Akbar and Tolerance

Michael Wood – BBC History Magazine

In India, the emperor Akbar (1556-1605) was one of the greatest figures in world history. Ruler, administrator, war leader, person of culture, he has close comparisons with Elizabeth I, and he initiated one of the most fascinating experiments in the history of civilisation.

Confronted by India’s many religions, with their claims to absolute truth, Akbar came to see that no religion can have superiority.

Questions

1. Who did Akbar how regular meetings with?
2. Why is this significance?
3. What did Akbar want to establish in his empire?
4. Why was it important for Akbar to overrule the Qur’an and other religions?
5. Why did Akbar want Absolute Peace or peace for all?
6. What was the Jizya?

Akbar began to hold weekly conferences with wise men (not women, so far as we know) from all faiths to talk through these questions, and to apply that knowledge to ruling the state. Eventually, he took over spiritual leadership. He even got the Muslim clergy to pronounce a *fatwa* (judgement) that he could judge in any dispute between religious authorities – so he could even overrule the Qur’an, if necessary in the public interest.

This led to claims among his opponents that he had actually rejected Islam and “*became a Kaffir*.” But maybe we should say he tried to develop a new concept of faith. As a great ruler, he wanted to establish a universal principle of tolerance, which he called *sulh-I kul:* ‘Absolute Peace’ or ‘Peace for All.’

There are two practical sides to this. One was to establish freedom of worship in public, abolishing the hated tax levied on the Hindu majority – the *Jizya*, “the contribution for not being put to death.” So Mughal India was to be a unified state in which non-Muslims could claim the same rights as Muslims.

The second concerned the private faith of the elite. He called this the *Din i-Ilahi* or ‘Worship of God.’ One of his most extraordinary ideas. At its core were 10 cardinal virtues or rules of conduct, the essence of which was to promote mutual tolerance. What he was trying to do was to combine aspects of different faiths – conducts, ethics and rituals – borrowing bits from all religions to make an ethical code for his inner circle.

Questions

1. How many cardinal virtues did Akbar create and what did they try and promote?
2. What happened in India during 1947?
3. What are the main 2 religions of India?
4. What did Akbar try and do with the various religions in India?

Some have thought him far ahead of his time, but he has also been accused of devising a pick and mix religion. At the time, a Christian critic said: “it ended up being nothing.” Later historians in the British Raj (India under British Control) emphasised differences between Hindu and Muslim as part of their divide and rule policy, dubbed it “ridiculous.” Looking at it now, in the 21st Century, maybe you could say that Akbar’s intuitive intelligence was smarter than their perspectives. His legacy was rolled back by less-enlightened successors, but it left its mark on Nehru and Gandhi and the independence struggle that, in 1947, gave birth to a secular India. Today, in an India ruled by Hindu nationalists, these are still massive issues – ones that also, I dare say, affect all of us in the wider world, too.

Extra Challenge

Pick either Nehru or Gandhi and research at least 5 interesting facts about them:

Extra Extra Challenge: how do you think they were influenced by Akbar?