

Islam and Tantra

At first glance, Islam and Tantrism might seem an unlikely pair for comparison: the former known for its austere simplicity and uncompromising monotheism, the latter presenting a plethora of rituals, mantras, and deities. But looking beneath the surface at the underlying philosophical principles will reveal that the two share much in common.

Both Islam and Tantrism are spiritual paths that arose at the same point in history to allow access to the Divine Reality for ordinary people in the latter age of the world. Both are world-affirming, life-affirming, in contrast to world-denying and life-denying creeds. They see creation and the body not as illusion or evil, but as a positive revelation of the Divine that assists in spiritual realization. Both are socially egalitarian and accord high status to women and the Feminine, in contrast to the milieus they arose in.

Both are paths that lead to the Divine not by shunning or negating this body, but by working through it. The body and the world, when approached in the right way, can become not obstacles, but the very vehicle to the Divine. Life in the world can be sacralized by the divine presence: one needn't be a monk, or a highly spiritually perfected ascetic saint or anchorite, to experience the divine presence. Women are sacred, sex is sacred, eating is sacred, the earth is sacred, the whole world can be transfigured: "*and the earth shines with the glory of its Lord (wa-ashraquat al-ardu bi-nûri rabbihâ)*," as the Qur'ân ecstatically proclaims (39:69).

Salvation for fallen humanity in the Kali Yuga

Islam arose in the seventh century after Christ, and the early texts of Tantrism date from approximately the same time (6th-8th centuries). While Islam is a continuation of the revelations of earlier prophets, its practical approach to worldly and spiritual life contrasts with that of earlier dispensations; for example, the complex Halakhic laws governing Jewish life are very much simplified in Islam. The spiritual life has been made much easier to follow, as the Qur'ân promises: "*We make easy for you the way to ease,*" and Prophet Muhammad said that this way of ours is meant to be easy. No priesthood is required to fulfill any rites, for each individual Muslim man and woman is his or her own priest. The heroic spiritual qualities required of earlier peoples are not required for salvation in Islam, as Allah allowed for the fallen condition of humanity in this late stage of the world and opened access to the highest spiritual realization for all peoples.

Similarly, Tantra is understood as a divine concession to the conditions of the Kali Yuga. In contrast to Brahminism where access to the Divine was controlled by a priestly élite, Tantrism is a way open to anyone of any caste, any station in life. Whereas in the early ages, great rigor and austerities were imposed on spiritual seekers, and superhuman efforts were required, Tantrism like Islam does not demand of people more than they can bear, but takes people as they are and shows them the way to ascend spiritually.

World-affirmation and life-affirmation

Islam has a totally different orientation from the Manichean type of attitude that the world is evil. Rather, the Qur'ân emphasizes that all of creation holds signs for people with hearts, for those who contemplate, signs that show the truth of the Creator and inspire us spiritually. All of virgin Nature becomes transparent, showing the glory of Allah shining through in every stone, every leaf, every creature. The world is not a barrier to the Spirit when understood by people whose hearts are clean and virtuous. Thus Muslims are not to flee the world and withdraw to monasteries and nunneries; they are encouraged to engage fully in life, to marry and earn a living, to work for good in society. In this way spiritual values are infused throughout the entire civilization. The Muslim esoteric orders, the Sufis, although committed to a holy life, are just as engaged in the life of this world as other Muslims, and through their prayers and remembrance of Allah in the midst of it alchemically transmute earthly life into something sacred.

The Tantric attitude toward the world or phenomenal existence also values it as a vehicle for the spiritual life. Tantra presented an alternative to the life-denying Hindu doctrine that negated the world as mere illusion. As the classical Tantric dictum says, "What is here is elsewhere. What is not here is nowhere." *Mâyâ* itself, often translated as "illusion," is in fact the creative, feminine power of the Divine and is related etymologically to the root *mâ*, meaning to measure. Far from being mere illusion, it is the power that through cosmological measurement generates this world and constitutes its substance. Far from being unreal, it is in a sense consciousness veiling itself. Spirit, Mind, and Matter are ultimately one, the two latter being the twin aspects of the Fundamental Substance or Brahman and Its power or Sakti.

The ancient Dravidian tradition was always life-affirming, as the ancient Tamil book of wisdom, the *tirukkural*, demonstrates. Its author **tiruvalluvar** was a member of the lowest caste, the Paraiyans, and his Dravidian vision of the virtuous life is in sharp contrast with that of Vedic Brahminism in its affirmation of worldly life as sacred for everyone. The lowest castes of the ancient Dravidians were essential to the sacred functions that upheld the state and the social order; they fulfilled the roles of sacred drumming and communication, and **tiruvalluvar** continues this perspective in his writing. This world-affirming Dravidian tradition is at the source of Tantra as well, and as such both are congruent with Islam.

The sacred body

Islam does not condemn the body as a hindrance to the spiritual life, but on the contrary ennobles it as a vehicle to ultimate realization. In Islamic the pleasures of the body are not denied or repressed but integrated into a wholesome way of life. As the Prophet said, your body has its rights over you. The spiritual significance of the body in Islam is shown through the bodily postures used in praying *salât*: each of them is potent with cosmic symbolism, so that the body itself is transfigured into a spiritual expression. Thus Islamic prayer is congruent with hatha yoga, which is a branch of Tantric yoga. Islam's unitary, holistic view of the body and spirit is evident in the alchemical saying of the Shi'ite Imams, "*arwâhunâ ajsâdunâ wa-ajsâdunâ arwâhunâ*" (our spirits are our bodies and our bodies are our spirits). In Islamic spirituality, God-consciousness effects an alchemical transmutation on matter so that the body and its pleasures are seen as a sacred divine gift.

An early Islamic classic, *Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Safâ'* (The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity), discusses the metaphysical significance of the human body as a microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm of the whole of creation. Our inner understanding of our bodies is therefore a key for the understanding of the world of nature, as is our comprehension of the rapport between the soul and the body, their complementarity and integration into a whole. The great Sufi sage Muhyî al-Dîn Ibn al-'Arabî developed

many such themes dealing with the body, including sexuality, on the deepest level of their significance in his writings. He says that the body is the seat of the highest reality created by Allah in the whole universe, the *rûh* or the Spirit of Allah Himself which He blew into Adam's body. Altogether the Islamic teachings about the body emphasize its Divine Origin—that is, being created by Allah and possessing the greatest significance for the understanding of the human state.

The Tantric body is considered to be the manifestation of the Divine. The basic tenet of Tantrism is that matter, and therefore the body, is also a manifestation of Sakti power, that is, the power emanating from the feminine aspect of Divine Reality. Hence, the body must not be opposed or despised. The body itself is a form of consciousness so veiled that we get the appearance of insensibility, inertia, and mere mechanical energy. But this is only an appearance. One can contemplate even in the gross body the consciousness that underlies its reality. The practice of *kuNDalini* yoga unites the creating and sustaining Sakti of the whole body with the Lord Consciousness. The yogi makes Her introduce him to Her Lord, and enjoys the bliss of union through her. In *kuNDalini* through the very pulse of life in the body we realize Universal Life. Therefore, the body is to be respected and revered. To deny it is to deny the Divine Life that flows through it; it is to deny the unity of spirit, soul, and body and to forget that it is the manifestation of the Divine Feminine power, Sakti. From the perspective of Tantrism, because the physical, spiritual, and mental cannot be separated, all being aspects of the one all-pervading consciousness, the body must also be considered in spiritual realization and therefore has profound religious significance.

One striking congruence between Islam and Tantra is in the symbolism of the Prophet's night journey to Heaven (*al-mi'râj*). He mounted on a female riding beast with the head of a woman and ascended through the seven heavens to the Divine Presence. The *kuNDalini* is a feminine force (*Sakti*) that ascends through the seven *cakras* to divine realization.

Egalitarianism and social leveling

Both Islam and Tantra came into their respective cultures as a breath of fresh air, opening up a closed social hierarchy in which the powerful classes dominated the lower classes. Both offered a spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood in which all members shared equal status. In Islamic society, according to a hadith, all are "as equal as the teeth on a comb." The new Islamic order allowed the poor and the slaves to stand shoulder to shoulder with the highborn, with no distinction of class or position. Bilal, the freed African slave, was addressed by the Caliph 'Umar as "*sayyidnâ*" (our master), which is the highest term of respect in Arabic; he was accorded that respect for the spiritual nobility of his heart, which is the only distinction recognized in Islam. The Prophet ordered the Muslims to follow leaders who are black slaves. In Tantric circles, this social leveling went even further: not only did *tântrika* assemblies bring together people of all castes, there was even a preference for members of the lowest castes, for the greater spiritual power they brought to the working. This is from the ancient Dravidian heritage of Tantra, in which the lowest castes, the holders of the sacred drums, were essential to the sacred functions of the whole civilization.

Spiritual Feminism

Islam was the first thoroughgoing feminist restructuring of the Middle Eastern society that had been dominated by patriarchy for millennia. Although in subsequent eras, down to the present day, patriarchy was re-established in Muslim lands due to the inevitable decline of spiritual values in the human world, the fact remains that the Qur'ân and Prophet Muhammad uplifted women to be the full and equal spiritual partners of men and established their civil rights and liberties. This has been well documented in the six-volume Arabic book *Tahrîr al-mar'ah fî 'asr al-risâlah* (Women's Liberation in the Era of the Prophet) by 'Abd al-Halîm Muhammad Abû Shuqqah. The new Islamic social order upholding women's liberation was a reflection of the Prophet's love for women, the Islamic recognition of the Divine Feminine aspect of Allah, and the power of the female. Allah commanded reverence for the female reproductive organs, the Yoni (*al-arhâm*) in the Qur'ân (4:1), for its name in Arabic is derived from the divine name al-Rahmân, the All-Merciful. Prophet Muhammad said that woman is the greatest treasure in the world. Through the centuries it has been the Sufi orders who were attuned to the Feminine and kept alive Islam's reverence for the sacredness of women, through the veneration of Mary and of women saints like Râbi'ah. The present spiritual resurgence of Islamic feminism is also being birthed through the Sufi orders that have kept it alive.

Tantrism has been the comparable tradition that has upheld the sacredness of the Feminine in India. Closely interconnected with Saktism, the Tantric veneration of Woman is central to its spiritual working. The *Shaktisangama Tantra* says:

Woman is the Creator of the universe. She is the very body of the universe; woman is the support of the three worlds, she is the very essence of our body. There is no other happiness as that which women can procure. There is no other way than that which woman can open to us. Never has there been, there is, there will be a fortune the like of woman, no kingdom, no place of pilgrimage, yoga, prayer, mystic formula, asceticism, wealth.

This passage is reminiscent of Rumi's poetic lines saying "Woman is a ray of God ... she is Creator, not created." To take another example, the *Kaulâvalî Tantra* says:

One should bow to any female, be she a young girl, flushed with youth, or be she old, be she beautiful or ugly, good or wicked. One should never deceive, speak ill of, or do ill to, a woman and one should never strike her. All such acts prevent the attainment of *siddhi* (success in religious exercise)."

The Kaula Tantriks regarded female gurus very highly and there were many examples of yoginis or female tantriks. In the *Yoni Tantra*, Patala 7, we find: "Women are divinity, women are life, women are truly jewels." This sentiment is echoed in many other tantras such as the *Shakti Sangama Tantra*, *Devirahasya*, and elsewhere. A woman is the Goddess: "Worship carefully a woman or a maiden as she is Shakti, sheltered by the Kulas. One should never speak harshly to maidens or women." (*Kaula Jñana Nirnaya Tantra*, Patala 23)

In both Islam and Tantrism, there is a consistent pattern: high regard for women and empowerment of women are concomitants of veneration for virgin nature, the earth, the body, and sacred sexuality.

Interplay of traditions

In India, many have seen an opposition between Vedanta and Tantra. The former is centered on transcendence, the negation of everything other than the One Real; the latter is centered on immanence, the experience of the Real within the phenomenal manifestations of this life. One well-known example of the opposition between the two is in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. He began as a devotee of Kali Ma, and was a Sakta Tantric initiate. Later he was initiated into Vedanta by a guru who tried to expunge his Tantric tendencies. The tension between the two produced immense suffering in Ramakrishna's soul. His lineage was carried on by Vivekananda who founded the Vedanta Society and downplayed the Tantric side of Ramakrishna.

In Sufism, the polar opposition of transcendence and immanence was not a problem, for both are integrated into a holistic spiritual path, just as Sufism combines both *bhakti* and *jñâna*, love-devotion and intellectual gnosis. The Sufi when invoking the Divine Name of Allah meditates alternately on the discernment of the unreality of the world and the self and everything besides Allah; and on fact that one's own being is nothing other than Allah's Being, immediately present. In this way one realizes the complementarity of the two, how they are the two faces of one and the same ultimate Reality. This esoteric insight is how Sufism was able to overcome the conundrum of divine transcendence (*tanzîh*) and immanence (*tashbîh*) that so perplexed rationalist Islamic theologians and philosophers. Indeed, negation (*nafy*) followed by affirmation (*ithbât*) is the essential structure of the entire doctrine of Islam: No reality but the Reality.

Srîvidyâ is a Dravidian Tantric school of South India, tracing its lineage back to the founder of Advaita Vedanta, Adi Sankaracarya. It is interesting for having united Vedanta and Tantra together in a single spiritual path of devotion to Sakti as Sri Vidya, 'Auspicious Wisdom'. As such it has a striking congruence with Sufism, which should make for an interesting comparative study of the two.

The Nath Siddhas are an alchemical Tantric tradition that was widespread in medieval India, studied extensively in David Gordon White's fascinating book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*. Their activity flowed into many spheres of esoteric activity including hatha yoga, alchemical working, and sacred sex. One major branch of this school was the Tamil *cittar* (Siddhas). The Tamil Tantric master **tirumûlar**, author of the classic *tirumantiram*, has had a major influence on Saiva yoga among Tamils until the present day. The Nath Siddhas were, according to White, more amenable than any other Hindu sect to interaction with Islam. This can be explained through the congruence of the metaphysical principles of Islam and Tantrism. Many are the Nath Siddhas who are known as "Guru" or "Nâth" by their Hindu disciples and "Pîr" by Muslims. The Bauls of Bengal are a prime example of this interaction of Tantrism with Islam; many of them are Muslims who revere Gorakh and other Nath Siddhas, and their songs resemble those of the Buddhist Mahasiddha Tantrists. There is also a prominent place occupied by "Jogis" (Tantric alchemical yogis) in Indian Sufi hagiography.

These exchanges went both ways. According to the *Kalaikkalañciyam* (Tamil Encyclopaedia), Islam made its own contribution to Tamil Siddha tradition: "The Arabians joining hands with the Tamils sailed ships and fought the Portuguese. The Arab contact gave a further impetus to the Siddha system of [Tantric-alchemical] medicine here. The Tamil Muslims of Kayalpattinam were poets who made use of books expounding the Siddha system of medicine. The influence of Islamic Sufis like Rumi found its way into the poetical works of Tamil Siddhars. "Gnanarathina Kuravanji," composed by Pir Muhammad Sahib, was included in the collection of Siddhar devotional songs entitled *Periyagnanakovai*." (Tamil Encyclopaedia, vol. 4, p. 643. Quoted by S. M. Sulaiman in *Islam, Indian Religions, and Tamil Culture*, p. 15-16.)

An eighteenth-century Gujarati text of the Satpanth Nizari Isma‘ilis tells of a renowned Isma‘ili and Sufi master imparting Tantric spiritual instruction to a Nath Siddha Jogi master. It includes both Islamic and Tantric terms, and demonstrates the intersection of these two traditions. A portion of this document has been published with a study by Dominique Sila Khan as "Conversation between Guru Hasan Kabiruddin and Jogi Kanipha: Tantra Revisited by the Isma‘ili Preachers" in *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White, Princeton Readings in Religions.

Conclusion: a meeting of two spiritual oceans

There is something providential about the meeting of the world's oldest religion, Hinduism, and the youngest, Islam, in India. The congruence between the two is aided by the Tantric philosophical tendencies shared by both the ancient Dravidian world (which extended into the Middle East in prehistory) and Islam.

Vedic Brahmanism allowed only the males of the upper castes any spiritual validity. Tantra spiritually empowered women and men of any caste or no-caste whatsoever. Tantra's egalitarian spirituality and upliftment of women, so similar to that of Islam, arose from the primal Dravidian world where women were revered for their female sacred power, and the low castes performed vital religious and state functions.

Naturally, in the course of the playing out of infinite possibilities, there did appear ascetic and monastic, life-denying tendencies among Sufis and yogis. But on the whole, both Tantra and Islam are notable for their life-affirming, nondualist spiritual paths. Most Sufis, as in the Shâdhilî order, are people who live fully in the world and yet live fully in the Sacred.

Both Sufism and Tantra share a vision of God experiencing God's Being concretized, through us *as* us, the human form and heart being the only vehicle capacious enough and refined enough to fully accommodate the embodied Divine Consciousness.

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