Mughal dynasty in India started with Babur in 1526 A.D. and ended with the exile of the last emperor Bahadur Shah by the British in 1858 A.D. For political purposes Mughal Emperors patronized shi’ism During this period mystics from Islam appeared to reach out towards Hinduism. From within the Hindus, Santh kabir (b1398) Nanak (b. 1469)and Chaitanya (b.1485) by their condemnation of caste, Hindu rituals and idolatry were appreciated by the Muslims. Till AurangJeb (1658) the Suhrawardi, Chishti and Naqshbandi orders received royal patronage. Sunni Ulama was sidetracked. Babur was a great humanist. When Prince Humayan fell ill, Babur performed a Naqshbandi practice, walked three times round the sick bed and exclaimed that he had borne away Humayun’s sickness Babur was the ideal of Akbar. Humayun was also liberal minded and very tolerant to Hindus and especially to the Brahmins. He advised Akbar to be kind and considerate towards Rajputs as loyalty was ingrained in their character.

Akbar visited Sufi retreats at Ajmer and Sikri, in 1562, married a Hindu Rajput princess and by 1574 was presiding over discussions and debate on comparative religion attended by Sunnis, Sufi Shaiks, Hindu pandits, Catholic priests from Partuguese Goa, Paris, and Zorastrians. In 1582 he propounded a new religion Din-I-Ilahi (Divine Faith) – but-people were not pressurized to accept it. He ordered for translation of Atharba Veda, Ramayana and Mahabharata. He prohibited killing of cows, refrained from eating meat on certain days and celebrated non-Islamic festivals. Akbar called learned monks from Europe, Hindu and Budhist ascetics, and yogis, patronized them, gave them separate interviews and was engrossed seriously of knowing the ultimate truth.

As a sequel it became evident to him that emancipation from the bondage of sorrows and suffering is to be obtained only by the knowledge of truth following a perfect man or Prophet. Akbar “the wise” announced certain measures to be observed by the people. He called upon his country men:(i)to refraining from sensuality and lust, entertainment, slaughter of what possesses life, (ii)not to misappropriatie riches of others,(iii) not to indulgein in deceit, false accusation,
oppression. He enunciated ten virtues: (1) Liberty and beneficence (2) refraining from bad action and repulsion of anger with mildness (3) Limiting worldly desires (4) Taking the path of non-violence in social lie (5) Piety, wisdom and meditation (6) Sublimity (7) Soft voice, gentle words and pleasing speeches. (8) Brotherly attitude for others (9) Development of attachment towards the Supreme Being (10) Self purification by enkindling longing for God.

Akbar adopted an attitude of distrust towards the conservative and orthodox sections of Ulama. He also became critical about the muslim thinkers like Ghazzali and Razi. In 1582 A.D. formal debates on religion were stopped and initiation to the new religion was given by Akbar himself by giving shast to the new entrant. Abul Fazl writes : His majesty then gives the shast upon which is engraved the Great ‘Name’ and his Majesty’s symbolical motto Allah-U-Akbar. This teaches the novice the truth that pure shast and the pure sight never err. In mystical parlance this prayer means ‘God is Great’, but it may also mean Akbar is God. Sunday was fixed for initiation of disciples; the novice with turban on his head, will put it at the feet of the Emperor who would raise him up and put the turban back on his head. This procedure shocked public sentiments. It is to be noted that there was no objection to the practice of bowing down when previous rulers enforced it in their courts. But as Akbar made it a religious ritual, it created uproar and resentment. To allay criticism Akbar issued orders of exemption and made prostration voluntary.

Akbar had firm faith in God as the Supreme Power. He turned to Him in moments of crisis in his life and prayed for help and guidance. He used to say that there exists a bond between the Creator and the creature which can not be expressed in language. He proclaimed that Divine Love is the highest and noblest goal, and whosoever habituates himself to preserve this sacred relation will be rewarded not only in this life, but also here after.

The dynamic element in Akbar’s religious thought found its powerful expression in his anxiety to study religious orders other than his own. Maxmuller calls him the first student of comparative religion. One essential condition for comparative religious studies is sympathy for all religions and antipathy for none. By propounding his doctrine Sulh-i-Kul (peace with all) Akbar emphasized on the peaceful coexistence of people belonging to different religious communities. But this liberal attitude was interpreted as hostility towards Islam by his orthodox critics.

Two distinctly different motivations seem to have inspired Akbar’s religious thought and activities: (1) he was anxious to see that an atmosphere of religious goodwill and tolerance should prevail in India. For him religion was to unite and not to divide. Religious coexistence of all communities in India became the end-all and be-all of his efforts. Secondly he found that Indian populace is highly
religious and political consolidation is possible only on the foundation of religious amity. For this purpose he was thinking of an “Universal Religion,” which will be acceptable to all religious sects at large. For this purpose he was criticized for deviating from the strict path of Shariat and for not often mentioning the name of Prophet Muhammad, during his religious discourses.

Different views have been expressed about the religious position and ideas of Akbar. Finding the atmosphere at Akbar’s court confusing, and hence congenial, minions and sycophants rushed from every side of the country. They bestowed upon him many titles like-Lord of the times (sahid-i-zaman), Perfect man (Insan-i-camil). Muslims did these sorts of glorification by making him Shir-i-khuda (lion of God), Hindus declared him as incarnation of Rama and Krishna. That Akbar could retain his balance of mind in the midst of such sycophants is a tribute to his greatness. Akbar himself did not disdain flattery. He opined that some amount of flattery was necessary to cool down the aggressiveness of power.

Akbar had a vast horizon of activities before him and a great and strong kingdom at his back. He thought that unity of the country could be achieved where both temporal and spiritual activities are guided by a benevolent liberal Emperor. For coming to this conclusion he had in mind the heterogeneous religious groups, the barriers of geography and different languages for causing disintegration. However he could not achieve his ambition and “Din-i-Ilahi” could not succeed as a new cult in Islam.

***