

“Divine Love in a World History Perspective: Contributions of Medieval Female Saints”

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Scholars have noted that similar notions of Divine Love have existed among the mystical traditions within Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. And by Divine Love I am referring to the means in which someone, usually the mystic, uses love as a way of experiencing and uniting with God. Now central to the development of Divine Love, also known as love-mysticism, were the poetic contributions of the female saints in each of these religions. Yet to date a comparative study does not exist. Why? I suspect that many scholars would agree with noted religious studies expert Carol Lee Flinders who wanted to write just such a book, but stated that, “my own scholarly training was in the literature of medieval Europe...I don’t know Hindi and the cultural divide is so considerable that I could not do” justice to such an endeavor.¹ Isn’t it great to be a world historian and to be liberated from the shackles of narrow national specialization! These global studies are vitally important not only to our understanding of the cross-cultural transmission of ideas and beliefs, but also as a means to better understand individual traditions as well. Such daunting comparisons must be tackled despite the

linguistic barriers; here we must rely on the translations provided by specialized linguists – just as we rely on the numbers calculated by economists, demographers, or geologists in our own research. And we, as world historians, are just the right kind of trained specialists to take on such a challenge.

I teach Islamic World, History of India, Classical and Christian Europe, and World Religions. I can't help but make connections across regional boundaries. My current project is an investigation of the remarkable similarity of beliefs among medieval female mystics in Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Today I will identify the similar notions of Divine Love, and the next step in my research will be to identify specific points of contact among the mystics following the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth century and the gradual expansion of the Dar al-Islam into the Indian sub-continent. I need to investigate if increased contact among mystics of multiple faiths fostered an emphasis on the notion of Divine Love. But for now I have identified how the saint poets in each tradition used the idiom of romantic love -- often erotic -- between a man and a woman as a suitable metaphor to explicate the intimate relationship between humans and God. The concept reached its height in the 12th and 13th centuries as love

mysticism swept across Europe, the Dar al-Islam, and the Indian subcontinent. Central to the formulation the Divine Love movement was the voice of the female mystic, who increasingly saw themselves as love-sick “brides” or the besotted “lovers” of either Christ, Krishna, or Allah. **I argue that the passionate love affairs of the sainted women mystics with their God, as revealed in their poetry and prayers, shaped the most fundamental components of mysticism’s religious tenets, as well as the most common forms of piety in their respective traditions.**

Notions of Divine Love can be independently found in the Christian *New Testament* (2nd century AD), the *Bhagavad Gita* (3rd century BC to 3rd century AD), and the *Qur’an* (6th century AD). Mystics in each religion look first to their own scriptures for inspiration and guidance in their quest for direct union with God. **I will save time today by not stating these passages – but I will if there are questions.** *Christian mystics, for example, find insight in Jesus’ supreme commandment in Matthew 22:37 “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Hindus following the bhakti path of loving devotion look to Krishna’s revelation in chapter 10:9 of the Bhagavad Gita which states, “To those who worship me always with loving devotion, I give the real wisdom*

by which they come to me.” And finally in Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, the Sufis view Muhammad as the “pairer” who unites the people of faith to God as stated in the Qur’an 51:49-50, “Of everything we have created pairs that you may be mindful [to the Grace of Allah], so flee to God. Surely I am a plain warner to you from Him.” There is also the passage that states that Allah is closer to us than our own jugular vein (50:17). Thus the mystics argue that the seeds or source of Divine Love were inherently present in the earliest texts of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.

I’ll begin with Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, which emerged in the eighth century in Iraq as reaction against the materialism and ostentatious wealth of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750).² The first Sufis in Iraq embraced a contemplative and ascetic lifestyle as characterized by their woolen clothing (*suf* mean wool in Arabic).³ One of the first well-known Sufis, al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), was a theologian known for his extreme asceticism and his perpetual fear against God’s judgment. His sermons warned his fellow believers to avoid consorting with the Umayyad rulers and, especially, with women -- no matter how virtuous.⁴ The transition of Sufism from primarily a movement of asceticism to one of mysticism with an emphasis on Divine

Love was solely due to the influential poetry and prayers from a woman from Basra named Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 801).

Rabi'a was born c. 717 in Basra and died in 801. Her biographers relate that she became orphaned at a young age and was sold into slavery.⁵ During her tenure as a slave, Rabi'a's master was deeply moved by the pious woman's incessant prayers and fasting as she carried out her duties. Soon he freed her in order to fulfill Rabi'a's desire to renounce the world and give up her life to the service of God. The burgeoning Sufi movement in Basra at that time was known for its asceticism; its practitioners sought union with God along the Sufi path or stages until the mystic is in the presence of God. Unlike orthodox Islam, Sufism offered equality between the sexes in their religious pursuits, and women attained the rank of saint almost as often as men.⁶ At the time of Rabi'a, however, the Sufis sought God either out of fear of eternal damnation or out of hope for heavenly reward. Rabi'a rejected this position and her biographers report her saying she wished to extinguish both heaven and hell so that "both veils (i.e., hindrances to the true vision of God) may completely disappear."⁷ At that point, Rabi'a argued, humans could then serve God solely out of absolute love for God .

Thus it was Rabi'a's revolutionary teachings that formed the central tenet of Sufism, that of *Hubb-e-Illahi* or Divine Love. Rabi'a combined the current doctrine of *Kashf*, which literally means "unveiling" and for Sufis it meant the final revelation of God at the end of the Sufi path, with her notion of absolute love of God solely because God is worthy of that love.⁸ Inspired by Rabi'a's compositions, Sufi poetry thereafter focused primarily on the fervent union of the lover with the Beloved. Her biographer Attar calls her, "that woman on fire with love and ardent desire...consumed with her passion [for God]."⁹ Listen to Rabi'a's words:

O my Joy and my Desire and my Refuge,
My Friend and my Sustainer and my Goal,
Thou art my Intimate, and longing for Thee sustains me...
Thy love is now my desire and my bliss,
And has been revealed to the eye of my heart that was athirst,
I have none beside Thee, Who doest make the desert blossom,
Thy art my joy, firmly established within me,
If Thou art satisfied with me, then
O Desire of my heart, my happiness has appeared.¹⁰

The Sufi poet -- both male and female -- henceforth frequently used erotic language to convey in allegory the rapture of the mystic with his or her ultimate union with God.

Love mysticism did not emerge in Christianity until the 12th century and is attributed to the Cistercian monk St. Bernard of Clairvaux (c.1190-1153).¹¹ Bernard wrote a series of sermons on the first two verses of “Song of Solomon” in the *Old Testament* -- those sensual verses which extol a bride’s love for her bridegroom. In Bernard’s sermons, he depicts the bride “as a figure that represents both the Church and the individual soul, whereas the bridegroom stands for Christ. ...the goal is the ecstatic union of the bride and the bridegroom.”¹² Yet this “spiritual marriage” he proposed became transformed and popularized by female mystics who characterized themselves as “brides of Christ.” Christian doctrine, as taught by the Cistercians, considered only the bridegroom [Christ] as divine. But the female mystics of the 12th and 13th centuries developed radical interpretations of the Cistercian’s bridal imagery and depicted themselves not only as noble and strong, but also as fully divine as they became transformed through Divine Love.¹³ For instance in the new consecration liturgy of nuns, women challenged male gender privileges as they entered into bridal union with Christ.¹⁴

Moreover, the devotional prayers and poetry of the female mystics took on the characteristics of the troubadour’s songs of courtly love. Consider, for

example, the lyrics of this hymn by St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a contemporary of St. Bernard who corresponded with him regularly. Here she writes about a legendary 3rd or 4th century Christian martyr, Ursula:

Ursula fell in love
with God's Son in a vision:
her faith was true. She rejected
her man and all the world
and gazed straight into the sun,
crying out to her beloved,
fairest of the sons of men:

"With yearning I have yearned
to come to you and sit by you
at our wedding in heaven!
Let me race to you strangely,
chase you like a sapphire cloud
where the sky is purest."¹⁵

The words of the medieval Christian mystics are paradoxical as they clearly use erotic undertones, yet at the same time celebrate the bride's chastity.

Hildegard writes, "And as a bridegroom loves his bride with exceeding love, so does My Son sweetly embrace His brides, who for love of chastity eagerly run to him."¹⁶ Hildegard further elevates the status of women as having attained the rank of priest (an exclusive male position) saying, "A virgin betrothed to My Son will receive Him as Bridegroom, for she has shut her body away from a physical husband; and in her Bridegroom she has the

priesthood and all the ministry of My altar, and with Him possess all its riches.”¹⁷ Thus by rejecting earthly marriage and instead embracing bridal mysticism and celibacy, Christian female saints attained a prominent religious status.

Celibacy figured into Muslim and Hindu mysticism as well. A brief comparison reveals that even in Islam, where orthodox religious leaders criticize celibacy, convents for Sufi women existed from an early period; in fact, several were founded in Mecca.¹⁸ Like their Christian counterparts, Sufism allowed women to improve their social status as they achieved a high rank in the religious life. Moreover, celibacy permitted these women to pursue their religious quest without distraction. Rabi’a was the first to reject an earthly marriage in favor of a heavenly one.¹⁹ She rejected a suitor saying that, “The contract of marriage is for those who have a worldly existence...[but] my existence is in Him, and I am altogether His.”²⁰ Yet despite Rabi’a’s example, many, if not most, of the early female Sufi saints were also wives and mothers -- as were a few Christian saints.²¹ The same was true for female saints of India who followed the *bhakti* path of yoga -- where the devotee develops an intense love and desire for God, without any selfish motive, as a means of union with God.

The *bhakti* path was first expressed in the *Bhagavad Gita* and later explicated in the *Bhagavata Purana* (c. 9th -10th century) under the influence of the Tamil Vaishnavites in south India. The word *bhakti* is derived from the Sanskrit word “bhaj” which means to be attached to God.²² The *bhakti* movement of loving devotion was popularized between the 6-10th centuries by the Tamil poets of south India whose rejected the caste dominated Brahman orthodoxy and ritualism in favor of the more individualized and personal path of devotion to either Shiva (Shaivism) or Vishnu (Vaishnavism) and Vishnu’s incarnation Krishna. In the *bhakti* tradition, a devotee worshiped his or her lord in numerous ways -- as a friend, mother, father, child, or master. But the most common form of devotion is the *madhura bhava* relationship where God is depicted as the Beloved and the devotee as the lover.²³ This form evolved in the hands of the Tamils who already possessed a tradition of secular romantic poetry -- known as *aham* poetry. When they encountered the more ascetic spiritual tradition of the north in around the 6th century, they blended their concept of *shringara rasa* (the element of erotic or romantic love in their arts) with Sanskrit *bhakti* yoga into a new transformed *shringara bhakti* -- a combination of “northern spirituality with southern sensuality.”²⁴ Traveling from temple to temple, the Tamil singer saints²⁵ transmitted the romantic expressions of *aham* poetry in

bhakti songs as they launched a mass *bhakti* movement that spread among all classes in south India and eventually spread throughout northern India from the 12-18th century. The goal of the devotee was a passionate and exclusive loving attachment to God as a means to complete union. Open to all regardless of caste or sex, the *bhakti* movement improved the religious status of Indian women considerably (however, in their case, not the social status) -- just as we saw in medieval Christian mysticism and Sufism.

One of the earliest, and the most popular and beloved of Tamil poet saints was a fifteen year old devotee of Vishnu named Andal from the sixth century.²⁶ Andal defied the traditional route of marriage and instead identified herself as the bride of Krishna.²⁷ In the second of her two works, a poem of 143 verses called *Sacred Utterance* (Tirumozhi), she describes her obsession with marrying Krishna during all her waking and sleeping moments. Daily Andal dressed herself up in garlands, that were later offered to the local temple deity, as she imagined herself in the role of the bride of Krishna. In her first work, *Song Divine* (*Tiruppavai*), thirty verses reveal Andal's passionate and irrepressible yearning to be one of the *gopis* -- the cowherd girls who serve Vishnu in his incarnation as Krishna. She writes: "Desire for the Lord consumes me, the Lord who measured the worlds, his

power I cannot resist, his slave I have become.” Her longing for Krishna intensifies in her ardent plea to the rain clouds:

O cool clouds, go to him who churned the ocean deep
fall at the sacred feet of the lotus-eyed lord of Venkatam
and make this request on my behalf
tell him that my life will be spared only if he will come
to stay with me for one day
if he will enter me so as to leave
the mark of his saffron paste upon my breasts.²⁸

Andal’s erotic imagery as Krishna’s lover left an unparalleled mark not only on Indian literature, but also dance. The classic Tamil dance *Bharatanatyam* features Andal’s divine love for Krishna. Following the times of Andal, all devotees of Krishna, whether male or female, conceived of themselves as one of the *gopis* -- the female lovers of Krishna. Males Vaishnavites transformed themselves both inwardly – and sometimes outwardly in their dress – into women in order to identify with the *gopis* who longed for the love of Krishna.²⁹ Moreover, Andal’s poetry has had a tremendous effect on daily religious life in South India. In Tamil Nadu, her *Song Divine* is recited daily in Vaishnava temples and remains enormously popular among the Tamils today.³⁰

Clearly, the notion of Divine Love as conceived and articulated by the early female saints in the mystical movements within Islam, Christianity, and

Hinduism energized the movement of Divine Love in the later medieval era. Mysticism offered women a opportunity to participate fully in religious life and to achieve high ranking positions in the religious sphere -- opportunities not available to them within the conventional, male-dominated orthodox traditions. In return, the contributions of the female saints toward articulating the concept of Divine Love thoroughly revolutionized mysticism in all three religious cultures in ways that their male counterparts were unable to realize fully. Their achievements were primarily due to their romantic concepts of bridal mysticism and/or a besotted lover with her Beloved. In the Christian tradition, St. Paul and later St. Bernard may have been the first to liken the Church to a bride and Christ as a Bridegroom, but the works of Hildegard of Bingen and her followers (Saints Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Genoa, the Beguines) and the erotic imagery that accompanied the notion of bridal mysticism among devout medieval women thoroughly entrenched the notion of Divine Love as an accepted practice of popular devotional piety.³¹ For the Sufis, Rabi'a was the first Muslim to articulate Divine Love -- a notion that then became the centerpiece of all later Sufi orders and practices. And Andal's poetry -- that of a love-sick teenager -- and her spiritual marriage to Krishna forever altered the Vaishnavites relationship with his or her Beloved; henceforth

males and females alike adopted the stance of a hyper-sentimental female *gopi* head-over-heals in love with Krishna. Thus the concept of divine love - - so central to mystics in all three traditions -- could never have been conceived without the contributions of these early female pioneers who were the first to envision themselves as lovers serving their Beloved.

¹ Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), xix.

² Western scholars of Islam have long claimed that following the Arab conquest of Iraq in the seventh century, Muslims contact with eastern Christian monasticism led to the ascetic practices and beliefs of the early Sufis.² Yet prominent Muslim scholars such as Sayyed Hussein Nasr, a practitioner of Sufism himself, asserts that Sufism's origin developed from the Qur'an itself -- not outside influences -- and Sufis themselves have always traced their spiritual lineage back to Muhammad and God. See Sayeed Hussein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 165; Denny, *Introduction to Islam*, 212.

³ Egger, too, notes that "even the woolen clothing characteristic of the early Sufis was almost certainly a direct borrowing from Christian monasticism." *A History of the Muslim World*, 124.

⁴ Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 218.

⁵ For a complete list and assessment of Rabi'a's biographers, see "Survey of Sources" in Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi'a and other Women Mystics in Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 2-15.

⁶ Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸ *Ibid.*.

⁹ *Ibid.* 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹¹ Bridal imagery can also be attributed to the letters of Paul in both second Corinthians and Ephesians chapter 5. For example, in 2 Corinthians 11:2 "[Paul reminded the church in Corinth that they were married to Jesus.] For I am jealous over you with Godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one Husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Nonetheless, although the terms "bride" and "bridegroom" were used in Christian imagery, it was not popularized until St. Bernard.

¹² K.R. Sundararajan, "Bridal Mysticism: A Study of St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Nammalvar," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 43:3, Summer 2008, 414 – 415.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁴ Ulrike Wiethaus in Margaret Schaus (ed), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, (NY: Routledge, 2006), 94.

¹⁵ Saint Hildegard of Bingen, with introduction, translations, and commentary by Barbara Newman. *Symphonia: a critical edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum [Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations]* 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 241. In 1106, a group of bodies were unearthed in a Cologne cemetery. It was believed that they were the relics of the English martyr Ursula and her companions, who had fled from unwanted marriages and were martyred at Cologne some 900 hundred years before. Hildegard's first monastery had one of the these relics, and Hildegard wrote several hymns in Ursula's honor.

¹⁶ Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

¹⁸ Smith notes that several early convents were mentioned in the *Chronicles of Mecca*. In the 12th century, the convent of the Hurrish for women who belonged to the Shafi'rite was founded in Mecca. Another 13th Meccan convent was known as the Bint al-Taj. In Egypt, the most famous convent for women was known as the Hostel of the Baghdadis built in the early 14th century by the daughter of the king.

¹⁹ Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

²¹ St. Adelaide, St. Monica, St. Anne, and St. Elizabeth are a few. St. Birgitta is a married saint from the 14th century. Nonetheless, all the women saints who had experienced sexual relations in their earlier life consider romantic love as deplorable and a hindrance to spiritual enlightenment.

²² Karel Werner, *Love Divine: Studies in Bhakti and Devotional Mysticism*, (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993), 168.

²³ Sharada Sugirtharajah, "Women in Hinduism" in Paul Bowen (ed), *Themes and Issues in Hinduism* (London: Cassell, 1998), 64.

²⁴ Harsha V. Dehejia, *A Celebration of Love: The Romantic Heroine in the Indian Arts*, (New Delhi: Roli and Janssen, 2004), 288.

²⁵ Known as the Alvars and the Nayanmars. The twelve Alvars promoted ecstatic love of Vishnu-Krishna, while the sixty-three Nayanmars were Shaivite devotional poets.

²⁶ In Vaishnavism, the saints were considered to be in a perpetual state of communion with God. The male saints are called *Alvars* and the corresponding female term is *Andal*, whose name signifies “she who dives deep into the ocean of love divine.” The term Andal became the distinctive name of a single saint (one of the twelve Alvars) who came to personify the concept of bridal mysticism among the Vaishnavites. Swami Ghananada and John Stewart-Wallace, *Women Saints East and West*, (Hollywood: Vendanta Press, 1955), 23.

²⁷ See Steven J. Rosen, *Vaisnavi: Women and the Worship of Krishna*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidars, 1999) and Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints*. (New Delhi: 2002).

²⁸ Harsha V. Dehejia, *A Celebration of Love*, 288.

²⁹ Sujirtharajah, “Women in Hinduism,” 64. Famous male saints who “suspended their masculinity in order to relate to Krishna” include Jayadeva (12th century), Caitanya (15th century), and the 19th century Sri Ramakrishna dressed like a women and identified with Radha.

³⁰ Women in the Shavite tradition in South India, too, were highly regarded. One sixth century Tamil saint, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, one of the greatest figures of early Tamil literature, contributed important verses in the Shaivite scriptures.

³¹ Consider the Beguines contribution to the formation of spiritual lay communities for both men and women.