The A’in-i Akbari and Modernity: Should we Reconsider the Akbar-`Alamgir Binary?

a talk by

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Talk Abstract:
A common stereotype of Mughal historiography is that of Akbar as the champion of inter-religious harmony, and of his great grandson `Alamgir as the champion of a narrow, puritanical Islam that approached, if not reached, bigotry. For some, `Alamgir is presented as single-handedly undermining the harmonious empire that Akbar is said to have built, not only leading to the decline of the empire but the unravelling of Indian society and even – in its extreme form – paving the way for the partition of British India in 1947. In this narrative, `Alamgir as hyper-villain is destined to be forever “Aurangzeb”, as if he had never occupied the Peacock Throne. In short, Akbar and `Alamgir have both become cardboard cut-out caricatures. I would challenge these hackneyed stereotypes, and suggest that a careful reading of the A’in-i Akbari and other contemporary sources can help us reframe how these two emperors most profoundly differed from each other, and highlight what they shared in common. Instead of viewing them through the lens of religion, I propose seeing them through that of modernity.

Speaker Bio:
Richard Eaton is Professor of History at the University of Arizona. His research interests focus on the social and cultural history of medieval and early modern India (1000-1800), and especially on the range of interactions between Islamic and Indian cultures that took place at that time. He is also active in the growing subfield of world history, as well as comparative history. Prof. Eaton has published monographs on the social roles of Sufis (Muslim mystics) in the Indian sultanate of Bijapur (1300-1700), on the growth of Islam in Bengal (1204-1760), and on the social history of the Deccan from 1300 to 1761, and on the interplay between memory and art in the Deccan plateau between 1300 and 1600. Most recently, he has published the second volume of the new Penguin history of India, entitled India in the Persianate Age, 1000-1765, which explores the long-term interaction between the Persianate and Sanskritic worlds, between the Iranian Plateau and South Asia, and between Islam and Indian religious traditions. Prof. Eaton is the recipient of multiple book awards including the Albert Hourani Book Award for the best book in Middle Eastern Studies and the A. K. Coomaraswamy Book Award for the best book in South Asian Studies, as well as three film awards for his 2002 film on European contact with Asia entitled, Through the Looking Glass.