Medieval Women Mystics and A Global Era of Divine Love

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Today I am going to argue that women mystics and poets launched a global era of Divine Love, or love-mysticism, between the eight and twelfth centuries from Spain to China. And by Divine Love I am referring to the ways in which mystics use the concept of male-female romantic and/or sexual bliss, most often metaphorically -- but not always -- as a means to unite with God or Absolute Reality. All mystics seek direct union with God or attainment of enlightenment through a union with universal Truth, and Divine Love was frequently the most expedient way to achieve that union. According to the mystical traditions, the bliss of romantic passion is an earthly reflection, or a foretaste, of the union between the soul and God or enlightenment.[1] Central to the development of Divine Love in Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Daoist theologies were the poetic contributions of the female mystics. Scholars of religion have long noted the parallels among the mystical traditions of the various world religions, yet to date a comparative study of Divine Love does not exist. Why? Perhaps because the field of Religious Studies, like History, also engages in narrow specialization. I suspect that many regional historians would agree with

noted religious scholar Carol Lee Flinders, who wanted to write a comparative book among Christian and Hindu mystics, but stated that, "my own scholarly training was in the literature of medieval Europe…[and] I don't know Hindi and the cultural divide is so considerable that I could not do justice to such an endeavor."[2] Yet these commonalities among mystical traditions over specific eras and locales are vitally important to our understanding of the cross-cultural transmission of ideas and beliefs, as well as a means to better understand individual religions. Such daunting comparisons must be tackled despite the linguistic barriers; here we must rely on the translations provided by prominent linguists – just as we rely on the numbers calculated by economists, demographers, or geologists in our own research. World historians are just the right kind of trained specialists to take on such the interdisciplinary, cross-cultural challenge of the spread of religious ideas in the medieval era.

At the WHA in San Diego last year I presented the first half of my comparative study where I emphasized similar notions of Divine Love among medieval female mystics in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. And today I will add Tantric Buddhism and Daoism to that body of work. I will also identify specific points of contact among the mystics following the Arab

conquests of the seventh and eighth century and the spread of religions along the Silk Roads.

Thus far, I have identified primary sources of the earliest female mystics who use the idiom of romantic love between a man and a woman as a suitable metaphor to explicate the intimate relationship between humans and God, or as a means to attain enlightenment or immortality. Christian, Hindu and Muslim female saints became the besotted brides and lovers of Christ, Krishna, or Allah, while tantric Buddhists yoginis meditated on male and female Buddhas in the act of sexual union, or obtained male consorts themselves and engaged in ritual sex as the surest means to reach enlightenment. Their works subsequently influenced their male counterparts who adopted and adapted love-mysticism's allure. The concept reached its height in the 12th and 13th centuries as Divine Love swept across Europe, the Dar al-Islam, and the Indian subcontinent. **Thus I argue that the passionate love affairs of medieval women mystics with their God or with their spiritual male partners as revealed in their poetry, prayers, and teachings shaped the most fundamental components of mysticism's religious tenets, as well as the most common forms of piety in their respective traditions. Moreover, specific points of contacts between**

Muslims and Christians, as well as Buddhists, Daoists, and Hindus led to a cross-cultural transference of Divine Love's key doctrines and practices. Today I am emphasizing the voice of women from the *yogini-tantras* in Tantric Buddhism (also known as Mantrayana or Vajrayana or esoteric Buddhism) in order to further illuminate the necessary inclusion of *yoginis* (female practitioners) as the principle initiators of Divine Love precepts in Tantric Buddhism.

Tantra refers to an amalgamation of esoteric religious beliefs, rituals, and practices that emerged among Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains perhaps as early as the third century C.E. in northern India.[3] A mature system of Tantric Buddhism and the Tantric texts, called *tantras*, emerged in post-Gupta India during the second half of the seventh century as India fragmented politically.[4] An offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism and became an influential movement that swept through Asia between the eight and twelfth centuries.[5] In their quest to achieve enlightenment in this lifetime, Tantric practitioners, both yogis and yoginis, entered a master-disciple relationship and underwent a lengthy training period that typically involved thousands of prostrations, breathing exercises, and repetitions of mantras until the devotee was ready to receive orally secret teachings from

his or her guru that may have included the highest of all the various yogic tantras, ritual sex, with real or imagined partners. Like its counterparts, the male and female founders of this distinctive yogic practice asserted that desire and passion can be a religiously transformative vehicle that ultimately leads to enlightened states of awareness. "What is sought in the yoga of union," states religious scholar Miranda Shaw, "is a quality of relationship into which each partner enters fully in order that both may be liberated simultaneously."[6] Because this level of intimacy is difficult to achieve, Shaw continues, men and women formed lifelong spiritual partnerships or went on retreat for years together. The object was to unite sexual ecstasy with the Buddhist concept of emptiness or void (*sunyata*) – the final stage of the yogic union. By realizing experientially and bodily, rather than cognitively, that all things -- including sexual bliss and even gender -- are in fact of one nature, which is emptiness, one achieves identification with the void, or attains enlightenment. As opposed to the Buddhist monks who sought refuge in the monastery, the Tantrics taught that ordinary activity as well as the human body was a means to enlightenment and thus sexual intimacy, gender, and embodiment became an integral part of Tantric ritual and meditation.

Like their Sufi, Hindu, and Christian counterparts, medieval women in Tantric Buddhism were active creators of their respective doctrines and rites. Texts written by medieval female practitioners reveal what women practiced, experienced, and believed about themselves in Tantra, and establish that women were among the early teachers and creators of love-mysticism in Buddhist traditions.[7] In the past, western scholars have portrayed Tantric Buddhism as an oppressive movement that degraded and oppressed women, while others, like Shaw, are now demonstrating through extant writings, lineage histories, and biographical narratives how women fully participated, on their own initiative, at every level in formulating the emerging Tantric movement that remain prominent today in Tibet and Nepal.[8]

For example, consider the writings of Sahajayoginicinta, whose name means "Spontaneous Jewellike Yogini," and who was part of a core group of yogis and yoginis who introduced Tantric Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century.[9] Her work was one of seven Tantric texts acknowledged by the Tibetans (and preserved in Sanskrit), and several others were authored by women as well.[10] Her tract titled *Realization of Reality through its Bodily Expressions* reveals how earthly sexual desire links humans to the spiritual

plane of ecstasy – or enlightenment. In her text she relates how an inner self, one's essence or Buddha nature, was created by the spark of bliss at conception and then manifested as either male or female. Thus sexual bliss and gender both provide a link back to one's Buddha nature.[11] As a result, tantric practitioners frequently meditated on the *yab-yum* or *maithuna* (a male and female Buddha in sexual union) and esoteric Buddhist art often depicted this image. Sahajayoginicinta delivered her teachings to a group of female yoginis and described her yoga of union as the means to teach nonduality – a key concept in Tantric Buddhism. Sexual bliss contains the elements that lead to enlightenment, such as the knowledge of no-Self and the absence of duality. Listen to her instructions:

In stages, because of the taste of desire

One ceases to know who is the other and

What has happened to oneself.

The lovers experience an inexpressible bliss

The never experienced before. ...

Both of them

Are bound by a stream of concepts

Born from and arising from the mind.

As long as they are united,

Their minds will not remember anything else;

They will be mindful only of pleasure.

She also writes that:

Human pleasure, with its identifiable characteristics,

Is the very thing that,

When its characteristics are removed,

Turns into spiritual ecstasy,

Free from all conceptual thought,

The very essence of self-arising wisdom.

Tantric Buddhism appealed to the laity because it taught that enlightenment could be reached in this lifetime (without taking strict monastic vows) and, moreover, it included "intimacy and sexuality, gender and embodiment, as part of the path to liberation."[12]

Tantric Buddhism entered China in the 8th century and spread eastward, influencing both Chinese Buddhism (and later Japanese) and Daoism.[13] For example, Daoism's construction of the concept of "Inner Alchemy" (union of *ying* and *yang* – male and female) can be traced to Tantric Buddhism's arrival to the Tang court in the 8th century. Inner Alchemy reflects the

highly technical and precise language of the tantras and, especially, the so-called sexual yogas. [14] Like their Buddhist sisters, women practitioners of Inner Alchemy are equal partners with male adepts and gain the same spiritual benefits as men. The goal is a psycho-physiological transfiguration through ritual sex that yields an "immortal embryo, the first sprout of the adept's spiritual rebirth."[15] A poem by a 12th century Daoist female practitioner of Inner Alchemy, Sun Buer (1119-1182), describes it this way:

All your tasks already well fulfilled,
Just sit down in a corner, concentrate the spirit,
Feel your body rest on purple clouds,
Your whole being calm, floating on weak waters.
The qi forces melt together, yin and yang unite,
Spirit, Heaven, Earth all are only one.
Concluding the great work, you see the Gate of Jade
Emerging from the mists—and heave a deep, long sigh.[16]

After long years of practice in this meditative state, Daoist scholar Livia Kohn writes that "mind and spirit are no longer of this world but illuminate the infinite, and the adept is fully integrated into the heavenly spheres…and attains the ultimate state of mystical achievement.[17]

These poems match the spirit and tone of the poems I presented last summer in San Diego, where the revolutionary poetry and teachings of one of the first Sufi mystics, Rabi'a al-Adawiyya of Basra, (d. 801), formed the central tenet of Sufism, that of *Hubb-e-Illahi* or Divine Love. Inspired by Rabi'a's compositions, Sufi poetry thereafter focused primarily on the fervent union of the lover with the Beloved, using erotic language to convey in allegory the rapture of the mystic with his or her ultimate union with God. Sufi orders spread throughout the dar al-Islam, and Sufi schools were flourishing in Muslim Spain as early at the ninth century. Arab vernacular love poetry and sufi songs of love, influenced the Troubadours of first southern and then northern France. The Troubadour songs of courtly love served as inspiration to the 12th century female mystics in Christian Europe.

The first of these mystics was St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), whose passionate imagery of bridal union with Christ in her poetry and theology elevated the status of Christian nuns (and subsequent female saints) in Europe to prominent positions as they rejected earthly marriage in favor of bridal mysticism. Moreover, female Christian mystics of the 12th and 13th

depicted themselves not only as noble and strong, but also as fully divine as they became transformed through Divine Love.[18]

In a similar movement in south India, one of the earliest Hindu mystics to popularize the *bhakti* path of yoga, where the devotee develops an intense love and desire for God as a means of union, was a fifteen year old devotee of Vishnu named Andal, who lived sometime in the ninth century.[19] Andal defied the traditional route of marriage and instead identified herself as the bride of Krishna. 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 Andal, all devotees of Krishna, whether male or female, conceived of themselves as one of the *gopis* -- the female lovers of Krishna. In Tamil Nadu, Andal's poetry, *Song Divine*, is recited daily in Vaishnava temples and remains enormously popular among the Tamils today.[20]

The poems, hymns, and theologies of the women I have presented today offered medieval women across Eurasia an opportunity to participate fully in religious life and to achieve high ranking positions in the religious sphere – opportunities not always available to them within the conventional, male-dominated orthodox traditions, as well as shaped the most fundamental

tenets of the world's mystical traditions in Eurasia from the eighth through the tewelfth centuries. The yoginis in seventh century northeast India formulated many of the earliest *tantras* as well as one of the main symbols of enlightenment in Buddhism, the *maithuna*, or the image of the union between a male and female Buddha, which Miranda Shaw describes as, "a vision of authentic humanity in which women and men are restored to wholeness through a delicately balanced, joyous state of harmony."[21] In Europe, the erotic imagery that accompanied the notion of bridal mysticism, evoked by Hildegard of Bingen and her followers (Saints Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Genoa, the Beguines), thoroughly entrenched the notion of Divine Love as an accepted practice of popular Christian devotional piety.[22] Rabia's conception of Divine Love 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. Central to all mystical traditions is the supreme bliss that manifests as a result of, or the path to, a perfect union with the Deity of Universal Truth, paths that were forged and recorded by the medieval female pioneers of the worldwide Divine Love movement.

NOTES:

[1] See especially Sayeed Hossein Nasr's description of "The Spiritual Significance of Human Love" in *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism* (New York: Harper One, 2007), 65.
[2] Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics,* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), xix.
[3] Serinity Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consort: Sexualities in Buddhist Narratives, Iconography, and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 135.
[4] Ronald Davidson*, Indian Esoteric Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 2.
[5] Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 20. For a discussion of Tantric Buddhism and its emergence in India, see Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 20-34 and Davidson*, Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 113-168.
[6] Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 168.
[7] Shaw, 179.
[8] For opposing views, see Ronald Davidson*, Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, 91-98 who argues that " We must conclude that, overall (and with notable exceptions), medieval Indian women were persuaded to leave Buddhist religious life behind and retreat to the home, as their society (and, increasingly, their religion) exhorted them, and frequently forced them, to do." (98) and Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment* who states that, "Male dominance has long been accepted as an ahistorical, immutable principle of Buddhist history." (4).
[9] Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 182.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 184.
[12] Ibid., 195.
[13] See George Keyworth, "The Esotericization of Chinese Buddhist Practices" in Charles Orzech, Henrik Sorensen, and Richard Payne (eds), *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 518-519; and Joshua Capitanio, "Esoteric Buddhist Elements in Daoist Ritual Manuals," in Orzech, *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras*, 534-535.
[14] Livia Kohn , "The Subtle Body Ecstasy of Daoist Inner Alchemy," *Acta Orientalia* 59.3 (2006): 325-40; Livia Kohn (ed)*, Daoism Handbook: Handbook of Oriental Studies*. (Leiden: Brill), 405.
[15] Kohn, *Daoism Handbook*, 405.
[16] Kohn, "The Subtle Body Ecstasy," 340.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 95.
[19] 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. For dates, see also *the Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism* N-Z, James Lochetfeld (editor), (New York: The Rosen Publishing group, Inc., 2002), 698.
[20]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.
[21] Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 200.
[22] Consider the Beguines contribution to the formation of spiritual lay communities for both men and women.