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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

The Path of Devotion: Religious Ecstasy in Hindu and Christian Mystics

Jessica Leu

Abstract: What comes to mind when one hears the phrase, “Religious ecstasy”? Images of well-known Christian saints in states of bliss worthy of being artwork come to mind, especially in the West. However, this association of ecstasy with Sainthood specifically distances the layperson from the idea that they too can experience the Divine as these mystics once did. In Bhakti Yoga, a branch of practices within Hinduism, this same association that religious ecstasy is only a characteristic of mystics does not exist. Rather, states of documented religious rapture are not only strived for but believed to be universally accessible. In my paper, “The Path of Devotion: Religious Ecstasy in Hindu and Christian Mystics” I explore the narratives of 4 mystics from two different religious traditions, then compare the similarities in their testimonies. By drawing upon the experiences Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Chaitanya Mahabraphu, and Meera Bai, I explore the implications of the similarities in their love for the divine. In doing so, it is clear: not only do these mystics have more in common than meets the eye, but their experiences speak of a universal truth accessible to all of humanity. In this paper, I argue that the experience of religious ecstasy and love for the divine transcends cultural, geographic, and religious barriers.

Keywords: Religious Ecstasy, Ecstasy, Mysticism, Mystics, Christianity, Hinduism, Bhakti Yoga

Introduction

Religious ecstasy is a phenomenon that transcends religious affiliation. Alongside the concept of God, there is no single definition or exclusive experience of religious ecstasy. The very personal accounts of Hindu and Christian mystics are evidence of the same emotional transcendental experiences of the divine. Upon reading *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich, I recognized instantly that it was remarkably similar to the experiences of bhakti yoga often documented in the Hindu Vaishnava movement. Unlike in Christianity, where scenes of religious ecstasy are often critiqued or doubted in their authenticity, religious ecstasy found within bhakti yoga is available for all devotees to strive for and experience. It is not a confined or rare experience only discovered by saints.

For this paper, I will observe the accounts of multiple Christian and Hindu mystics and compare their religious experiences to one another. Julian of Norwich is only one example of a well-known Christian mystic. Thomas Aquinas and Teresa of Avila are also known to have had very deep emotional experiences with the Divine throughout their lives. Meanwhile, in Hinduism, Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the Saint Mirabai are well known for being mystics of exemplary character and love for their Godhead, Sri Krishna. In this paper, I will argue that the experience of religious ecstasy and love for the divine transcends cultural, geographical, and religious barriers.

Christian Mystics

A. Revelations of Divine Love

Julian of Norwich was an English Christian mystic and theologian born in the early fourteenth century. Her text *Revelations of Divine Love* remains her biggest contribution to Christian mysticism. These writings overflow with emotions of love, longing, and adoration for God. Julian manages to encompass her emotions experienced towards the divine with incredible detail in her writing. The love expressed for both Jesus and God cannot be overstated. Julian longs to have been present at the crucifixion of her savior, “so that I could have suffered with him as others did who loved him”.¹

She describes the blood pouring down Jesus’ face from the crown of thorns pushed violently onto his head, grieving the pain experienced by the Messiah. She begs for a sickness that ends in death to overtake her, because she “wanted no hopes of fleshly or earthly life”² and “longed to be with God”³. Julian loves Jesus so much that she states, “I wanted to suffer with him, while living in my mortal body,”⁴ so grateful for the sacrifice of his life in her faith. Jesus’ agony is matched by her own agony. Even without being present at the crucifixion, Julian truly suffers with her savior as though the nails pierce her own palms.

While this kind of extreme devotion may seem bizarre in today’s Western Christianity, it is actually a very well documented mode of attachment to the divine in the East. This rhetoric is reminiscent of texts from the Hindu bhakti yoga movement, striving to be with God and achieving

1 Juliana and Frances Beer, *Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love: The Shorter Version* ed. from B. L. Add. MS 37790, (Heidelberg: Winter, 1978), 175.

2 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 176.

3 Ibid., 176.

4 Ibid., 178.

salvation through union with him. Bhakti yoga, the path of devotion, is a very deeply spiritual practice. It is a path of salvation focused on loving devotion to a personal god, most often to Krishna. More than a practice, it is a mode of being— one that Julian of Norwich very clearly achieves as documented in *Revelations of Divine Love*. She describes a desperate thirst, a longing to be with her creator, saying: “Until I become one substance with him, I can never have love, rest or true bliss; that is to say, until I am so bound to him that there may no created thing between my God and me.”⁵ Her devotion, her bhakti, to God is identical to the goal of achieving moksha in Hinduism, to achieve unity with her creator. This level of absolute surrender to her faith is a model of devotion for Christians, but why not for Hindus as well?

Julian continues, “If a man or a woman were under the wide waters, if he could see God he would be safe, body and soul, and be unharmed, and furthermore, he would have more joy and comfort than words can say.”⁶ The peace that accompanies union with God and all that this union provides eliminates all worldly and bodily suffering. What Julian desperately longs for is beyond that of her mortal body and this world. This call from God to the individual soul of a person is one that any person can experience. While Julian’s true ecstasy in her devotion to God can feel unfamiliar, people of all religious traditions can reach this point of utter madness and desperation for the Divine.

The text is structured personally, an account of her visions and intimate relationship with God as Jesus. It is filled to the brim with *pathos*, inspiring an emotional response within the reader as though they were also at the feet of Jesus’ crucifixion. The submission of the individual soul (the atman in Hinduism) with the Supreme, Absolute Soul (God/Paramatman in Hinduism) is an important experience for humanity. In Christianity this union is seen as occurring exclusively after death, more specifically described as seeing the face of God in heaven. Julian is clearly experiencing a unity of personal and divine spirit, which can be similarly viewed as moksha in Hinduism. God “wants us to believe that we can see him constantly, even though we think we see very little of him.”⁷ God is a constant presence in the lives of all men and women. This firm belief in unity between the two is reminiscent of a verse in the Quran that states Allah is closer to humanity than their jugular vein.⁸

B. Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic born in 1515, is also well known for having similar intimate religious experiences. Teresa lived in a period of religious turmoil in Europe, in which she founded several houses for Carmelite friars and nuns who were criticized for living an ascetic form of monastic life uncommon during the time. A white marble statue titled *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* is present in Cornaro Chapel of Rome. It is based on the religious experience found in her autobiography in which an angel appears to her, helping her achieve religious ecstasy in both a violent and intimate manner. The angel carries with him a “long spear of gold” with a “little fire

5 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 179.

6 Ibid., 183.

7 Ibid., 183.

8 The Quran, Surah Qaf, 50:16.

at the iron's point."⁹ The angel violently thrusts the spear into Teresa's heart, "piercing my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God."¹⁰ With this violent, war-like, and even painful act, the angel helps Teresa experience an intense love for the divine. She is on fire with longing, with the pain of separation and loss that accompanies the soul ripped apart from its creator.

She continues, "The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God."¹¹ This imagery and this experience is often criticized as being too pornographic or ecstatic. The extravagant show of these saints is bizarre and even 'too unreasonable' for proper devotion. Sexual undertones are not often embraced in religious experiences of the Abrahamic faith. God is distant, the omnipotent and omnipresent creator. In Christianity, he is not awakening this fire of divine lust in every devotee he touches, piercing them to the very core and eliciting moans and sweet pain every day. This fantastic show of faith is unique in Christianity, and even at times too extreme for Christianity. It is no surprise that Teresa was forced to defend her mystical experiences through her autobiography, especially given a political climate wary of so called 'mystics.' And yet, she writes,

The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.¹²

This love Teresa experiences, even with a violent vision, "seems to imitate the love which Jesus—our good lover—bore us; and hence it proves so profitable, for it embraces all kinds of afflictions, that so others without any pain may reap the benefit thereof."¹³ Here, Jesus is referred to as 'our good lover,' adding even more potentially erotic and sexual undertones to Teresa's emotions towards God. This is reminiscent of another Hindu religious term, the madhurya bhava or lover role. A bhava is a mode of attachment, in other words, a feeling one can have towards God (or a specific face of God). More often than not, the madhurya bhava describes a romantic love for Krishna. But this same application, or feeling, is clearly experienced by Teresa of Avila. She begs,

O my Lord! will you not do me the favour, that I may have many such to love me? Truly, O my Lord! I would more willingly obtain this, than be loved by all the kings and lords of the world; and with great reason, since these labour, by all possible ways, to make us such, that we may command the world itself, and make all things herein subject to us.¹⁴

While extreme, even bizarre in its erotic language, this fanatical vision is so intimate that one might wish or seek to be similarly desperate for unification with God. Is this animalistic, despairing desire for God something that is only a characteristic of chosen Saints? Or is it something everyone, at their core, can achieve in their spiritual lives? In Christianity the case may be that it is a special, uncommon, and unique experience. However, in Hinduism this devotion, if

9 Teresa of Avila, *St. Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*.

10 Teresa of Avila, *St. Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*.

11 Teresa of Avila, *St. Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*.

12 Teresa of Avila, *St. Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*

13 Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*.

14 Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*.

anything, can be experienced both by the layperson and the saint. Union with God is the desire and duty of every soul, and every soul retains the same capacity to achieve it. Like all things, this relationship starts small, like the parable of the mustard seed in the Bible¹⁵. Small at the beginning, growing into something much larger and stronger than could be imagined when it was first planted.

Hindu Mystics

A. Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

The founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and a large influencer of the modern International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was born approximately 1486. For some religious Hindus, he is even seen as the embodiment of Krishna himself. It is because of Lord Chaitanya that kirtan, the singing and chanting of God's holy names, has become so prominent in modern Vaishnava movements. Sri Chaitanya was one of the most popular practitioners of bhakti yoga, the art of devotion. There are many yogas (paths) that can be used to achieve salvation with God, some of which include doing selfless works or studying scripture. Bhakti yoga is one of the most popular means to achieve moksha or nirvana in Hinduism because it was the first practice that appealed to all people regardless of gender, caste, or financial means.

While the experiences of Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich are uncommon and eccentric, these same practices are made accessible to all in Hinduism through the bhakti yoga movement, in which the union of the soul with God is paramount to salvation. Lord Chaitanya's experiences of religious ecstasy might be even more extreme than those of Teresa and Julian. His ecstasy borders on madness and insanity both mentally and physically. According to scripture Lord Chaitanya once sat and meditated on a mantra for Krishna, until "the Lord of his Heart appeared to him."¹⁶ After regaining consciousness he shed tears, calling out, "O my dear Krishna! O Hari, my life and soul! Where did you go after stealing My heart? I saw you, my Lord, but now where have you gone?"¹⁷

The story continues,

The Lord then cried and recited beautiful verses about Krishna, absorbed in sentiments of ecstatic love. His body became covered with dust because He rolled on the ground, loudly calling in distress, "*Where did you go, leaving Me behind, My dear Krishna?*" "He became greatly agitated in ecstatic love of God and floated in the ocean of devotional feelings of separation from Krishna. His students pacified Him with great care."¹⁸

Lord Chaitanya was forcibly pacified by his devotees after rolling in the ground and sobbing, crying for his Lord. So strong was the Lord's love for his Divine savior and face of God, 'The Dark One' as he is sometimes called (the name Krishna means "dark skinned"). For Chaitanya, his love for Krishna is so all-encompassing that he physically cannot contain it. His soul is absorbed by his longing, but his body is limited by his mortality. As a result of this imbalance, he borders on madness and needs to be pacified by his students to prevent further distress.

15 Matthew (13:31-32), Mark (4:30-32), Luke (13:18-19)

16 Shachinandana, *When Chaitanya's Ecstasy Awakened*.

17 Shachinandana, *When Chaitanya's Ecstasy Awakened*.

18 Shachinandana, *When Chaitanya's Ecstasy Awakened*.

From that point on, Lord Chaitanya is determined to see “the Lord of my life, Sri Krishna.”¹⁹ Hellbent on union with God, even if dying was necessary to do so, he was stopped from entering a complete state of madness only through another vision of his Lord.

He cries out,

Alas! Where is Krishna, the treasure of My life? Where is the lotus-eyed one? Alas! Where is the divine ocean of all transcendental qualities? Alas! Where is the beautiful blackish youth dressed in yellow garments? Alas! Where is the hero of the rasa dance with the milkmaids? Where shall I go? Where can I find You? Please tell me. I shall go there.²⁰

Lord Chaitanya is in a constant state of longing for Krishna. He addresses him with terms of endearment similar to that of a lover. He calls him the “beautiful blackish youth” and “the treasure of My life”. Most of, if not all of, his words here are begging for Krishna and his presence. Before he can go completely mad, Krishna intervenes, ordering him to spread the message of bhakti yoga and chanting of the holy names of God— to which Lord Chaitanya complies. Scholar Srila Vishvanatha Cakravarti Thakura once described Chaitanya and his state of being after returning from Gaya (a place of historical and mythological significance in India). Upon seeing Chaitanya Srila Vishvanatha writes, “I saw the most extraordinary person on the road from Gaya. His form was very handsome, and He roared just like the thundercloud. His eyes rained tears, and He rolled about on the ground, His voice choked up in the ecstasy of love of God. All glories to that Lord!”²¹

Even reading Lord Chaitanya’s desperation for Krishna can ignite the strongest longing in the reader. Those same sobs, tears, pure elation, and pure sorrow at separation, arise in even the simplest of devotees. The longing in Lord Chaitanya’s speech could be equivalent to a man estranged from his lover. In the Mahabharata, human love is described as just a shadow of divine love. If the love for another human being can force another to their knees, then that same love for God can drive one mad with insanity. The intimacy between Lord Chaitanya and Krishna, especially in Chaitanya’s own scripture, is what later led to the interpretation that Chaitanya was an embodiment or incarnation of Krishna himself.

B. Meera Bai

A 16th century Hindu mystic and poet, Meera Bai (or Mira Bai) is best known for her absolute devotion to Krishna as her lover. She is celebrated as one of the most well-known Bhakti saints, similar to Lord Chaitanya. Despite her high social status and affluent family, she is best known for her fearless rejection of societal conventions and her devotion to God. Though she was expected to marry and pressured to do so by her family, she viewed Krishna as her husband for life, and refused to marry. This led to further persecution by her in-laws for her religious devotion, which only further drove her to absolute devotion towards God.

Even without authentication from scholars, thousands of devotional poems for Krishna are often attributed to her in the modern Bhakti yoga movement. Her love for Krishna resembles that of a young bride early in her marriage, and her separation from him that of a widow grieving her partner. This love is firmly believed to transcend not only religion, but life itself. She describes

19 Shachinandana, *When Chaitanya’s Ecstasy Awakened*.

20 Shachinandana, *When Chaitanya’s Ecstasy Awakened*.

21 Shachinandana, *When Chaitanya’s Ecstasy Awakened*.

loving Krishna in her current life as well as her past lives, while also affirming her love for incarnations yet to come. In her poem titled, “The Dark One”, she describes purchasing a statue of Krishna at the market. She writes:

You say I gave too much; I say too little.
Actually, I put him on a scale before I bought him.
What I paid was my social body, my town body, my family body, and all my inherited jewels.
Mirabai says: The Dark One is my husband now.
Be with me when I lie down; you promised me this in an earlier life.²²

Mirabai would relinquish everything in her possession to achieve unity with Krishna. Her social status, her financial status, her entire family, and every material possession she owned. Krishna is all that she sees: her husband, her Lord. Who, as the above poem describes, promised unity with her in a previous life. The desire to relinquish her material possessions is reminiscent of Jesus’ parables involving wealth, advising those to gift their possessions to the poor and turn to follow him.

What Meera’s poems lack in eroticism (found in the previous three saints texts), they make up for in desperation and longing. The same violent undertone that exists in Teresa of Avila’s vision and the same desperate madness found in Lord Chaitanya’s can be found here, in the poem “The Dagger”:

The Dark One threw me a glance like a dagger today.
Since that moment, I am insane; I can’t find my body
The pain has gone through my arms and legs, and I can’t find my mind
I know the thrower of daggers well; he enjoys roving the woods.
The partridge loves the moon; and the lamplight pulls in the moth.
You know, for the fish, water is precious; without water the fish dies.
If he is gone, how shall I live? I can’t live without him.
Go and speak to the dagger-thrower; Say, Mira belongs to you.²³

The description of pain, a longing as strong as choking for air, is a common occurrence in religious ecstasy. This pain that derives from desperation and separation is only subdued by a union with God. Many of these saints that supposedly border on insanity often even describe suicidal tendencies to see God. In her poem “The Arrow”, Mirabai finishes with:

Now I’m chained. Who knows my pain, except him?
Helpless, unstoppable crying. Friends, tell me— what more can I do?
Mira says to her Lord: give me your presence or death.²⁴

In the Bhagavata Purana, the Rasa Lila is a traditional story in which Krishna dances with the gopis (milkmaids) of his village. The Indian classical dance Kathak evolved from this story. The word rasa loosely means “aesthetics” and lila derives from the Sanskrit, “act”, “play”, or “dance.” Together, Rasa Lila is translated as “The Dance of Divine Love.” In this story, Krishna draws the gopis from their homes with the sound of his flute. Young or old, married or unmarried, the women abandon their homes, their families, and their children, to search for Krishna in the field and dance with him through the night. In a re-telling of Krishna’s life from the Mahabharata, Devi Vanmali (a Hindu teacher and author) writes the same ancient scripture as a book that absorbs

23 Mirabai Bly Robert, and Jane Hirshfield, *Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004), 27.

23 Mirabai, *Ecstatic Poems*, 4.

24 Ibid., 26.

the reader while still following the original text. The account of the Rasa Lila is one of the most intimate and moving parts of the book. During the dance each gopi felt that she was alone with her beloved, and, forgetting all modesty, she clung to Him and caressed Him. He, in turn, embraced her and transported her to a state of bliss never before attained by anyone, for it was no ordinary physical union that they experienced but the ultimate union of the jivatma with the Paramatma.”²⁵

Krishna supernaturally extends the night to the length of one Night of Brahma, a unit that lasts approximately 4.32 billion years. At any point a gopi desired to keep her Beloved for herself, so that he could not be shared with the other women, Krishna disappears from their arms: a symbolic reminder that God belongs to everyone and cannot be selfishly kept from others. In this night, each of the gopis achieved moksha— liberation from reincarnation and blissful union with God.

After the dance, 4.32 billion years later, Krishna wipes their faces, kisses them, embraces them. Their clothes are falling apart from dancing so long and locks of their hair starting to fall, but,

They knew not, nor cared, for they were quite unconscious of their bodies. He was their husband, their lover, their Lord. Nearer to them than friend or relative, nearer to them than father or mother, dearer to them than life itself. He was flesh of their flesh and soul of their soul. They had no separate existence apart from Him. He alone existed.²⁶

This description of union with the divine is bhakti yoga in the purest sense. A mystical experience happens for the gopis in this sacred text, who have the opportunity to physically be in Krishna’s presence. Their union with one another is so complete that their own ego fades away in Krishna’s, they do not exist apart from him any longer. Mirabai longs and strives for this same union. The desire to experience this relationship with God is shared by all of humanity without even realizing it. Krishna is, for Mirabai, her husband. Jesus is, for nuns, their husband. The difference is nonexistent. Whether it is in the form of heaven, moksha, or nirvana, longing and desperation for the divine can be experienced by members of any religion.

Conclusion

Be it bhakti yoga or Christian mysticism, the longing for union with God transcends religious barriers. Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila experience that same longing, that same emotional attachment for Jesus as Lord Chaitanya and Mira Bai do for Krishna. Krishna and Jesus are one in the same, God incarnate who intervenes when the world is in utter turmoil to save humanity. All religions at their core lead their followers to a union with the divine, a place in which it does not matter which tour guide you followed to reach heaven, nirvana, or moksha.

While many scholars or religious authorities alike may criticize all four of these saints as being too eccentric, too extreme, or too mad, they embody what the soul striving for union with God resembles when everything else is stripped away. At their core is longing, desperation, sorrow and utter elation towards a divine reality with a different name. The lives of each of these saints take place hundreds of years from one another, showing that the desire of the soul to reach the divine continues on regardless of time period and regardless of religion. In the words of Hindu

25 Devi Vanamali, *The Play of God: Visions of The Life of Krishna* (San Diego, CA: Blue Dove Press, 1998), 77.

26 Devi Vanamali, *The Play of God: Visions of The Life of Krishna*, 77.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

poet Sri Aurobindo, "What is God after all ? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden."²⁷ A garden and a child that will continue to dance with its devotees regardless of what name they call out.

²⁷ Aurobindo Ghose, *Thoughts and Glimpses* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1964).



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

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