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An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions

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Bayān al-adyān

Abū al-Maʿālī Muḥammad ibn ʿUbayd Allāh ibn ʿAlī was descended from the Prophet Muḥammad's son-in-law ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), from a branch that had settled in Balkh (Afghanistan). He wrote *Bayān al-adyān* in 485/1092 in Ghazna (Afghanistan) during the reign of the Ġaznavīd ruler Ibrāhīm ibn Masʿūd (r. 1059-1099). While he may have had Shīʿī inclinations, he apparently followed the Ḥanafī legal school.

The *Bayān al-adyān* or *Explanation of Religions* is the earliest major Persian work devoted to describing the various religions of the known world. It consists of a short preface, followed by five chapters (*bāb*): (i) on the discovery that, in all times and regions, the majority of humanity believe in the Creator, (ii) on pre-Islamic religious teachings (*maḏhab*), (iii) on the well-known *ḥadīṯ* (saying) of the Prophet Muḥammad, "My community after me will become seventy-three divisions (*firqa*)," with commentary, (iv) on the religious teachings of Islam, (v) accounts of those who proclaimed impossible things, i.e., those who claimed divinity and those who claimed prophecy.

The preface frames these subjects in the context of Qurʾān 4:59: "Believers! Obey God, obey the messenger, and those of you in authority." The author interprets this as mandating obedience to those in authority (*ūlū al-amr*) as a duty second only to the obedience owed to God and the Prophet. The author also observes that the only source of lasting memory for any mortal is the production of writings of wisdom. He relates that in the royal assembly (of the Ġaznavid court), a discussion took place on the nature of Islamic and pagan (*jāhilī*) religions and teachings (*adyān wa maḏāhib*), in connection with the prophetic saying discussed in chapter three; the conclusion of the saying is that seventy-two divisions will be condemned to hellfire, while only one is saved. The main objective of the text is to point out the errors of

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the misguided teachings and preserve the Sunnī group for salvation. Secondarily, the text aims to expose the missteps and infamies of these teachings in order to supply forceful arguments against them for the reinforcement of certainty by rational methods. Throughout, the terms "division" (*firqa*) and "group" (*gurūh*) are used interchangeably to describe social collectivities, while "religious teaching" (*maḏhab*) becomes the key word for doctrines. In this respect, Abū al-Maʿālī departs from the usage of previous heresiographers like al-Baġdādī (d. 429/1037), for whom the *firqa* mentioned in the *ḥadiṯ* was the dominant category for doctrine.

India is first mentioned towards the end of chapter one as another example of monotheism (*Bayān al-adyān*, 1376 š./1997, pp. 23-24). Abū al-Maʿālī first quotes Maqdisī as saying that the Indians (*hindūvān*) worship God (*īzad*) under the names "*Siriśtiyā* and *Ayit Mahādīw*" (Huart reads these names as "*Chītā, Vābit* and *Mahādev*"; see Maqdisī 1899, vol. 1, p. 63 of the Arabic text). While these titles appear garbled, the final element in this formula evidently contains the name of the Hindu deity Mahādeva, i.e., Śīva. Abū al-Maʿālī then goes on to cite al-Bīrūnī's *Arā' al-hind*, which is described as a book explaining the "path and religious teachings" (*ṭarīqat wa maḏāhib*) of the Indians. This monotheistic doctrine is illustrated by drawing on a passage from the Arabic translation of Patañjali's *Yoga sūtra*, ostensibly taken from the second chapter of al-Bīrūnī's work on India (Bīrūnī 1377/1958, pp. 20-21). Abū al-Maʿālī in fact presented an Islamized version of the original Arabic text, for instance by eliding a reference to the Vedas and substituting the name of Abraham (Ibrāhīm) for the Hindu god Brahmā (Lawrence 1976, p. 90), implying by this word-play that Abraham was acknowledged by Hindus as a prophet. Abū al-Maʿālī closed this section by citing al-Bīrūnī on the titles of the five principal Indian texts on monotheism: *Gītā, Bhārat, Bāsūdev, Sānka,* and *Arjun.* Here too Abū al-Maʿālī was inaccurate; while one may recognize in this list the titles of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Sāṁkhyakārikā*, the other two names are obviously not books but people: Vasudeva (Kṛṣṇa) and Arjuna. The chapter concludes by remarking that some Indians call God *išfar* (= Sanskrit *īšvara*, "lord"), interpreted as meaning independent and benevolent (*bī niyāz wa jawād*).

Somewhat inconsistently, India appears again in the second chapter, on pre-Islamic religions (*Bayān al-adyān*, 1376 š./1997, p. 35), after cursory surveys of philosophers, Jews, various Christian and Zoroastrian groups, and a generic category of idol worshippers. Abū al-Maʿālī acknowledges that the Indians are renowned

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for their scientific achievements, particularly in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, pharmacology, and astrology, to a degree that their opponents can only imagine. He underlines the fame of Indian science in Khurasan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Their knowledge and discernment (*firāsat*, i.e., divination) are such that they overthrow an enemy through the imagination (*wahm*) and destroy him, though Abū al-Maʿālī rejects the stories and tales he has read on this subject as useless for the purposes of this book. Consequently, he is amazed that, despite their skill and wisdom, "their stupidity in matters of religious faith and practice (*dīn wa šarīʿat*) is to such an extent that they are a group of idol-worshippers; they kill themselves and cast themselves in the fire for the sake of their idol." Nevertheless, he observes that they accept the prophetic status of Adam, and some also accept Abraham. Some are materialists who deny the Creator, and others worship the stars. Some worship whatever appears beautiful to their eyes, and others believe in reincarnation (a separate discussion on reincarnation follows the section on the Indians). Abū al-Maʿālī then quotes the philosopher (*ḥakīm*) Bū Zayd, i.e., Abū Zayd Aḥmad al-Balḫī (ca. 235-322/849-934), as saying that in the Indian language their idol is known as *Qāqīṭ* (also spelled *Qāqlīṭ*). While this identification may have been taken from Abū Zayd's lost work against idolatry (Kafafi 1949, p. 190), the name is spelled with consonants peculiar to Arabic and is not recognizable as an Indian name; curiously, it resembles the Arabic spelling of the Christian term Paraclete (*Fāraqlīṭ*). Abū al-Maʿālī notes the prevalence of vegetarianism among the Indians, particularly regarding the cow, and he observes that most also avoid drinking wine. He concludes by saying that they hold honesty in great esteem, and that "brahmin" is their term for an ascetic (*zāhid*).

Due to its brevity and its polemical and theological context, the account of Indian religions in the *Bayān al-adyān* is not particularly informative, but it is a good example of the way that Muslim intellectuals regarded the religions of India in the period just before the rise of the Delhi sultanate. There is a tension between the recognition of evidently monotheistic tendencies among Indian philosophers (combined with admiration of scientific achievements) and a revulsion toward idolatry and popular customs perceived to be exotic and extreme. At the same time, it displays a tendency toward assimilating Indian names and themes to Islamic equivalents, and it illustrates ways in which terms from the Islamic religious lexicon (*dīn, maḏhab, firqa, šarīʿat*) were applied to non-Muslim groups.

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