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Topic: Akbar's goals and his idea of Din-e-Ilahi and relevance of religious tolerance in present day India

Akbar- A Man Beyond His Time....

As I surf the television, I am struck by the ironies of our world. On the one hand I see images of how science has advanced in helping create test tube babies and delivering human beings from the deadliest of diseases. On the other hand, I see footage of pointless sacrifice of the lives of innocent men, women and children as they are caught in the cross fire of religious fundamentalism.

When did "jihad" become "mindless butchery rather than "struggle for self-improvement" ? Religion does not demand this of us. And while history is strewn with stories of bigots, there have been some people who have tried to find the true path to God, one of whom I would like to dedicate this essay to. He is remembered throughout the world as a beacon of religious tolerance. He was a man named Akbar.

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar was the third Mughal emperor of India. He is remembered for not only being a brilliant military general but for his attempts to create a secular and tolerant society. Akbar's secular outlook, was first influenced by his mother, the daughter of a Persian scholar, who sowed his mind with the seeds of tolerance at an early age. Akbar's early contact with great Sufi saints in the royal court of Kabul also imbued him with liberal religious views and the belief in the sublime Sufi concept of purity of heart and soul being the path to God rather than literal obedience of orthodox beliefs.

Akbar had an Ibadat Khana or Hall of Prayer built in Fatehpur Sikri. He originally had only Muslim scholars debate the ethics and morals of Islam, but when this took the form of personal attacks and morbid orthodoxy, he invited famed Hindu, Jain, Parsi and Christian scholars from all over his kingdom to take part in these debates.

Though illiterate, Akbar realized that every religion in his kingdom, in essence, taught the same moral values. Yet every religion due to its different name and identity for the Almighty, struggled to portray itself as distinct and superior. A man of great wisdom, Akbar realized the disharmony that religion sowed in the lives of men and devoted himself in the evolution of a new religion that would unite the discordant elements of the world in one harmonious whole. This eventually resulted in him promulgating a new religion, the Din-I-Ilahi.

Even though Akbar's Din-I-Ilahi, literally meaning "Divine Faith", had few followers, it was recognized to be one the most effective religions ever invented. Akbar did not force this religion upon anyone. Its teachings were simple yet universal - it prohibited greed, dishonesty and pride, considering them as sins. Piety, prudence, and kindness were the core virtues that Din-I-Ilahi promulgated. Akbar also gave the highest importance to parents and teachers and the Din-I-Ilahi taught one to obey and respect them. The soul was encouraged to purify itself through the love for God. Celibacy was respected and the slaughter of animals, or any other living creatures was forbidden. Owing to the

fact that Akbar did not believe in religious orthodoxy, sacrifices or rituals, but instead in the love of God and the spreading of good deeds, there were neither sacred scriptures nor a priestly hierarchy in this religion. Din-I-Ilahi was indeed more a way of life that brought together the core teachings of every religion.

Unfortunately, the concept of Din-I-Ilahi was seen as abhorrent to many orthodox Muslims and Hindus who did not have the wisdom and vision of Akbar. The fact that Akbar himself appointed himself as the religious head of Din-I-Ilahi, much like the Pope in Christianity caused people to believe that he was committing an unforgivable act of autocracy, and Akbar was greatly criticised by historians of the time.

As I watch television and see India being torn by strife due to the religious barriers I think, that if we could adopt Akbar's concept of universality of religion and pursuit of god, then today we would not have an alienated Pakistan and nor a 9/11 or even a 26/11. Rather we would not have a Pakistan at all; We would have a larger, peaceful India where people coexist without resentment amongst religions, because Din-I-Ilahi insulates us against exactly this. It is never too late to do the right thing, and if we can rise above petty religious divides, the government could instead focus on uplifting India from poverty and devastation. The statement: "Two people cannot hate each other if they both love God" is still relevant today, and I maintain that we can go on to prove it by recognizing the genius of people like Akbar, by following the principles taught to us by the concept of Din-I-Ilahi.