

tions was, as Van Bladel (2011) has suggested, a natural outcropping of the Barmakids' position as mediators from the east located at the centre of a cosmopolitan empire. Secondly, the interest in the religious traditions of the Indians must be seen in the context of direct and relatively tolerant engagement with various sects and religions that took place in the salons of 'Abbasid Baghdad (Lawrence 1976, 75–76, 84), which allowed for the absorption of ideas from the known world, but also served to cement the centrality of the Muslim worldview at a time of self-confident cultural production in which Muslim sacred history was perfectly compatible with the search for knowledge wherever it was to be found. Thirdly, the mission to India was possible due to the background of violent imperialistic expansion, with increasing interactions made possible by the Muslim conquest of Sind (Wink 2002, 1: 7–25). It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the account transmitted by Ibn al-Nadīm takes a particular interest in the wealth of the temples, which were to be a persistent focus of interest for conquerors raiding India, a material interest that was often clothed in the rhetoric of religious justification, both at the time and retrospectively (Eaton 2000, 283–319).

Archetypes for the Muslim construction of India

In Persianate histories (that is, historical narratives that draw heavily on Iranian and Persian experiences and narratives; especially those structured around the Iranian kings and heroes) a number of elements emerge as dominant. While 'Abbasid-era Muslims had numerous sources of information on India, derived both from transmitted lore and eyewitness accounts, their narratives tended to be dominated by a number of basic archetypes and topoi: the figure of the sage (often with a rationalistic message); the law-bringing king; the themes of astrology, star-worship, and idolatry. Doubtless these topoi reflect, to some extent, genuine historical information transmitted from India. However, they also had a life of their own and act as fundamental categories which shaped the way Muslim intellectuals received and interpreted new information about India.

The sage as archetype

One major opportunity for talking about India in the histories arises in relation to the conquests of Alexander the Great: his wars and relations with Indian kings, and also his interactions with Indian sages (*ḥakīm*). Alexander was considered a righteous king, and, in his relations with his

advisor, Aristotle, he was a paradigm for the proper relations between powerful rulers and their sage advisors. It is therefore significant that in his interaction with India, Alexander is depicted as having been impressed by the wisdom of Indian sages, thereby admitting Indian sages into the category of wise advisors to a righteous, divinely-sanctioned ruler (Tha'ālibī 1979, 421–431). India was thus famous for its sages, and these archetypes must be seen to originate, at least to some extent, in paradigms emerging from India itself. Perhaps the most famous example of an Indian sage whose exploits were domesticated within the Muslim context was the Buddha, whose name becomes Būdhāsaf or Yūdhāsaf in Arabic and Persian sources. The Buddha's story was domesticated (probably via Manichean sources) to the monotheistic context by stripping the young world-renouncing prince of his Buddhist trappings and recasting him as a more generic ascetic (Abuladze 1966, 19–41; Gimaret 1971). Nonetheless, the Islamic tradition did not forget his role as the founder of a religious community, as we will see in Bīrūnī's account in the *Āthār*, below. Būdhāsaf became an important model for the Shi'a who identified with the story of the persecution of a boy of noble blood at the hands of an unjust king. Thus, for example, Ibn Bābūya includes the story of Barlām and Yūdhāsaf as an extended sixty-page excursus in his treatise on the Occultation. Ibn Bābūya's use of an Indian legendary figure is facilitated by the distinctively Shi'i vision of history in which, at all times and in all communities, a small group accepts the message of a prophetic figure, though they are surrounded by a misguided and irreligious majority (*'amma*), usually synonymous with the Sunni status quo in the era of Muḥammad. In this context, the wise sage is at odds with the community around him. The true religion belongs only to the few (Ibn Bābūya [1975], 577–638). This enthusiastic appropriation of the figure of the sage Būdhāsaf as a quasi-Muslim hero is in sharp contrast to Bīrūnī's treatment of Būdhāsaf in his *Āthār* (see below), but it fits within a larger pattern of accepting the sage-philosopher-ascetic figure as a legitimate model for the thought and actions of Muslims, in spite of the pagan context from which they spring (whose idolatry, of course, is roundly criticized in such narratives).

In addition to acting as a model of asceticism, the idea of the sage was adopted by thinkers who upheld the rationalistic pathways to truth as opposed to or in addition to the guidance of revelation. In some accounts, for example, Būdhāsaf is identified with the astrologer-king who brings astrology to India (Pingree 1968, 4–5). The above-mentioned case of Ibn al-Muqaffa's physician (also *ḥakīm*) Būrzōy is an extreme case of a

rationalistic skeptic whose search for knowledge takes him to India. As De Blois (1990, 32–33) notes, Būrzōy unites Hellenistic philosophical skepticism and Indian ascetic renunciation of an inconstant world. The central pivot of Būrzōy's skepticism is a relativistic equalization of the competing claims of the different religions, which was anathema to Muslim theologians of various orthodoxies (De Blois 1990, 26). In the case of Ibn al-Muqaffa's sage Būrzōy, then, India comes to be associated with a cosmopolitan rationality which equalizes claims to articulate the truth, and (for many readers), represented a dangerous and perhaps heretical questioning of revealed religion. Bīrūnī, for example, sees Ibn al-Muqaffa's citation of the Būrzōy story as a way of softening up those weak in faith to make them receptive to Manichean propaganda (De Blois 1990, 26–30). For Ibn al-Muqaffa', however, Būrzōy's skepticism seems to be equated with wisdom. The Būrzōy story was not the only figuration of India as a locus of skeptical thought: among Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūna*) the Indian religious thinkers known as the *Barāhima* came to be the archetypal representatives of a skeptical, rationalistic argument for the denial of prophecy.¹⁸ For Bīrūnī and Shahrastānī, as we shall see, the Indian sage is a philosopher comparable to the Greek philosophers of antiquity. The extremely flexible nature of the idea of sage, allows it to represent a number of different orientations, including ascetic, philosopher, doctor, scholar, theologian and skeptic, thereby offering very different thinkers a space in which to consider Indian contributions to philosophy and religion positively.

The philosopher king as archetype

The archetype of the philosopher-king or law-bringing king accompanies the sage as a key frame of reference for treatments of India. These accounts provide a framework in which Indian thought and religion can be made sense of as part of the prophetic history of the world. In both Ya'qūbī's *History* and Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab*, to take a pair of prominent examples, instead of what we might expect to find—a sustained polemic against the idolatrous Indians—India is, in fact, treated as the origin of much true knowledge which the world continues to benefit from. In addition, through the figures of the sage and the philosopher king, Indian religion

18. There is no consensus on how the *Barāhima* came to be the archetypal rationalist prophecy-deniers, but a definitive early statement of this idea came in Ibn al-Rāwandī's *Kitāb al-zumurrudh* who used it to voice skeptical anti-prophecy arguments in the mouths of the *Barāhima*. (Lawrence 1976, 78–88; Stroumsa 1985, 229–241).

is portrayed as historically comparable to the more canonical religions usually understood as the religions of the book (those religions possessed of a scripture which has its origins in a true revelation from God to man, albeit since corrupted by time and human frailty). Like them, India is seen as part of the common story of successive cycles of revelation followed by corruption. In this way, the *fiqhī* paradigm of clearly separating between Muslim, protected monotheist *dhimmī* and infidel *mushrik* is paralleled by a contradictory model which collapses the distinctions between monotheists and infidels as distinct communities.

In the *History* of Ya'qūbī, one of the earliest Islamicate universal histories, the author treats India as one among many historical communities whose histories and legends he recounts, including the stories of the kings of Greece, Persia, Syria, Babel, China, the Berbers and Ifrīqiya, Ethiopia, Yemen and so forth. His account is notable in its use of native informants, rather than purely Arabic or Muslim legendary sources (Robinson 2003, 136). In Ya'qūbī's account, the sheer fact of Indian wisdom is treated prominently. His account of the Kings of India begins with an acknowledgement of the great scientific achievements of the Indians, and their progenitor, the wise king Brahman,¹⁹ who is depicted as the original source of this knowledge: "And he was the first to speculate about the stars, and the science of astronomy was taken from him" (Ya'qūbī [c. 1980], 1: 84). There follows a list of the great books that were derived from Brahman's original contribution, including books like the Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Following this auspicious start, the problems of India are said to have arisen when the primordial kingdom of Brahman splintered, but nonetheless, we are told, "They were people of philosophy (*ḥikma*) and knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and intellect (*'uqūl*), surpassing the other nations (*'umam*) in them" (1: 84). In their wisdom, the Indians agreed to reunify and appoint a king, Zāriḥ, to rule over all of them once again. Zāriḥ proves his greatness by going on a campaign of conquest, until he tries to conquer Banū Isrā'īl: "And Banū Isrā'īl cried out to exalted God, and God gave Death dominion over Zāriḥ and his army, and he returned to his land." Here, then, we see a curious mixture of positive and negative elements associated with the primordial India: it is recognized as the wellspring for knowledge of the stars (a realization that is grounded a memory of the transmission of knowledge from

19. It is hard to surmise how Ya'qūbī might have vowelled this name: perhaps Barahman to avoid the initial consonant cluster. I have used the transliteration "Brahman" to achieve some kind of consistency and to approach the presumed Indian originals "Brahma" and "Brahman."

India to Iran in antiquity),²⁰ and Indians are recognized as truly wise, yet when faced with the religion of the monotheistic Israelites, the power of God is invoked to crush the Indians. This fits the familiar pattern of impious outsiders threatening the monotheists, and yet there is a notable lack of judgmental opprobrium targeted at the Indians. The Indian kings are praised as intelligent and wise (*hakīm*).

Indian sages also figure prominently in Ya'qūbī's narrative, participating, for example, in a theological debate in the famous story of the invention of backgammon and chess. In this story, backgammon is said to represent the cosmos, and the workings of the game symbolize the operation of the heavens in predetermining human destinies. After its invention, backgammon becomes a great success with the king and the people of India (1: 90). This situation persists until a new king, Balhīt comes to power who disapproves the deterministic theology and star-worship implicit in the game of backgammon and asks "Is there any man who remains in the Brahmite²¹ religion?" A man is accordingly identified who is said to be "possessed of intellect and religion (*lahu 'aql wa dīn*)" (1: 90). A new sage is sent for, who corrects the pernicious influence of the game of backgammon with the game of Chess which itself contains a parable: as a war-game, Chess indicates the importance of one's active engagement to shape one's own fate: "Then the sage (*hakīm*) said: There is nothing nobler than war, for in it the virtue of ordering one's affairs is made manifest, as well as the virtue of good council, and steadfastness, and precaution..." (Ya'qūbī [c. 1980], 1: 91). The king gathers the people of his kingdom and adjures them to contemplate the new game, asserting that,

We know that there is nothing living, articulating, thinking, laughing, reasoning, except mankind. Thus, everything that is in the world pivots around mankind, for the Creator created the cosmos along with everything in it [i.e. the celestial bodies] for mankind, so that he may know through it what he needs to know by way of time and seasons. (Ya'qūbī [c. 1980], 91)

Here, then, the pairing of an Indian sage and the philosopher king is approvingly depicted as supplanting the deterministic astrological beliefs and practices which are often associated with India, with a theology that

20. For the evidence that Sasanian astrology was deeply influenced by Indian astrology, see Pingree (1963).

21. This adjective could perhaps be translated as "Brahmin," however, in translating it as "Brahmite" I suggest that it is referring back to the progenitor king Barham mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, rather than referring to Brahmins who were contemporary to Ya'qūbī or his informants.

places more emphasis on human agency. This salutary insight into the truth appears to have a fully human origin, achieved through reason, rather than direct revelation. There is no suggestion that as Indians, they are restricted from insights into truth or the nature of the cosmos.

To conclude his account of the Kings of India, Ya'qūbī returns to a remarkably positive summary comment on the achievements of the Indians:

“And the Indians are people of wisdom/philosophy (*ḥikma*) and rational speculation (*naẓar*) and they supersede people in all branches of wisdom and their statements on the stars are the most accurate of statements, and their book on this is *Kitāb al-Sind-hind*, from which is derived all the sciences which the Greeks and the Persians elaborated.” (Ya'qūbī [c. 1980], 1: 94)

After enumerating their scientific and intellectual achievements, Ya'qūbī briefly mentions the topic of idolatry:

“And the religion of the people of Hind is *al-Brahmiyya* and it includes the worship of idols (*'aṣṇām*) and they have various kingdoms and different kings due to the extent of the country and its length and width...” (Ya'qūbī [c. 1980], 1: 94)

Explicit condemnation of idolatry was superfluous to Muslim audiences. Nonetheless, it is striking how this mention of contemporary idolatry appears almost neutral, sandwiched between an enumeration of the scientific and intellectual achievements of the Indians and a list of the contemporary kings of the various regions. While Ya'qūbī's account subordinates Indian history to the monotheistic tradition (most explicitly in the story of Zāriḥ's invasion of the Israelites), the tone is remarkably apolemic: India is depicted as a partner in humanity's quest for truth; a legitimate source of scientific and philosophical insight.

Mas'ūdī's (d. 956 CE) orientation towards the history of India follows similar patterns to Ya'qūbī's, mentioning many of the same episodes, though, as we have mentioned, Mas'ūdī himself had travelled to India and was therefore and more fully informed by eyewitness accounts and contemporary reportage (Ahmad 1960, 97–112; 1954, 510–512). He was also very interested in the history of religious groups, authoring several works of disputation and heresiography, as we can see from those works in the list he gives of own works, which clearly suggest a heresiographical-theological framework from their titles (*Naẓm al-'adilla fī uṣūl al-milla*, and *al-Mas'āl wa al-'ilal fī al-madhāhib wa al-milal*) (Mas'ūdī 1938, 3). As Tarif Khalidi notes, Mas'ūdī's “oral information was gleaned from debates as well as interrogations... Mas'udi records that he held public debates with Christians, Jews and Khurramiyya, in Iraq, Palestine and Persia” (Khalidi 1975, 3). In reading his account of the kings of India, we can detect the

influence of heresiographical frameworks, to a greater extent than in Ya‘qūbī’s history.

As in Ya‘qūbī’s history, Mas‘ūdī’s account of the history of India in *Murūj al-dhahab* depicts a philosopher king, Brahman, as laying down foundational rules and doctrines, including the foundations of the sciences of astronomy and astrology that were adopted by the Greeks, followed by political fragmentation and religious and intellectual decay. Brahman is regarded as the primogenitor of the group known as the *Barāhima*: “His descendants are called the *Barāhima* up until our own time, and the Indians venerate them, for they are the highest among their castes (*ajnās*) and the most noble of them” (Mas‘ūdī 1938, 1: 62). While Mas‘ūdī assimilates Brahman to Muslim models of prophetic revelation, he does not do so by the simple method of identifying Brahman with a Muslim prophet. Mas‘ūdī mentions, but is skeptical of theories which had attempted to force Brahman into the sequence of Qur’āno-biblical prophets:

“A disputation exists regarding Brahman. Some of them claim that he is Adam (AS), and that he was a Prophet (*rasūl*) sent by God (AJ) to India. And some of them say that he was a king as we have mentioned, and the latter opinion is more widespread.” (Mas‘ūdī 1938, 1: 63)

While Mas‘ūdī does not accept the incorporation of Brahman directly into prophetic history, it is notable that he addresses such theories as plausible. The existence of such theories show us that some people had attempted to splice Indian foundation myths with Islamic prophetic history. This attempt is comparable to Persian attempts (also rejected by Mas‘ūdī and Ṭabarī) to conflate the Zoroastrian first man, Gayomard, with Adam. Intrinsic to the task of producing a universal history was the assessment of purist versions of communal histories against hybridizing models. (Bowen Savant 2013, 31–60; Tavakoli-Taraghi 1996, 157–161). While Mas‘ūdī argues on the basis of the weight of consensus to reject the idea that the Indian founder figure, Brahman, was a prophet within Qur’āno-biblical tradition, he nonetheless assimilates his Indian historical material to a very Muslim vision of the history of the communities of the world. In this vision, the truth is revealed to the nations of the world, as articulated in Qur’ān 16:36. However, the revelation of the truth is then followed by gradual loss and corruption of this truth, thereby explaining the existence of divergences from Muslim doctrine within the Jewish and Christian traditions (See “*Taḥrīf*,” EI2). In Mas‘ūdī’s version of this scheme, he implicitly gives great importance to rationalistic insights into the truth. In his narrative on India, not only Qur’āno-biblical prophets,

but also philosopher-kings of other historical traditions appear as legitimate bringers of truth and law to their communities. In this way, he draws upon the identification of India with science and philosophy that we see in Ya'qūbī and other writers.

In effecting the association of India with Muslim models, Mas'ūdī uses terminology familiar from heresiographical literature. From the beginning of Mas'ūdī's chapter on India in *Murūj al-dhahab*, he makes it clear that the Indians were, from the start, participants in the legitimate history of religion: "A group of the people of science and investigation mentioned... that the Indians in olden times were the sect (*firqa*) in which was righteous practice and wisdom (*al-ṣalāh wa al-ḥikma*)" (Mas'ūdī 2005, 1:61; Ahmad 1960, 99). Given this opening, if Indian religion ends up in idolatry, then, the narrative must be one of corruption of religion, rather than an essential intrinsic divide between them and monotheists. Thus, after the account of various reigns of the ancient kings of India, their philosophies and religious opinions and their cultural and scientific achievements, Mas'ūdī's account of the ancient kings closes with a suggestion of the gradual corruption of the pristine Indian religion into its present state. In the reign of King Kūrash, the king is said to have,

"Innovated for the Indians [new] doctrines in their religions (*aḥdatha li-al-hind 'ārā' fī al-diyānāt*), according to his opinion about what would benefit the age (*ṣalāh al-waqt*), and what the people of the age could bear regarding religious responsibility (*taklīf*), and he departed from the doctrines of his forebears (*kharaja 'an madhāhib man salafa*). (Mas'ūdī 1938, 1: 65; Ahmad 1960, 104–105)

The language here links the evolution of a religious community with the semantics of the Muslim theologians' conception of religious responsibility (*taklīf*). The terms for religious sects: *firqa*, *'ārā'* and *diyānāt* are those familiar from Muslim heresiography, and the verb innovated (*'aḥdatha*) recalls debates over what might constitute beneficial and malicious innovation (*muḥdath/bid'a*) in law.²² The evocation of religious responsibility recalls central topics of disputation about free-will and justice familiar from the discourse of the *kalām* theologians, especially the theodicy-fixed *mu'tazila*, with whom Mas'ūdī appears to have aligned himself.²³ The passage implies that Kūrash acts to relieve his subjects of an overly burdensome responsibility which they are not capable of bearing. However in the landscape of *kalām* debate on the subject of *taklīf*,²⁴ we must adjudge

22. J. Robson, "Bid'a" *EI2*.

23. Charles Pellat "Al-Mas'ūdī," *EI2*.

24. Daniel Gimaret, "Taklīf," *EI2*.

Kūrash to have erred in attempting to relieve his subjects of obligations mandated by God. And yet the negative assessment in Mas'ūdī's account is again implicit, rather than explicit. The Indians of the generation of King Kūrash, are depicted as engaged in disputes comparable to the disputes within earlier generations of Muslim thinkers. While there are no unambiguous cues to assign a clear moral valency to Kūrash's innovations, the language implied that this was a milestone in the corruption of the beliefs of the Indians.

Following Kūrash, Mas'ūdī's narrative of fragmentation and corruption of religion proceeds apace: "When this king died, the Indians became divided in their [religious] opinions (*'ārā*), and different parties formed and the generations were generated and every leader went off on his own way" (Mas'ūdī 2005, 1: 65–66). In this way, the Indians are seen to fulfill what appears to be a universal pattern in the history of religion: fragmentation and disunity after the initial revelation. Elsewhere Mas'ūdī mentions that after the appearance of seven sages (*ḥakīm*), the Indians split into further groups, ultimately generating seventy sects (Mas'ūdī 2005, 1: 62–63). This, too, corresponds very exactly with the history of the Muslim community as understood by Muslim heresiographers. The story of religious foundation followed by fragmentation into seventy sects recalls the famous hadith (extant in several versions) in which the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions each received prophetic revelation after which they became fragmented into around seventy sects (Van Ess 2011, 1: 7–58). In this way, India is presented as being integrated into the cyclical patterns of monotheistic history, in which a founder figure, Brahman, brings a religious law, followed by gradual political and sectarian fragmentation through which access to the truth is diminished. This is a process which does not distinguish the Indians from the Muslim community, but rather is *shared* by the Muslim community, albeit the final outcome may be understood to be different. Here, then, we appear to witness the paradox identified by Josef van Ess, in which the heresiographical framework, although founded upon the exclusivist assumption that there is just one "saved group" (*al-firqa al-nājiya*), nonetheless quarantines the conflicts between Muslim sects by fixing them into a crystallized interrelatedness which acknowledges all groups as somehow belonging to the same religious tradition (Van Ess 2011, 1: vii–x). Mas'ūdī implicitly adds Indian religion to this quarantined web of human endeavor and weakness. The heresiographical assumption that only one group holds privileged access to the truth does not preclude the fact that all groups do, in fact, have some

relationship with the truth. While this erects hierarchies it also creates boundaries that are porous. In showing Indian religion to fit into a similar heresiographical and historical paradigm as the Muslim community, with the Indian philosopher-kings positioned as rationalist quasi-prophetic revealers of truth, India is effectively incorporated into the community of nations: a community that encompasses both truth and error.

The doctrinal elitism of comparative religion

While Maṣ'ūdī's account of India in *Murūj al-dhahab* is a history influenced by theological categories, the Indian studies by Bīrūnī and Shahrastānī are more centrally driven by the comparison of doctrinal typologies. Both Bīrūnī in his *Tahqīq mā li al-hind* (often known simply as his *India* or *Indica*) and Shahrastānī in *al-Milal wa al-niḥal* use doctrinal taxonomies to erect explicit hierarchies of religious truth. One might expect the erection of such hierarchies to result in a sharp differentiation between Muslim and non-Muslim religious traditions, and while this is true to some extent, there is a contrary motion to uphold true models of religious thought and behaviour regardless of which tradition it is found in: all religions and sects appear on a great continuum.

Bīrūnī's assimilation of Brahminical religion to Muslim paradigms

Bīrūnī's study of India and Indian religion is unique in the level of its engagement with Sanskrit primary sources and Brahmin informants.²⁵ Bīrūnī's engagement was made possible by Ghaznavid empire-building violence, but also by the theoretical engagements with India and Indian religions made by previous generations (as represented, in the current discussion by the efforts of Yaḥyā b. Khālīd al-Barmakī, Ya'qūbī and Maṣ'ūdī) who had made the study of other traditions both possible and desirable.

It is interesting, then, to note Bīrūnī also enunciated a negative assessment of Indian religion in his comparative analysis of chronology and calendrical systems, *al-Āthār al-bāqīya*. In contrast to the positive assessment of the figure Būdhāsaf in accounts by Ibn Bābūya (1975, 577–638), Abū Ma'shar (Pingree 1968, 4–5) and the Ikhwān al-Ṣāfā (Almutawa 2013, 80–133), Bīrūnī in the *Āthār* rejected the assimilation of Būdhāsaf

25. In addition to his summary of Brahminic religion and philosophy in the *India*, he had also earlier translated an Indian philosophical text from Sanskrit into Arabic, the *yogasūtras* of Patañjali, as *Kitāb Bātanjal*. Bruce Lawrence, "Bīrūnī, Abū Rayḥān, viii, Indology," *Elr*.

to Islamic models. Bīrūnī instead counts Būdhāsaf among the archetypal false prophets who established religious traditions or communities on false grounds. In general, what Bīrūnī says of India in *Āthār* conforms to a more purist, anti-syncretic dichotomy between the people of the book (religions of prophecy and revelation) and the idolatrous others.²⁶ Within this scheme, Indian religions are referred to among the religions of the false prophets, and Būdhāsaf, is mentioned as the first among the false prophets:

The first mentioned [of the pseudo-prophets] is Būdhāsaf, who came forward in India after the 1st year of Tahmurath. He introduced the Persian writing and called people to the religion of the Šābians. Whereupon many people followed him. The Peshdadhian kings and some of the Kayanians who resided in Balkh held in great veneration the sun and moon, the planets and the primal elements, and worshipped them as holy beings, until the time when Zaradusht appeared thirty years after the accession of Bishtasf. (Bīrūnī 1879, 186)

The foundation of a religious community does not, in itself, presuppose righteousness: Būdhāsaf is understood to have founded a community of error. In this passage, using legendary-historical data on the life of Būdhāsaf, Bīrūnī also introduces an implicit theological taxonomy which allows him to conflate the religion of Būdhāsaf with that of the Šābians (as did Shahrastānī in the following century), because both Šābians and Indians were known as archetypal star-worshipping religions (Lawrence 1976, 50–51, 188–189). Here, an implicit heresiographical taxonomy is at work which assumes that doctrinal similarity (the worship of astral bodies), is tantamount to being of the same religious community (“the religion of the Sabians”). In spite of his negative assessment of the false religion of the community believed to have been founded by Būdhāsaf, then, Bīrūnī applies a heresiographical taxonomy to the history of religions which equates peoples who share similar doctrines. In his *India*, however, this taxonomical framework results in an assessment of the religion of the Brahmins as conceptually comparable to Islam. While the Bīrūnī of the *Āthār* is content to make clear boundaries between prophets and false prophets, his *India* was a project of a very different nature, in which he explicitly strived to make the alien Indian philosophical and cosmological categories intelligible to his Muslim and monotheist audience.

The different nature of the two works may also owe something to the circumstances of their production. Bīrūnī started his *Āthār* during his tenure as a court scholar in his native Khwārazm, though he updated it

26. G. Vajda, “*Ahl al-kitāb*,” *EI2*.

through his life. His *India*, on the other hand, was written when Bīrūnī was working at the Ghaznavid court, perhaps as an astrologer.²⁷ The ruler, Maḥmūd of Ghazna, had imperial ambitions involving rapid expansion to create a large empire, including raids into the wealthy north of India which had receded from Muslim control since the original conquests of Sind in the eighth-ninth centuries CE (Wink 2002, 1: 192–218). In addition to his expansionist policy, which was directed equally against his Muslim neighbours, including a “heretical” Ismaili Muslim kingdom in Northern India, these raids were also motivated by the prospect of huge financial gain. However, Maḥmūd certainly also garnered prestige from his stance as a Muslim *ghāzī* king, famous for smashing idols at the temple of Somnath,²⁸ which continued to burnish the reputation of his dynasty after his death, being the subject of a court elegy upon his death by the poet Farrukhī (Bosworth 1999, 43–49). Bīrūnī’s project in the *India*, though very different from that of Maḥmūd, then, must be seen as having been facilitated by Maḥmūd’s incursions into India which created a wide range of direct interactions with Indians.

In the *India* Bīrūnī displays a great deal of scorn for Indian philosophy, cosmology and science. The best he can say of them is that they contain a mixture of pearls and dung (Bīrūnī 1958, 12–13; 1888, 25). Nonetheless, the very apprehension of “pearls” among the dung of Indian idolatry is a crucial enabler for a cross-confessional mode engagement with another intellectual tradition. In order to assess an alien system of thought, Bīrūnī applies a universalizing theological taxonomy in which prophecy and idolatry are key touchstones. As in his earlier treatment of the Būdhāsaf’s Indian followers as belonging to “the religion of the Sabians,” in his *India*, Bīrūnī employs doctrinal similarities (rather than genealogical commonalities) to serve as the basis of the equation of one tradition and another. Thus, in a radical move, Bīrūnī is able to say that Indian elites are monotheists. After mentioning that the beliefs (*i’tiqād*) of the elite and the commoners differ in every place and time, he writes, “And the beliefs of the Indians in God (*allāh*) are that he is the One, the Eternal, with no beginning nor end, willful in his actions, all-powerful, wise, living and life-giving...not resembling anything, and with nothing resembling Him” (Bīrūnī 1958, 20). This statement of the basic creed of the Indians has clear and dramatic parallels to God’s Qur’ānic self-description, specifically with reference to the central Islamic precept of *tawḥīd*, “monotheism” (see Qur’ān 112; 42: 11).

27. C. E. Bosworth, “Bīrūnī, Abū Rayḥān i. Life,” *EIr*.

28. C. E. Bosworth, “Maḥmūd b. Sebüktegin,” *EIr*.

As for the idolaters amongst the Indians, these are merely commoners who yearn to have a concrete realization of their objects of worship. In another passage, Bīrūnī points out that Indian commoners are comparable to the commoners among the Muslims, who would also leap at the chance to worship a concrete representation of Muḥammad or the Kaʿba (Bīrūnī 1958, 53; 1888, 1: 111. For similar instances see Bīrūnī 1958, 15, 19; 1888, 1: 31, 39). In doing so, Bīrūnī employs a theological typology that appears to draw closer connections between the elites of the two religious communities, than between the elite and the idolatrous commoners. Humans are seen as part of a common community striving for truth, but only those with education, experience and logical discernment are able to achieve this truth. The elite, therefore, have a responsibility to apply appropriate doctrines, laws and customs which limit, rather than conceding to, the pressure of popular beliefs which lead to anthropomorphism and idolatry.

If rational people can achieve monotheistic truth themselves, as seems to be the implication of his acknowledgment of the monotheism of the Indian elites, then what of prophecy? Bīrūnī certainly does not reject prophecy, nor does he explicitly embrace a Fārābīan down-grading of prophecy as being merely a representation of the truths of philosophy for the common people (Fārābī 2005, 1–26). In a passage praising Socrates, and alluding to Athenian society’s opposition to his ideas, Bīrūnī implies that the non-prophetic apprehension of the truth is simply extremely rare in human history, and its insights are less perfect than prophetic inspiration (Bīrūnī 1958, 12, 53–54 ; 1888, 1: 24–25, 1: 111–112). Given his rejection of a figure like Būdhāsaf in the *Āthār*, does Bīrūnī admit a prophetic or quasi-prophetic genealogy of Indian religion in the way that Yaʿqūbī and Masʿūdī and their informants hint at? The answer is complicated by the fact that when Bīrūnī discusses prophets in the *India*, he is referring to their role within a cosmological typology of the mediation of divine guidance in human affairs. Thus, he is not primarily interested here (unlike in the *Āthār*) in prophets as historical founder figures. His contribution in the *India* is a doctrinal taxonomy, rather than a historical genealogy of prophecy. Given this provision, we can identify moments at which Bīrūnī clearly depicts Indian figures to equate to the Muslim concept of prophet, at least as far as they fulfill his conceptual typology. In doing so, he is not bound by linguistic usage, but rather constructs a typology based on cosmological function within the belief system. Bīrūnī makes the point that sometimes linguistic usage might disguise rather than illu-

minate theological conceptions. As an example, he cites Muslims, Jews and Christians who apply the words “Lord” and “Father” to the divinity without necessarily thereby intending an anthropomorphisation of God. In the same way, Bīrūnī’s description of Indian religious entities places linguistic usage on one side in order to understand them in terms of their place and function within the Indian cosmology.²⁹ This provides Bīrūnī with the conceptual foundations to break with previous heresiographical descriptions of Indian religions: Bīrūnī discovers Indian cognates for both prophets and angels, in contrast to the common understanding of Muslim *kalām* theologians that the *Barāhima* are the archetypal deniers of prophecy.

In contrast to some other Muslim writers, Bīrūnī does not, in the *India*, make a significant effort to engage with debates about supposed prophetic or quasi-prophetic progenitors who correspond with the figures of the Indian pantheon. This is because he is not here embarking on a synthesis of traditions as were the universal historians, but rather a study of a distinct tradition. He does not assume that the characters present in Muslim history must appear in Indian traditions, but rather is motivated to compare the ideas in each system. Thus he translates the Indian system of thought into terms intelligible to himself and his readers, without ruling on explicitly on the divine or non-divine origin of the ideas. In this way, Bīrūnī discusses the idea of direct divine inspiration without a mediating prophet, drawing a parallel between the claims made by both ancient Greeks and Indians for the divine inspiration of their laws:

And this was the situation with [the ancient Greeks], and the state of the Indians is similar, for they see the divine law (*sharī‘a*) and its usages (*sunan*) as issuing from “Rishshis”; the sages (*hukamā*) who are the leaders of religion, rather than from the prophet—that is Nārāyan [Nārāyaṇa], who comes in human form when he comes, and never came other than to cut off an evil substance which overshadows the world, or for the mending of some occurrence, but never to change anything about the laws (*sunan*). For [the Indians] only act according to [laws] as they find them. For this reason, they came to consider prophets as superfluous with regards to the institution of law and acts of worship (*al-shar‘ wa al-ibāda*), albeit they need [prophets] to act in the good interests of created beings (*maṣāliḥ al-barriyya*). (Bīrūnī 1958, 51–52; 1888, 1: 106–107)

Here, then we see an emendation of the theologians’ stereotype of Brahminical rejection of prophecy. Instead of rejecting prophets outright,

29. We might compare Bīrūnī’s prioritizing of concept and function within a system as opposed to linguistic usage and indigenous categories, to Durkheim’s functionalism (Durkheim 1995).

Bīrūnī here identifies their prophet as Nārāyan (Nārāyaṇa),³⁰ but his role is not the bringing of laws, but the rectification of events in the created world, perhaps to be understood as corresponding to the model of the Islamic Mahdī or Shi'i Imam. There are some complications to this, for Nārāyan is elsewhere described as an impersonal cosmic force (Bīrūnī 1958, 46; 1888, 1: 94), or its incarnation in human form (Bīrūnī 1958, 62; 1888, 1: 129). Elsewhere God's religion (*dīn allāh*) is described as Nārāyan's (Bīrūnī 1958, 64; 1888, 1: 132.). Such complications as this are doubtless what Bīrūnī refers to when he talks of the confusion of Indian religious ideas. The identification of Nārāyan as a prophet is noteworthy in that it marks a breach in the Islamic heresiographical trend of identifying the Brahmins as the archetypal deniers of prophecy. However, it is not very prominent in Bīrūnī's overall treatment of Indian religion.

The significance of sages in Bīrūnī's description represents a factor of continuity with earlier readings of Indian history and religion we have seen, in which the wise sages play a uniformly important role. Thus, in the quotation above, it is the sages, not a prophet, who are responsible for the elaboration of the divine law (*sharī'a*). Earlier, the revelatory role of sages is compared to the direct revelatory role of the divinity. In a dialogue about the nature of God, Bīrūnī quotes a dialogue from the Patan-calī, which addresses the distinctively Muslim question of God's attributes (*ṣifāt*). In the dialogue the questioner asks: "Do you describe God as having the attribute of speech?" To this it is replied that, "Seeing as He is Knowing, he is necessarily Speaking."

"The questioner said: "And if He is Speaking due to His knowledge, then what is the difference between Him and the Wise Sages (*al-'ulamā' al-ḥukamā'*) who spoke due to their knowledge."

The respondent said: the difference between them is Time. For [the sages] were knowing in time, and only spoke after a time in which they had been neither knowing nor speaking. They transferred their knowledge to others through speech, and their speech and their acquisition [of knowledge] was in time. However divine matters have no connection to time. God (praise Him) is eternally knowing and speaking. It is he who spoke to Brāhm and the other progenitors (*awā'il*) in numerous ways. Amongst these ways was the sending down to him [i.e. Brāhm] of a Book; the opening of a door (*bāb*) as an intermediary to Him; and those whom He inspired (*awḥā*) with the knowledge of Him.

(Bīrūnī, Taḥqīq, 13; Bīrūnī, 1: 28)

30. Nārāyaṇa is a deified sage Narayana (who came to be identified with Lord Vishnu). In some creation stories he is involved in the creation of the Universe. See "Hinduism" and "Pancharatra" In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Bīrūnī's translation of this passage employs the familiar language of Islamic theology. The conception of God as knowing and speaking eternally are ideas that had been vigorously debated by earlier generations of Muslim theologians.³¹ The various mechanisms by which entities in the world receive divine knowledge are also familiar from Muslim discourse: Brahma is depicted as receiving a book as a revelation from God,³² in parallel to the revelation-receiving prophets. The use of the word *awḥā* echoes the developing terminology of revelation.³³ The opening of a door is ambiguous but in addition to its literal meaning, it evokes the Shi'i conceptions of an intermediary with the Imam or the divine (Khaṣībī 2007). Sages have a place within this system as legitimate articulators of the truth, albeit bound by time and materiality. Bīrūnī's Muslim readers would immediately have recognized this passage to represent Indians engaged in the same debates as their own theologians. The sense of a common theological playing field would have been strengthened by the depictions of the wise Indian sages already present in the universal histories we have encountered.

The figure of Brāhm/Brahman, who is so prominent in earlier Muslim reports, proves difficult for Bīrūnī to satisfactorily categorize. In the quote above Brahman appears as the recipient of God's speech: thereby corresponding either to the role of Muḥammad as inspired prophet, or to Gabriel, the angelic figure who brought the prophet his revelations. Elsewhere, indeed, Brāhm and other divine entities of the Hindu pantheon are glossed as "angels," in another place, Brāhm is glossed as "the force known as Nature (*ṭabī'a*)" (Bīrūnī 1858, 76; 1888, 1: 100–101). Brāhm is also described as a "first cause," being understood as a kind of hypostasis of God, through analogy with hypostases of the Christian trinity, also corresponding to a force of nature (Bīrūnī 1858, 45–46; 1888, 1: 94). In spite of these problematic overlaps, it is clear that Bīrūnī sees Indian religion as intelligible within monotheistic categories of creator God, mediating angels (including Brahman), a prophetic figure (Nārāyan), and the sages who also seem to have had true access to truth in the way that Socrates is approvingly said to have had (Bīrūnī 1958, 12; 1888, 1: 24–25). Whatever we might make of the complexities of Bīrūnī's attempt here to force square Indian pegs into round Muslim holes, we can assess his modelling

31. Daniel Gimaret, "*Ṣifa*," *EI2*.

32. In his notes on the translation Sachau glosses this as the Veda, though the Arabic just refers to a Book (*kitāb*). (Bīrūnī 1958; 1888, 13; 1888, 1: 28).

33. A. Rippin and A.J Wensinck, "*Wahy*," *EI2*.

of Indian ideas as both precedented and unique. Unique, in that in the *India*, (in contrast to the *Āthār*) he largely ignores the rich old reservoir of Persian and Muslim legendary lore about Brahman as a philosopher king, and does not rely on the theologians' stereotype about the *Barāhima* being prophecy-deniers. However, his description relies on earlier Muslim and Persian models of sages, prophets and angels.

Perhaps because of Bīrūnī's maverick replacement of traditional wisdom about India in preference to the direct use of Indian texts and informants, his *India* does not appear to have been greatly influential before the modern era.³⁴ For an intervention in a tradition to be successful, its originality must, perhaps be filtered through models already well-established in that tradition. While Mas'ūdī successfully synthesized Indian religious history into a comprehensibly Muslim form, Bīrūnī's efforts to compare Indian religious terminology with Muslim terminology remained perhaps too abstract. However, he was not the last Muslim thinker to attempt to fit Indian religious ideas within a universalizing taxonomy of comparative religion. Shahrastānī is comparable to Bīrūnī insofar as he is not bound by the understanding of India based on origin myths. Shahrastānī's account of Indian religions is based substantially upon Muslim-era reportage, including the fact-finding mission sent to Sind by Yaḥyā b. Khālid al-Barmakī (Lawrence 1976, 21–29)³⁵ and shaped according to a taxonomical framework drawing upon the ideas of earlier theologians and heresiographers,³⁶ in addition to a few other sources, such as the account of Indian religions and the spread of Pythagoreanism to India by the neoplatonist philosopher Ammonius.³⁷ Shahrastānī and Bīrūnī both use Indian religions as a way of critiquing the shortcomings of certain tendencies among Muslims. However, Shahrastānī's touchstone for assessing religious validity is almost exactly the opposite of Bīrūnī's rationalism. For Bīrūnī, for example, idolatry should be rejected because it is deemed unacceptable to reason. In contrast, Shahrastānī's taxonomy of true religion is based not on the touchstone of reason, but on the capacity to abandon one's own

34. Though Abū al-Ma'ālī has a superficial summary of Bīrūnī's contribution on India. (Lawrence 1976, 25).

35. Again, Shahrastānī drew upon reportage drawn from of the fact-finding mission sent to Sind by Yaḥyā b. Khālid al-Barmakī. Lawrence, *Indian Religions*, 21–29.

36. This reliance on earlier theological categories also results in a prominent place for the idea of the *Barāhima* as prophecy-deniers, and the refutation of their theses. (Lawrence 1976, 38–41, 75–100).

37. See passage quoted below.

opinion in submission (*islām*) to the decrees of another, outside authority; including the authority of a prophet, (and, implicitly, perhaps an Imam),³⁸ a revealed book, or, failing these, laws set down by earlier generations:

“Those who follow only their own judgements are [also] those who deny prophecies, such as the philosophers, Ṣābians and Brahmins; they do not accept ordained laws and statutes. [On the other hand], those who utilize the teachings of others also accept prophecies. And those who accept divine ordinances also subscribe to rational statutes and not vice versa.” (Lawrence 1976, 65)³⁹

On this basis, then, the following hierarchy of religious validity is produced:

- Muslims
- Non-Muslims who possess a revealed book, i.e. Jews and Christians
- Those who possess something like a revealed book, i.e. Magians and Manicheans
- Those who subscribe to laws and binding judgements without the benefit of a revealed book, i.e. the ancient Ṣābians
- Those who have neither a revealed book nor fixed laws, i.e., the ancient as well as the materialist philosophers, the star- and idol-worshippers and the Brahmins. (Lawrence 1976, 64)

This hierarchy then reproduces and theorizes the old distinctions between Muslims, People of the Book, and “polytheists” *mushrikūna*. In this scheme, the boundaries separating the Muslim community are preserved by the identity of the authority to whom one submits. Thus, in his chapter on the Indian sect of “idol-worshippers,” Shahrastānī suggests that idolatry is the end result of misdirected worship. When one worships something other than the true God, concrete objects are employed to fill the vacuum (Lawrence 1976, 52). Unlike Bīrūnī’s assessment of idolatry as something that all religious communities may fall prey to, for Shahrastānī it ultimately derives from the worship of the wrong object, the wrong God. This insight ultimately tends towards the exclusion of communities according to how far they are from the authoritative revelations of God’s prophets. While this bespeaks an anti-cosmopolitan separation of Muslim experience from that of other communities, Shahrastānī’s taxonomical approach can, like Bīrūnī’s allow for comparisons to be made across religions, on the basis of what are understood to be universal principles. Thus Greek philosophy is,

38. Note the debate surrounding the question of whether Shahrastānī sympathized with Ismailism, summarized and discussed by Steigerwald (2006, 262–273).

39. Here and in what follows I use Lawrence’s translations.

on the whole, favorably treated. This favorable apprehension of Greek philosophy is the product of several generations of engagement and absorption of Greek thought as part of the Muslim tradition (Gutas 1998), and this tolerance comes to be extended to Indian philosophy also,⁴⁰ especially in a story about the Indian followers of Pythagoras. It is in this passage, drawn from Ammonius, that we see an account of the sage or philosopher-king as primogenitor of an Indian religious and political community:

Pythagoras, the Greek sage, had a student named Qalānūs who, after he had learned wisdom from Pythagoras and studied under him, went to one of the cities of India and there promulgated the Pythagorean viewpoint. Now there was one Braḥmanān, a man of intellectual refinement, incisive judgements and unerring reason, who was also eager to know about the upper worlds. He learned wisdom from Qalānūs the Wise and appropriated the latter's knowledge and skill. After the death of Qalānūs, Braḥmanān came to rule over all India. He spurred the people to purify their bodies and to purge their souls. (Lawrence 1976, 56)

The sage, Braḥmanān, represents a clear parallel to the legendary king Brahman in other accounts and he plays a similar, quasi-prophetic role of founding a religio-political community on the basis of his wisdom. Here the comparison between Indian and Greek philosophers is made explicitly. Thus, while Sharastānī's heresiographical taxonomy tends towards the hierarchical exclusion of non-Muslim and non-prophetic religious communities, he too seems to accept a widespread appreciation of the role of philosophical sages as the founders of religious communities whose religious traditions are independently valid. While Sharastānī's taxonomy tends to exclude, his use of narrative can be seen to build bridges.

Conclusion: Cosmopolitanism, elitism and violence

To sum up, we have looked at two major fields for the discussion of cosmopolitanism: the narrative-historical and the theological-doctrinal. In each, one can discern a tension between cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan tendencies. In the historical-narrative field, anti-cosmopolitan narratives imply the denial of common origins between communities (*'umma*, *'umam*) while cosmopolitan narratives, on the other hand, assert the relatedness of human societies: either direct relation by blood, or relation through the common divine origins of the foundation-moment of the respective communities. In theological-doctrinal accounts of the structure of human societies, doctrinal factors account for the difference and similarity between

40. See, for example, his assessment of the ideas of the Bakrantiyya, and those who, in contrast to the *Barāhima*, attest to a pseudo-prophetic or angelic mechanism of mediation with the divine. (Lawrence 1976, 44–47, 73).

human groups. An anti-cosmopolitan account emphasizes the distinction between communities, based on defining touchstone-doctrines which assert impregnable boundaries between groups. Cosmopolitan accounts would tend to emphasize the porousness of these boundaries, due to the existence of doctrinal similarities across confessional divides.

From a modern perspective, it might seem strange to entrench a discussion of cosmopolitan thinking within the debate over how an *'umma*, a religious or national community, was understood to have been founded by a prophet, king or sage. These questions, however, were at the heart of the understanding of the place of different peoples and different religious traditions in the world, and therefore the extent to which outsiders could be understood to be “citizens of the world” on a similar footing as Muslims residing at the heart of an imperial 'Abbasid or post-'Abbasid metropolis. Therefore any pre-modern formulation of cosmopolitan thinking within the Muslim tradition will inevitably deal with the issues discussed in this article. That being said, a number of factors have emerged which structure the kind of cosmopolitan thinking visible in the authors analyzed. One is the importance of discipline in defining the orientation of discourse. Having passed swiftly over the important legal (*fiqh*) division of communities between Muslim, protected monotheist (*dhimmi*, *ahl al-kitāb*), and infidel (*mushrik*), the major disciplinary division I have outlined is that between historiography and theological taxonomies of doctrine. In the historiographical vision exemplified by Ya'qūbī's *History* and Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab*, the master principle that structures various narratives is that of the origination and fate of particular communities founded by prophets and kings, and facilitated by sages. This principle tends to equate the experiences of different nations, who receive the truth but then are liable to fall into fragmentation and error. While the Muslim community has a special place as the community of divine guidance, the historical processes that affect the Muslim community are seen as universal, and project a certain kinship between all communities. This kinship is most explicitly visible in Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*, in which, I argue, the heresiographical paradigm of a foundational figure bringing insight into the truth followed by corruption and fragmentation is applied to the Indian religious community as well as to monotheistic religions. On the other hand, the theological taxonomies exemplified by Bīrūnī and Shahrastānī use what are understood to be universally-applicable Muslim standards to judge other religious traditions. Though this asserts a hierarchy of truth, in the case of Bīrūnī it also equates the pure religion of the monotheistic elites across

communitarian boundaries. All of these thinkers can be seen to participate in a broader phenomenon of the universalization of knowledge of the world, and the assimilation of knowledge to universalizing Muslim standards. Thus, as is well known, the Muslim universal histories of the 'Abbasid period famously synthesized all available knowledge about the historical communities of the known world into a single meta-narrative. In a less-well known phenomenon, the rise of comparative religion pioneered by thinkers like Ibn al-Nadīm, Nawbakhtī, Bīrūnī and Shahrastānī accomplished a similar act of assimilation and synthesis in the doctrinal realm, asserting a formal (if not essential) continuum between all doctrinal typologies extant among the different human religious communities. In order to produce such universalizing schemata, a certain intellectual elitism was necessary. The element of elitism is explicit in the work of Mas'ūdī and Bīrūnī, who both see the intellectual and religious elites as carrying the burden of preserving knowledge. For Bīrūnī, the elites are responsible for preventing the masses from falling into idolatry—a task that has been failed in by Jewish and Christian leaders as well as Indians. In a similar spirit, Mas'ūdī, in his introduction to *Murūj al-dhahab*, describes his own purpose as a writer in terms of preserving knowledge of the elite for future generations, and providing the insights that only a learned, well-travelled, cosmopolitan intellectual can acquire:

And what prompted me to compose this, my book, on history and the narratives (*akhbār*) of the world and what passed along the byways of the ages regarding the narratives of the prophets and the kings and their vitae (*siyar*), and the nations (*'umam*) and their dwelling places, was that I loved to imitate the path which the learned men (*'ulamā'*) had headed for and which the sages (*hukamā'*) had followed, so that there remained for the world a praiseworthy record (*dhikr*), and well-ordered and organized knowledge, ... Every region of the world (*iqlim*) has its wonders which the locals fail to understand. Someone who has remained in one corner of his homeland and believes in the stories that have been related to him about his region is not the equal of someone who has divided his life in crossing the regions (*aqtār*), and has apportioned his days to the battening blows of travels, and to extracting every fine thing from the mines of that region, and raising up every valuable thing from its hidden places. (Mas'ūdī 1958, 1: 11)

This is a manifesto on the superiority of the cosmopolitan intellectual over local informants who, given their narrower experience of the world and their unfamiliarity with stories told in different regions, are seen as less able to judge clearly regarding the stories from their own traditions. In this passage, we see empirical studies by the cosmopolitan intellectual as a means of defending the common human tradition established

by kings, prophets and preserved by the national communities that they have founded. Mas'ūdī himself, then, aims to participate in the mission of the sages and learned men who recorded the histories for posterity. Here, then, not only is knowledge of other traditions not considered to be taboo or corrosive, but rather knowledge of other traditions increases one's apprehension of the truth. This is the cosmopolitanism of a self-consciously wise elite rather than all humans as "citizens of the world." Such an elitism was also a component of the original stoic formulations of cosmopolitanism (Pagden 2000, 5).

If we view the production of universal histories as a cosmopolitan project, it can help us understand better the relationship between the particular and the universal which they posit. On one hand, we must agree with Chase Robinson when he says,

There is no confusing al-Ya'qūbī's or al-Mas'ūdī's work with what would now be called a multi-cultural textbook of world history. The latter may have been a humanist of sorts, and this a good century before an Islamic humanism enjoyed its brief efflorescence. But he is a thoroughly monotheist one. ... The purpose of pre-Islamic history is to provide a sort of *praeparatio evangelica* for the events of the early seventh century and what followed: the prophecy of Muḥammad and the caliphs, all ruling in his succession... It is universal history of a selective and very purposeful sort. (Robinson 2003, 138)

However, we can shift the emphasis a little. Given the diversity of national narratives incorporated, the project of the universal histories was not, and could not have been restricted to a single central aim. Even in subordinating these narratives to the sacred history of Muḥammad's prophecy, the universal histories also had to come to terms with the plurality of human experience, and to accept the witness of non-Muslims regarding the experience of these other communities. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the effects of this kind of cosmopolitan thinking. While we have seen hybridizing tendencies among the informants of our historians, the writers studied here were nonetheless engaged in a shared project of validating the precepts of Islam against other less-perfect traditions. Nonetheless, we can also detect powerful potential for bridge-building in the mechanisms employed, which emerge in a fuller form in later contexts. Thus, we see the syncretizing potential of the form of the universal history centered upon prophets, kings and sages explored more fully in, for example, the work of Mughal-era historians and thinkers who built upon a reservoir of texts and ideas produced in the pre-Mongol era. We might take as an example the Mughal court historian Tattawī

who relies on the familiar framework through which prophets, sages and philosophers are conflated as figures of authority, allowing him to defend the doctrine of reincarnation at the time of Akbar's syncretistic project to unite Hindu and Muslim courtiers behind his charismatic leadership (Tattawī [2003 or 2004]), 1: 378).⁴¹ Likewise, we see a reemergence of an elitist syncretism founded upon similar conceptualizations of the prophets and the sages in the project of the Mughal prince Dārā Shukōh, who produced a translation of the Upanishads, which he saw as comparable to the revelations in the Qur'ān, while also decrying the degraded capacity of the masses to understand religious precepts (Friedmann 1975, 217).

While the seeds of a kind of cosmopolitan thinking existed in the theological reading of the history of the world produced pre-Mongol thinkers, however, such universalizing discourse does not presuppose a tolerant encounter with others. It has been noted that the key documents that attest to the empirical investigation of Indian thought in the pre-Mongol period (by Yahyā b. Khālid al-Barmakī's emissary and Bīrūnī) come in the wake of violence. Mas'ūdī's travels to India also relied on the expansion of the Muslim footprint that the earlier conquests had created, including the use of the Muslim states in India and their allies as a foothold for his researches (Ahmad 1954, 509–524). However, neither are violence and intolerance necessary bedfellows. The logic of imperial rule can produce a selectively tolerant, even syncretizing intellectual environment as part of the objective of conquest. The Muslim "orientalist" scholarship on Indian religion in the ninth to eleventh centuries CE has certain parallels with the otherwise very different era of European orientalist scholarship, which also asserted certain cosmopolitan universals at the time of the rise of self-consciously rational and secular knowledge (Asad 2003). In both cases comparative religion appeared in the context of syncretizing projects to adapt and assimilate knowledge from other cultures, which coexisted alongside universalizing attempts to conquer the world through studying it, with the effect of reducing all knowledge within a supposedly objective taxonomy in which categories of thought masquerading as universal (but in reality reflecting a very particular set of historical genealogies) became the touchstone for judging competing systems of thought and practice (Asad 1993). This should act as a cautionary tale to scholars who seek to identify European orientalism as historically unparalleled in its

41. Thanks to my friend Said Reza Huseini for enlightening me in discussions of the subject of Akbar's project, and the *Tārīkh-i alfī*, in particular. See also his study of the work (Huseini 2017).

violent appropriation of the other. The intolerance of particularism is one of the inevitable pitfalls of a universalizing cosmopolitan thinking. For the other to become intelligible, it must be translated and domesticated into local categories, and to be accepted, it must be seen to accept such ‘rational,’ principles as monotheism or secularism. When such a translation and domestication occurs, the power dynamics between the scholar and the object of his study are inevitably incorporated into the categories that emerge. However, power is not the only framework for apprehending such scholarship. We might fruitfully quote Srinivas Aravamudan’s comments on pre-19th century Enlightenment orientalism in this context:

European knowledge regarding the East [was] influenced by the utopian aspirations of Enlightenment more than materialist and political interest. Enlightenment interrogation was not innocent –no knowledge ever is—but it was a complex questioning, with multiple objectives and orientations, “a state of intellectual tension rather than a sequence of similar propositions.” Not just bent on the domination of the other but also aimed at mutual understanding across cultural differences, for Enlightenment the self was under critique as much as any “other.” (Aravamudan 2012, 3)

While the texts that we have examined do not amount to a thorough-going theory of cosmopolitanism, they do present certain broad tendencies towards cosmopolitan thinking in the elites of ‘Abbasid and post-‘Abbasid world, in which the expansion of the horizons of the known world through conquest, travel and trade was accompanied by an assimilation of the ideas of the world to the Muslim canons of knowledge. This knowledge was not innocent, but involved an orientation both towards violence and towards mutual understanding.

Acknowledgments

This article was completed with the support of the Leiden research project “Embedding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule (600–1000)” funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement 683194.

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