an intellectual intermediate gateway between the One/God—to which it remains subordinate—and the material world. The One is the ultimate single source of light that remains unified while being everywhere. Like the divine, light is simultaneously transcendent and omnipresent. The One enlightens the Sun, the Sun enlightens the ideal philosopher king, who enlightens the people and, as a guide, leads them back to the divine. In order to receive the Sun's emanations and ascending power, people must prepare themselves by developing a worthy capacity of world-renouncing self-awareness in order to follow the pathway of an enlightened trailblazer or philosopher king. Finally, through theurgy, Neoplatonic sun worship can produce worldly goods such as good fortune and good health. Above all, Neoplatonic sun worship offered both Akbar and Julian an appealing cosmotheistic imperial programme that countered the jealous monotheistic gods who dominated their milieus and at the same time could accommodate religious diversity under their own benevolent guidance. As such, Julian and Akbar fashioned themselves as divine philosopher kings who, like the Sun, illuminated everything with their light and wisdom, uniting all into one.

Acknowledgements. An early version of this article was presented at the conference on 'The Ethics of Idolatry: Sun and Cosmos Worship in Judaism and Islam' at the University of Texas, Austin, on 17 April 2023. We are grateful to A. Azfar Moin, Bert van den Berg, Ebba Koch, and Johnny Beentjes for their support and incisive comments as well as to E. M. Forster and Louis Couperus for paving the way.

Conflicts of interest. None.

⁹³ Van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns*, pp. 145–189.

Cite this article: Gommans J, Huseini SR (2024). New dawn in Mughal India: longue *durée* Neoplatonism in the making of Akbar's sun project. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34, 455–476. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186323000664>