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IN SEARCH OF  
EQUIVALENCE:  
CONCEIVING  
MUSLIM-HINDU  
ENCOUNTER THROUGH  
TRANSLATION THEORY

From the sixteenth century to the early colonial period, the region of Bengal was notable for its vibrant religious activity, activity that was often closely allied to political and military fortune, economic expansion, and the opening of new lands for cultivation. As population grew, the delta region became the site of numerous encounters of religious communities, not so much in the sense of active proselytizing or efforts to lay claim to a land in the name of religion, but in the considerably more casual process of individuals and groups from different backgrounds meeting as they moved into previously unsettled territories and tried to keep something of

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their religion about them. This is especially important to remember in the study of Islam in Bengal because of an often naive assumption that Bengal was innately “Hindu” and then gradually converted to Islam, when, in fact, only portions of western Bengal and the periphery around the delta were initially Hindu in orientation, while much of the remaining territory was unsettled or sparsely so. This frontier territory—much of what constitutes Bangladesh and southern parts of western Bengal today—was domesticated by practitioners of one or the other tradition on a more ad hoc basis. Those areas east of the Gaṅgā tended to yield more readily to Muslim development because of certain explicit restrictions on *brāhmaṇa* settlement and the more general fact that much of that land was insufficiently domesticated for Hindu habitation of a kind favored elsewhere. Many of the small communities that carved their niches in the un- or partially settled land were often remote and isolated, only eventually linking to larger metropolitan trading and political networks that we assume today to be the norm in the region that is now so heavily populated. In these outposts it comes as no surprise that religious power—the ability for individuals to negotiate and impose a meaningful moral order on an often wild and unruly physical and cultural landscape—was not automatically an issue of theology or doctrinal purity and even less so an issue of religious practice. The evidence suggests that what was deemed right was what was powerful (and vice versa), and what was religiously powerful in these regions was often simply what worked to help people endure. Regardless of their background, nearly everyone in this precolonial period acknowledged certain forms of local and regional power, and because of this, apposite religious structures (e.g., the ascetic Hindu *saṃnyāsīn* and the Sufi *pīr*) operated with a kind of exchange equivalence.<sup>1</sup> Doctrine seems often to have had little bearing in these situations, but that in no way should imply that doctrine was not present; it was simply used and understood differently than is the academic norm today.

If we approach the development of religious belief and practice in Bengal as a function of the local and assume that in this environment improvisation was central to survival—as it would have to be in an area without the strong institutions that accompany more organized religion—then we must reconceive the nature of the religious encounter that characterizes the region in this pre- and early colonial period. The reason is straightforward enough: old academic models for articulating this encounter label it “conflict,” in which case there is little left to say apart from that one succeeded and the other did not, or label it “syncretism,” which produces something

<sup>1</sup> For more on this phenomenon, see Tony K. Stewart, “Alternate Structures of Authority: Satya Pir on the Frontiers of Bengal” in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), pp. 21–54.

new and different from either original part. Seldom do we see any analysis that articulates how two or more traditions in this region might encounter one another without this ontological shift in the makeup of the tradition; and the change most often assumed is the latter. Syncretism is predicated on the assumption that preexisting and discrete doctrinal or ritual systems are mysteriously combined to form some unnatural admixture. But the myriad forms of the concept of syncretism (when used as an interpretive, rather than strictly descriptive, category) become highly problematic in nearly all of their applications because they nearly uniformly read into the history the very institutional (ritual, theological, social) structures that are not yet present in any enduring way. But this is to say that the constituent parts that are brought together to create this syncretistic entity are historical back formations of a kind that could be made only once the tradition was successfully rooted. And precisely because the end product is conceived as the unholy alliance of religious entities that should be kept apart in an ideal world—again because the constituent parts are idealized, essentialized, and completely stripped of their historical grounding—the focus is on the result, rather than the process, and that product is routinely described in negative terms. Until very recently, this has been the case with nearly all of the studies of Islam in the Bengali environment.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this kind of theorizing constructs models that have little or no relation to what actually happens in the course of practice except as an arbitrary measure of deviation from some presupposed norm, a measure that is rhetorically effective for religiously committed reformers but that should be highly problematic for historians.

The experience attested in the extensive literatures of precolonial Bengal, however, suggests a very different kind of religious experience, an experience that did not produce unviable end products as syncretists would argue, but established enduring frameworks of religious organization and interpretation that eventually grounded the traditions as we understand them today in their regional forms. These encounters emphasized the local, the creative efforts of individuals trying to make sense of an environment that did not always cooperate. The textual evidence of early Bengali Islam, which by virtue of this dearth must be considered potentially idiosyncratic, individualistic, and highly localized, points to very pragmatic applications of doctrine to practice, from the ragged and incomplete to very sophisticated creations. These texts portray the struggle of individuals and their groups—various persuasions of Sufis, but also Sunnis and Shi'ahs—to understand

<sup>2</sup> The most sophisticated use of the problematic concept of syncretism for Bengali religion can be found in the important book by Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). It was Dick Eaton's study that marked the shift away from models of syncretism to more historically nuanced and historically contextualized studies; see Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

their Hindu counterparts—Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Śāktas, and others, and never in terms of the gross categories of Hindu and Muslim, which are the stock and trade of syncretistic formulations. These early Bengali Islamic texts document the way authors attempted to make their understanding “fit” with those they encountered, and that process of understanding became an extended act of “translation.” Translation in this context defines a way that religious practitioners seek “equivalence” among their counterparts. As will become apparent, it is this act of translation that offers an alternative interpretive strategy for conceptualizing the way these various Sufi communities formulated their understandings of the contours of power in Bengal. Because of the local nature of this religious expression, power that could be translated could be effective for everyone, regardless of persuasion; by extension, we might argue that only those constructions that were translated were truly effective, and in that dynamic process of translation comes the creative application of doctrine to real life. The results of the encounter of traditions can best be appraised in the process of this interaction, not in the static instantiated end product that is often falsely understood to result. But before examining how the processes of translation can provide a model for reconceptualizing the issue, it is necessary to understand first why the concept of syncretism fails in most cases as a viable interpretive category to explain the encounter of Islam with the various Hindu traditions of Bengal. It is important to note that both arguments hinge on common but complex issues of language and category formation that are shared by nearly all religious writers of the time and region.

#### LANGUAGE AND CATEGORY FORMATION IN THE BENGALI MIDDLE PERIOD

In the premodern, precolonial literature of Bengal, it is not at all uncommon to find overtly religious texts using common technical vocabularies that today we routinely identify as significant markers of sectarian affiliation. From our late twentieth-century perspective, this language allows us to categorize the orientation of these texts as Muslim or Hindu, and those categories themselves are deemed transparent and generally unambiguous to the contemporary reader. Yet many texts from the older period do not lend themselves to such easy marking, not only in the common Bengali folk genres such as *pāñcālī* and *pālā gān*, but in romance and semiepic, and even certain overtly religious speculations and instructional manuals. Among the latter, it is the Sufi literature that is perhaps most difficult to interpret because of the mixture of technical and nontechnical terms from sometimes unexpected sources, but other less overtly religious genres have adopted similar lexical strategies, so the analysis of the Sufi approaches should yield insights into the full range of forms.

Because many among today’s scholastically oriented, as well as many among the general educated populace, judge these texts by holding them

to a standard of value that equates a purity of language to a purity of religious intention, these Sufi and related texts are all too frequently deemed so sufficiently problematic that they are not seriously examined as documents of a Bengali Islam. For many modern interpreters of South Asian Islam, a text is often assumed to be unworthy of study when the technical vocabulary for key theological concepts suggests anything other than a consistent use of a strict and unambiguous Islamic vocabulary that is derived from Urdu or Persian (and ultimately from Arabic). A text that mixes Islamic vocabularies with others, especially those apparently Hindu, can be acknowledged in only a limited way, if at all, but is more often simply avoided as a perhaps well-intentioned, but somehow confused, or at least confusing—and therefore potentially dangerous—work. The effect of this approach is to divert the gaze from an important formative dimension of the history of Bengal. This negative result is further exacerbated when the depiction of Islamic life found in some of these texts appears to overlap with other religious traditions—again especially various modalities of Hindu religion—or when its praise extends to specific religious figures, mythical or historical, who are promoted or shared across these boundaries (e.g., Satya Pir), or, more problematic yet, when opposing sectarian ethical or religious systems of value are espoused that appear at least on the surface to be transparently the same in their working effect (e.g., *adab* and *dharma*). In today's often highly charged political climate where language and religion and politics are often aligned to define mutually exclusive identities, the reason for this response is actually rather unambiguous: for most contemporary interpreters, whether in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, or the West, the concept of religious encounter—which this shared vocabulary and shared experience imply—is almost automatically understood in terms of ideological “contest,” if not conflict, an assumption that pits two opposing groups in eternal enmity. These rigid monolithic constructs play a very important role in nearly all theories of their interaction, as will become apparent. Historically this has not always been the case.

Because of the nature of this commonly held presupposition about the exclusive nature of religions and religious experience, the contemporary interpreter is generally blind to the fact that this attitude is itself the result of historical processes that have conflated religious orientations with political identities in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Since the reform movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, starting with the Wahhabis, but eventually including others of different religious persuasions, a general and very unreflective assumption in the intellectual (and certainly the political) community of Bengal has gradually taken hold: people routinely assume that when an author uses a specialized vocabulary to talk of religious matters, that author is making a political statement

about his religious intentions.<sup>3</sup> Since the mid-nineteenth century, it has become increasingly difficult when declaring religious preference not to declare a political proclivity, if not a clearly demarcated identity, because of the various state-imposed institutions that have historically conflated the two; this was especially precipitated in the effects of the first census taken in 1872 and then translated into other state apparatuses, such as domestic law and parliamentary representation, which guaranteed separation of religions as a standard for public polity.<sup>4</sup> An overt religious declaration or the equally obvious choice of technical language to speak of significant issues is now generally assumed to signify a political orientation that reveals the author's "real" or underlying intention in writing a religious work.

But today the possibility of ever determining "authorial intent" precisely is now moot, with most modern analysts arguing that no matter what an author claims to be doing, the reader can never really know; or, in the extreme, the author cannot know fully what he is about, thereby making any estimate of intention little more than informed speculation that often reflects more the concerns of the interpreter and his world. In its worst case, this hermeneutical skepticism can produce an outright epistemological impasse for analysis.<sup>5</sup> While this debate about intentionality generally focuses on fiction, it has important ramifications for other forms of writing, especially where religious values are articulated. So whenever a religious text uses a mixed language that seems to confuse "proper"

<sup>3</sup> The impulse to ignore centuries of historical change within Islam itself, and to eliminate the inevitable subtle shifts that take place when a universal religion moves into another cultural arena—in this case, a Perso-Arabic Islam taking root in Bengal—motivates a classical fundamentalist decision to "purify" Islam of perceived foreign accretions and to try to recreate the experience of an archaic, pristine Islam as conceived by its original founding members. The implications should be obvious.

<sup>4</sup> See Kenneth W. Jones, "Religious Identity and the Indian Census" in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. Gerald Barrier (Delhi: Manohar, 1981), pp. 73–101; and Bernard S. Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia" in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 224–54.

<sup>5</sup> The most commonly cited individuals responsible for this shift in perspective include Barthes, Derrida, and Bakhtin. But more immediately germane is reception aesthetics, starting with that initiated by Hans Robert Jauss at the University of Konstanz, and its follow-on in reader-response criticism. The latter diverges specifically from the initial inquiries of the phenomenology of reading (e.g., Georges Poulet) and, while refining certain propositions of deconstruction, has greatly enhanced our understanding of the role the reader plays in creating the text. The text of course becomes a variable entity based on what the reader brings to it and how he or she understands it. There is an obvious debt here to basic hermeneutic theory, but of more specific reader-response interest is the approach adopted by Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); see also the very useful anthology, Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

religious ideals—ideals that are determined in advance by these nineteenth- and twentieth-century standards of purity and exclusion—the precolonial author is judged to be either confused or just ignorant, or alternatively his work can comfortably be ignored in a way that allows the text to be manipulated toward the ends of the interpreter. Either way, the text seems to disappear from public view as an independent document with any historical or intrinsic value.

In his pioneering Bengali literary histories, Muhammad Enamul Haq (Beng. Muhammad Enāmūl Hak) cataloged Muslim writers from this early period, classifying their works into genres, such as *śarā-śarāyit* (legal and moral code), *kāhini* (“historical tales”), *sṛṣṭitattva* (cosmogony), *darśana* (theology and philosophy), *sūphitattva* (Sufi metaphysics), *premo-pākhyaṇa* (romance literature), *marsiyā* (lamentations), *itihāsika-kāvya* (historical poetry), *rūpaka* (rhetoric), *padāvalī* (lyric poetry), and a miscellaneous category for leftovers.<sup>6</sup> He also did much the same for Sufi literature in his *Baṅge sūphī prabhāva*.<sup>7</sup> It is significant that in those early works an entire class of religious literature was simply eliminated, texts that were to his eyes a hodgepodge of Sufi, Vaiṣṇava, Nātha, general *tāntrika*, and other religious ideas both mainstream and not. It is easy to speculate that these texts were omitted precisely because in their language they failed to fit the exclusive categories he had constructed. Their *apparent* hybridity was, not surprisingly, problematic for those construing religious or ideological purity as a litmus test for inclusion in a “proper” literature and was just as problematic for those compiling a “national” literature, both impulses applying to the Pakistan in which he wrote.<sup>8</sup>

Among those texts omitted, and therefore worthy of additional scrutiny, were two books called *Āgama* and *Jñānasāgara* by one Āli Rajā, and one of these will retain our attention as example for analysis.<sup>9</sup> These books, often paired as two parts to a single book, present a sophisticated systematic

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Enāmūl Hak, *Muslim bāmlā sāhitya*, in *Muhammad enāmūl hak racānavali*, ed. Mansur Musā, vol. 1 (1957; reprint, Dhākā: Bāmlā Ekādemī, 1398 B.S.); for summary, see pp. 375–79.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Enāmūl Hak, *Baṅge sūphī prabhāva* (1935; reprinted in Musa, ed.).

<sup>8</sup> After Bangladesh independence Muhammad Enamul Haq expanded his doctoral dissertation in English under the title *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1975) and significantly appended two new chapters that included this unique literature. It is not unreasonable to imagine that he was signaling the nature of the new Bangladeshi democracy that was more inclusive than its Pakistani counterpart.

<sup>9</sup> These texts can be found in the anthology of premodern Sufi texts compiled and edited by Ahmad Sharif. See Āhmad Śarīpha, ed. and comp., *Bānlāra sūphī sāhitya: ālocanā o nay-akhāni grantha sambalita* (Dhākā: Bāmlā Ekādemī, 1375 B.S. [1969]). Ābdul Karim first publicized the works of Āli Rajā, and it is from the introduction to his published edition of the *Jñānasāgara* that all biographical information has been gleaned by subsequent scholars. See Ābdul Kārim Sāhityaviśārada, ed., *Jñānasāgara of Āli Rajā*, Sāhitya Pariṣad Granthāvali no. 59 (Calcutta: Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat Mandir, 1324 B.S. [ca. 1917]). This entire publication has been reprinted in Śarīpha, ed. and comp., pp. 400–532.

theology, grounded in an extensive cosmology that serves to justify the yogic mode of Sufi practice. The contemporary literary historian Ahmad Shariph considers Āli Rajā, whose precise dates are uncertain, to be one of the most significant thinkers of the eighteenth century, with a metaphysical acumen equal to the great Vaiṣṇava scholar Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja or the Muslim scholar Hāji Muhammad.<sup>10</sup> Āli Rajā (alt. Rājā, Rejā, Riḍā), who also wrote under the alias of Oyāhed Kānu Phakir, was a Sufi from the village of Ośa Khāin, Ānoyārā District, in Caṭṭagrāma (Chittagong), whose family still claims a tract of land there. He had for his *murshid* (spiritual guide) and *dikṣāguru* (initiating teacher) the famous Śāh Keyāmuddīn, and in that association he wrote extensively, in addition to the two above-mentioned works, a book of meditations put to music titled *Dhyānamālā* and the speculative *Sirājkulupa*. He was also a poet of some stature, with no fewer than forty-seven of his *padas* surviving, all of which are on the theme of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's love.<sup>11</sup> His sons were also authors of some note.<sup>12</sup> All of this suggests that Āli Rajā was a fairly prominent member of the Islamic literati around the prosperous region of Chittagong, who left a significant literary and religious legacy—yet Muhammad Enamul Haq's original classification scheme could find no comfortable place for Āli Rajā's metaphysical works. It was only much later that Haq reluctantly recognized Āli Rajā and others like him in his English *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*, where, as an obvious afterthought, he tacked on two short chapters at the end of his book to create a new category called "Muslim Yoga Literature." This reflects a more discrete and somewhat more neutral acknowledgment of its "hybrid" or "admixed" character previously noted by Ābdul Kārim, who had published Āli Rajā's *Jñānasāgara* nearly a half century earlier.<sup>13</sup> By creating a separate category of syncretistic labels for this literature, Haq and his followers have operated on the assumption that these authors were engaged in an intellectual and religious activity that was somehow fundamentally different from what other "mainstream" authors did, that writers like Āli Rajā were trying to create a new religious identity or praxis that was perhaps ingenious but ultimately confused. With this assumption hinging on Āli Rajā's use of an explicitly non-Muslim vocabulary, the literary gaze is turned to works of

<sup>10</sup> Śarīpha, ed. and comp., pp. 311–13.

<sup>11</sup> Yatīndramohana Bhaṭṭācārya, *Bāmlāra vaiṣṇava-bhāvāpanna musalamāna kavira pad-amañjuṣā* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1984), pp. 43–57. Āli Rajā's surviving collected output of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa lyrics by Muslim authors is greater than all others, save two.

<sup>12</sup> Ābdul Kārim provides a genealogical chart on the second page of his introduction, giving his grandfather as Mohammad Ākbar, father as Mohammad Śāhi, son by his first wife as Erśād Ullā Miyā, son by his second wife as Ephāj Ullā Miyā, and another son called Sarphat Ullā Miyā. The lineage today is traced through the first son.

<sup>13</sup> It was, in Ābdul Kārim's words, "hindu musalmānī bhāvera saṃmīśreṇa," lit. "an admixture of Hindu and Muslim religious sentiment," with an implication of "confusion"; see Ābdul Kārim, *Jñānasāgara*, introduction, p. 1.



perceived greater value. But if we begin with a different proposition about his use of this non-Islamic vocabulary, assuming that it was a search for equivalence, assuming that he and others were attempting to articulate sophisticated ideas of their own using the locally available lexicon with its limiting conceptual structure, these texts suddenly come alive as examples of Islamic expansion in an entirely new mode, a linguistic and cultural appropriation, not an Islamic dissipation.

Before attempting to classify by genre the texts of Āli Rajā and others like him, and automatically implying in that classification a value judgment, we might fruitfully start one step earlier in the hermeneutic process by asking ourselves about the availability and limits of language in the historical time and place of these texts. It becomes clear that no unambiguously Islamic idiom existed in Bengali during the time, or at least it was only beginning to emerge by the end of the period. Such specific Islamic technical vocabulary would not prevail until sometime later, largely with the development of institutional infrastructures, and even that language—in spite of attempts by certain factions to identify a “Musalmāni” Bengali—has never been, nor could it be, completely “pure” in ideational terms. The reason it cannot be pure in exclusively Islamic terms is because the Bengali language itself has its roots in Sanskrit, which has been the bearer of a traditional culture that operates according to assumptions that are common to the religious traditions of the Hindus, and of course Jains, Sikhs, early Buddhists, and others. It has been well documented that religions and languages share many features as formal, albeit now widely understood to be open-ended, semiotic systems, regardless of how that structural similitude is construed. For our purposes, one of the most relevant points of convergence is in the ability of both language and religion to capture, preserve, and reify basic cultural values, to structure experience according to shared conceptual elements. Language of course is not religion, but the two rely heavily on each other in this process of articulating what is of value, because language itself structures the conceptual world of any culture to the point where certain thoughts cannot be entertained in a given language, and those structures that prevail in a language will reflect what is significant to its host culture.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that religion is often the most pronounced articulator and repository of those key struc-

<sup>14</sup> The first to argue this now widely accepted position was perhaps Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956); and Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language, and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), and *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), esp. chaps. 7–11. There are of course cognitive science specialists who challenge this view, starting with the initial formulations of Chomsky and then pushing the implications of his propositions about the predetermined nature of grammatical deep structures; see Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965).

tures of meaning and value, and in its use of texts—whether oral or written—language becomes the medium of the experience; hence the close relation. Any analysis should, then, account for the ways that Bengali Muslims chose to use this Bengali language that has from its inception been imbued with a religious or ideational sensibility that is other than Islamic.

The problem was not simply that these authors were attempting to use the Bengali language to express ideas that were not in the Bengali language's original conceptual structure, for many of the key concepts that control an Islamic cosmology and theology were in fact present (and this, as will become apparent, is vitally important to our strategy of interpretation). Precisely because these concepts were present—even though the terms frequently carried or at least implied additional conceptual entailments that were alien to Islam as an extension of the terms' semantic fields—Bengali offered a potentially malleable medium for the message of Islam, which is to say that the ideas were not so alien that they could not be expressed in the extant vocabulary of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. That Bengali should be so used is paramount to the Islamic conception of its own message, for Islam claims for itself a transnational and universal status; that is, Muslim practitioners argue that the sublime object of their religious world is transportable across all national and cultural boundaries, and its tenets can be conveyed in any language (in spite of the caveat that the Holy Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān can only be in Arabic). Had this not been so, Islam would have remained exclusively limited to Semitic language speakers in a tightly confined geographic area; yet Islam has been a vibrant force in South Asia for well over a thousand years, and in Bengal for a good portion of that. Given the developing nature of the language during the premodern period, coupled with the proposition that the language itself structures the very ideas being conveyed, we might not unreasonably ask how it is that a Muslim author can use Bengali successfully to convey his religious sensibility, without compromising his commitments or inadvertently changing Islam itself. To answer this question may be the first step in determining what constitutes a distinctively Bengali Islam, as opposed to the more usual strategy of measuring Islam in Bengal against some essentialized ideal. And the few extant Sufi texts are among the most extensive Islamic Bengali documents of the formative period, capturing the struggle of these early practitioners as they tried to articulate a Muslim vision in the local vernacular, a language that bore the weight of centuries of Hindu adaptation.

#### THE PROBLEM OF SYNCRETISM

The language of the texts composed by the likes of Āli Rajā, especially the technical vocabulary, appears to our contemporary sensibility to be largely

Hindu, perhaps most obviously in the yogic terminology, but that appearance only disguises to our modern eyes what were thoroughly Islamic conceptions. Most interpreters characterize this language as somehow “hybrid” in character. Hybridity is only one version of the larger interpretive strategy that hinges on the concept of “syncretism.” But the model of syncretism is never simply applied to the language itself but—and this is one of its biggest flaws—operates on the assumption that the language transparently and faithfully reflects the traditions behind the language (not just their conceptual structures), and so the analysis almost imperceptibly shifts from language to tradition, naively extrapolating the form of religion from its limited expression in texts. As it has been used in the history of religions, this model of syncretism assumes that two distinct entities—in these examples, “Islam” and “Hinduism,” as if those were somehow truly monolithic entities—were brought together to form some new construction that shared parts of both but could be classified as neither.<sup>15</sup> But the concept of this syncretism is ultimately faulty as an interpretive model for two closely related reasons, which have been hinted at above. First, syncretism assumes at the outset its own conclusions, in a curious form of the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*, by articulating the inappropriate alliance of two things that in their essential form are mutually exclusive and distinct from each other—yogic meditation in ecstatic practice in the case of early Bengali Sufis, for example—and which do not “naturally” belong together because they have been defined as such. Second, the unstated object of the model of syncretism is its end product, pointing to the creation of some kind of static “entity” that is by virtue of its violation of exclusive categories inherently unstable. This model, which conveniently sidesteps any attempt to understand the process by which these seemingly disparate or disjunctive religious beliefs and practices interact, is forever damned to project unseemly (i.e., “impure”) entities that cannot reproduce themselves (i.e., they are not viable), if in fact they are anything more than the product of the scholastic imagination in the first place. It is the way this end product is articulated that reveals the problem most vividly, because any resort to interpretive models of syncretism appears on the surface to produce neutral descriptions, but the descriptions are never direct nor are they precise: they are always metaphoric and value laden. And the metaphoric constructs not only free the interpreter from examining syncretism itself but generally reveal their almost universally negative implications. The metaphors, which only hint at processes (but never explicitly articulate the combining action directly, leaving it to the reader to imagine), imply that the resulting

<sup>15</sup> Since the first modern use of the term (1615 C.E.), “syncretism” has described “misguided” attempts at reunion of the Protestant and Catholic churches, and its earliest use was to compare the “mixed” religions of the Hellenistic and Roman eras to “pure” Christianity. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971 compact edition, for early use of the term.

form is unnatural, and therefore unstable, if not doomed to eventual destruction. There are four basic categories of metaphor that control these images, each of which demonstrates how the underlying notion of invalidity is disguised but omnipresent: (1) influence and borrowing, (2) the overlay or "cultural veneer," (3) alchemy, and (4) organic or biological reproduction.<sup>16</sup>

*Borrowing and influence.* Often not even understood as a form of syncretism, the economically derived metaphor of "borrowing" suggests that members of one group (here Sufis, especially in Bengal the Chishtāyya and Naqshbandāyya) are not sufficiently creative or independent to think for themselves and must take prefabricated ideas or rituals from somewhere else (here Hindu, largely Vaiṣṇava theology, or from *yoga* in modalities of meditative practice) to articulate its truths—and of course with that limited understanding the borrower inevitably uses the "borrowed" ideas and rituals improperly, that is, *not* as they were "meant to be" used. Similarly, the astrologically based metaphor of "influence," originally explained as emanations from the stars and planets, is understood to exert mysterious unseen force, often articulated through sophisticated hydraulic metaphors, causing someone or some group to be persuaded without fully understanding why. The explanation then suggests that volition was absent in the decision-making process, which thinly disguises the borrowing metaphor, making one group dependent, passively receptive, and therefore of less value than the source. For example, the Sufi poets of this early age could only imagine their religious path in already well developed yogic terms.

*The "cultural veneer" or overlay.* Another common metaphor of syncretism is that of "cultural veneer," an overlay of one alien culture on another, which in our examples is inevitably an imported Islam overlaid onto a Bengal that is assumed to be Hindu. While giving the appearance of accounting for historical change, since Hindus were assumed to be there first, the resulting amalgam describes no process but rather a static condition, an end result. The entailment of the metaphor, however, is decidedly pointed with respect to an obviously anticipated result, for veneers are generally thin layers of fragile ornamental wood or other material bonded to a foundation that is coarse and sturdy. Subject to delamination, the veneer is easily damaged or destroyed; that is, it is impermanent, while the permanent base continues to function as it always had, perpetrating by the choice of

<sup>16</sup> For the more detailed study of this problem, which is here only summarized, see Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst, "Syncretism," in *Encyclopedia of South Asian Folklore*, ed. Margaret Mills and Peter J. Claus (Garland, N.Y., in press). The analysis itself is much indebted to the understanding of the metaphors of everyday speech developed by Lakoff and Johnson; see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

metaphor a not-so-subtle political commentary. Occasionally this approach is articulated as the “false mask,” with many of the same entailments.

*Alchemy.* Alchemy is arguably the most popular metaphor of syncretism, one that secondarily shares in the hydraulic metaphor of influence, while maintaining a chemical basis of interaction and reaction. The combinations that can be forged in the alchemical crucible produce either permanent change or reversible temporary conditions. Understood as bad or quack science, the irreversible combination of fluids or the dissolution of a compound results in the creation of a solution that is often construed as a dangerous process by combining elements that should not be. Such daring processes create new entities that often have little or no use, and can in fact be fatal to those who come into contact with them, as religious reformers are quick to point out. The more common alchemical model of syncretism, however, is the “mixture,” a colloidal suspension of two ultimately irreconcilable liquids that will inevitably separate, or the admixture of solids that with little effort will disintegrate. In both versions of this more commonly conceived mixture of religious beliefs and practices, the parts retain their unique identities, implying that their essences are unchanged and their concoction is little more than a momentary juxtaposition.

*Biological model.* The biological is arguably the most persuasive model of syncretism: two or more contributing “parents” produce through miscegenation an offspring that cannot be classed with either parent (even Manu invokes this image to explain the multitude of *varṇa* designations); equally often the offspring is a “bastard” of unacknowledged provenance, for example, the mother was raped by some unknown assailant. The potential inflammatory nature of this kind of metaphor lends itself to an obvious polemic. When the offspring’s characteristics are identifiable to a parent, the “mixture” metaphor is subsequently invoked and those features are understood to be dominant,” that is, its “real” characteristics come through. If the product is blended in such a way that dominant features from both parents are incorporated, it is a hybrid (plant) or halfbreed (animal), again classifiable with neither source. But the negative entailment of the hybrid metaphor is that these offspring do not reproduce because they are sterile, or if they manage to reproduce, they do not “breed true”; that is, most will disaggregate in one or two generations.

None of these models of syncretism adequately characterizes the process by which the religious practitioner actually encounters the other and addresses it, leaving those processes to the imagination invoked by the metaphor itself, a move that shifts the focus onto the ostensible end product, itself a metaphoric creation. And, of equal import, each of the models of religious syncretism carries in its metaphor the implicit expectation of failure, falsity, or impermanence, a decidedly negative valuation in nearly

every case, the only possible exception being the occasional good alchemical solution or the rare hybrid that does manage to reproduce. On the whole, the models presuppose essentialized, dehistoricized, monolithic entities that interact in ways that cannot be described directly, only metaphorically, with the conclusion that they are unnatural and inappropriate not only built into their original category formation, but reinforced in the entailments of the metaphors themselves. Further, the evidence that is marshaled to make the arguments for syncretism is largely linguistic, punctuated by the occasional physical monument or record of ritual but predicated on the all-too-easy assumption that the language of these texts transparently and directly reflects experience and practice, an assumption that uncritically, although not necessarily intentionally, extends the original Whorfian hypothesis (i.e., that language reflects categories of meaning) to the instantiation and reification of religious traditions that are at best idealized constructions read back into the material. The reader can see in the passage below how seductive and easy these models would be to apply, which should in itself give pause. So to offer an alternative that does not naively assume that the language of the text is a literal replica of religious belief or practice, we must return to the initial language through which we understand these early Bengali Sufis and other Islamic practitioners and theologians. I would like to propose a different interpretive strategy that would refocus the question onto the active dimension of these texts and their authors and consumers, that is, to account for the “process of production,” rather than a description of the static end product of this complex and challenging cultural and religious interaction.

In contrast to the model of syncretism that proposes to describe the new amalgam created by these Sufi texts, I would propose that we can reconstruct a process by which the premodern Sufi or other Muslim writer, working within the constraints of a Bengali language whose extant technical vocabulary was conditioned largely by Hindu ideational constructs, attempted to imagine an Islamic ideal in a new literary environment. These texts become, then, historical witnesses to the earliest attempts to think Islamic thoughts in the local language, which is to say, to think new thoughts for Bengali, ideas that had never previously been explicitly expressed, otherwise there probably would have been an explicit vocabulary to support them, as there now is. In order to express their ways of imagining the world, we must assume that these Muslim authors did not “borrow” terms but, in a more intellectually astute process, sought the closest “terms of equivalence” in order to approximate the ideas they wanted to express. Put another way—and here the direction of this method should become clear—these early Bengali Islamic authors “translated” their concepts into the closest locally available terminology as a step

toward articulating a different kind of religious orientation, but as we shall see, terminology is not just words, but entire conceptual worlds, metaphoric worlds. If we assume that the authors were fully cognizant of what they were doing, that is, they were not confusing Islam and various traditions of Hinduism, then we can see that while appearing to write in their own language (Bengali), they were in effect *translating* into that language ideas and concepts that were at least somewhat alien to it. Eventually a technical terminology derived from Persian and Arabic would take its place in the Bengali of the Muslim author, and this vocabulary would prove to be formidable in size and effect;<sup>17</sup> but in the earliest stages of this process, which date to the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, that particular technical terminology was not a common or widely agreed-upon part of the Bengali language, so the texts from this period illustrate the initial experiments of these innovative and adventurous authors. In order to understand how translation itself can become the model for interpreting these texts, I propose that different styles of translation imply, if not explicitly dictate, systematic decisions regarding the act of translating; that in turn suggests that formal theories of translation can help to illustrate the complexity of the process by providing a logical structure against which to measure the extent of these early authors' struggle to use Bengali to a new end. What follows is an all-too-brief outline of the proposed approach, based on an extended close reading of a single passage of an eighteenth-century Bengali Sufi text.

#### "TRANSLATION THEORY" AS HERMENEUTIC MODEL

All of translation is a search for equivalence, but obviously the kind of equivalence that is sought is dictated by the nature of the concept being translated from the source language (SL) and the desired result in the target or receiving language (TL). In our examples, however, the language appears at first glance to be just Bengali, but in this premodern period, it is the special relationship of Bengali to its "parent" languages, especially Sanskrit, that makes this "translation" possible. In this precolonial period, when a Bengali author wished to speak technically about matters of religion, or economics, medicine, or any specialized branch of knowledge, he tapped Sanskrit for its rich and precise vocabulary, often appropriating words and phrases in toto without modification. This special diglossia, which was marked by the learned who were frequently multilingual and could shift easily from Bengali to Sanskrit—or, more often, who used a highly Sanskritized Bengali in complex acts of "code-switching"—gradually enriched the Bengali language to the point where it could express ideas

<sup>17</sup> One need only consult any of the several dictionaries of "foreign words" in Bengali to see the extent of this vocabulary, e.g., *Dictionary of Foreign Words in Bengali*, comp. Gobindlal Bonnerjee Kaviratna, rev. Jitendriya Bonnerjee (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1968).

that previously had only been possible in Sanskrit itself.<sup>18</sup> The process was quickened by the many translations of Sanskrit epics and other works that had been commissioned by various royal patrons during the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, translations such as the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, the stories of the Bhāgavata and other purāṇas, and so on. When the first authors of distinctly Islamic texts began to write in the vernacular—something that apparently was considered unnecessary at first, since the language of the courts was generally Persian, which was considered a more appropriate vehicle for the lofty ideas of Islamic scholarship—most of the Bengali technical terminology and its concomitant conceptual structures were of Sanskrit origin. Problematic was the fact that the conceptual structure these Sufi authors were seeking to translate derived ostensibly from Arabic, although it was actually primarily through Persian; it was decidedly not Bengali. It is interesting to note that Bengali speakers in general, but especially notably, Bengali Muslims, resisted the domination of the higher languages of the Muslim elite, unlike vernacular speakers in other regions that underwent the Islamization process.<sup>19</sup> This is borne out today by the role language played in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and how that functioned as a unifier of diverse peoples. Consequently, after several centuries of active use of Bengali by Muslim authors, the situation is different for the users of the language, for Bengali enjoys what Bakhtin would call a polyphonic relation to the languages of its high culture (Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and even Urdu).<sup>20</sup> Before that level of adaptation could occur, however, the initial move was to seek appropriate, albeit apparently not altogether comfortable, terms of equivalence.

<sup>18</sup> Sheldon Pollock has recently argued that the use of Sanskrit in the various regions often functioned as a hyperglossia (rather than diglossia), because Sanskrit cut across regional boundaries in ways that made it and its claims universal but also because, in this transcending mode, Sanskrit was the ideal vehicle for expressing what was “really real,” the most important ideas (in contrast to the vernaculars that were used for the mundane). See Sheldon Pollock, “The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology” in *Ideology and the Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, ed. Jan E. M. Houben (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), pp. 197–247, and “India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500,” “Early Modernities,” *Daedalus* (ed. Shmuel Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter) 127, no. 3 (1998): 41–74.

<sup>19</sup> See Eaton (n. 2 above), esp. pp. 291–97.

<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin characterizes monoglossia as the use of a single uniform language, diglossia as the complex interaction of a language and its parent, and heteroglossia as the interaction of two or more contributing parents when these are in conflict with each other. He resorts to polyphony to describe the conflict-free use of multiple parent contributors. While analytically useful, the practical distinction of heteroglossia and polyphony seems somewhat strained, if not artificial, in this context. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Slavic Series no. 1 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and for Bakhtin’s position relative to members of his school, see Pam Morris, ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov* (London: Arnold, 1994).



Relying on contemporary translation studies, we can isolate a number of often radically different formal approaches to this search for equivalence that can account for many, if not all, of the incredible linguistic manipulations found in these early religious texts, such as Āli Rajā's. Religious encounter seen as translation, however, is not just an act of utterance followed by the emotional, political, and ideological conflict of conversion, but ultimately reveals a movement of accommodation by the receiving or target language and the culture it represents, which when sufficiently pursued eventually becomes an act of appropriation. The target language incorporates fully the new terms and concepts that result from this encounter, a process that is patently different from syncretism. The act of incorporating what is alien ultimately changes its host—and here is where we can trace some of the processes of religious change, the making of a Bengali Islam. For example, the Muslim *pīr* and his teaching are not just accepted as legitimate expressions of Bengali religiosity; when appropriated into the language and culture, the image of the *pīr* has actually had an effect on analogous, that is, "equivalent," theological and institutional structures of Hindus by modifying their images of the holy man. This process is especially obvious in the Vaiṣṇava case where the power of the *pīr* was more readily recognized because of strong theological affinities, among other factors. The initial act of this Muslim encounter with a Hindu religious figure leads the authors to search for some kind of parallel or analogue in an effort to find an equivalent term or concept, for example, *saṃnyāsī*, *vairāgi*, and so forth, that signifies the original term's common features as found in *pīr*, a strong match in the semantic fields of the term and its gloss. But as the terms of equivalence are actively used, the target language concept—in this example, the Hindu holy man—slowly yields to a dialectic of differentiation with the alien concept—in this example, the *pīr*—that gradually incorporates the alien term and its concept as similar to but uniquely distinct from its analogue, so that today *pīr* and *saṃnyāsī* are both recognized as Bengali words with related but distinct meanings. When the "translation" is successful, the new term becomes a part of the target culture's extended religious vocabulary, and carries with it, or at least points to, another conceptual world. Yet this process of seeking equivalence invariably leaves out some of the original idea, while introducing new ideas into the equation. Ortega y Gasset captured something of the paradox inherent in the effort to express the thoughts of one language and its culture in those of another:<sup>21</sup> "Two apparently contradictory laws are involved in all uttering. One says, 'Every utterance is deficient'—it says less than it wishes to say. The other law, the opposite,

<sup>21</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and People*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Norton, 1957), quoted in A. L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 5.

declares, 'Every utterance is exuberant'—it conveys more than it plans and includes not a few things we should wish left silent.' As do languages, when religious traditions encounter one another, they translate, and when they do, they inevitably observe this paradoxical rule of discursive transformation. This is a creative and improvisational act that enriches and strengthens both participants, but this dialectic is uneven, and it does not automatically or predictably lead to the creation of some strange new creation but augments the existing entities, enriching all. To impose some logical order on our analysis of these varying processes, we will briefly sample four different strategies of increasing complexity that are in evidence in Āli Rajā's text and others like it, although it would be easy to multiply the numbers: (1) formal literal equivalence, (2) refracted equivalence, (3) dynamic equivalence, and (4) metaphoric equivalence.<sup>22</sup>

Let us turn, then, to Āli Rajā, to look at a snippet of the *Āgama* text that deals with cosmogony.<sup>23</sup>

*The Foundation of Creation: The Metaphysics of Light (nur-tattva)*

In the beginningless space the prime mover and creator (*karatā*) alone existed. The Stainless One (*nirañjana*) was a creamy essence in the thick of the enveloping universe of bleak inertia (*tama guṇa*). When the one called Stainless (*nirañjana*) rent the interior of that orb, he transformed into the Lord Īsvara. Forms (*ākāra*) began to differentiate within that universe and the unitary formless (*nirākāra*) metamorphosed into seventy-one forms. When the formless (*nirākāra*) assumed form, the Stainless (*nirañjana*) took the name of Viṣṇu. The blazing effulgence (*ujjvala*) of the formless (*nirākāra*) quickened the form (*ākāra*); and the darkness enveloped the blazing light with its dazzling colors: white (*sattva*), black (*tamaḥ*) and reddish-orange (*rajaḥ*) were latent and undifferentiated. No one could distinguish among the three qualities (*guṇa*) what was pleasing.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that to use different styles of translation (explained by the underlying translation theories) as a way of conceiving the encounter of religious traditions, or to better understand the apparent encounter, is to use "translation" as a metaphor in its most general sense as the expression of one thing in terms of another. This is fundamentally different from the metaphoric basis of the concept of syncretism itself and therefore not subject to the same critique. The reason the metaphoric use of translation escapes this critique is simple: translation is an identifiable, analyzable act, a concrete process that seeks to express one set of concepts in another language with a potentially different conceptual structure. Syncretism is itself a metaphor, no matter how it is construed, and generally one with no identifiable process to be uncovered; in contrast, the classic metaphors of syncretism serve to cover over what is not understood about the process they ostensibly seek to describe, all too often making syncretism a pseudo-explanation. To deploy translation as a model of religious encounter (i.e., to use it metaphorically) is really to use it on the metadiscursive level, not on the primary level as metaphor is used by the constructions of syncretism.

<sup>23</sup> Āli Rajā, *Āgama*, in Śarīpha, ed. and comp. (n. 9 above), p. 323–25. It should be noted that in the sample passage that follows, when speaking directly of the letters that compose the *bija mantra* "aum," I have translated *aḥṣara/ākāra* as "syllable" or "sonic form"—rather than the more common gloss of "letter"—in order to convey the aural quality of this cosmogonic act; in other places *ākāra* is translated simply as "form."

When the unsegmented universe was segmented into parts, consciousness (*cetana*) drifted in the primal waters. Emotional Being (*bhāva*) inferred its own existence within those primal waters. As it labored to unite (*yoga*) with the Lord, it experienced the essence of love (*prema rasa*). No part (*kalā*) can be under the control of passionate love in a form that is unsegmented. In the absence of syzygies (*yugala*) the intellect (*manas*) can not discern name [and form]. Unable to distinguish pairs, neither action nor naming can occur. Without the conjunction [of opposites], neither speech nor love are possible. When the Stainless (*nirāñjana*) conceived a love for an opposing lover, consciousness (*cetana*) permeated the realm of the unmanifest (*nirākāra*). The Prime Mover (*karatā*) was concealed within the realm of creation, and through his independent immaculate power parted the waters and cleansed the darkness. From that which was without form (*nirākāra*), the formed (*ākāra*) was born as the initial sonic-form “a.” The formless (*nirākāra*) generated the sonic-form “u” (*ukāra*) through the sonic-form “a.” From the union of the sonic-forms “a” and “u,” the sonic-form “m” (*makāra*) was born. Its power (*śakti*) was realized as [the qualities] *sattva*, *rajaḥ*, and *tamaḥ*. The sonic-form “m” (*makāra*) pulled himself from the waters. Looking at himself [reflected] in the waters, he was smitten (*mohita*) with the love of a devotee (*bhakta*). As he gazed at the reflection of his own initial image (*nija ākāra*), he gained consciousness of himself, yet he remained absorbed, undifferentiated from the sonic form “a” (*ākāra*) and the sonic form “u” (*ukāra*). For aeons they remained coiled together as a single form, the universe of the sonic-form “m” (*makāra*) within the sonic-form “u” (*ukāra*) within the sonic-form “a” (*ākāra*). The sonic-form “m” (*makāra*) grew fiercely hot within the sonic-forms “a” (*ākāra*) and “u” (*ukāra*). From the unified one came the two a coupled pair [like] the archer with his bow properly strung. The unifying single name of the triple world remained hidden, the sonic-form “m” (*makāra*) and the sonic-form “u” (*ukāra*) together preserving the unifying essence. The Imperishable Syllable (*akṣara*) remained in solitude within the triple forms. It was from this single Imperishable Syllable (*akṣara*) that the triple world arose.

While others more knowledgeable of the niceties of the explicit and implied cosmological systems in this not altogether transparent text may not agree with every line of my translation, there are some unmistakably distinct acts of Āli Rajā's translation that we can identify, and which will in the final analysis show him to be using this vocabulary for his own very distinct Islamic objectives.

#### FORMAL LITERARY EQUIVALENCE

While serving as a logical starting point, “formal literary equivalence” in practice was seldom sought in the early Bengali Muslim writings, because formal equivalence operates on the naive assumption that each idea or concept can be literally translated from the source language into the target language without addition or subtraction of meaning. In the West, this formalism has grounded nearly all classical theories and confounded more than a few interpreters over the last two millennia. But perfect one-to-one

correspondences simply seldom existed in the materials that the early Bengali Muslim writers sought to describe, and this is tacitly acknowledged by its absence; on this simplistic level, perfect equivalence makes translation invisible, which is only possible for very simple, nontechnical concepts. In practice this literalism in matters of religious import functions more as an ideal generally held by the unreflective, by those who do not translate at all, or by those who wish to make a point that deliberately runs roughshod over subtlety and nuance, as, for example, in the Vaiṣṇava figure Kṛṣṇa Caitanya's argument with a *pīr* wherein he equates the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Qurʾān, the point of course being conversion.<sup>24</sup> Beyond that basic semantic level, literal equivalence loses much of its practical value because it works only for the simplest terms or for the broadest generalizations. Take, for instance, such limited concepts as recitation of the name, *dhikr* and *japa*; but even here supposed equivalence requires immediate clarification, which is to admit its failure. While noting that this strategy is useful for setting a baseline in our analysis, there is little evidence within these works that the semantic fields of religiously significant terms were ever conceived to be identical, transparent, or literally equal to their adopted equivalents—our examples would be limited here to very general mythic constructs such as the primal waters, the chaos before order, or the darkness that pervades prior to creation, all of which are sufficiently vague that they require little or no reflection until they are later manipulated. Most of the equivalences, however, are more realistically seen as “approximations of equivalence,” which leads to the more common conception of translation that today is called, among other things, “refraction.”

#### REFRACTION AND MIRRORING

Refraction theory suggests that one be not so much concerned with literalness as with locating approximations—and this strategy was historically useful for establishing equivalent grounds of meaning between Muslims and Hindus. To describe refraction, André Lefevre coined the expression “mirroring,” for a translation reflects the original idea but refracts it in the process; that is, it does not capture the identical semantic field but approximates it, often with distortions, the latter being key.<sup>25</sup> With this

<sup>24</sup> *Caitanya Caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja*, trans. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., ed. Tony K. Stewart, with an introduction by Edward C. Dimock and Tony K. Stewart, Harvard Oriental Series 56 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 608–9 (2.18.175–203).

<sup>25</sup> André Lefevre, “Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, Systems and Refraction in a Theory of Literature,” *Modern Language Studies* 12, no. 4 (1982): 3–19, and his monograph, *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* (Assen and Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975); see also André Lefevre, “Theory and Practice: Process and Product,” *Modern Poetry in Translation* 41–42 (March 1981): 19–27, “Literary Theory and Translated Literature,” *Dispositio* 7, nos. 19–21 (1982): 3–22. In a related vein, see also J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), especially the chapters on formal correspondence and transference.

approach, central religious or other concepts can be established as analogues. For instance, a Hindu notion of god, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, is held to be the equivalent of Allah, especially through the shared concept of “stainlessness” or *nirañjana*, as Āli Rajā uses the term throughout the first paragraph of the sample text. This concept, explicitly denoting one of Viṣṇu’s features, resonates strongly with the equivalent characteristics of God that are enumerated in *dhikr*. This kind of refraction works best in those areas where obvious and overt similarities of character or action can be aligned. In this way an author can compare in general terms an institution such as the Hindu *tola* with the Islamic *madrasa*, or a *guruparamparā* with a Sufi *silsilah*, with a certain confidence that he will not be misunderstood as equating the two; they are roughly similar in function or form, but they are not the same. Refraction theory reaches its limit of usefulness, or is prone to confusing the reader, when it reaches the point where the communities place different values on these apparently equivalent practices or expressions, especially in their specific and technical functions. To handle this differentiation, the authors turn to a more complex strategy of establishing “functional analogues” that bear strong resemblance to the translation theories of Eugene Nida that emphasize the context of a term or phrase.

#### DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

Nida, who rejects the “literal” and “refraction” approaches as logically formal theories that describe impractical ideals, offers an alternative in his theory of “dynamic equivalence.”<sup>26</sup> Dynamic equivalence not only accounts for overlapping semantic domains but also gives priority to cultural context, which can begin to account for the different values ascribed to equivalent terms. The emphasis shifts away from the precise content and contours of the idea being translated, toward that idea as it is used in its social context, its role and function within the target language and culture, which then allows for a kind of creative latitude in seeking equivalence. Āli Rajā in this short passage uses a *sāṃkhya*-derived terminology to describe the basic dualism that is inherent in all Islamic cosmogonic portrayals according to which the world depends on the opposition of paired elements, the *syzygies* (*yugala*), necessary for discrimination and cognition to arise. Yet, by invoking the classical *sāṃkhya darśana* or philosophical system, he instantly finds himself embroiled in its implications, especially notable here in the generation of the three *gunas*, the elements of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. While I can find nothing in the Islamic cosmogonies that corresponds directly to this process of generation, it is the mechanism by which the “unfolding” of creation takes place and represents a

<sup>26</sup> Eugene Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); see also E. Nida and C. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

prominent Pāñcarātrā cosmogonic concept that bears strong resemblance to the mitosis that characterizes Islamic cosmogonies, especially some of the more elaborate among Ismailis and others. The point is that according to Nida's suggestion, the distinctive Bengali vocabulary for creation, which is nearly universally grounded in the terminology of *sāṃkhya*, is the best vehicle to translate the idea of duality, even if exact matches cannot be made and the concomitant concepts blur other distinctions. Put another way, we can say that the translation is dynamic to context. There are numerous such examples from the literatures of this period that by comparison can clarify the range of the dynamic translation even further.

Vaiṣṇavas, for instance, talk of the descents of god or *avatāra*,<sup>27</sup> figures who descend to guide the wayward back to the path of proper conduct (*dharma*), and as such these figures can easily be conceived as the "dynamic equivalent" of the Islamic concept of "prophet" or *nabī*. For the obvious reason that only Allah can be divine, a Muslim author would clearly deny as heresy that dimension of the semantic domain that designates "divinity" for the Vaiṣṇava term of *avatāra*; but because prophethood functions in an Islamic environment in a way analogous to that of the *avatāra*, that is, to guide people to the proper religious path, the terms could be established as parallel or equivalent. So, in response to the popular and underlying notion of "inspired guidance," which can be found in both *nabī* and *avatāra*, authors such as Saiyad Sultān could adopt the term *avatāra* to describe the Prophet Muhammad, as he did with some regularity in his monumental work *Nabī Vaṃśa*.<sup>28</sup>

To suggest that Saiyad Sultān understood *nabī* and *avatāra* to be identical, or that this represented a shift in basic Islamic theology (a shift that would inevitably be considered a degradation and heresy), or to propose that he was constructing some kind of new hybrid or syncretistic religious modality, is utterly to misread his text, for it is clear he did none of these. Rather, he articulated this function of inspired guidance in terms common to a Bengali-speaking world; that is, he "dynamically translated" the idea in context. But the effect of this dynamic translation was not unidirectional, because while Saiyad Sultān may have been simply seeking a Hindu functional analogue for *nabī*, in choosing *avatāra*, he actually expanded the semantic domain of the concept of *avatāra* itself. In the *Nabī Vaṃśa*, Śiva and Hari and other figures become *nabīs* or prophets, as much as Muhammad becomes an *avatāra* (although their functions were differentiated). And with this exchange, the two terms become paired in

<sup>27</sup> *Avatāra* is usually misleadingly translated into English as "incarnation," but in the Hindu conception there is no "flesh" (*carn-*) involved, making the translation an example of "refraction."

<sup>28</sup> Saiyad Sultān, *Nabī Vaṃśa*, in *Rasul Carita*, ed. Āhmad Śarīḥ, 2 vols. (Ḍhākā: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemī, 1385 B.S.).

the premodern period as twinned concepts, not identical, but sharing in that common core of meaning in specific local contexts. At the same time, Saiyad Sultān provided sectarian Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, and Śāktas with a different reading of their own traditions in a way that makes them more palatable to a broader audience and in so doing permanently altered the conception of *avatāra* itself to include this somewhat expanded meaning.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, the semantic trajectories of the two terms diverge in opposing ways. Yet when Saiyad Sultān equated *nabī* and *avatāra*, or Āli Rajā translated his basic dualism into *sāṃkhya*-derived terms, there were implications, which were not always spelled out, but which pointed to a much more complex process of translating entire conceptual worlds. It is not clear just how far Saiyad Sultān was prepared to go in this direction because most of his efforts to seek equivalence in the Bengali of his day were limited to refracted and dynamic choices, but others such as Āli Rajā did take the process further.

#### SHARED METAPHORIC WORLDS AND THE DOMAIN OF THE INTERSEMIOTIC

Linguistic activity that embraces more than equivalent concepts to include larger structures for negotiating the exigencies of the world moves us into more complex acts of appropriation and assimilation that are required to transcend the purely interlingual. Roman Jakobson refers to this as the highest level of complexity, the category of the intersemiotic.<sup>30</sup> On the intersemiotic level of translation we find an interchange and interpolation of ideas among mythologies, between rituals that are (to a certain extent) mutually observed, and even in the fixing of translation equivalents among the parts of extended theological systems. At this stage, which is the most vexing type of translation—a cultural translation—an entire conceptual

<sup>29</sup> According to Nida, this reading would in fact have to be a more complete reading on the assumption that dynamic translation is possible in the religious context because the material being translated has at its deepest level an “invariant core” that will always manage to transfer across the language barriers in spite of the surface dissimilarities. The idea of the invariant core stems from his assertion that religious texts (which in his endeavors were limited to Christianity, especially the Bible) were inspired or revelatory and therefore were immune to the conceptual vagaries of different languages (defying the assertions of Whorf and Sapir). This was further justified for Nida, however, by a deliberate misreading of Noam Chomsky’s ideas of linguistic “deep structures,” which were avowedly not universal, even though Nida chose to read them that way. For an incisive critique of Nida’s approach and misuse of Chomsky, see Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 43–73.

<sup>30</sup> Roman Jakobson argues that translation is “intra-lingual” within different parts or dialects of the same language, “inter-lingual” between different languages, and finally, “inter-semiotic” between different cultural signification systems; see Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” in *On Translation*, ed. R. A. Brower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 232–39.

world is understood in terms of another, not just in its single terms or phrases. Because these worlds are not identical, yet admit to being understood in terms of direct or implied comparison, they are extended, complex metaphorical constructs, which can be conceived as “shared” or “emergent” metaphorical worlds (and we might even argue that to call it translation is itself a metaphoric leap). Linguistically, the impulse behind this analysis is what Gideon Toury has called “polysystem theory,” which attempts to extend the processes of translation to the cultural, intersemiotic level, wherein different features of culture participate in increasingly complicated, often disjunctive, systems of discourse.<sup>31</sup> Polysystem assumes that no single mode of discourse or cultural construct can account for the varieties of lived experiences or types of exchanges within which people routinely operate and that people comfortably shift from system to system, often without reflection, depending on the situation. The system in operation is context-dependent; the domains of meaning are not limited to exclusively verbal significations; and the application of them is necessarily imprecise, if not inconsistent. Translation, then, will shift from purely linguistic to symbolic and other forms of cultural expression in ways that are not naively arithmetic; different modes of translation will embody greater and lesser degrees of conformity in the same complex act, so that depending on what is being emphasized, the various dimensions of cultural expression will be more or less translated into their equivalents. If in our examples each expression of religiosity attempted by these precolonial authors is understood to participate in a range of semiotic systems, then its translation will likewise reflect these multiple referents as well. A theological term could conceivably imply, then, certain ritual actions, cosmological expectations, political allegiances, and so forth, in an ever spiraling complication as one attempts to account for the encounter of one religious culture with another through a shared language and its metaphoric and symbolic systems.

<sup>31</sup> Gideon Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1980); for the implications of such an approach, see the interesting essays in Pramod Talgeri and S. B. Verma, eds., *Literature in Translation: From Cultural Transference to Metonymic Displacement* (London: Sangam, 1988). See also Gentzler's critique of polysystem theory in *Contemporary Translation Theories*, pp. 105–43. A slightly different approach that seeks to quantify discretely the complex levels of translation that account for the rich cultural context can be found in the “variational” model as described by Lance Hewson and Jacky Martin in *Redefining Translation: The Variational Approach* (London: Routledge, 1991). In this model, the highest level of intersemiotic translation involves the isolation of multifaceted “homologons” that lead to more tightly controlled paraphrastic constructions. This seems to be a promising model for translators to conceptualize what they do, but less useful descriptively in conceptualizing the problem I have described in the encounter of religious traditions.



It must be remembered, however, that what is sought is not the precise equation of the parts of one symbolic or semiotic system with another in clear one-to-one matches. Rather, this overt use of an apparently alien terminology and conceptual system is an attempt to establish the basis for a common conceptual underpinning so that the matching systems and their parts are demonstrated to be coherently conceived, or at least rectifiable—hence the possibility of equivalence—while almost certain to remain inconsistent in their particulars.<sup>32</sup> Equivalence in this mode suggests that two conceptual worlds are seen to address similar problems in similar ways, without ever proposing that they are identical; to express one in terms of the other—the quintessential metaphoric step—remains an act of translation, not an assertion of identity or some mysterious change of allegiance on the part of the author. This might help explain how Āli Rajā's attempt to articulate the cosmogony in the opening passage of the “*nur tattva*” of his *Āgama* text can appear to appropriate wholesale a generic Hindu cosmogonic act of differentiation through the sacred syllable “*aum*.” When we see how he seeks to locate some measure of symbolic equivalence through comparing parallel cosmological constructs—a move that would allow him to express a Muslim truth in a language and conceptual structure that is at least nominally Hindu—the text suddenly illuminates a very different cultural and religious process. In its application, this process of translating on a higher conceptual plane can be understood as an extension of the previously noted processes, which have upped the ante of complexity. And there is in this passage an important hermeneutic move that makes clear that Āli Rajā is looking for equivalence, not voicing preference for a Hindu creation scheme.

In general but precise terms, Āli Rajā asserts from the first phrase of this passage the unity of the creator before creation, while noting the ineffable connection between this unity and the dualism necessary for all existent things to interact with the divine, the dualism necessary for a relationship of love to exist. This position of *tawhid* (*tauḥīd*)—which becomes clear in the passage in the second paragraph beginning with the phrase “The Prime Mover (*kartā*) was concealed within the creation”—is wholly consistent with any mainstream Islamic theology, yet this same ineffable connection resonates strongly with the mainstream theology of the Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal and their emphasis on *acintya bhedaḥbhedā*—a simultaneous distinction and nondistinction between the ultimate and the created world that is cognitively unresolvable, that is a mystery. It is no

<sup>32</sup> I am here following the lead of Lakoff and Johnson, who argue in their work on metaphor in everyday speech that the mechanics of this process can be envisioned as seeking the “coherence” of conceptions without worrying about the consistency of the details of the expression, image, or symbol being manipulated.

accident, then, that he chose the already noted use of the term *nirañjana*, here connecting Viṣṇu with Allah.<sup>33</sup> It is the treatment of the processes of creation through the aural power of *auṃ* that suggests Āli Rajā's attempt to establish an analogy with common Islamic cosmogonies. In the next few lines of the text, which redescribe the process of differentiation through which the formless becomes formed, as he noted initially in the opening paragraph, the world unfolds through sonic mitosis: it is the "a" (*ākāra*) that produces "u" (*ukāra*), and together they generate the "m" (*makāra*). It is important to note that the latter two are somehow mysteriously contained within the original *ākāra* and are not just discrete linear unfoldings from it. At this juncture, Āli Rajā portrays the process in a way that mimics a generic Islamic cosmogony so that direct parallels can be drawn between a number of different Sufi, and even Shia and Sunni cosmogonies. The sonic transformation of creation begins with God, Allah, as represented by the character from which all characters flow, *alif*, the number one, the uncreated who creates; from *alif* is then generated *mīm*, Muhammad, and through him eventually all of creation. *Alif* and the *ākāra*, *mīm* and the *makāra*—these are the two points of action in the creation of the world, the vowel and the consonant as the progenitors of speech and the world. The ambiguous *ukāra*, which at first glance appears to have no direct analogue positioned between *alif* and *mīm*, is not superfluous, nor is it simply glossed over. In Āli Rajā's conceptual world (as noted later in this same text), creation does not move directly from Allah to Muhammad but is mediated by a formless form, the *nur muhammadī*, the *nur tattva*, which separates and connects the world from God, the worldly Prophet Muhammad from his creator; it is the Muhammad of guiding light. Yet the relationship of *nur* to Muhammad and that of those two to Allah is vague and mysterious, yet hierarchically progressive as the individual parts of *auṃ*. It is Āli Rajā's treatment of the *ukāra* that reveals his hand and makes clear his choice of symbolic homologies.

Neither the fact that Āli Rajā does not spell out that connection, nor the fact that his handling of the problematic *ukāra* is imprecise, should be taken as a sign of some abortive attempt at fusing theologies. Rather, it is this apparent imprecision, especially in the vagueness with which the *ukāra* and *makāra* are generated from the *ākāra*, that alerts us to his attempt to find an analogous structure within which to translate the mystery

<sup>33</sup> For a summary of the *acintya bhedābheda* theory as it was adapted by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, see Rādhāgovinda Nātha, *Gauḍīya vaiṣṇava darśana*, 5 vols. (Calcutta: Prācyavāṇī Mandira, 1363–66 B.S.), 1:137–43 for a brief introduction, then vols. 1–3 passim. For an English summary, see Edward C. Dimock, Jr., "Doctrine and Practice among the Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal," in *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. Milton Singer (Hawaii: East-West Center Press, 1966), pp. 41–63.

of Sufi cosmogony. Had the *aum̐* been presented as a progression of discrete steps followed by the all-important silence with which it symbolically closes in the traditional Hindu cosmogonies of the *upaniṣads*, Āli Rajā might be understood to have attempted some synthesis or even to have adopted a Hindu perspective, but his manipulation of the parts of *aum̐* so that they mimic and parallel the relationship of the creation through *alif* and *mīm* suggests a search for equivalence, a translation of a fundamental but complex concept into the target culture's conceptual lexicon. And precisely because it is a search for equivalence—not an assertion of positive identity—the parts must remain vague, analogous, or at best homologous. The use of one conceptual structure to express another suggests the coming together of metaphoric worlds that operates according to a logic of both metonymic and synecdochal displacements, where parts can be exchanged and substituted in ways that allow one cultural system (the equivalent of a source language) to interact with and be understood by another (the equivalent of a target language). We might conceptualize this search for equivalence taking place on the level of a cultural metalanguage, a kind of conceptual hyperglossia that allows these critically important figures to speak in a conceptual idiom that brings different cultures together, while acknowledging and even justifying their own independent conceptual—and in this case religious—worlds. In our last example, it is an Islamic theology that uses and appropriates a Hindu cosmology to its own purposes, explaining the “real” meaning of the sacred syllable *aum̐* to an audience that might not otherwise have seen the connection, an act that is substantially apart from syncretism; at the same time it demonstrates that the truth of God's creation has been observed by Hindus, even if they did not fully comprehend it. The result is a thoroughly Islamic view of the world in a text that uses an ostensibly Hindu terminology to express it.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion we argue that the search for equivalence in the encounter of religions—when understood through the translation models we have characterized as literal, refractive, dynamic, and metaphoric—is an attempt to be understood, to make oneself understood in a language not always one's own; it does not necessarily reflect religious capitulation or theological ignorance or serve as the sign of a weak religious identity. A hermeneutic strategy that acknowledges the unusual linguistic and cultural confluence found in the Bengali-speaking world clearly will help to explain how so many cultural productions could appear on the surface to violate or be inconsistent with contemporary notions of the pristine ideal standard of religious exclusion, when in fact they project a coherence of conception. The texts that reveal these actors attempting to locate commensurate analogues

within the language tradition capture a unique historical “moment” in the process of cultural and religious encounter, as each tradition explores the other and tries to make itself understood. Once the translation process can be shown to have moved from the simplistic modes of seeking equivalence to the complex realms of conceptual sharing that we have designated as metaphoric in nature, the analysis must, of necessity, shift. Because this current analysis seeks to describe the nature of the discourse within which new (and old) ideas are expressed through translation, the focus is deliberately shifted away from the ontological nature of the conceptual entity that is produced, the falsely ascribed new religious idea or end product that results from all models of syncretism, to an analysis of the conditions, both creative and constraining, within which that production, that experimentation, is possible, that is, to the way such encounter can take place. It is a shift from preoccupation with the final form to a greater understanding of the process of its creation, a shift that dramatically alters our estimation of what results from this process. From this point, any number of plausible and useful strategies may be adopted to further explain and refine this discursive activity. The method of looking at these texts through the model of translation should, if applied rigorously, demonstrate a different kind of social and religious interaction among the diverse populations of Bengal, not just among different groups of Hindus and Muslims. And it may well point to previously unaccounted factors that have contributed to that perspective on the world that appears to be so uniquely Bengali, an element of identity that is perhaps Bengali first and sectarian second.

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