

ROUNDTABLE

## Al-Ghazali and his Interpreters: The Case of the Emperor Aurangzeb

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The integration of South Asia into a Persianate world or “Persianate cosmopolis” has proven to be a particularly popular framing of the study of South Asian history. In *Venture of Islam*, Marshall Hodgson describes the Persianate as follows:

The rise of Persian had more than purely literary consequences: it served to carry a new overall cultural orientation within Islamdom. Henceforth, while Arabic held its own as the primary language of the religious disciplines and even, largely, of natural science and philosophy, Persian became, in an increasingly large part of Islamdom, the language of polite culture; it even invaded the realm of scholarship with increasing effect. It was to form the chief model for the rise of still other languages to the literary level ... Most of the more local languages of high culture that later emerged among Muslims likewise depended upon Persian wholly or in part for their prime literary inspiration. We may call all these cultural traditions, carried in Persian or reflecting Persian inspiration, “Persianate” by extension.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the subsequent theorization and conceptualization of the “Persianate” owes a significant debt to Hodgson’s framing. Scholars have emphasized different aspects of the “Persianate,” with some choosing to frame it as a cultural milieu and others as a linguistically connected region.<sup>2</sup> Here, “Persianate cosmopolis” refers to a geographical area whose major cultural foundation are the stories, ideas, and motifs expressed in New Persian literature. The circulation of such New Persian texts has supplied the primary content of the “Persianate cosmopolis.”

In this short essay, I suggest that Islamicists working on pre-modern South Asia would benefit from de-emphasizing the region’s integration into a Persianate world, arguing instead that studying South Asia as part of an “Islamic world” would yield more profit. To do so, I utilize A. Kevin Reinhart’s framing of “lived Islam,” which consists of three inter-linked layers: “Dialect,” “Koiné,” and “Cosmopolitan” Islam.<sup>3</sup> The “Islamic world” I refer to is the area joined by Koiné and Cosmopolitan Islam.

<sup>1</sup> Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vol. 2, 293.

<sup>2</sup> Nile Green, “Introduction: The Frontiers of the Persianate World (ca. 800–1900),” in *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, ed. Nile Green (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 1–9.

<sup>3</sup> Notably, Reinhart uses language as a framework for his model of “Lived Islam.” Thus, Reinhart notes that koiné refers to a “lingua franca.” He states, “I use the term koiné here in the sense of a language common to all, yet that frequently varies under the influence of the real native language or ‘home language’ of the use.” See A. Kevin Reinhart, *Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 62.

Dialect Islam, Reinhart notes, consists of the features of Islam practiced in a particular region that would feel alien to another Muslim traveling to that locale.<sup>4</sup> Koiné Islam most prominently consists of the rituals and symbols shared across Muslim societies, including prayer, fasting, and the Qur'an itself.<sup>5</sup> Cosmopolitan or Standard Islam is the aspect of "lived Islam" found in texts written by 'ulama' and most prominently consists of Islamic legal rulings. For the argument set out here, these last two categories are particularly important. As Reinhart aptly observes, "The first structural feature that helps construct lived Islam is that the ritual language of Koiné Islam (the 'Islam shared by everyone'), and the scholarly language of Standard Islam, are in both cases Classical Arabic."<sup>6</sup> Even when locally inflected into other languages, the discourses of Cosmopolitan and Koiné Islam are based substantially on a wider, shared Arabic discourse. The Islamic world I wish to integrate South Asia into is the region connected by Reinhart's Cosmopolitan and Koiné Islam.

Studying "India as Islamic" requires careful attention to all three dimensions of Reinhart's "lived Islam." While, as mentioned above, the study of Cosmopolitan and Koiné Islam necessarily involves engagement with the Arabo-Islamic scholarly tradition of law, hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, theology, and ethics, I am not suggesting that Arabic has been a language used exclusively for the Islamic tradition. As Roy Bar Sadeh states in his contribution to this roundtable, Arabic was also used by South Asian thinkers as a model for inter-communal exchange. Furthermore, it is also by now well established that both Muslims and non-Muslims contributed extensively to the Arabic scholastic tradition. Thus, I argue here instead that the study of Islam in South Asia would greatly benefit from engaging with the Islamic scholarly tradition—a large proportion of which was either in Arabic or based on the Arabic tradition. In the following pages, I illustrate this point by reading letters of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb 'Alamgir (r. 1658–1707) in the context of the *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111).

Anyone familiar with the historiography of South Asia will know how central Aurangzeb has been to studies of the Mughal Empire. Having reigned for almost half a century, Aurangzeb was one of the longest reigning rulers in Islamic history who ruled during a particularly consequential time. Aurangzeb's religiosity and attitude toward non-Muslims have been the subject of particular scrutiny in secondary literature and the political discourse of modern South Asia for many decades.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the many attempts to grapple with this issue, it remains poorly understood and will continue to be so unless serious attention is paid to, among other things, the layer of Cosmopolitan Islam transmitted through the Arabo-Islamic intellectual tradition. With this in mind, I propose bringing al-Ghazali into conversation with the words of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir.

By now, al-Ghazali's influence over the post-classical Islamic intellectual tradition has been well established. In fact, Devin Stewart argues that al-Ghazali's *Ihya'* may well be "Islamic literature's most plagiarised work."<sup>8</sup> Thus, even before considering whether anyone in South Asia actually read al-Ghazali's works directly, I believe there is a strong case to be made for Islamicists working on South Asia to familiarize themselves with the *Ihya'*.

With regards to Aurangzeb, there is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that he was familiar with al-Ghazali's *Ihya'*. For instance, in one of his letters, the emperor writes that he has read both the *Ihya'* and the *Kimiya-yi Sa'adat* (The Alchemy of Happiness).<sup>9</sup> In his

<sup>4</sup> Reinhart, *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhart, *ibid.*, ch. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhart, *ibid.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Most famously, see Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib Based on Original Sources*, 5 vols. (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1912–24). For a more recent contribution to this debate, see Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Devin Stewart, "A Modest Proposal for Islamic Studies," in *Identity, Politics and the Study of Islam*, ed. Matt Sheedy (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2018), 191.

<sup>9</sup> 'Inayat Allah Khan Kashmiri, *Kalimat-i Tayyibat*, ed. S.M. Azizuddin Husain (Delhi: Idar-i Adabiyat-i Delhi, 1982), 211.

study of sufism in pre-modern South Asia, S.A.A. Rizvi mentions Aurangzeb's affinity for al-Ghazali's *Ihya'*, stating that in a letter between two Naqshbandi shaykhs, Muhammad 'Ubayd Allah (d. 1672) and Muhammad Naqshband (d. 1703), the former explicitly mentions Aurangzeb's reverence for al-Ghazali.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in a letter to the emperor, Shaykh 'Ubayd Allah confirms that he received extracts from al-Ghazali's *Ihya'* sent by Aurangzeb.<sup>11</sup> The historical chronicle *Ma'athir-i 'Alamgiri* (Traditions of the World-Conqueror) by Saqi Musta'idd Khan, an officer of the Mughal administration, also states:

Among the admirable pursuits of His Majesty, which adorned him with divinely bestowed conditions was his diligent study of religious books, such as the Commentaries on the Qur'an, the Traditions of the Prophet, and works on jurisprudence, the writings of Imam Muhammad Ghazali selections from the books of Shaykh Sharaf Yahya of Manir, Shaykh Zayn al-Din, Qutb Muhyi Shirazi, and other books of the same class, which he perused constantly.<sup>12</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel also briefly mentions that Aurangzeb studied the *Ihya'* with the scholar Mulla Ahmad Jiwan (d. 1717).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it is striking that much recent secondary literature on Aurangzeb pays relatively little attention to the emperor's theological and ethical beliefs, instead of making cursory comments on Aurangzeb's personal piety or juxtaposing him with the "liberal" Akbar. This becomes even more surprising when we note the substantial number of letters written by the emperor, many of which focus on religious and ethical themes. There are a number of surviving letter collections from Aurangzeb's life. The one examined here, the *Ruqa'at-i 'Alamgiri* (The Short Letters of the World Conqueror), consists of 181 letters addressed mainly to his sons and prominent figures within the Mughal administration. While most of the letters are undated, several are dated from the last two decades of Aurangzeb's reign. Several hundred letters also exist in a number of other collections, such as the *Adab-i 'Alamgiri* (The Ways/Customs of the World Conqueror), which contains letters from the 1650s. It should be noted that the assumption of a strict separation between public life and personal piety underlying some secondary literature on Aurangzeb also needs to be examined and questioned on a case-by-case basis.

While these letters could, in theory, be approached in isolation, it is more fruitful to read them within the context of the intellectual and social world in which they were embedded. Understanding the intellectual context of these letters means grappling with works in vernacular languages, Persian, and last but certainly not least, Arabic. Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* is one particularly important Arabic text in this regard.

In several of his letters, Aurangzeb emphasizes the importance of subduing the *nafs* (soul). For instance, in a letter to his vizier, Asad Khan, the emperor writes:

Because there is no worse act than this ugly act [i.e., insincerity and negligence on the part of Khan Jahan Bahadur]. "Indeed, the hypocrites will be in the lowest reaches of the Fire" (Q4:145). You should write something to console him and suggest something to him [i.e., Khan Jahan Bahadur] from what has been mentioned so that his eyes will be opened and chastisement be found. Although it is not possible that the inner enemy is strong, "your greatest enemy is your *nafs* between your two sides."<sup>14</sup> Who, of his own

<sup>10</sup> Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978), vol. 2, 490.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Saqi Musta'idd Khan, *Ma'asir-i 'Alamgiri: A History of the Emperor Aurangzib-'Alamgir (reign 1658-1707 A.D.)*, trans. Sir Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1947), 317.

<sup>13</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 103.

<sup>14</sup> This is a famous tradition of the Prophet. See, for example: Abu Bakr al-Bayhaqi, *Kitab al-Zuhd al-Kabir*, ed. 'Amir Ahmad Haydar (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyya, 1987), 157; Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1982), vol. 3, 4.

account, would allow this person to pay attention to truth and reality? O God! Free us from the grip of the *nafs* and let us not die in its obedience.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, in another letter, Aurangzeb rebukes himself for misjudging a dervish in a previous letter to Asad Khan, stating:

That devotee let it be known that this sinner, who had refused this, after studying the incontrovertible narrations of the scholars of the shari‘a, has forgiven [him]. When I contemplated this, [my refusal] was due to the cunning and manipulation of the commanding soul (*nafs-i ammārih*). Otherwise, how could anyone be restrained from the desire [to visit the saint]?

(Verse): “The *nafs* is a dragon; how can it be dead? It is only frozen due to grief (*gham*) and lack of means.”

Praise be to God that I have not acquiesced to it and its deceit. To appear happy with loss/downfall is an act of the *nafs*. That sincere sacrifice (i.e., you) should request the saints of special benevolence to pray for good, welfare, and freedom from the grip of the *nafs*.<sup>16</sup>

Two questions in particular arise from letters like this: How should one understand Aurangzeb’s conception of the constitution of man and its relation to ethics? And how does such an understanding of Aurangzeb’s religious views help in interpreting other aspects of the history of his life?

From the letters themselves, it is clear that Aurangzeb sees the *nafs* as a negative influence on the individual. Indeed, for Aurangzeb, the *nafs* is the “greatest enemy” and man must seek freedom from its grip. In fact, in another letter, the emperor describes the *nafs* as having the nature of hell.<sup>17</sup> In the second extract presented here, he also specifies that he is referring to the “commanding soul” and states that the *nafs* can only be made dormant, never killed.

As is clear from above, a fair amount of information can be extracted from the letters themselves. However, if one really wishes to understand Aurangzeb in detail, the information in these letters is little more than introductory. To extract richer information about his religious and ethical beliefs, one could turn to theory from religious studies or literary studies, but I believe it more productive to look at some of the texts Aurangzeb was himself familiar with—in this case, al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’*.

In the third quarter of the *Ihya’*, al-Ghazali devotes a section to defining key terms such as *rūh* (spirit), *nafs* and *‘aql* (mind). With regards to the *nafs*, al-Ghazali notes two main definitions. First, for Sufis, the *nafs* is the faculty of anger and desire, that part of man that incorporates his blameworthy qualities; thus, for Sufis the *nafs* must be broken. Second, al-Ghazali also notes that the *nafs* is the essence of man, and its description differs according to its state. The philosopher describes one of these states as the “*nafs* that orders one to evil” (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sū’*),<sup>18</sup> an idea that Aurangzeb draws on in his letters through reference to the commanding soul (*nafs-i ammārih*).

It is clear from the *Ihya’* that al-Ghazali conceives of the “sicknesses of the heart” (*amrād al-qalb*) as deriving from activities of the *nafs*. These sicknesses include pride, ignorance, and greed, the remedy for which is to deny the *nafs* and adopt their opposite characteristics.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir, *Ruq‘at-i ‘Alamgiri* (Lahore: Matba‘-i Mustafaiyy, 1875), 93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘Ulum*, vol. 3, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Al-Ghazali repeatedly notes that the way to cure the ills of the heart is to practice denial of any desires that emerge from the soul. Aurangzeb repeatedly encourages such qualities throughout his letters and often refers to himself using self-deprecating titles such as “sinner” (*āṣī*) and “beggar at the court of the One Without Need” (*niyāzmand-i dargāh-i bī niyāz*).<sup>20</sup>

Previous scholarship has noted some of Aurangzeb’s ascetic tendencies. For example, Jadunath Sarkar reports, “His private life — dress, food and recreations — were all extremely simple, but well-ordered.”<sup>21</sup> Aurangzeb is also famously reported to have refrained from making use of the imperial treasury for his personal expenses, instead sewing prayer caps and transcribing copies of the Qur’an to meet his costs.<sup>22</sup> Thus, we have evidence that the piety displayed in his letters was not merely self-adulatory. These aspects of Aurangzeb’s character can be best understood as manifestations of his Ghazalian piety, in particular its heavy emphasis on cultivating virtues through subdual of the *nafs*. Hence, when Aurangzeb refers to himself in self-deprecating terms, one need not be so doubtful as to note that he “appears to show humility.”<sup>23</sup> Rather, such self-criticism is a fundamental aspect of both sufi ethics and Ghazalian piety.

However, simply noting that Aurangzeb had certain ascetic tendencies does not do justice to the meaning and importance of these aspects of Aurangzeb’s life and character. Given that we know of Aurangzeb’s affinity for al-Ghazali and reputation for pious living, it seems sensible to read his letters and other life incidents in the context of the emperor’s wider religious milieu. When we read Aurangzeb’s letters and reports of his life in the context of al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’* in particular, and this sober trend of sufism more generally, what begins to emerge is a portrait of a prince and emperor whose struggle with his pious aspirations provide the backdrop and context for understanding his life more generally.<sup>24</sup> Such an exercise can and should be extended to the wider textual universe of Cosmopolitan Islam in which figures like Aurangzeb were situated.

Unfortunately, texts like the *Ihya’* and other legal and theological Arabic works have been relatively marginal to the study of Islam in South Asia, and one reason for this underutilization has been the field’s overemphasis on South Asia as Persianate. This neglect is also, in part, due to the perception that Arabic is relevant only to the Islamic “hard sciences”—law, theology, hadith, and exegesis—a mistake highlighted by Jyoti Gulati Balachandran’s contribution to this roundtable.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Arabic material written in South Asia outside these genres has often been overlooked in favor of Persian. Nevertheless, even if Arabic had only been used for these genres and texts, it would still be a misstep to neglect it in the study of Islam in South Asia. It is a mistake to view texts from the Arabo-Islamic intellectual tradition as only useful for intellectual history or only relevant to studying the intellectual gymnastics of scholarly elites. Indeed, such texts form a major part of the wider intellectual and cultural zeitgeist of Cosmopolitan Islam, which Muslim societies have been immersed in worldwide for the last fourteen centuries.

The great benefit of moving away from a Persianate framing is most succinctly noted by Shahab Ahmed, who states:

<sup>20</sup> ‘Alamgir, *Ruq’at*, 92, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib*, vol. 5, 389.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Jean de Thévenot and Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri: Being the Third Part of the Travels of M. de Thevenot into the Levant and the Third Part of a Voyage Round the World by Dr. John Francis Gemelli Careri*, ed. Surendra Nath Sen (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1949), 237.

<sup>23</sup> Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir, *Ruka’at-i-Alamgiri; or Letters of Aurangzebe*, trans. Jamshid H. Bilimoria (Delhi: Idarih-i Adabiyat-i Delhi, 1972), 9.

<sup>24</sup> Here I use language drawn from M. Reza Pirbhai, *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), ch. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Tahera Qutbuddin, “Arabic in India: A Survey and Classification of Its Uses, Compared with Persian,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no. 3 (2007): 336.

This term serves also to detract from the continuing centrality and fundamentality of Arabic discourses to the construction of Islamic meaning and value throughout the historical space and discourses characterized as “Persianate.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, framing South Asia as Islamic serves the purpose of not privileging any language or literature over another a priori. Instead, such a designation allows for the investigation of discourses in various languages and leaves room to discuss how they influence each other. While one may respond that I am unfairly centering Islam here, my intention is only to center Islam specifically in the study of pre-modern Muslim societies and their beliefs. Reinhart’s framing of “lived Islam” is particularly useful for this purpose, as it avoids many of the essentialist pitfalls that come with focusing on a specific part of the Islamic tradition.

Despite the above, I am not arguing for a wholesale rejection of the idea of the “Persianate.” On the contrary, the idea/concept remains relevant, albeit in more circumscribed circumstances than it has been utilized thus far. Furthermore, framing South Asia as Islamic more readily integrates the study of Islam with the wider temporal and geographic expanse of Islamic and Islamicate civilization, from al-Andalus to Southeast Asia and from the Medinan community to the modern day. It should be noted, however, that the framework proposed here also has limitations. In a study that integrates the non-Muslim sections of the region in question, for instance, it would be more suitable to shift to “India as Islamicate.” Thus, depending on the specific topics of study, it is important to utilize the framework most suitable to the object of investigation. In this case, I have argued that “India as Islamic” is particularly appropriate for the study of Islam and Muslims in South Asia.

In sum, I suggest that the study of Islam in South Asia will be more fruitful if we shift our perspective from the Persianate to the Islamic, as defocusing the “Persianate” allows for the integration of other discourses and materials. In particular, seeing how Cosmopolitan and Koiné Islam pervade the Islamic world makes it essential to integrate Arabic texts into any discussion of Islam in South Asia, as the inclusion of such texts into the study of figures like Aurangzeb will undoubtedly be enriching.

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<sup>26</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 84.