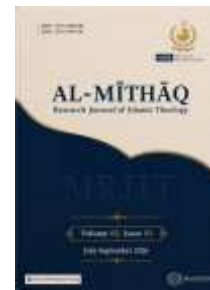




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Christianity in Mughal India (1580–1707): Imperial Policy, Christian–Muslim Relations, and Cross-Cultural Exchange

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Christianity in Mughal India (1580–1707): Imperial Policy, Christian–Muslim Relations, and Cross-Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

This article examines the development of Christianity in Mughal India between 1580 and 1707 through an analysis of imperial religious policy, Jesuit missionary activity, and Christian–Muslim intellectual relations during the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. Drawing upon Persian chronicles, Jesuit correspondence, European travel accounts, missionary literature, and modern historical scholarship, it argues that Mughal policy towards Christianity cannot be understood simply in terms of tolerance or intolerance. Rather, it evolved in response to changing political, diplomatic, and imperial priorities under successive Mughal rulers. The study demonstrates that Christianity remained a minority religion despite enjoying periods of remarkable imperial patronage, particularly during Akbar's reign. Its limited expansion resulted from the resilience of Islamic and Hindu religious traditions, the Jesuits' court-centred missionary strategy, their limited knowledge of local languages, history, and religious traditions, the social and cultural consequences of conversion, changing political circumstances, and the close association of Christian missions with Portuguese imperial interests. The article further argues that the sectarian rivalries between Catholics and Protestants, together with the confrontational attitude adopted by some missionaries towards Islamic beliefs, sacred figures, and religious practices, further weakened the credibility of Christian missions and reduced their appeal among both the Mughal elite and the wider population. Despite its limited demographic success, Christianity exercised a significant intellectual and cultural influence on Mughal India. Persian Christian literature, theological debates, translation projects, educational activities, diplomacy, artistic exchange, and sustained interaction between Muslim scholars and Jesuit missionaries created one of the most important centres of Christian–Muslim intellectual dialogue in the early modern world. The article concludes that the historical significance of Christianity in Mughal India should be measured not by the number of converts but by its enduring contribution to interreligious dialogue, cross-cultural exchange, and the intellectual history of the Persianate world.

Keywords: *Mughal Empire, Christianity, Jesuit Missions, Christian–Muslim Relations, Persian Christian Literature, Religious Policy, Cross-Cultural Exchange.*

1. Introduction

The relationship between the Mughal Empire and Christianity represents a significant yet comparatively understudied dimension of early modern South Asian history. The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century transformed the region's political and commercial landscape while opening new avenues for religious, diplomatic, and cultural interaction between European Christian

missionaries and the Mughal court. From the arrival of the first Jesuit mission at Emperor Akbar's court in 1580 until the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, Mughal–Christian relations evolved in response to changing imperial policies, political circumstances, and diplomatic priorities. Akbar's invitation to the Jesuits from Goa and the theological debates held at the Ibādat Khāna (House of Worship) remain among the best-known examples of interreligious dialogue in early modern South Asia. However, previous scholarship has concentrated primarily on Akbar's personal religious ideas and the activities of individual Jesuit missionaries, while the evolution of Mughal policy towards Christianity under Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb has received comparatively limited attention.

This article addresses that gap by examining Mughal–Christian relations between 1580 and 1707 as a continuous historical process. Rather than focusing on a single emperor or missionary, it analyses imperial religious policy, Jesuit missionary activity, diplomatic relations, and Christian–Muslim intellectual interaction during the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. Existing studies have relied extensively on Jesuit correspondence, missionary narratives, and European travel accounts, while more recent scholarship has increasingly incorporated Persian court chronicles to provide a more balanced interpretation of Mughal–Christian relations. Nevertheless, a comparative study tracing the changing position of Christianity throughout the four principal Mughal reigns remains lacking. By integrating Persian, Jesuit, and European sources within a single analytical framework, this study seeks to demonstrate how imperial policy towards Christianity evolved in response to changing political and diplomatic circumstances rather than according to a fixed pattern of either tolerance or persecution.

The study employs a qualitative historical methodology based on the comparative analysis of primary and secondary sources. Its principal primary sources include Persian court chronicles, such as the *Akbarnāma*, *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh*, *Tūzūk-i Jahāngīrī*, *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī*, and *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, together with Jesuit correspondence, missionary reports, and contemporary European travel accounts. These materials are examined comparatively to distinguish confessional interpretations from historical evidence and to identify the political, religious, and diplomatic contexts in which they were produced. Modern scholarship on Mughal history, Christianity in India, Jesuit missions, and early modern intercultural relations is likewise employed to support a balanced interpretation of the interaction between imperial policy, missionary activity, diplomacy, and Christian–Muslim intellectual exchange. This article argues that Mughal policy towards Christianity was shaped not solely by religious considerations but by the interaction of religious, political, diplomatic, and imperial interests. When examined within the broader global context of the early modern period and compared with the policies of contemporary empires, the Mughal Empire provided an exceptionally favourable environment for interreligious dialogue and cross-cultural exchange. Nevertheless, Christianity remained a minority religion due to the resilience of Islamic and Hindu religious traditions, the Jesuits' court-centred missionary strategy, their limited familiarity with local languages, history, and religious traditions, the confrontational attitude adopted by some missionaries towards Islam, other Indian religions, and their sacred beliefs and figures, the confessional rivalries among European Christian powers, and the close association of Christian missions with Portuguese political interests. By examining more than a century of interaction between the Mughal Empire and Christian missions, this study offers a comprehensive and balanced reinterpretation of the place of Christianity within the religious, political, and intellectual landscape of Mughal India.

2. Historical Background

Although the origins of Christianity in India remain a subject of scholarly debate, there is broad agreement that Christian communities existed in the subcontinent long before the establishment of the Mughal Empire. According to Christian tradition, the Apostle Thomas introduced Christianity to India during the first century CE, while later communities along the Malabar Coast preserved the Syriac liturgical tradition and maintained ecclesiastical connections with the Church of the East. Medieval Muslim writers, however, made little reference to these communities, suggesting that Christianity exercised only limited political or intellectual influence in northern India before the arrival of the Portuguese. The arrival of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century fundamentally transformed the position of Christianity in India. Unlike the long-established Saint Thomas Christians, Portuguese Christianity was closely associated with maritime expansion, commercial interests, and Roman Catholic missionary activity. The establishment of Portuguese authority in Goa and the organisation of the Jesuit missions created the political and institutional foundations for sustained contact between the Mughal Empire and European Christianity. These developments culminated in the arrival of the first Jesuit mission at Emperor Akbar's court in 1580, marking the beginning of a new phase in Mughal–Christian relations.

3. Portuguese Expansion and the Beginning of Jesuit Missions

The arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the history of Christianity in India. Unlike the long-established Saint Thomas Christian communities, Portuguese Christianity was closely associated with maritime expansion, commercial enterprise, and the Roman Catholic Church. The establishment of Portuguese authority in Goa after 1510 created the political, ecclesiastical, and institutional foundations for Catholic missionary activity throughout Asia. Goa soon emerged as the principal centre of the Portuguese Estado da Índia and the headquarters of Roman Catholic missionary activity in the East. Supported by the Portuguese Crown under the Padroado system, religious orders—including the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and especially the Society of Jesus—established churches, schools, seminaries, and missionary institutions. From Goa, Catholic missionaries expanded their activities across India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Japan, China, and eventually the Mughal Empire.

The rise of the Jesuits formed part of the wider Catholic Reformation. Founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540, the Society of Jesus placed particular emphasis on education, linguistic training, and intellectual engagement with local cultures. These characteristics distinguished the Jesuits from many contemporary missionary orders and made them especially well-suited to operate within sophisticated political and intellectual environments such as the Mughal court. The missionary methods pioneered by Francis Xavier and his successors in Goa provided the organisational experience that enabled the Jesuits to respond to Emperor Akbar's invitation in 1580. Thus, the first Jesuit mission to Akbar's court was not an isolated religious event but the outcome of broader political, commercial, and ecclesiastical developments linking the Portuguese Empire, the Catholic Reformation, and the expanding missionary networks of the sixteenth century.

3.1. Babur and Humayun: Before Mughal–Christian Relations

Before Akbar's reign, there is little evidence of sustained contact between the Mughal court and Christianity. The reigns of Babur (1526–1530) and Humayun (1530–1540; 1555–1556) were dominated by military campaigns, imperial consolidation, and internal political challenges rather than religious diplomacy with European powers. Babur's *Bāburnāma* contains detailed observations on geography, politics, and society

but makes virtually no reference to Christianity or European missionaries, indicating that these subjects lay outside his immediate political concerns. Similarly, despite Humayun's prolonged exile in Safavid Iran and his later conversations with the Ottoman admiral Seydi Ali Reis, contemporary sources provide no evidence that Christianity or Catholic missionary activity became subjects of political or intellectual interest at the Mughal court.

This absence can largely be explained by the political circumstances of the period. During the reigns of Babur and Humayun, the Mughal Empire was still struggling to establish and preserve its authority, while Portuguese influence remained largely confined to India's western coast. Regular diplomatic and religious contacts between the Mughal court and the Portuguese had not yet developed. Only after Akbar consolidated imperial authority did Christianity emerge as a subject of diplomacy, theological discussion, and intellectual exchange, inaugurating a new phase in Mughal–Christian relations.

4. Christianity under Akbar (1556–1605)

The reign of Emperor Akbar marked a decisive turning point in Mughal–Christian relations. Unlike his predecessors, whose reigns were dominated by military conquest and political consolidation, Akbar ruled a stable empire that enabled him to devote increasing attention to religion, philosophy, and imperial ideology. Under his patronage, Christianity became an important component of Mughal diplomacy and religious discourse through the arrival of successive Jesuit missions from Portuguese Goa. Akbar's engagement with Christianity emerged gradually from his broader interest in comparative religion, political pragmatism, and dialogue with diverse religious traditions.

4.1. Akbar's Religious Policy and Intellectual Transformation

Akbar's reign marked a turning point in the history of Mughal–Christian relations. Unlike his predecessors, he governed a politically stable empire that enabled him to devote increasing attention to questions of religion, governance, and imperial ideology. Although he never received a formal literary education, both Muslim and Jesuit writers emphasise his remarkable memory, intellectual curiosity, and ability to engage in sophisticated religious discussions. During the early years of his reign, Akbar remained a committed Sunni Muslim. He maintained close relations with Islamic scholars and the Chishti Sufi Shaykh Salim Chishti and established the *Ibādat Khāna* at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575 as a forum for theological discussions among Muslim scholars. However, the increasingly bitter disagreements among the participating '*ulamā*' gradually weakened his confidence in the exclusive authority of the religious establishment. As Badā'ūnī observed, the *Ibādat Khāna*, originally intended as a place of worship, soon became a centre of controversy and sectarian dispute. These experiences encouraged Akbar to widen the scope of religious debate by inviting representatives of other faiths, thereby laying the intellectual foundations for sustained dialogue between the Mughal court and Christianity.

4.2. The Jesuit Missions and Mughal–Christian Relations

Following the Mughal conquest of Gujarat in 1573, direct contact between the Mughal Empire and the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* became increasingly important. Historians have interpreted Akbar's invitation to the Jesuits from two complementary perspectives. Some emphasise his genuine interest in comparative religion, while others underline political and strategic considerations, particularly his desire to understand Portuguese military organisation, maritime power, and commercial institutions. These explanations are not contradictory. Akbar's intellectual curiosity had already developed

through the discussions held in the *Ibādat Khāna*, while Portuguese naval supremacy and the *cartaz* system made knowledge of Portuguese affairs politically valuable after the Mughal annexation of Gujarat. Under this licensing system, merchant and pilgrimage vessels sailing in the Indian Ocean were required to obtain Portuguese permits, enabling Portugal to exercise extensive control over maritime trade and navigation in the region.

An important step towards direct relations occurred in 1577 when the priest Giuliano Pereira visited the Mughal court and advised Akbar to invite Jesuit scholars from Goa, whose theological training would enable them to explain Christian doctrine more fully. Acting on this recommendation, Akbar dispatched an embassy to Goa in 1579 led by ‘Abd Allāh and accompanied by Domingos Pires. In his letter to the Jesuit authorities, the emperor requested learned priests capable of explaining the Gospel and guaranteed them honour, protection, and complete freedom during their residence at the Mughal court. The Jesuit authorities accepted the invitation and appointed Rodolfo Acquaviva, Antonio Monserrate, and Francisco Henriques as members of the first official mission. Departing from Goa in late 1579, they arrived at Fatehpur Sikri in February 1580. Their arrival inaugurated more than a century of sustained religious, intellectual, and diplomatic interaction between the Mughal Empire and the Roman Catholic Church and marked the beginning of one of the most remarkable episodes of Christian–Muslim dialogue in early modern South Asia.

Following the arrival of the first Jesuit mission in 1580, the *Ibādat Khāna* at Fatehpur Sikri became the principal venue for discussions between Muslim scholars, Jesuit missionaries, Hindu pandits, Jain thinkers, and representatives of other religious traditions. Originally founded for debates among Muslim scholars, it gradually evolved into an unprecedented centre of interreligious dialogue, reflecting Akbar’s growing interest in comparative religion. Discussions focused on the authority of the Bible and the Qur’an, the doctrine of *tahrīf*, divine revelation, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the respective status of Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muḥammad. Muslim and Jesuit writers interpreted these debates very differently. Badā’ūnī regarded them as evidence of Akbar’s excessive favour towards Christianity, noting that the Jesuits presented copies of the Gospels to the emperor, instructed Prince Murad in Christianity, and encouraged the Persian translation of the Gospels under the supervision of Abū al-Faḍl. His account, however, reflects his broader criticism of Akbar’s religious policies. By contrast, Antonio Monserrate portrayed the missionaries as successfully defending Christian doctrine while emphasising Akbar’s intellectual curiosity and openness towards theological discussion.

The confessional nature of these sources is particularly evident in their descriptions of a famous debate concerning the truth of Christianity and Islam. According to Monserrate, Akbar proposed that representatives of both religions should enter a fire carrying their respective scriptures, declaring that whichever emerged unharmed would demonstrate the truth of its faith. The Jesuits declined the proposal, arguing that Christianity required no such miraculous proof. Badā’ūnī presents the same incident as a public challenge issued by the Muslim mystic Shaykh Quṭb, claiming that the Jesuits refused to enter the fire and were consequently humiliated before the imperial court. Abū al-Faḍl, however, offers an entirely different interpretation, praising the Jesuit Rodolfo Acquaviva for the strength of his arguments while criticising the Muslim scholars for their intolerance and inability to respond convincingly. Although these accounts differ fundamentally in assigning victory to their respective religious communities, they reveal the strongly confessional character of the contemporary

sources. Each author portrayed his own tradition as intellectually superior while presenting the opposing side as defeated. Read together, however, they demonstrate that Akbar consistently favoured discussion and comparison over sectarian exclusivism. While the debates broadened his understanding of Christian doctrine and strengthened his interest in comparative religion, none of the contemporary sources suggests that he seriously intended to convert to Christianity. Instead, the *Ibādat Khāna* became an important forum for interreligious dialogue that profoundly influenced the intellectual character of Akbar's reign.

After the departure of the first Jesuit mission in 1583, Akbar continued to encourage contact with the Christian world as part of his broader policy of religious dialogue and intellectual exchange. In 1590 he met the Greek Christian priest Dom Leon Grimon at Lahore and entrusted him with a letter inviting learned Jesuits from Goa to continue theological discussions at the Mughal court. Acting upon this invitation, the second Jesuit mission arrived in 1591 under the leadership of Duarte Leitão, accompanied by Christóvão de Vega and Estêvão Ribeiro. Akbar again received the missionaries with honour and permitted the establishment of a Portuguese school for Mughal princes and the sons of leading nobles. Besides reflecting his continuing interest in Christianity, this initiative also served practical diplomatic purposes by promoting familiarity with the Portuguese language and institutions. Nevertheless, the second mission achieved only limited success. Unlike their predecessors, its members possessed neither the same intellectual reputation nor sufficient command of Persian to participate effectively in theological discussions, and the mission returned to Goa after little more than a year.

Despite this limited outcome, relations between the Mughal court and the Jesuits continued. In 1594 Akbar once again requested missionaries from Goa, leading to the arrival of the third Jesuit mission at Lahore in May 1595 under Jerome Xavier, Manuel Pinheiro, and Benedict Goes. Jerome Xavier remained at the Mughal court for nearly two decades and became the most influential Christian scholar associated with Akbar's reign. Under his leadership, the Jesuits translated important Christian works into Persian, established educational activities, and participated actively in theological discussions, thereby making Christian doctrine more accessible to the Persian-speaking Mughal elite. The third mission represented the high point of Mughal–Christian relations during Akbar's reign. Although the missionaries failed to convert the emperor, they established a lasting Christian intellectual presence through Persian translations, educational initiatives, theological dialogue, and sustained diplomatic contact. Akbar continued to receive the Jesuits with respect while preserving his broader policy of religious accommodation. His interest in Christianity therefore reflected neither an intention to convert nor exclusive favour towards a single faith, but rather his wider commitment to comparative inquiry and the maintenance of political stability within a religiously diverse empire. The three Jesuit missions collectively established the foundations of Mughal–Christian relations during Akbar's reign. Although none of them succeeded in converting the emperor or securing Christianity a privileged position within the Mughal state, they profoundly influenced the intellectual and cultural life of the imperial court. Through theological debates, Persian translations of Christian literature, educational initiatives, artistic exchange, and sustained diplomatic contact, the Jesuits introduced Christianity to the Mughal elite in an unprecedented manner. At the same time, Akbar consistently maintained a policy of religious accommodation, treating Christianity as one of several traditions worthy of intellectual engagement rather than as a faith to be either officially embraced or suppressed. Consequently, the lasting significance of the Jesuit missions lay less in missionary success than in their contribution to interreligious

dialogue and cross-cultural exchange within the Mughal Empire.

4.3. Christian Missionary Activity beyond the Mughal Court

Although the primary objective of the Jesuit missions had been the conversion of Emperor Akbar, by the mid-1590s the missionaries recognised that this goal was unlikely to be achieved. They consequently redirected their efforts towards public preaching, education, charitable work, and the establishment of Christian institutions beyond the imperial court. Akbar's policy of religious accommodation created opportunities that were exceptional within the contemporary Islamic world. Around 1595 the Jesuits received permission to preach publicly and administer baptism, while in 1602 Akbar formally confirmed these privileges through an imperial decree. He also authorised the construction of churches, including one in Gujarat and another at Lahore, the latter receiving financial support from Prince Salim.

Despite these privileges, Akbar made it clear that his policy did not imply an intention to embrace Christianity. During an audience with Jerome Xavier in 1599, he reminded the missionaries that they enjoyed a degree of religious freedom unavailable in many other Muslim states, demonstrating that his objective was the promotion of religious coexistence rather than personal conversion. Relations between the Mughal court and the Jesuits nevertheless remained closely connected with political considerations. During the siege of Asirgarh, for example, Akbar requested Portuguese artillery through the missionaries, but they declined to intervene, illustrating that the Jesuits also functioned as diplomatic intermediaries between the Mughal Empire and Portuguese India. Beyond the court, Jesuit missionaries expanded their activities in major cities such as Agra, Lahore, and Ahmedabad. Schools offering Portuguese and Christian instruction became important centres of evangelisation, while charitable work, particularly during the famine and plague in Kashmir in 1597, strengthened missionary influence through the care, baptism, and education of orphaned children. Public preaching in streets and marketplaces, together with Christmas and Easter processions, biblical dramas performed in Persian, and the display of paintings depicting Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, introduced Christian beliefs to wider sections of Mughal society and made visual culture an effective instrument of missionary activity.

The Christian population of Mughal India remained diverse, comprising Portuguese settlers, Armenian merchants, Europeans, people of mixed ancestry, and a limited number of local converts. Although missionary activity resulted in increasing baptisms and the gradual expansion of Christian communities, converts frequently encountered opposition from their families and local society, while missionaries occasionally faced violence and other forms of resistance. Nevertheless, by the end of Akbar's reign the Jesuits had established a durable Christian presence through education, charitable institutions, literary activity, and pastoral work. Although they failed to convert the emperor, they laid the institutional foundations upon which Christian communities continued to develop during the reign of Jahangir. During the final years of Akbar's reign, political developments increasingly overshadowed religious discussion. The assassination of Abū al-Faḍl in 1602, the deaths of Princes Murad and Daniyal, and the rebellion of Prince Salim shifted imperial attention from theological inquiry to questions of succession and political stability. Although the Jesuits remained at court until Akbar's death in 1605, they were no longer at the centre of imperial affairs. By the end of his reign, they had failed to convert the emperor, yet they had firmly established Christianity as a recognised component of Mughal intellectual and diplomatic life. This legacy continued under Jahangir, although within a changing political environment.

5. Christianity under Jahangir (1605–1627)

Akbar's death in October 1605 marked a new phase in Mughal–Christian relations. His eldest surviving son, Prince Salim, ascended the throne as Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad Jahāngīr after suppressing opposition from Prince Khusrau. Although Jahangir inherited Akbar's policy of religious accommodation, his approach differed significantly from that of his father. Rather than encouraging extensive theological experimentation or promoting a universal religious ideology, he presented himself more explicitly as a Muslim ruler while maintaining relative tolerance towards other religious communities. Soon after his accession, Jahangir reinforced the Islamic character of the monarchy by restoring the Islamic profession of faith (*lā ilāha illā Allāh*) to imperial coinage and emphasising traditional symbols of Muslim sovereignty. Nevertheless, he neither expelled the Jesuits nor abandoned the policy of religious coexistence established under Akbar. Christian missionaries continued to reside at the Mughal court, where they were received with courtesy and allowed to practise and propagate their religion within the limits of imperial authority.

The nature of Mughal–Christian relations, however, gradually changed. Unlike Akbar, Jahangir showed little interest in organising formal interreligious debates or comparing different religious traditions systematically. His interest in Christianity was expressed primarily through diplomacy, artistic patronage, and personal curiosity rather than theological inquiry. Consequently, relations between the Mughal court and the Jesuits became increasingly pragmatic, reflecting the political and cultural priorities of the empire while preserving the atmosphere of relative religious tolerance established during the previous reign.

5.1. Christian–Muslim Intellectual Exchange under Jahangir

Although Jahangir showed less interest than Akbar in systematic theological inquiry, his reign witnessed some of the most sophisticated Christian–Muslim debates of the Mughal period. The *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī* demonstrates that Muslim scholars increasingly engaged Christian doctrine through direct reference to the Bible and to Persian Christian works translated by the Jesuits themselves, reflecting a more mature stage of interreligious dialogue than had existed under Akbar. One of the most significant discussions took place between the Mughal scholar 'Abd al-Sattār Lāhorī and the Jesuit Jerome Xavier. Drawing upon both the Gospels and Xavier's *Mir'āt al-Quds*, 'Abd al-Sattār argued that biblical passages emphasised the humanity rather than the divinity of Jesus Christ. He referred to Jesus' prayer before raising Lazarus (John 11:41), his cry on the Cross (Matthew 27:46), his words after the Resurrection (John 20:17), and his reply to the rich young man (Matthew 19:16–17; Mark 10:17–18; Luke 18:18–19), maintaining that these passages demonstrated Christ's dependence upon God rather than equality with Him. Jerome Xavier defended the traditional Christian doctrine of Christ's divinity, although Lāhorī records that Jahangir regarded the Muslim arguments as more persuasive.

Another important discussion concerned the authenticity and authority of the Gospels. Jahangir questioned whether the existing Gospels represented the original revelation granted to Jesus or later narratives composed by his disciples. Muslim scholars argued that the canonical Gospels were historical accounts rather than the original revealed scripture, while the Jesuits defended their authenticity and doctrinal authority. The debates occasionally became openly polemical, particularly when Christian and Muslim participants criticised one another's central religious doctrines. Nevertheless, Jahangir continued to permit these discussions and maintained the policy of religious accommodation established under Akbar. Jesuit missionaries remained free to preach,

maintain churches, and engage Muslim scholars, while converts to both Islam and Christianity received comparable public recognition under imperial authority. These discussions illustrate the growing intellectual maturity of Mughal–Christian relations. Unlike the debates of Akbar’s reign, Muslim scholars now challenged Christian theology through direct engagement with biblical texts and Persian Christian literature rather than relying solely upon traditional Islamic polemics. Although Jahangir did not share his father’s enthusiasm for religious experimentation, he preserved an environment in which theological dialogue continued to flourish. His death in 1627 brought this formative phase of Mughal–Christian relations to an end. Under Shah Jahan, Christianity continued to enjoy legal protection, but imperial policy increasingly reflected concerns of political authority and Sunni orthodoxy rather than theological inquiry.

6. Christianity under Shah Jahan (1628–1658)

The reign of Shah Jahan marked a significant transition in the history of Christianity in Mughal India. Although he did not abandon the policy of religious accommodation established by his predecessors, his approach differed substantially from that of Akbar and Jahangir. Rather than encouraging theological dialogue or comparative religious inquiry, Shah Jahan regarded Christian communities primarily within the framework of imperial administration, political stability, and state security. Consequently, Mughal–Christian relations became increasingly shaped by diplomatic and political considerations rather than theological engagement. A committed Sunni ruler, Shah Jahan strengthened the Islamic character of the monarchy through greater patronage of the *‘ulamā’*, mosques, charitable institutions, and public religious ceremonies. Nevertheless, he largely preserved the administrative system inherited from Akbar and Jahangir. Hindu nobles continued to occupy senior positions within the imperial administration, while many earlier grants to Hindu temples and religious institutions remained in force. Christianity likewise remained a legally recognised religion within the empire, although the privileged position previously enjoyed by the Jesuits at court gradually diminished.

Unlike Akbar’s reign, Jesuit missionaries no longer participated directly in imperial religious discussions and increasingly depended upon influential nobles for protection and patronage. Among their principal supporters were Āṣaf Khān and Prince Dārā Shikoh, both of whom maintained cordial relations with Christian missionaries. Around 1650, Dārā Shikoh held several discussions with Jesuit priests, particularly Father Buzeo, concerning Christian theology and comparative religion. Although these exchanges produced no conversions, they demonstrate that Christian–Muslim intellectual dialogue continued among members of the Mughal elite despite the decline of official court patronage. The most significant turning point in Mughal–Christian relations during Shah Jahan’s reign, however, was not theological but political. The Mughal conquest of the Portuguese settlement at Hugli in 1632 fundamentally transformed imperial attitudes towards European missionaries and redefined the relationship between Christianity and the Mughal state. This event marked the beginning of a new phase in which questions of imperial sovereignty and security assumed greater importance than interreligious dialogue.

6.1. The Hugli Campaign and Mughal–Christian Relations

The most significant turning point in Mughal–Christian relations during Shah Jahan’s reign was the Mughal conquest of the Portuguese settlement at Hugli in 1632. More than a military campaign, the event fundamentally reshaped imperial perceptions of Portuguese political ambitions and redefined the position of Christian institutions within the Mughal Empire. Originally established as a commercial settlement during Akbar’s reign, Hugli gradually developed into an autonomous Portuguese enclave

whose activities increasingly challenged Mughal authority. Contemporary Mughal and European sources accuse the Portuguese of constructing fortifications without imperial permission, engaging in piracy, participating in the slave trade, abducting men, women, and children from Mughal territory, and forcibly converting many captives to Christianity. According to Barkat Ullah, the abduction of two female attendants of Mumtaz Mahal further intensified tensions between Shah Jahan and the Portuguese community. European observers likewise emphasised the exceptional autonomy of the Portuguese settlement. François Bernier records that the Portuguese claimed to convert more people to Christianity in a single year than all the missionaries in India achieved in ten years. He further reports that Muslim religious practices were restricted within the settlement and that orphaned children of non-Christians were frequently baptised and raised as Christians under Portuguese supervision. Whether every accusation can be accepted uncritically, these contemporary accounts demonstrate that Hugli had become a source of growing political and diplomatic conflict.

In 1632 Shah Jahan therefore ordered a large-scale military campaign against the settlement. Following a prolonged siege, Mughal forces captured Hugli, destroyed its fortifications, confiscated considerable wealth, and imprisoned many Portuguese inhabitants. Churches closely associated with Portuguese political authority also suffered significant damage. Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that Shah Jahan distinguished between suppressing a rebellious colonial settlement and persecuting Christianity itself. No empire-wide prohibition was imposed upon Christian worship, and Christian communities continued to exist in Agra, Lahore, Delhi, Bengal, and other Mughal cities, although under closer imperial supervision than during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. The Hugli campaign therefore marked a decisive shift in Mughal–Christian relations. From this point onward, imperial policy increasingly evaluated Christian communities according to their political loyalty rather than their religious identity. Although Jesuit influence at court declined, Christianity remained a legally recognised religion within the Mughal Empire, while relations with European missionaries became increasingly shaped by considerations of imperial sovereignty, diplomacy, and state security rather than theological dialogue.

6.2. Dārā Shikoh and Christian Intellectual Exchange

Although Shah Jahan himself showed limited interest in theological discussion, Christian–Muslim intellectual exchange continued through Prince Dārā Shikoh. Distinguished by his broad comparative interests, Dārā maintained discussions with Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian scholars, including several Jesuit missionaries, particularly Father Buzeo (Busi). Jesuit correspondence records conversations concerning Christian doctrine, the Trinity, biblical prophecy, and comparative religion. Although these exchanges never resulted in Dārā’s conversion, they demonstrate that Christianity continued to receive serious scholarly attention among sections of the Mughal elite despite the decline of official Jesuit influence.

European accounts occasionally present the closeness of this relationship in exaggerated terms. Niccolao Manucci claims that, during his imprisonment and in the final days of his life, Dārā Shikoh expressed a desire to meet Father Buzeo and even intended to embrace Christianity. Since this claim is not corroborated by contemporary Persian sources, it should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the account reflects the unusually close intellectual relationship that had developed between Dārā Shikoh and certain Jesuit scholars. Dārā Shikoh’s interest in Christianity formed part of his wider comparative religious project rather than any intention to convert. His *Majma‘ al-Bahrayn* and Persian translation of the Upanishads sought to identify common spiritual

truths shared by different religious traditions. Christianity therefore occupied an important place within his intellectual vision as one among several traditions worthy of serious scholarly investigation. Consequently, by the later years of Shah Jahan's reign, Christian–Muslim dialogue survived less through imperial patronage than through the personal interests of individual Mughal intellectuals.

6.3. Assessment of Christianity under Shah Jahan

The reign of Shah Jahan marked a transitional stage in the history of Mughal–Christian relations. Unlike Akbar and Jahangir, he no longer regarded Christian missionaries as active participants in imperial religious discussions but increasingly viewed them within the framework of imperial administration, diplomacy, and state security. The Mughal conquest of Hugli demonstrated this shift most clearly. Although Shah Jahan acted decisively against Portuguese political and military activities, he did not seek to suppress Christianity as a religion. Christian communities, churches, missionaries, physicians, merchants, and educational institutions continued to exist throughout the empire, albeit under closer imperial supervision than before. At the same time, missionary success remained limited. Christianity retained an organised institutional presence through churches, schools, charitable activities, and Persian Christian literature, but conversions among Muslims and members of the Mughal elite remained extremely rare. The resilience of Islamic and Hindu religious traditions, together with the close association of many Jesuit missions with Portuguese political interests, significantly restricted the long-term expansion of Christianity within Mughal India. Nevertheless, Shah Jahan's reign should not be interpreted simply as an era of religious intolerance. Rather, it represented the gradual transformation of Mughal–Christian relations from the theological and intellectual engagement characteristic of Akbar and Jahangir towards a more regulated relationship shaped by imperial governance and political pragmatism. This transformation formed the immediate background to the reign of Aurangzeb, under whom Christianity continued to exist within the Mughal Empire but under increasingly restrictive political conditions.

7. Christianity under Aurangzeb (1658–1707)

The reign of Aurangzeb 'Ālamgīr marked the final phase of Mughal–Christian relations examined in this study. Unlike Akbar and Jahangir, who encouraged theological discussions with Jesuit missionaries, Aurangzeb ruled within a political and religious environment that placed greater emphasis on Sunni Islamic orthodoxy as a source of imperial legitimacy. Consequently, Christianity was no longer viewed primarily through the framework of intellectual exchange but increasingly within the context of imperial administration, political authority, and state security. Nevertheless, describing Aurangzeb's reign simply as an era of religious intolerance fails to reflect the historical evidence. Christianity remained an established minority religion throughout the Mughal Empire. Christian communities continued to exist in Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Bengal, Gujarat, Hugli, and other major urban centres, while churches, schools, charitable institutions, and missionary residences established during earlier reigns continued to function under closer imperial supervision. Aurangzeb consciously projected the image of a pious Muslim ruler committed to the protection of Sunni Islam and the implementation of the *Sharī'a*. Unlike Akbar, he showed little interest in comparative theology, and the formal religious debates that had characterised the Mughal court gradually disappeared. Jesuit missionaries consequently lost the privileged position they had previously enjoyed within imperial intellectual life.

Despite these changes, Mughal policy remained more pragmatic than has often been assumed. Aurangzeb consistently distinguished between peaceful Christian communities and

European political or military intervention. Missionaries who respected Mughal authority generally continued their religious activities, whereas individuals associated with European commercial or political ambitions encountered greater restrictions. Armenian, Portuguese, and Indo-Portuguese Christians continued to serve the empire as merchants, physicians, interpreters, soldiers, and diplomats, illustrating that Christianity retained an important, though increasingly regulated, place within Mughal society. The reign of Aurangzeb therefore represents not the disappearance of Christianity from Mughal India but the final transformation of Mughal–Christian relations. Whereas Akbar had emphasised theological dialogue and Jahangir had continued intellectual engagement, Aurangzeb incorporated Christian communities into a more centralised administrative order in which political loyalty and imperial security assumed greater importance than religious debate.

7.1. Christianity under Aurangzeb: Pragmatism and the Survival of Christian Communities

Despite his reputation for religious conservatism, Aurangzeb did not exclude Christians or Europeans from imperial service solely on religious grounds. European physicians, military specialists, merchants, interpreters, diplomats, and technical experts continued to occupy important positions within the Mughal administration, demonstrating that professional competence frequently outweighed confessional identity in imperial governance. A similar pragmatism characterised the empire’s treatment of Christian institutions. Rather than abolishing churches or prohibiting Christian worship, Aurangzeb generally allowed established Christian communities to continue their religious activities provided they remained politically loyal and avoided involvement in conflicts affecting imperial sovereignty. Churches continued to celebrate religious festivals, administer the sacraments, educate children, maintain cemeteries, and provide charitable assistance, while provincial governors frequently exercised considerable flexibility in implementing imperial policy according to local political conditions. Missionary activity also continued during Aurangzeb’s reign, although its character changed significantly. Unlike the earlier Jesuit missions, which had sought to influence the emperor through theological debate, missionaries increasingly concentrated on preserving existing Christian communities. Their activities focused upon pastoral care, religious education, charitable work, and the maintenance of churches and schools serving Portuguese, Armenian, Indo-Portuguese, and local Christian populations.

This transformation is clearly reflected in the careers of later missionaries such as John Campbell and Raphael du Mans. Rather than attempting to influence imperial religious policy, they devoted their efforts to strengthening established Christian congregations and preserving ecclesiastical institutions. Their writings likewise suggest that Christian communities which respected Mughal authority generally encountered fewer difficulties than those associated with European political or military ambitions, confirming the essentially pragmatic character of Aurangzeb’s religious policy. Although Christianity no longer occupied the prominent intellectual position it had enjoyed under Akbar and Jahangir, neither did it disappear from Mughal India. By the end of Aurangzeb’s reign, Christian communities remained established in several major cities, while churches, schools, charitable institutions, and missionary networks continued to function under closer imperial supervision. The final phase of Mughal–Christian relations therefore reflects continuity as much as change, demonstrating that political loyalty and administrative considerations ultimately proved more significant than confessional differences in determining the position of Christianity within the Mughal Empire.

7.2. Assessment of Christianity under Aurangzeb

Aurangzeb’s reign marked the final stage in the transformation of Mughal–Christian

relations that had begun with Akbar's invitation to the first Jesuit mission in 1580. By the late seventeenth century, Christianity had largely ceased to depend upon privileged access to the imperial court and instead survived through its own institutional foundations, including churches, schools, charitable organisations, and established congregations. Missionary priorities likewise shifted from the conversion of the Mughal elite towards pastoral care, religious education, and the preservation of existing Christian communities. Although Aurangzeb strengthened the Islamic identity of the Mughal monarchy and reduced the political influence of Jesuit missionaries, Christianity was neither prohibited nor eliminated from the empire. Christian merchants, physicians, soldiers, diplomats, missionaries, and Armenian and Indo-Portuguese communities continued to contribute to the commercial and administrative life of Mughal India. Imperial policy generally distinguished between peaceful Christian communities and activities associated with European political or military ambitions, demonstrating that considerations of political loyalty and imperial security remained more important than confessional identity alone.

Viewed in the broader context of Mughal history, Aurangzeb completed a gradual transformation rather than introducing a complete break with the policies of his predecessors. Akbar had encouraged theological dialogue, Jahangir preserved much of this intellectual environment, and Shah Jahan increasingly subordinated relations with Christianity to political considerations. Under Aurangzeb, this evolution culminated in a more regulated administrative framework in which Christian communities continued to exist but no longer occupied a prominent position within imperial intellectual life. The history of Christianity during his reign therefore illustrates adaptation rather than disappearance, confirming that Mughal–Christian relations throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were shaped as much by imperial governance, diplomacy, and commerce as by religious belief.

Table 1. Evolution of Mughal–Christian Relations under the Four Major Mughal Emperors (1556–1707)

Emperor	Reign	Imperial Religious Policy	Relationship with the Jesuits	Status of Christianity in the Empire
Akbar	1556–1605	Religious pluralism, <i>ṣulḥ-i kull</i> , and interfaith dialogue	Active theological engagement and extensive imperial patronage	Expanded through imperial patronage, Jesuit missions, and intellectual exchange
Jahangir	1605–1627	Political accommodation and religious pragmatism	Cordial relations continued, with greater emphasis on intellectual exchange than formal theological debate	Maintained institutional continuity and relative religious freedom
Shah Jahan	1628–1658	Strengthened Islamic legitimacy while maintaining political pragmatism	Court influence declined after the Hugli campaign, although missionary activity continued	Continued under closer imperial supervision while remaining legally recognised
Aurangzeb	1658–1707	Sunni orthodoxy combined with administrative pragmatism	Court patronage largely disappeared as missionary activity shifted towards established Christian communities	Survived as an institutionalised minority within a more regulated imperial order

8. Why Did Christianity Remain a Minority Religion in Mughal India?

One of the central questions arising from the history of Christianity in Mughal India concerns the limited numerical success of the Jesuit missions. Despite more than a

century of missionary activity, sustained contact with four successive Mughal emperors, and periods of exceptional imperial patronage—particularly during the reign of Akbar—Christianity never developed into a major religious tradition within the Mughal Empire. Instead, it remained a relatively small minority whose historical significance far exceeded its demographic size. This outcome appears particularly striking because, during the reigns of Akbar and, to a lesser extent, Jahangir, Christian missionaries enjoyed a degree of religious freedom rarely granted elsewhere in the contemporary Islamic world. They were permitted to preach publicly, establish churches and schools, administer baptism, engage in charitable work, translate Christian literature into Persian, and participate directly in theological discussions at the imperial court. Nevertheless, after more than a century of missionary activity, the number of converts remained relatively modest when compared with the vast religious diversity and population of the Indian subcontinent.

The explanation for this apparent paradox cannot be reduced to a single cause. Rather, the limited expansion of Christianity resulted from the interaction of religious, political, social, cultural, linguistic, and diplomatic factors. Mughal patronage undoubtedly created unprecedented opportunities for missionary activity, intellectual exchange, and the institutional development of Christianity. Yet imperial support alone could not overcome the deeply rooted religious traditions of India, the social consequences of conversion, the cultural distance between European missionaries and local communities, or the changing political priorities of successive Mughal rulers. At the same time, missionary success should not be measured solely by the number of converts. Although Christianity remained numerically limited, the Jesuits established churches, schools, charitable institutions, and enduring Christian communities throughout Mughal India. They also produced an extensive body of Persian Christian literature, encouraged Christian–Muslim intellectual dialogue, introduced elements of European artistic and scientific knowledge, and created historical records that remain indispensable sources for the study of Mughal India. The following sections therefore examine the principal factors that prevented Christianity from becoming a major religion in the Mughal Empire while explaining why its intellectual and cultural influence extended far beyond the size of its community.

8.1. The Strength of Existing Religious Traditions

The most significant obstacle confronting the Jesuit missions was the strength and institutional continuity of the religious traditions already established in the Indian subcontinent. By the late sixteenth century, Islam had become firmly rooted in northern India through centuries of Muslim rule, the activities of Sufi orders, and an extensive network of mosques, madrasas, and religious scholars. At the same time, Hinduism continued to command the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population through its ancient philosophical traditions, temple institutions, pilgrimage networks, and deeply embedded social structures. Christianity therefore entered a religious landscape in which both major traditions possessed well-established theological foundations and widespread popular support. Jesuit missionaries themselves recognised these challenges. Referring to the Parable of the Sower in the Gospel of Matthew (13:5–7), they metaphorically described Islam as rocky ground and Hinduism as thorny soil, suggesting that the seeds of Christianity encountered formidable obstacles before they could take root. In their view, the greatest difficulty lay not in presenting Christian doctrine but in persuading people to abandon religious traditions that had shaped their communal and cultural identities for centuries.

Missionary reports further indicate that many Muslims respected Jesus (*ʿĪsā*) and the

Virgin Mary (*Maryam*) as revered religious figures. According to Pierre Du Jarric, Muslims often listened attentively to Christian preaching and acknowledged Christianity as a revealed religion, while many Hindus expressed admiration for Christian paintings depicting Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Du Jarric recounts the case of an Indian woman who offered a gift before an image of the Virgin Mary after believing that her prayers to "Maryam Bibī" had been answered with the birth of a son. Such respect, however, rarely resulted in conversion. Jesuit missionaries observed that many Muslims concluded religious discussions by affirming that "Whatever the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ has said is true, and that is sufficient for us." Although they recognised the divine origin of earlier revelations, they regarded Islam as God's final revelation and therefore saw no reason to embrace Christianity. Likewise, most Hindus viewed Christianity as another foreign religious tradition rather than a replacement for their own long-established beliefs. Consequently, despite the favourable conditions created by Mughal patronage, the deeply rooted religious traditions of Islam and Hinduism remained the greatest obstacle to the large-scale expansion of Christianity in Mughal India.

8.2. Missionary Strategy and Its Limitations

A second factor limiting the expansion of Christianity was the missionary strategy adopted by the Jesuits. During the first decades of their presence in Mughal India, their principal objective was not the gradual evangelisation of the wider population but the conversion of Emperor Akbar and members of the Mughal elite. This approach reflected the widespread assumption that the emperor's acceptance of Christianity would encourage influential courtiers and eventually broader sections of the population to follow his example, thereby securing a permanent place for Christianity within the imperial order. This court-centred strategy reflected the institutional character of the Society of Jesus, which emphasised discipline, intellectual formation, linguistic training, and the education of political and social elites. Such preparation enabled Jesuit missionaries to participate confidently in theological debates, educate members of the imperial household, and communicate Christian doctrine through Persian translations and scholarly discussion. Consequently, much of their energy was devoted to theological discussions with Akbar, the education of Mughal princes, and cultivating influential courtiers. These activities greatly enhanced the visibility of Christianity within Mughal intellectual life but failed to achieve their principal objective. Although Akbar showed sustained interest in Christian theology and treated the missionaries with considerable respect, his engagement reflected intellectual curiosity rather than any intention to embrace Christianity. Only after recognising that Akbar was unlikely to convert did the Jesuits gradually redirect their efforts towards the wider population. Akbar expanded the scope of missionary activity by permitting public preaching and baptism, first through oral permission around 1595 and later through a formal decree in 1602. He also authorised the construction of churches in Gujarat, while Prince Salim supported the establishment of a church in Lahore, creating an exceptional degree of religious freedom for Christian missionaries within a Muslim empire.

A conversation between Akbar and Jerome Xavier illustrates the emperor's attitude. When Xavier expressed disappointment that the emperor had not accepted Christianity, Akbar replied that, unlike many other Muslim rulers, he had allowed Christian missionaries to preach openly and build churches throughout his empire. This response demonstrates that Akbar regarded religious tolerance as a principle of imperial governance rather than a personal concession to the Jesuits. At the same time, imperial patronage remained closely connected with political interests. During the siege of Asirgarh, Akbar asked the Jesuits to use their Portuguese connections to obtain heavy

artillery from Chaul. Their refusal temporarily strained relations with the emperor and illustrates that Mughal support for the missionaries was conditioned by political as well as religious considerations.

Following the imperial decree, Jesuit missionaries expanded their activities in major cities such as Agra, Lahore, and Ahmedabad by establishing churches, schools, and charitable institutions. They attracted converts primarily from socially and economically disadvantaged groups, while the famine and epidemic in Kashmir in 1597 enabled them to baptise numerous orphaned children. Despite these efforts, Christianity remained numerically limited because the Jesuits possessed a much better understanding of Islam than of Hinduism, Jainism, or Buddhism, restricting their ability to communicate effectively with the religious majority of the subcontinent. Moreover, the shift towards wider missionary activity came relatively late. By the time the Jesuits expanded their work beyond the imperial court, the political climate had already begun to change under Shah Jahan and, more markedly, Aurangzeb. Missionary access to the emperor declined, public theological debate gradually disappeared, and Christian institutions increasingly operated under closer political supervision. A further limitation arose from divisions within European Christianity itself. Rivalries between Portuguese Catholics and English Protestants frequently undermined the credibility of Christian missions before the Mughal court. A notable example occurred in 1609 when the English ambassador William Hawkins presented King James I's letter to Emperor Jahangir. Because the letter was translated by the Jesuit Jerome Xavier, Hawkins accused Xavier of deliberately misrepresenting its contents out of hostility towards England. Although Jahangir ultimately received Hawkins favourably, granted him commercial privileges, conferred upon him the title "English Khan," and arranged his marriage to an Armenian Christian woman, Hawkins later attributed the limited success of his embassy largely to continuous Portuguese intrigue.

These rivalries were carefully observed by the Mughal rulers, who recognised that European powers were often more divided among themselves than against their non-Christian rivals. Such conflicts inevitably weakened the moral authority of Christianity. While Christian missionaries preached peace and forgiveness, political and confessional disputes between Catholic and Protestant powers presented a contradictory image before the Mughal court. As a result, people judged Christianity not only by its scriptures but also by the conduct of its representatives. The Mughal experience therefore reveals a fundamental strategic paradox. The Jesuits' greatest success—their unprecedented access to the emperor and the imperial elite—also became one of their greatest limitations. By concentrating their efforts primarily on the imperial court while remaining divided by European political and confessional rivalries, they delayed the development of broader pastoral, educational, and community-based networks among the wider population. When imperial priorities changed, Christianity lacked the social foundations necessary for substantial demographic expansion. Its limited numerical success in Mughal India therefore resulted not only from changing imperial policies but also from the missionaries' own strategic priorities and the internal divisions that weakened the long-term effectiveness of Christian evangelisation.

8.3. Opposition within the Mughal Court

Besides external political factors, missionary activity also encountered opposition from within the Mughal court itself. Although Akbar and Jahangir generally treated the Jesuits with respect, not all members of the imperial household shared the emperors' favourable attitude. The large imperial harem, whose women exercised considerable

influence over court politics and the emperor's personal life, appears to have viewed the missionaries with increasing suspicion. According to Abū al-Faḍl, the imperial household contained thousands of women serving in various capacities, including several hundred royal wives and consorts. Since Christian doctrine emphasised monogamy, Jesuit missionaries repeatedly encouraged both Akbar and Jahangir to retain only one wife and dismiss the others. Such advice directly challenged established Mughal court practice and was unlikely to be welcomed within the imperial household.

Relations were further complicated by incidents outside the Mughal Empire that influenced attitudes towards Christianity. One of the most notable occurred in Portuguese Goa, where a copy of the Qur'an was reportedly desecrated by being hung around a dog's neck and paraded through the streets. When news reached the Mughal court, Akbar's mother, Ḥamīda Bānū Begum (Maryam Makānī), reportedly suggested that a copy of the Gospel should be treated in the same manner. Akbar firmly rejected the proposal, declaring that insulting any revealed scripture ultimately amounted to insulting God Himself and asking, "What fault has the Gospel committed that I should take revenge upon it?". His response reflected the Qur'anic principle: "Do not insult those they invoke besides Allah, lest they insult Allah in hostility without knowledge" (Qur'an 6:108). Although Akbar prevented the incident from developing into a wider religious conflict, such events inevitably strengthened suspicion towards Christianity among sections of the Mughal elite. Together with the social influence of the imperial household, these attitudes created additional obstacles for missionary activity and reduced the attractiveness of Christianity within Mughal society.

8.4. Cultural and Social Barriers to Conversion

Beyond theological and political considerations, the expansion of Christianity was also constrained by profound cultural and social barriers. Although many Jesuit missionaries acquired proficiency in Persian and, in some cases, local Indian languages, they remained representatives of a distinctly European cultural tradition. Their dress, customs, dietary habits, and social practices reinforced the widespread perception that Christianity was a foreign religion associated with Europe rather than with the indigenous religious landscape of India. More importantly, conversion to Christianity carried significant social consequences. In both Muslim and Hindu communities, religious identity was closely intertwined with family, communal affiliation, caste relationships, and social status. Conversion was therefore rarely regarded as an individual spiritual decision but often meant separation from established social networks. Missionary correspondence indicates that many converts experienced social isolation, loss of family support, and economic hardship, becoming increasingly dependent upon churches and missionary institutions for both material and spiritual assistance.

Jesuit missionaries attempted to reach wider society through public preaching, religious processions, schools, charitable institutions, and the use of Persian-language literature. These methods occasionally attracted converts, but most came from socially vulnerable groups, including orphans, famine victims, and individuals already separated from their communities. Conversion often resulted in further social exclusion, requiring missionaries to provide continuing financial and pastoral support. At the same time, criticism of Islamic and Hindu beliefs occasionally provoked hostility, and missionary sources record attacks on priests as well as attempts to poison some missionaries. The missionaries' limited familiarity with Indian religious culture also reduced the effectiveness of their work. Although many sought respectful dialogues, some criticised local beliefs in ways that alienated potential converts rather than attracting them. As a result, admiration for certain aspects of Christian ethics or theology rarely developed

into religious conversion. The Mughal experience therefore demonstrates that the principal barriers to conversion were not exclusively theological. Cultural distance, social exclusion, and the limited adaptation of missionary methods to local religious and social realities significantly restricted the long-term expansion of Christianity in Mughal India. The changing political climate further weakened these fragile Christian communities. As imperial priorities shifted under Shah Jahan and, more decisively, Aurangzeb, many European missionaries gradually left Mughal India and returned to their respective countries. Consequently, numerous local Christian communities found themselves without sustained pastoral leadership and institutional support. In this respect, their situation resembles the biblical image that "the shepherd was struck, and the sheep were scattered" (Matthew 26:31). The departure of the missionaries significantly weakened the organisational continuity of the missions and further limited the long-term expansion of Christianity in Mughal India.

8.5. Political Constraints and the Changing Imperial Climate

Political developments also shaped the fortunes of Christianity in Mughal India. Although Akbar's patronage created exceptional opportunities for missionary activity, these privileges depended largely upon the policies of individual emperors rather than permanent institutional guarantees. Under Jahangir, Christianity continued to enjoy imperial protection, but relations became increasingly influenced by political considerations. During the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, changing diplomatic priorities, the growing association of Christianity with European political interests, and the increasing emphasis on imperial security gradually reduced the scope of missionary activity without abolishing Christianity as a legally recognised religion. The close association between the Jesuits and the Portuguese Estado da Índia further complicated their position. As Mughal-Portuguese relations deteriorated, missionary activity increasingly became subject to political and diplomatic considerations rather than theological ones. The Mughal experience therefore demonstrates that the success of Christian missions depended not only on religious persuasion but also on the wider political environment in which they operated.

8.6. Christianity as a Foreign Religion within a Well-Established Religious Landscape

Ultimately, Christianity remained a minority religion because it entered a society in which Islam and Hinduism already possessed deeply rooted theological traditions, institutional structures, and extensive social networks. Unlike these long-established religions, Christianity was represented primarily by European missionaries, Portuguese settlers, Armenian and Indo-Portuguese communities, and a relatively small number of local converts. It therefore lacked the indigenous institutional foundations necessary for large-scale expansion. Despite its limited numerical growth, Christianity exerted a significant intellectual and cultural influence. The Jesuit missions stimulated interreligious debate, introduced Persian Christian literature, contributed to artistic and scientific exchange, and strengthened diplomatic and cultural contacts between the Mughal Empire and Europe. Its historical importance therefore lay less in the number of converts than in its contribution to Christian-Muslim dialogue, cross-cultural exchange, diplomacy, and the intellectual history of early modern South Asia.

8.7. Christian Literary Contributions

One of the most enduring legacies of the Jesuit missions in Mughal India was the development of a substantial body of Persian Christian literature. Encouraged by the intellectual atmosphere of Akbar's court, Jesuit missionaries translated and composed numerous works explaining Christian doctrine for a Persian-speaking audience. Among the most influential was *Mir'āt al-Quds*, Jerome Xavier's celebrated life of Jesus,

prepared for Emperor Akbar and later read by Prince Jahangir. Xavier also authored *Ā'īnā-i Ḥaq-numā*, *Intikhāb-i Ā'īnā-i Ḥaq-numā*, *Dāstān-i Ahvāl-i Hawāriyyān*, together with several catechetical works. Persian translations of the Gospels, the Psalms, and other Christian texts likewise circulated among members of the Mughal elite. Although these works resulted in relatively few conversions, they made Persian one of the principal languages of Christian apologetics in South Asia and provided the textual foundation for many of the theological debates held during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. Their historical significance therefore lies less in missionary success than in their contribution to Christian–Muslim intellectual exchange, Persian literary culture, and the transmission of Christian thought within the Mughal world.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the development of Christianity in Mughal India between 1580 and 1707 through an analysis of imperial religious policy, Jesuit missionary activity, and Christian–Muslim intellectual exchange under the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. Rather than interpreting Mughal–Christian relations through the simple framework of tolerance versus persecution, the study has demonstrated that imperial policy evolved in response to changing political priorities, diplomatic circumstances, religious outlooks, and concerns for imperial stability. Christianity occupied different positions under successive Mughal rulers, reflecting the changing needs of the empire rather than the application of a single, consistent religious policy. The four reigns examined in this article illustrate a gradual transformation in Mughal attitudes towards Christianity. Under Akbar, Jesuit missionaries enjoyed unprecedented access to the imperial court, where interreligious dialogue, theological debate, and cultural exchange flourished under the principle of *ṣulḥ-i kull*. Jahangir largely preserved this atmosphere while approaching Christianity from a more pragmatic political and intellectual perspective. Under Shah Jahan, the relationship increasingly reflected questions of imperial sovereignty and state security, particularly following the Mughal conquest of Hugli. During Aurangzeb's reign, Christianity continued to exist as a legally recognised minority religion, although missionary activity became more closely regulated within a political order that placed greater emphasis on Sunni Islamic legitimacy and administrative control. The study further demonstrates that the limited numerical expansion of Christianity cannot be explained simply by changes in imperial policy. Even during the exceptionally favourable conditions created under Akbar, Christianity attracted relatively few converts. The strength of Islamic and Hindu religious traditions, the Jesuits' court-centred missionary strategy, cultural and social barriers to conversion, political constraints, and the close association of many missionary activities with Portuguese interests collectively limited the wider spread of Christianity. Imperial patronage facilitated dialogue and protected Christian communities, but it could not fundamentally reshape the religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

At the same time, the historical importance of Christianity in Mughal India extended far beyond missionary success. Jesuit missionaries produced a remarkable body of Persian Christian literature, translated important Christian texts into Persian, established schools and churches, encouraged theological dialogue, and contributed to artistic, educational, and intellectual exchange between Europe and Mughal India. Works such as *Mir'āt al-Quds* and other Persian Christian writings became important instruments of Christian–Muslim debate and introduced Christian thought into the intellectual world of the Persianate court. In this respect, the Mughal Empire emerged as one of the most significant centres of Christian–Muslim intellectual interaction in

the early modern Islamic world. Another important finding concerns the relationship between Christianity and Portuguese political power. Mughal rulers increasingly distinguished between Christianity as a religion and the political ambitions of the Portuguese Estado da Índia. While they often welcomed peaceful missionary activity and protected established Christian communities, they responded firmly whenever European political or military activities threatened Mughal sovereignty. This distinction demonstrates that Mughal policy towards Christianity was shaped as much by imperial governance and diplomacy as by religious considerations.

More broadly, this study contributes to current scholarship by demonstrating that relations between Islam and Christianity in early modern South Asia were characterised not only by conflict but also by dialogue, translation, diplomacy, artistic exchange, and intellectual cooperation. The Mughal experience challenges simplistic civilisational narratives that portray Europe and the Islamic world as permanently isolated or antagonistic. Instead, it reveals a dynamic process of negotiation and cultural interaction in which both traditions influenced one another while preserving their distinct religious identities. Ultimately, the history of Christianity in Mughal India was neither a story of missionary failure nor one of continuous persecution. Rather, it was a history of adaptation, diplomacy, translation, and intellectual encounter. Although Christianity remained a minority religion throughout the Mughal period, it became an enduring component of Mughal intellectual and cultural life. Its greatest legacy lay not in the number of converts but in the creation of lasting channels of Christian–Muslim dialogue, Persian Christian literature, and cross-cultural exchange that continued to shape the intellectual history of South Asia long after the decline of direct Jesuit influence.

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