The principle of “universal conciliation” (ṣulḥ-i kull), the core doctrine of the “Divine Religion” (dīn-i ilāhī) conceived under the Timurid ruler of India Jalāl al-Dīn Akbar (r. 1556–1605), has been the subject to a number of historical studies and diverse interpretations. It is praised by some as a genuine religious innovation but more often as an ephemeral royal cult contemplated in the inner circle of Akbar’s influential minister, Abū-l-Faḍl ‘Allāmī, and his brother, the chief court poet Abū-l-Fayḍ Fayḍī. Little attention however has been paid to the make up of this circle and more specifically to the role of the agnostics, such as Nuqtawī exiles from Iran and their advocacy of a post-Islamic millennial dispensation.¹

Nuqtawī advanced a theory of mystical materialism and cyclical renewal that essentially called for a renewed humanist creed beyond the pale of Islamic dispensation. Almost exclusively consisted of Persian émigrés, refugees and self-exiles to India who escaped persecution in Safavid Iran, they were often depicted in the hostile sources under the general rubric of mulḥids (heretics; atheists; agnostics) and for obvious reasons their presence and influence were downplayed, and their traces were paled if not entirely wiped out by their contemporaries or by later Islamic sources.

Yet despite meager information about them, it is clear that the Nuqtawī advocates, and more so the Nuqtawī ideas, thrived in the multi-confessional environment of India as late as the 17th century where they remained part of the intellectual and literary landscape. Even after the execution of Prince Dārā Shikūh (1615–1659) and elimination of his cultural circle by his prevailing brother Aurangzeb (1658–1707), the Nuqtawī beliefs seem to have lingered among the itinerant Khâksâr dervish order in India and Iran.

¹ For religious policy under Akbar and the emergence of Dīn-i Ilāhī see Ahmad, Dīn-i Ilāhī, Sharma, The Religious Policy 18–68, Roychoudhury, The Dīn-i Ilāhī, Ahmad, Akbar 21–38, and more recently Grobel, Der Dichter. Aziz Ahmad’s assertion in his EP² entry that “the trend of recent scholarship is to treat the Dīn-i Ilāhī as a heresy within Islam, rather than a form of apostasy” is typical of the anxieties in the scholarship of Indian Islam which tends to view Dīn-i Ilāhī within tenets of Islam rather than a break from it.
and survived as diffuse motifs in the poetry of the period. By the time the author of Dabistān-i Madhāhib rendered his relatively accurate account of Nuqtawīs some time in the latter half of the 17th century, there were still Nuqtawī leaders and followers in India. The author of Dabistān, presumably a follower of Ādhar Kaywān’s neo-Zoroastrian school in India, or possibly his son, may very well have been in contact with the Dārā Shikūh circle where Nuqtawīs were free to confess their beliefs. He interviewed six of them whom he identified by name. Among whom there are four “trustees” (umanāʾ), which in turn suggests the existence of a Nuqtawī network.2

It may also be argued that the rise of the neo-Ṣūfī conservatism in the latter part of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century in part was because of the popularity of Nuqtawī and similar heresies in the Indian subcontinent. The conservative, even puritanical, theology of wahdat-i shuhūd (unity of vision), a transcendental interpretation of divinity as being completely distinct from human existence, advanced by the well-known Naqshbandi theologian Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) and his followers. Reassertion of the Islamic shariʿa under emperor Aurangzeb was in large part inspired by Sirhindī’s teachings in responses to the prevalence of the doctrines of the “unity of being” (wahdat-i wujūd). At least since the 13th century the doctrine of “unity of being” was favored among majority of Ṣūfī thinkers in the Persianate world. In its extreme form, this doctrine was close to the Nuqtawī theory of “pointism” (from the term nuqta: point as the building block of man and universe) and its corollary, the doctrine of the universal conciliation (ṣulḥ-i kull).3

Rise of the shariʿa-dominated Shiʿism in Safavid Iran from the first quarter of the 16th century on the other hand and sporadic persecution of nonconformists of all sorts, as has been recorded from the early part of the 17th century, drove off a large number of mystics, poets, philosophers and artists with libertarian affinities to neighboring Ottoman and Mughal

2 Dabistān. Eighth chapter (taʿlīm-i hashtum) deals with the Nuqtawīs who are identified as Wāhidīyya. For the author of Dabistān see Mojtabāʾi, Dabestān who identifies him as Mīr Dhulfiqār Ardistānī better known as Mullā Moʿbad or Moʿbadshāh. This identification however has been soundly rejected (along with earlier erroneous identifications) by R. Riḍāzāda Malik in his scholarly edition of Dabistān ii, 9–76. He identifies Kaykhusraw Isfandiyār son of Ādhar Kaywān the only possible author. Such proposal, if can be proven beyond doubt, confirms close relations between Nuqtawīs and Ādhar Kaywānīs in India.

3 For significance of nuqta (point) in Nuqtawī doctrine see Amanat, Nuqtawī Movement 284–289. Recent studies on Sirhindī suggest that even Sirhindī was preoccupied with millenarian themes. See below.