The Identity of a Mystic:
The Case of Sa'id Sarmad, a Jewish-Yogi-Sufi Courtier of the Mughals*

By Nathan Katz

Said to be the second largest mosque in the world, Delhi's Jama Masjid is the bastion of Islam in North India. There prayers are offered, *fatwas* issued, pilgrimages made, vows fulfilled, and mystics venerated. Between 1638 and 1650, Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan built both the masjid and his royal complex, known today as the Red Fort, separated by a mile-long, broad avenue that was the Empire's prime marketplace.

As one enters the masjid through the *shahi darwaza* (royal entrance), at the honored right portal is a *dargah*, a Muslim saint's tomb, dedicated to Sa'id Sarmad (1590?-1660?), one of the mystical luminaries of the Mughal Court. All of the appurtenances associated with a Muslim saint's cult are to be found there — pilgrimage manuals, *taskaras* or hagiographies, collections of his mystical quatrains, as well as a festival (*urs*) held annually on his death anniversary (the 18th day of Rabi).

Sarmad as Muslim, Jew, Atheist, and Mystic

Possession may be nine-tenths of the law, but Sarmad's religious identity is not quite so easily established. According to his first biography, written by the Iranian Tahir Nasrabadi sometime between 1672 and 1678, Sarmad was "a Jew who later converted to Islam."[1] According to Mu'bid Shah's (or Mohsan Fani's), *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*.[2] Sarmad "... was originally from a family of learned Yahuds [Jews], of a class they call Rabbanian...; after an investigation into the faith of the Rabbins and the perusal of the Mosaic books, he became a Muselman."[3] Shah was Sarmad's friend in Hyderabad. Sarmad and Abhai Chand were his informants about Judaism in his excursus into comparative religions, the *Dabistan*. The chapter on "The Yahuds" contains Sarmad's eccentric presentation of Judaic beliefs and Abhai Chand's Persian translation of Gen., 1-6:8, bearing the title, "The Book of Adam." Most scholars, such as B. A. Hashimi,[4] unquestioningly cite this verse as evidence of Sarmad's Muslim identity. Lakhpat Raj goes further to assert that, "It is obvious that his conversion to Islam was out of earnest convictions..." but offers no evidence for his knowledge of Sarmad's motives.[5]

But is that only one version of the religious identity of Sarmad, the "official" versions of the saint's cult?

According to Maulvani 'Abdu'l Wali, Walter J. Fischel, and others.[6] Sarmad remained a Jew despite his spiritual peregrinations around India. Wali reconstructs Sarmad's beliefs as contained in the Judaism chapters of the *Dabistan*. His beliefs include a rejection of the messiahship of Jesus, a Kabbalistic theology based on emanations of light, the transmigration of souls and a complex theory of divine rewards and punishments. Wali concludes that, "He had neither any faith in Christianity or in Islam. Once a Jew he remained ever a Jew."[7]

Fischel, a pioneering scholar of Jews in Asia, approvingly cites Wali's conclusion, explaining: "A merchant by profession and, it seems, a very prosperous one, his search for knowledge and wisdom brought him into contact with the leading Mohammedan scholars of his time, under whose guidance he studied Islamic philosophy, metaphysics, and science, and under whose influence he was apparently induced to become a Muslim. His conversion was probably only nominal and superficial, since he himself later warned the Jews not to convert themselves to Mohammed's religion."[8]

Others, including some of Sarmad's contemporaries, insisted that he was neither Muslim nor Jew, but a conniving atheist, much as they alleged about his student, the Mughal crown prince Dara Shikoh. One such skeptic was Dr. Niccolao Manucci of Venice, court physician to Dara's rival, Aurangzeb. Manucci wrote that, "Dara had no religion. When with Mohamedans he praised the tenets of Muhammad; when with Jews, the Jewish religion; in the same way, when with Hindus, he praised Hinduism. This is why Aurangzeb styled him Kafir [infidel]. At the same time, he had great delight in talking to the Jesuit fathers on religion, and making them dispute with his learned Mohamedans, or with a Hebrew called Cermad [Sarmad], an atheist much like the prince."[9]

Two recent Indian books about Sarmad offer a fourth possibility, that he was a Mystic or Sufi and that Mystics and Sufis are often misunderstood as belonging to one or another religion, or as being atheists. One contemporary author who holds this view is Isaac A. Ezekiel, an Indian Jew and a Radhasoami Satsangi (a *satsangi* is a member of the Radha Soami Satsang). In his foreword to Ezekiel's book, fellow Satsangi Joseph Leeming comments:

> "Sarmad was a unique member of the spiritual galaxy composed of the scores of great saints of India of the past and of the present day. This is because he was born of Jewish parents and was brought up as an adherent of the Jewish religion. During his visits to India, however, he found that a greater spiritual truth was known to the illumined souls of that country, and from one or more of them he discovered and absorbed the real and basic truths of the purpose of human life, of genuine spirituality, and of the Path to God-realization."[10]

If Sarmad was no Jew, according to Leeming, he was no Muslim either. "Sarmad is known to most present-day Indians as a Muslim Saint, or Master of the highest order. This seems to be partly due to the fact that in giving out his spiritual teachings he quoted the sayings of many Muslim Saints. It is possible that he nominally accepted Islam; but he did not teach its orthodox beliefs. Instead, he taught the practice given out by all Perfect Masters, of listening to the Divine Melody of the Word and Power of God, the Holy Spirit."[11] Ezekiel succinctly made the same point: "In mysticism, the religious affiliations of saints are of no importance..."[12]

While our Satsangi writers seem to want to make all mystics their own, M. G. Gupta is content to declare Sarmad a Mystic or Sufi and leave it at that. When he does so, he employs the term "Sufi" in much the way that contemporary western Sufis do, as utterly separable from Islam in particular and from religion in general. Gupta wrote, "Sarmad was a mystic saint of the highest order and had rejected the traditional faiths — Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism and had no use for idol-worship, rituals, canonical laws, scriptures, mosques, and temples."[13]

Such diverse attributions of faith — Muslim, Jewish, atheist, mystical — reflect more than jealous claims upon the mystic. An understanding of Sarmad's life (as found in his Muslim hagiography and in his poems) and of the religious environment of his day — both the fecund *bhakti*-crucible of medieval North India and the religious policies of Mughal emperors — shed light on the thorny question of the relation of the mystic to a religious tradition, and in a larger sense on the relationship between mysticism and religion, or between the esoteric and the exoteric.

The Problem of a Mystic's Identity

Just who a mystic is depends on what one understands mysticism to be. Thus, the complex issues surrounding Sarmad's religious identity rest upon a prior understanding of mysticism itself. The essential question is whether there is one mysticism or many, whether there is one mystical experience that is subsequently interpreted through the categories of thought and language of specific religious traditions, or whether these categories precede and, therefore, condition all experience, mystical and otherwise.

During an earlier period in the history of *Religionswissenschaft*, these positions were cogently articulated by Aldous Huxley[14] and R. C. Zaehner.[15] Huxley held that that there is one metaphysical/experiential essence that is subsequently interpreted according to the doctrines of the world's various religions. His point was put most forcefully by Agehananda Bharati, who wrote that all religions are reducible to a "numerical oneness" and that while the non-dualist strands of Hinduism best reflect this metaphysical fact, it is nonetheless the basis for all mysticism,

monistic, theistic, or otherwise.[16] Zaehner contended against Huxley's perennial philosophy, holding mysticism to be of at least two types: the higher theism and the lower monism. More recently, this debate was reenacted in the academic repartee between Steven T. Katz.[17] and Huston Smith.[18] Katz argues that there are as many mysticisms as there are religious traditions (or perhaps he would hold there are as many mysticisms as there are mystics) because each tradition conditions the experiences of its adherents. Since there is no unmediated experience, he argues, there could be no one, extra-linguistic ("ineffable") experience that becomes intelligible subsequently through the language of the mystic's tradition. Smith counters that the mystics of all traditions, at least the "introspective" sort of mystics, concur about the ineffable core of their experience, an agreement that he takes at face value as evidence for an ineffable reality underlying such experiences.

And somewhere in the midst of this debate we encounter Sarmad, who wandered from synagogue to masjid to ashram, claimed by each group as one of their own, and claimed by modern followers of certain mystical traditions to have transcended all such categorization.

His Life

Sarmad is best known in India for going about naked and for having been beheaded by Aurangzeb. Of course, there is much more to his life than this, and one may simply recapitulate the highlights of his *taskara* to begin to appreciate his many accomplishments.

1) Sarmad was born in Armenia around 1590. A Jew, he read both the Taurat (Torah) and the Injil (Gospel) before studying Islam, to which he converted. He was an outstanding Persian poet and a successful merchant.[19]
2) In 1031 A.H. he arrived at Thatta (near modern Karachi), an important port during Mughal times. He was so impressed with religious discussions in India that he decided to stay.[20]
3) At a poetry conference, he heard a young Hindu boy, Abhai Chand, reciting *ghazals*. Sarmad immediately fell in love with the youth. The two began cohabiting, but Abhai Chand's family objected and separated the lovers. Sarmad became despondent and eventually was reunited with Abhai Chand, with the boy's family's blessings.[21] Abhai Chand became Sarmad's student, studying Jewish religion and the Hebrew and Persian languages well enough to translate sections of the Hebrew Bible into Persian, which were included in Mu'bid Shah's *Dabistan*.[22]
4) At some point and for reasons not entirely clear, Sarmad renounced all clothing.[23] He let his hair and nails grow, according to a description by Mu'tamad Khan: "I found him naked, covered with thick crisped hair all over the body and long nails on his fingers."[24]

5) Sarmad and Abhai Chand moved to Lahore, where they remained until 1044 A.H., when they moved to Hyderabad. In the Deccan, Sarmad flourished. He attracted many followers in high positions and he and Abhai Chand collaborated with Mu'bid Shah on the *Dabistan*. Sarmad's fame as a poet and a mystic grew.[25]
6) He then moved from Hyderabad to Delhi, stopping briefly at Agra. His fame preceded him, and in proximity of the Mughal court, Sarmad was befriended by Sufi *shaikh* Khwaja Syed Abdul Qasim Shabzwari.
7) Mughal crown prince Dara Shikoh, long interested in mysticism, asked his father, Emperor Shah Jehan, to investigate Sarmad's spiritual eminence. The Emperor appointed *qazi* Inayat Ullah Khan to lead the inquiry, but Sarmad somehow was inaccessible to the judge, and accosted the Emperor at his court. The Emperor praised Sarmad's sanctity, but questioned him about his nudity. Sarmad is said to have replied with a quatrain: "Why do you object to my nudity at the same time as you acknowledge my miracles? The truth is not what is visible, but the truth is what is concealed in my heart, and that is love." Sarmad remained naked and so impressed the crown prince that he became his disciple.[26]
8) With the encouragement of his *guru*, Dara transformed the Mughal court into an arena for interreligious debate, much as had been done by his grandfather, Emperor Akbar (1542-1605).[27] The *taskara* describes the unlikely scene: "There used to be Muslim scholars as well as Hindu yogis present in his [Dara's] court and he used to rank them all alike. In fact, he adopted religious practices that were a mixture of Muslim and Hindu beliefs... These practices were such that Aurangzeb, a staunch Muslim, hated him. As Aurangzeb was against Dara Shikoh, automatically Hazrat Sarmad came under suspicion."[28]
9) As Shah Jehan became infirm, his empire became divided among his four sons: Shuja and Murad Baksh ruled in Bengal, Aurangzeb the Deccan, while Dara remained in Delhi with his ailing father, preparing to occupy the Peacock Throne. As battles raged, Dara and his allies, in alliances forged by Sarmad with the Shivaliks in Maharashtra.[29] the Sikhs in Punjab and an array of Shi'a and Sufi Muslims, waged war against Aurangzeb and his Sunni allies. Aurangzeb prevailed, and then imprisoned and finally executed his elder brother in 1659.[30]
10) Dara's defeat led to a purge of his supporters, and Aurangzeb's chief justice, Mullah Abdul Qazi was appointed to investigate Sarmad.[31] Charges against Sarmad were filed, although it is not clear just what the charges were and for which ones he was convicted.

Some of the charges had to do with morality. His nakedness was a scandal of sorts. He was said to use *bhang* (marijuana), which had been outlawed by Aurangzeb just after his coronation.[32] Sarmad's homosexual affair with Abhai Chand also bothered some.[33] — although these three behaviors would have been unexceptional at the time. He was even accused of drinking Dr. Manucci's wine.[34]

Two of the charges in particular had to do with religious heresy. He is said to have denied the ascension of the Prophet (*al-Miraj*). And there is the famous incident when he was called into court by Mullah Abdul Qazi who demanded that he demonstrate his Muslim *bona fides* by reciting the *Kalima*, the Muslim affirmation of faith: "There is no God but God." Sarmad is said to have recited, "There is no God" and then fell silent. In response to the *qazi*'s demand that he complete the credo's recitation, Sarmad reportedly said that he was still immersed in the negative and had yet to achieve the positive, reflecting the Sufi teaching of *fana* and *baaqa*, the annihilation of the individual and subsistence in the Eternal.[35] Then again, there was the heresy that Sarmad proclaimed faith in Hindu gods (see his quatrain 320 below), and as Lakhpat Rai reasoned, "Aurangzeb, a religious bigot, could have tolerated a naked Jew or even a naked Muslim who was supposed to be acting in contravention of Islamic law, but he could never tolerate a Muslim having faith in a Hindu God."[36] For one or another of these heresies, Sarmad may have been sentenced to death.

Other charges were purely political. One, of course, was his championing the cause of the defeated Dara against his usurper-brother. He was not popular among the mullahs of the day, Mullah Abdul Qazi in particular. Rai argues that it was the mullahs, not Aurangzeb, who were Sarmad's antagonists. Jealous of his popularity, they connived to turn Aurangzeb against Sarmad.[37]

Sarmad also had failed to pay proper respect to Aurangzeb on several occasions.[38] There is the famous encounter between Aurangzeb and Sarmad on the roadway between the palace and the Jama Masjid. Aurangzeb reportedly asked the seated Sarmad to cover himself with a blanket, and Sarmad told the Emperor that he should put the blanket over his lap. As Aurangzeb lifted the blanket, he saw "freshly chopped heads, including the heads of his three innocent nephews and their companions." Terrified by this vision, Aurangzeb dropped the blanket, and Sarmad asked, "Tell me, shall I hide your crimes or my body?"[39]

The incident is the subject of one of Sarmad's quatrains:

> He who gave thee an earthly throne,
> Gave poverty to me;
> The costume covers ugliness;
> The faultless are granted the gift of nakedness.[40]

Sarmad was beheaded for blasphemy in 1070 A.H. Legends recount how his head rolled from the palace to the masjid, reciting mystical quatrains all the route. His popular *taskara* appends a legend which aims to affirm Sarmad's saintliness while at the same time exonerating Aurangzeb: "When his head was chopped, he became so angry that he jumped, picked up his head and climbed the stairs of the masjid.

"Suddenly the loud voice of his *shaikh*, Syed Hare Bhare Shah, was heard. 'Sarmad, where are you going?'

"'I am taking my case to the court of the Prophet Muhammad," he replied.'

"The voice again spoke: 'Calm down. You have reached your destination. For the whole of your life, you never complained. Why this anger now? This was your fate; otherwise, Aurangzeb was fully aware of your power and greatness.' After that Sarmad became silent and collapsed."[41]

The *taskara* concludes: "It was the decision of God to raise Sarmad's status. It was decided to crown him with the jewel of martyrdom, and he proved deserving at every step. As a matter of fact, he knew about his fate from the very beginning."[42]

His Mystical Poetry

We find intimations about Sarmad's confessional identity in his mystical poetry, many conflicting. Sarmad's chief work, the *Rubiayat-i-Sarmad*, contains between 320 (according to Ezekiel) and 340 (according to Gupta) quatrains, at least 20 of which illustrate Sarmad's relationship to religions — Islam mostly, but also Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and atheism. We also have one quatrain composed by Abhai Chand, and included in the *Dabistan*, which is pertinent to our question.

In his *Rubaiyat*, we hear a humorous, antinomian voice, one that abjures religions for the sake of God. Surveying his 320 quatrains (to follow Ezekiel's text and numbering), we discover the following motifs:

1) Four quatrains express disdain for organized religion in general.
2) Eight quatrains convey contempt for Islam in general and even Sufism in particular. Another five quatrains praise wine-drinking, which of course is proscribed in Islam but which is a central metaphor for mystical ecstasy in Sufi literature. He also commits two Islamic blasphemies: in three quatrains he proclaims himself an idol-worshipper, and in one he equates himself with the Prophet Muhammad;
3) Seven quatrains poke fun at Hinduism, especially the sadhus, although in one he proclaims himself a devotee of Rama and Lakshman, and as mentioned, in three he proclaims himself an idolater, which may be an affirmation of a Hindu identity; and
4) In one quatrain he expressed disdain for Judaism.

Of the first type of quatrain, those which express disdain for religion in general, number 5 (in Ezekiel's numbering) is typical:

> All search for happiness in worldly wealth
> or in temples, mosques and churches.
> O my Lord, save me from these, I pray these most earnestly.[43]

And in quatrain 313, we read his enigmatic words:

> O Sarmad! Thou hast worked havoc in attacking organized religion. Thou has sacrificed
> Thy religion for a Man whose eyes are red with intoxication.
> All thy wealth hast thou thrown at the feet of the Master,
> who is an idol-worshipper.[44]

Islam, however, is his favorite target for derision. He lampoons the Sufi's woolen cloak (*Suf*), the Ka'aba, and piety in general. For example, quatrain 17 reads:

> I care not for the rosary or the sacred thread.
> Am I pious? I care not.
> Nor do I wear the long woolen robe, it is so heavy.
> My concern is with my Friend (Master) alone.
> What do I care for the world's opinion.[45]

In quatrain 54, both the Ka'aba and the temple are objects of scorn:

> The Lover and the Loved, the idol and the idol-worshipper,
> Who is the cheat among them?
> Darkness prevails in the Ka'aba and the temple.
> Come into the Happy Valley of Oneness,
> Where only one color prevails.
> Think deeply. Who is the Lover and the Beloved, the flower and the thorn?[46]

And in quatrain 238:

> Repeat not stories about the Ka'aba and the temples, O Sarmad,
> For they are not the Way.[47]

In quatrain 218 Sarmad affirms Islamic practice but denies Muslim identity:

True, I am an idol-worshipper;
I am not of the faithful flock.
I go to the mosque,
But I am not a Muslim.[48]

Muslim piety and learning, as well as the emblematic cloak of the Sufi, are objects of scorn in quatrain 275:

O men of piety! What sweet deliciousness
Hast thou tasted in this hypocrisy? It is so insipid.
Thou hast many flowing woolen mantles to show off thy piety,
But don't forget that from the thread of thy rosary,
Thou hast made a strong rope with which to bind thyself.
As for myself, O Master, I can only pray for thy protection.[49]

Islam, of course, prohibits the consumption of wine (which is required in both Judaism and Christianity), and a number of Sufis have elevated drunkenness into a metaphor for mystical union. In accord with this antinomian trend, Sarmad wrote at least five quatrains that not only praise wine but also demean prohibitions against wine, as quatrain 197:

O men of piety, thou sayeth that wine is forbidden by religion;
I tell thee that it is most sacred, and not unlawful.[50]

And quatrain 124:

Who cannot tell the difference between true piety and hypocrisy?
Not by hypocrisy, teaching and deceit is God realized.
You (religious men) say, "Don't drink wine, but become pious like me."
"Go and tell this to those who don't know you," I reply.[51]

In quatrain 46, Sarmad commits the blasphemy of comparing himself to the Prophet. This blasphemy was one of the charges brought against him before:

Sarmad has attained Love Eternal; and selflessness from the wine,

Even the executioner's sword cannot make him sober.
He hath attained the status of Muhammad and remaineth there.[52]

Sarmad was nearly as critical of Hinduism as he was of Islam, and the sadhus fared no better in his eyes than the Sufis. In several quatrains, he dismisses "Ka'aba and temple," and in others it is "the rosary and the sacred thread," meaning in both cases Islam and Hinduism. His criticisms are launched against both exoteric and esoteric varieties of Islam and Hinduism. For example, the sacred thread of the brahmin, albeit covered by the robe of the sadhu, is Sarmad's object of scorn in quatrain 26:

O sadhu, this robe of thine covers the sacred thread;
'Tis a deception involving struggle unending.
Carry not this burden of shamefulness on thy shoulders,
Then wilt thou avoid a thousand sufferings.[53]

The sadhu is derided in quatrain 217:

O mendicant with patched and ragged mantle,
Why preach to me so much?
Thou knowest nothing of real Love.
My mind is engaged in more important work than learning piety;
My heart is torn to pieces by Love of the Beloved.
What does it care for the covering of a patched mantle?[54]

So far as shedding light on Sarmad's religious identity, one of the most puzzling quatrains is number 320. In it, Sarmad apparently declares his abandonment of Judaism and Islam, and a conversion to Hinduism. Despite this quatrain, however, of all the options available, no scholar or traditional biographer has ascribed a Hindu identity to him. The quatrain reads:

O Sarmad! Thou hast earned much worldly renown,
Come to Islam and got away from Judaism.
What shortcoming didst thou find in the Prophet and in God,
That thou turned away from God and the Prophet
And become a disciple of Ram and Lakshman.[55]

Another wrinkle in this tapestry of confessional identification and non-identification is found in the only extant quatrain by Sarmad's lover and disciple, Abhai

Chand, found in the *Dabistan*:

> I submit to Moses' law; I am of thy religion, and a guardian of thy way;
> I am a Rabbi of the Yahuds, a Kafir, a Muselman.[56]

If we are to take all of Sarmad's quatrains at face value, and if we are to assume that Abhai Chand speaks for him, then we are left with a set of paradoxical assertions:

1) That he simultaneously was a rabbi and that he abandoned Judaism;
2) that he was not a Muslim and that he was;
3) that he was an idol-worshipper and a devotee of Hindu gods but opposed both the Brahmins and the sadhus; and
4) that he opposed Mullah and Sufi alike, but that he frequented mosques and wrote mystical poetry that was very much in the Sufi tradition.

To try to make sense of these contradictory assertions, we must view them against the background of the popular religious life of medieval North India and the religious life and policies of the Court of the Mughals.

Religious Life during the Mughal Era

Religious life in North India during the medieval period (roughly 1000-1756) was dominated by cycles of conflict and accommodation between Islam and Hinduism.

Even before the arrival of the Mughals, on the popular level this great cultural accommodation expressed itself in a variety of syncretistic movements: Sufism; Ramananda's (ca. 1400-ca. 1470) non-caste-based devotion to Rama as supreme god; monotheistic, *bhakti*-oriented Vaisnava movements such as Vallabhacarya's (1479-?); the Kabir Panth founded by Benarsi Muslim weaver and poet-saint Kabir (1398? 1440?-1518); and Sikhism founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1538).[57] As the period has been summarized, "Widespread religious movements, having. . . their roots partly in the vivifying contacts of Hinduism with Islam, had produced a religious enthusiasm among the masses that was transforming the older Brahmanical religion."[58] Indeed, in the religious crucible that was medieval North India, caste lines were often blatantly disregarded and confessional barriers hardly existed. In such an eclectic religious environment, Sarmad's spiritual peregrinations are not so remarkable as they might have been during other historical periods.

On the level of courtly culture and the government's policies toward religious pluralism, there were oscillations from emperor to emperor. Akbar's court highlighted interreligious discussions and mystical conclaves, traditions echoed

by Dara Shikoh. In the capital he built at Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra, Akbar built himself a throne on a platform in the middle of a pool of water; the four walkways to the throne would be occupied by Sunni, Shi'a, Jesuit, Hindu, Zoroastrian, or Jaina sages who would debate issues and doctrines. This resulted in a policy he called *suhl-i-kulh*, or equal respect toward all religions, a policy simultaneously praised by minority religious leaders and scorned as a heresy by Sunni leaders.[59] Akbar's openness to other religions led to claims that he was a Christian, a Jain, and a Parsee (Zoroastrian), as well as a Sufi[60] — much like Sarmad.

Mughal polity ranged from official hostility towards Hinduism (and Sufism and Shi'a Islam) to tolerance for religious diversity reminiscent of the third century BCE Buddhist emperor, Ashoka Maurya, and back to stern repression, Hindu temple-razing, and inequitable taxation, policies which were later modified yet again.

Even before the demise of the Delhi Sultanate in the fourteenth century, the social fact of religious syncretism was reflected in government policies that allowed Hindus to govern themselves according to Hindu law, so long as they paid their *jizya* (non-believer's tax) to Muslim rulers. This toleration was anathema to the stern-minded Babur (1483-1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty whose policy was to suppress Hinduism by destroying Hindu temples, often constructing a masjid on the site. Within 50 years, his grandson Akbar (1556-1605) reversed the *jizya* in 1565. Akbar's *suhl-i-kuhl* policy was to be in force until Aurangzeb seized power and reinstated the hated *jizya* in 1679. Perhaps to Aurangzeb's mind, the flamboyant syncretism of Sarmad was too much to bear. Perhaps he was motivated by the need to increase the government's revenues.[61] Whether Aurangzeb's unpopular policies led to the downfall of the Mughal Empire is debatable,[62] but what is clear is that the remarkable courtly culture of amicable debate among religions and an imperial policy of tolerance toward religious minorities, instituted by Akbar and recalled by Dara Shikoh, ended with Aurangzeb's reign, and with them also ended the possibility of a Sarmad in the Mughal Court.

Conclusions

Of course, we cannot know what Sarmad himself felt about his religious identity, whether in his own mind he remained a Jew, or became something else, whether Sufi and/or Muslim, Hindu, atheist or "Idolater."

But we can view him against the cultural background in India, his adopted home. This places him in a most remarkable milieu. On one hand, on the popular level, there was the interreligious, mystical crucible of Kabir, Ramananda and Nanak, influential figures with religious identities nearly as complex as Sarmad's. On the public level, we can view the oscillations of Mughal policy about religions, from the triumphalism of Babur, to the syncretistic, mystical *din-i-illahi* of Akbar, to the combative sternness of Aurangzeb. While his passion and poetry speak for

themselves, Sarmad is less singular or idiosyncratic when viewed in the context of the culture of Kabir and Akbar.

We may also observe the processes by which his religious identity was commandeered *ex post facto* by the official Islam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, and how it was imposed upon by a modern Hindu sect, the Radha Soami Satsang, and by scholars such as Fischel, Wali, and Gupta.

FOOTNOTES

*This article first appeared in *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 47 (2000), pages 142-160, and is republished with permission. The editors believe that most readers of this journal may not have seen this article before, as there is likely but little overlap in readership of the two journals.

1. *Taskara-i-Tahir Nasrabadi*, a text discussed by Maulavi 'Abdu'l Wali, "A Sketch of the Life of Sarmad," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 20 (1924), p. 121, n. 3. Nasrabadi's work is the basis for the *taskaras* that are sold for a few rupees at Sarmad's *dargah*. (See the Urdu *taskara*, p. 18) The contemporary *taskara* published by Pir Syed Muhammad Sarmadi is available in Urdu (*Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed*, Delhi, Kutub-Khanna-e-Sarmadi, no date) and Hindi (*Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed Rooh*, translated into Hindi by Ahmed Jalees, Delhi, Kutub-Khanna-e-Sarmadi, no date). The quote in the text is from page 17 of the Hindi *taskara*.

2. *Taskara-i-Tahir Nasrabadi*, "A Sketch of the Life of Sarmad"

3. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, *The Dabistan, or School of Manners* (Washington: M. Walter Dunne Publisher, 1901), p. 299.

4. B. A. Hashimi, "Sarmad, His Life and Quatrains," *Islamic Culture* (1933):663-672, p. 666.

5. Lakhpat Rai, *Sarmad, His Life and Rubias* (Gorakhpur: Hanumanprasad Poddar Smarak Samita, 1978), p. 20.

6. For example, M. J. Seth, *Armenians in India* (Calcutta: Sri Ganga Press, 1937), p. 171, who held that Sarmad was an Armenian Jew whose family had settled in Persia.

7. Wali, "A Sketch of the Life of Sarmad," pp. 120-121.

8. Walter J. Fischel, "Jews and Judaism at the Court of the Moghul Emperors in Medieval India," *Islamic Culture* 25 (1951), p. 120.

9. Niccolo Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, William Irvine, trans. (1907, page 223), quoted by Wali, "A Sketch of the Life of Sarmad," p. 120. According to Sheikh Mohamed Ikram, many Europeans, especially Jesuits, were partisan toward the strict Sunni rulers in India, and had little patience with the more tolerant Sufis or Shi'as. "The Jesuits were critical of this [i.e., Akbar's] policy of tolerance, declaring the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslims 'a praiseworthy action,'

but noting their 'carelessness' in allowing public performance of Hindu sacrifices and religious practices." Sheikh Mohamed Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, Ainslie T. Embree, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 235.

10. Joseph Leeming, "Foreword" to I. A. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, (Beas, Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang, 1966), p. vii.

11. Leeming, "Foreword" to Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. vii.

12. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. v.

13. M. G. Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint (Life and Works)* (Agra: M. G. Publishers, 1991), p. v.

14. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books/World Publishing Co., 1968 [1944]).

15. R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: University of London/Athlone Press, 1960).

16. Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism* (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1972).

17. Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 22-74; and his rejoinder to Huston Smith's critique, "On Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 4, (1988):751-757.

18. Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 3, (1987): 553-566.

19. Urdu *taskara*, p. 20.

20. Urdu *taskara*, p. 21.

21. Virtually every biographer has insisted that the love between Sarmad and Abhai Chand was "pure." The earliest written account of their relationship is found in the 1660 work, the *Dabistan*: "When he arrived at the town of *Tatta*, he fell in love with a Hindu boy, called Abhi Chand, and abandoning all other things, like a Sanyasi [Hindu renunciate], naked as he came from his mother, he sat down before the door of his beloved. The father of the object of his love, after having found by investigation the purity of the attachment manifested for his son, admitted Sarmad into his house, and the young man too met him with an equal affection..." (Shea and Troyer, trans., *The Dabistan*, p. 299.) However, nowhere in Sarmad's poetry is there any indication that his love for Abhai Chand was other than carnal.

22. Urdu *taskara*, pp. 21-23.

23. Urdu *taskara*, p. 23.

24. Introduction to *Rubaiyat-i-Sarmad* (Lahore: Marghoob Agency, 1920), pp. iv-v, quoted by Rai, *Sarmad, His Life and Rubais*, p. 25.

25. Urdu *taskara*, 23-25.

26. Urdu *taskara*, pp. 25-27.

27. See "Akbar the Great," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1971), s.v.

28. Urdu *taskara*, p. 27. It is important to note that the *taskara* opposed Aurangzeb to his brother Dara, and not to Sarmad. It is one of the ideological underpinnings of the *taskara* that both Aurangzeb and Sarmad were "right," as expressed in the Preface (pp. 7-8): "Hazrat Sarmad was a victim of injustice, but on the other hand Aurangzeb was not a culprit... Aurangzeb was not an enemy of Hazrat Sarmad, but as Emperor he had a moral obligation to defend the religion, Islam."

29. Very recent excavations in Thane, near Mumbai, have unearthed an old Jewish cemetery, some of the graves in which are of Jews (Bene Israel) who held high ranks in Shivaji's army. See Pinhas David Bhalkar's report in *Kol India* (June 1998):25.

30. Urdu *taskara*, pp. 29-34.

31. Urdu *taskara*, pp. 33-36.

32. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, p. 189.

33. Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint (Life and Works)*, p. 45.

34. Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint (Life and Works)*, p. 44.

35. Urdu *taskara*, p. 42.

36. Rai, *Sarmad, His Life and Rubias*, p. 53.

37. Rai, *Sarmad His Life and Rubias*, pp. 49-50.

38. Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint (Life and Works)*, p. 45.

39. Urdu *taskara*, pp. 39-40.

40. *Rubiy'at* 105, in Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 321.

41. Urdu *taskara*, p. 44.

42. Urdu *taskara*, p. 47.

43. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 295.

44. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 378.

45. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 298.

46. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 308.

47. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 357.

48. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 351.

49. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 367.

50. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 345.

51. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, pp. 325-326.

52. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 306.

53. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, p. 301.

54. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, pp. 350-351.

55. Ezekiel, *Sarmad (Jewish Saint of India)*, pp. 379-380.

56. Shea and Troyer, trans., *The Dabistan*, p. 299.

57. F. E. Keay, *Kabir and His Followers* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, Sri Garib Das Oriental Series No. 171, 1996 [1931]), pp. 27-28.

58. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, p. 232.

59. Akbar's liberal religious policies were "resented as being in substance an attack on the Muhammadan religion," according to Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar, the Great Mogul* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1966), p. 132.

60. Smith, *Akbar, the Great Mogul*, pp. 115-119.

61. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, p. 198. Under tremendous popular pressure, the *jizya* was revoked by Aurangzeb's successor in 1720. S. M. Edwards and H. L. O. Garrett, *Mughal Rule in India* (Delhi: S. Chand., 1930), p. 216.

62. Ikram, *Muslim Civilization in India*, p. 199. As Edwards and Garrett wrote, "...Aurangzeb reimposed the *jizya*...and followed a policy of destroying as many Hindu temples as possible...goods belonging to Hindu merchants were subjected to a custom's duty twice as heavy as that demanded from Muhammadan traders." *Mughal Rule in India*, pp. 153-154.