

**KABIR: MYSTIC OR
MAVERICK?**

By
Professor David C. Scott

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Professor David C. Scott, of the Department of Religion and Culture at The United Theological College, Bangalore, gave this talk on November 30, 1989, as a The T. L. Crombie Memorial Lecture. Professor Scott has lived many years in India, and been actively engaged in studying comparative religions, especially Christianity and the various Indian ones.

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KABIR: MYSTIC OR MAVERICK?

Professor David C. Scott

It seems that one day when the famous Swami Ramanand wanted to perform the *sraddha rites* for his departed guru, he sent his disciples, among whom a *julaha* from Kasi is traditionally counted, to get the required milk. While the other disciples went to the vendors of milk, the *julaha* was seen headed towards the outskirts of the town. After a couple of hours of waiting, one of the disciples went in search of their companion, to summon him for the commencement of the rites. Imagine his surprise when he found the *julaha* squatting near the bones of a dead cow, with a small pile of grass in front of the skull. On their return to the *asram* Ramanand began to upbraid the *julaha* for his ignorance in not knowing that dead cows neither eat grass nor give milk. The delinquent disciple responded by expressing his doubt that dead gurus drink milk, but that in case they did, he thought the milk of a dead cow would be the most suitable for a dead guru.¹

Kabir; the *julaha* from Kasi, is probably one of the best known and most revered names in Indian religious history in spite of the uncertainty characteristic of medieval Hindu religious history². From the Punjab to Bengal, and from the Himalayan heights to the South Indian shores, our man has long been hailed by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike as a great mystic and bold religious reformer. His name has travelled far and wide in the Indian subcontinent, and thanks to the admiration of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, he is not completely unknown even in the West today. In the literary field too, Kabir ranks very high; often hailed as the 'the father of Hindi literature' and even sometimes placed on a par with the greatest of Hindi poets, Tulsidas. Kabir appears to modern India to be the true symbol of nonconformity. Some contemporary Indian writers do not hesitate to compare him to the Buddha Gautama, for the fearlessness of his character, the loftiness of his views, and his extraordinary hold on the common masses of India.

But Kabir, unlike the Buddha, was not born a prince; he was neither scholar nor aristocrat, but a *sudra* (therefore of non-aryan, impure descent), and a *mleccha*, a "barbarian," since the social group to which he belonged was already Islamized. Both tradition and Kabir's own words attest that he was a poor *julaha* - a Muslim weaver of traditional Kasi. He never had access to Sanskrit scriptures or knowledge, and he was most probably illiterate. His *banis*, or sayings, so popular among the common folk, are expressed in the vulgar tongue, a rough idiom which appears as a form of ancient Hindi.

Although Kabir's *nirguna* (without attributes) God or

Supreme Truth seems impersonal when compared with the anthropomorphic Rama and Krishna, Kabir may, in fact be described as the most personal of all *bhakti* poets. This is not so much because he dwells on his private experience, or exposes his own quivering heart, but because he gets very personal with us, the audience. Indeed, stylistically this factor most clearly distinguishes Kabir from his famous colleagues Surdas, Tulsidas and Mirabai. They are primarily addressing God; he is primarily addressing us. Even when Surdas and Tulsidas sing in their own person of the Lord's wondrous doings on earth, the implicit relationship in the poem is between poet and God -- a relationship often made explicit in the signature line, when the devotee turns to God with a prayer or other fervent expression of feeling. It is a convention of reverie, ecstasy, longing, in relationship to God. The listener or reader is present only as eavesdropper.

In Kabir's poetry it is the listener or reader who is central. Nearly everyone in North India is familiar with the formula "*khai Kabira suno bhai sahdho*" - "Kabir says, listen brother sadhu!" or "*sono ho santo*" - "Listen, Oh saints!" It is Kabir's trademark. But far more than a formula, it signifies Kabir's passion to engage, to wake people up, to affect them. Indeed, it is in his mastery of the vocative that Kabir is unique among the *bhakti* poets. Not in the *saguni* devotees, not in the *nirguna* Dadu or reformer Nanak, not in the radical Bengali Buddhist poets, the iconoclast Gorakhnath or the surreal Bauls, whatever else they may have in common with him, do we find the intense bearing down upon the listener that is so prominent with Kabir. It shows itself first in ' the array of addresses he uses to seize our attention: Hey Sant, Brother, Brahman, Yogi, Babu, Mother, Muslim, Friend, Fool! Many poems are simply directed at "you." But titles or pronouns of address are only the beginning. Kabir pounds away with questions, prods with riddles, stirs with challenges, shocks with insults, disorients with verbal feints. If one really listened to him responsively one could hardly help getting angry, squirming, searching, getting embarrassed, or shouting back.

Pandit, go do some research
and let me know how
to destroy transiency.

Now you, Mr. Qazi, what kind of work is that,
going from house to house chopping heads ?
Who told you to swing the knife?

Some Indian critics find the crudeness of Kabir and other *nirguna* poets a grave defect. Others have tried to force Kabir's verses into the categories of classical Indian poetics. Some have told me confidentially that Kabir was not a

poet at all, but a social reformer. He was both a poet and a social reformer, though society was only the most superficial layer of what he wished to reform. Be that as it may, there can be little question but that while Kabir is certainly rude, crude, vulgar and prosaic, he is at the same time eloquent, exciting, dazzling, and unforgettable. Indeed, the very roughness of his idiom not only enhances the striking forcefulness of his style, revealing the depth of his mystical awareness and the fervour of his maverick conviction, it sabotages the passivity of his hearers, creating an intimacy in which the listener is drawn into participating in a highly charged dialogue.

The impact of Kabir's sayings on the masses, especially of Northern India, has been profound. In Medieval Mysticism of India, a work largely based on the popular saying and songs carried by the itinerant *sadhus* of North India, the Bengali scholar Kshiti Mohan Sen has testified to the depth of Kabir's influence on the common folk: "Kabir's superior spiritual achievements came to have a sovereign influence on the people of the Indian medieval times. Kabir's influence, direct or indirect, on all liberal movements that occurred in the medieval times after him is uncommonly deep."⁴

Nor, did Kabir's great voice and remarkable hold on the common folk of the land pass unnoticed by western scholars who, from the end of the 18th century, applied themselves to the study of Indian traditions and literature. Their attention seems to have been first attracted by the existence of the well-developed sect bearing his name, that of the Kabirpanthis, who claim to be the followers of the panth shown by Kabir himself.

Today the Kabirpanthis have a number of maths spread over Northern and Central India.⁵ They are remarkable for their opposition to idol-worship, their strong monotheism, and their uprightness of their moral code, as well as their opposition to caste distinctions, though they consider themselves Hindus. These characteristics earned for them the respect and attention of a small number of Protestant Christian missionaries and British officials. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, interest in the Kabirpanthis as well as the mysterious personality of their purported founder steadily increased in missionary circles, as

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Western scholars began to recognize in Kabir one of the greatest mystics and religious reformers of India.

The real pioneer of 'Kabirian studies', however, seems to have been an Italian Roman Catholic monk, Padre Marco della Tombe, who was in India during the later half of the 18th century. Padre Marco travelled in North India, Nepal and Tibet, but spent most of his Indian days in Bettia, North

Bihar, close to the Nepal border, where he applied himself assiduously to the study of languages and the various religious traditions of the inhabitants of the region, one of them -- and not the least remarkable in the Padre's eyes -- being that of the "Cabiristi."

I saw a sect or a kind of religion called Cabiristi, descended from a certain Cabir, a man considered as a great saint who had performed many miracles; it is said he was the spiritual Master of Alexander the Great. On this sect, we would have to say much, as they are in great credit and number.⁶

Padre Marco did, in fact, translate into Italian the Satnus Cabir i.e., Satnam Kabir [also known as Gyansagar, and another book called Mulpanci [Mulpanthi?] - besides a particular Ramaen [Ramayana] in eight [not seven] books which appear to be a "Cabirist" [i.e., Kabir - panthi] version of the Ramayana, in which Rama appears as a great penitent and ascetic resembling the Buddha, Perhaps it is this that caused Angelo de Gubernatis, Padre Marco's anthologist, to suggest Buddhist sources for Kabir's perceptions and teaching. In the introduction to his edition of a part of the Padre's papers, Angelo de Gubernatis adds a section entitled "*Kabir's a la sua riforma*" in which he argues that Kabir's ideas are fundamentally Buddhist and that his rejection of caste, scripture, and Brahmanical practices and ritual had their source in Buddhism, which must have survived for a very long time in the region of Tirhut and the Nepalese border, where Bettia is situated.

We have no intention of reviewing the history of Kabirian studies, though that in itself would make a fascinating and revealing exercise. Suffice it to note that over the years from the end of the 18th century few Indians have received as much attention and praise from a whole line of foreign scholars-cum-missionaries as the julaha from Kasi. It was their enthusiasm for "the Indian Luther," and for the Christian echoes they discovered in some of his verses, that goaded them into further research. In their case as in the case of the Kabirpathi and Muslim writers, judgment was influenced by personal religious convictions, and total objectivity could not be expected for them. Moreover, though they knew of the Adi Granth collection of Kabir's verses, they had never seriously studied it, convinced as they were that the Bijak, revered by the Kabirpanthis, represented the authentic tradition of Kabir's teaching. Also from the end of the 18th century onwards, popular editions of Kabir's verses proliferated all over the country, especially in Bengal, but also in Gujarat and even in Maharashtra. The very abundance of these collections testified to Kabir's growing prestige among the literate, as well as to the extreme confusion prevailing then as to what was to be admitted as his authentic teachings.

Moreover, the interpretation of many sayings attributed to the *julaha*, either in the Bijak or in other collections, raised many difficulties, due partly to uncertainties of the texts and partly to the strange allusive, esoteric language in which many of the sayings were couched. Kabir's first translators, Prem Chand, Ahmed Shah and E. Trumpp, all rightly pointed out these difficulties. Commentaries, whenever they existed, as in the case of the Bijak, were of little help. "Local scholarship," in the modern sense of the term, to elucidate the number of difficulties encountered in all existing collections of Kabir's verses was still wanting.

Further, valid interpretation of Kabir's sayings also depended on reliable information

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about the enigmatic weaver's origins and *milieu*, his own religious and literary tradition. Such information had to be retrieved from a mass of legendary material in the face of preconceived ideas and judgments which, as they mainly depended on sectarian affiliations, were frequently mutually contradictory.

Kabir is generally considered in North India - at least by Hindus - as a Vaisnava, though a rather liberal one. More specifically, he is represented as the chief exponent of that particular form of bhakti centered on the invisible *nirguna* supreme Being, as distinct from the *saguna* Deity, i.e., the incarnate and visible manifestations of the supreme Lord, Bhagavan. Those vaisnava bhaktas worshipping the nirguna supreme Being and opposed to caste distinctions, ex' at least very liberal in matters of caste, are also called *sants* both in North India and Maharashtra. In the Sikh Granth the same appear as *bhagats*, predecessors or contemporaries of Nanak. In North India the promoter of this sant *parampara* is said to have been none other than Ramanand who probably lived in the 14th century and is traditionally named as Kabir's own guru. Kabir himself is considered the first and foremost of all sants, the *adi-sant* [first-sant].

The Northern sant tradition was critically studied by a group of modern Indian scholars, under the leadership of P. D. Barthwal, who was a pioneer in this field. In 1936 Barthwal published The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry, a study which showed remarkable insight. A few years earlier, in a communication to the Kasi Nagari Pracarini Sabha in Benares, Barthwal had brilliantly demonstrated the close link between the Vaisnava sants and the medieval *tantrik* sect of the Naths, also known as Kanphata or Gorakhnathi Yogis. Barthwal had worthy successors in H. P. Dvivedi⁸ and Parashuram Chaturvedi⁹ whose Hindu writings on the *nath* and *sant* traditions constitute an important contribution to the religious and cultural history of medieval India.

As far as most of the writers of that period were concerned, however, and especially in the case of Kabir, an important hurdle remained, as already noted by Jules Bloch an imperfect knowledge of facts and documents, lack of indices and dictionaries; and, he says, "what is worse, the texts are intrinsically open to suspicion and editors generally take no heed of their duties in this matter."¹⁰ The Bijak itself, which has been twice translated into English [Prem Chand, 1911, and Ahmed Shah, 1917] and abundantly commented on in Hindi, was not critically edited until 1972, when Shukdev Singh made the first attempt at a critical edition..

M. A. Macauliffe's translation of the Adi Granth [now called the Guru Granth Sahib], which occupies most of the six volumes of The Sikh Religion, the first volume of which appeared in 1909, is the only complete English translation of the Sikh scriptures. R. K. Varma's Sant Kabir (1947) gives a usable Hindi rendition of the text of Kabir's verses as they appear in the Granth Sahib: [a] a *padams* classified according to rag and [b] *saloku* [i.e., *shakis*] numbering 243 in all.

Of the Kabir-granthavali, the third great compilation of Kabir's verses, no translation or analysis, nor even an entirely reliable Hindi *commentary*, was available until relatively recently. The extremely difficult task of producing a critical edition of Kabir's sayings was attempted by P. N. Tiwari of Allahabad University, under the guidance of Dr. M. P. Gupta, and published in 1961 under the title Kabir-granthavali. The title was justified in so far as the Dadupanthi tradition, already published under the same title by S. S. Das in 1928, was given major importance in Tiwari's critical edition. Though, unfortunately he gives no concordance, a close examination of the variants, and a comparison of his amended text with the Granth Sahib and the Bijak texts, whenever the opportunity occurs, make it possible to

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guess, if not with absolute certainty, at least with a fair degree of probability, the substance of Kabir's teachings.

This means, therefore, that for the present anyway, we are forced to rely on the Kabir-granthavali and the selection of verses included in the Granth Sahib of the Sikhs. To these the Bijak may be added, but with reservations since it is later than the other two and must be regarded as basically a Kabirpanthi recasting rather than the original work of Kabir. With these as the primary sources the study of the life and teachings of Kabir must be, in pan at least, an exercise in discernment.

There are literally volumes of legendary material concerning Kabir, but the widely accepted "facts" about his life can be summarized in a few sentences. He was born in

Varanasi around the beginning of the 15th century¹¹ in a class of weavers [julahas] recently converted to Islam. He learned the family craft and later composed a number of poems with weaving metaphors. To a sadhu who is said to have urged Kabir to give up his lowly occupation, the julaha is supposed to have replied:

What is the point of being a *sadhu*
if one speaks without understanding ?
Says Kabir, weave the name of Hari,
on which the gods, men and *munis* are wrapt in
meditation.

He probably studied meditative and devotional practices with a Hindu guru. Most certainly he developed into a powerful teacher and poet, unique in his autonomy, intensity and abrasiveness. His verses were composed orally and collected by his disciples and admirers after varying periods of circulation in oral tradition.

Indeed, his supposed insistence on oral transmission accords well with the gist of his teaching. Of all the terms he used to refer to the enlightenment experience or the means of reaching it, the most prominent is *subda*, the Word, along with *nama*, the name, and *rama*, Ram. He stresses direct contact with the teacher, indicating that the only authentic teaching is the word from the guru's mouth. Further, he continually urges immediate understanding, a recognition which -- like the apprehension of a vibrating word - is *sahaja*, spontaneous, simple.

The tradition which associates Kabir with the famous guru Ramanand is strong and ubiquitous, however uncertain the historical evidence may be. One of the most popular legends about Kabir relates how he tricked the orthodox Hindu into accepting him, a Muslim, as a *sisya*. He is said to have stretched himself across the steps leading to the river where Ramanand came for his daily bath in the predawn darkness. Tripping over Kabir's prostrate body and fearing sudden danger to his life, Ramanand cried out -- as Kabir knew he would -- his own mantra: "Ram! Ram!" Kabir then claimed that the mantra had been transmitted to him and he must be accepted as a disciple. Whether or not the two men were related in this way, Kabir's poetry is full of exhortations to recite the name of Ram, to devote oneself to Ram, to drop every thing except Ram.

What can I give in return,
so great is the name of Ram?
What gift of mine could please the guru?
the wish remains [unfulfilled] in my heart

It must, however, be emphasized that this Ram is not the deity of popular Hindu bhakti, the *avatara* of Visnu and the hero of the Ramayan. Indeed, in a number of poems Kabir

explicitly repudiates this anthropomorphic Ram.

This is the big fight King Ram.
 Let anyone settle it who can, Is Brahma bigger or
 where he came from?
 Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
 Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
 Is Ram *avatar* bigger or the knower of Ram?
 Kabir turns round, it's hard to see --
 Is the holy place bigger, or the devotee?
 Kabir says, worship the one Ram in the heart,
 Or you'll go, all tied up, to Death City.

Though he sometimes addresses King Ram, Lord, or Hari in the songs, many references to Ram and the Word seem to indicate that this Ram is primarily a sound, a *mantra* consisting of the long and the short syllables ra - ma. We may surmise that he used this mantra, indeed was perhaps taught it by his guru. Whether or not Kabir's own practice was the repetition of "Ram," we know that he recommended it to others as a way of achieving the utter concentration necessary to penetrate the many layers of distraction and delusion, to reach the threshold of a fundamental question; is the Essence two or one? Something or nothing?, Can you find the tracks of a bird in the air, of a fish in the sea?

There is nothing in his sayings which would lead us to any human guru or even indicate an initiation rite.

I have acquired no learning,
 nor do I understand debate.
 I have become intoxicated by reciting
 and listening to Hari's praises.

Whether or not Ramanand or any other human individual was Kabir's guru, we would be wide off the mark to suggest that the *julaha's* spiritual life was totally independent of any guidance or inspiration, for his sayings contain many words of reverence and praise for his guru. In fact, for Kabir, the *guru* or *satguru* represented the inner voice, the mystical movement of the Divine in the innermost recesses of the human soul. The guru is the vital, the essential mediator of ultimate Truth, but no longer a human link. It is hardly surprising then, that the importance of the guru for Kabir's *sadhana* was such as to cause him to put fundamental questions of life, death and human destiny.

Touching the guru's feet I humbly bow,
 and ask to have explained,
 The meaning and purpose of the origin,
 and the destruction of the soul and the world.

Often, it would seem, the milieu of the *julaha* quarter of Varanasi was too much for Kabir's sensitive spirit. One legend

tells of his being so greatly disturbed by his wife's contribution towards the purchases of an animal to be slaughtered for *Id* that he ran away from home, only to return when she promised never to do it again. Of course, we are told, the Brahmans encouraged him to continue his protest against ritual slaughter of animals. But it would seem that he contributed little to their protest

O Sants, I've noted the ways of both,
Hindus and Muslims don't want
discipline; the taste is sweet all¹²
The Hindu keeps the *ekadasi* fast,

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eating only milk and water chestnuts.
He curbs his grain but not his brain
and breaks his fast with meat.
The Turk prays daily, fasts once a year
and crows "God! God!" like a cock.
What heaven is reserved for people
who slaughter chickens in the dark?
For kindness and compassion, both have
cast out all desire.
One kills by halal, the other by jhataka;
the fire [of violence] burns in both houses.
Turks and Hindus have but one path;
the guru's made it clear.
Don't say Ram, don't say *Khuda*,
So says Kabir.'

True religion is to be found not in external practices, but in the inward disciplines of love, mercy, and humility, expressed in righteous and compassionate deeds and in upholding all that is true.

Make knowledge [of God] the ashes you apply to
your body, make meditation your hom,¹³
Abandoning the world, roam in the city of the
body, play your man as kinguri,¹⁴
Keep the five elements¹⁵ in your heart so your
contemplation may be undisturbed by the world.
Says Kabir, listen O Sants,
make morality and mercy your garden.

Why does the Mulla climb the minaret?
Allah is not outside.

Him for whom you shout the call [to prayer],
you should search for in your heart.

While there is evidence that both Hindus and Muslims were ready to assault Kabir physically during his lifetime, they have since his death been ready to assault each other over the privilege of claiming him as their own. A famous legend shows his Hindu and Muslim followers massed for combat at the time

of his death, each side demanding to take charge of the body.

When Kabir was approaching the end of his life he set out from Kasi -- thought to be the most auspicious place for a Hindu to die in~ and headed for Magahar - which on the contrary is believed to be an extremely unfortunate place to breathe one's last. The people of Kasi urged him to spend his last days in the holy city. Indeed, it is said that the entire population was overcome with gloom and lamentation at his departure. The *julaha* - according to one tradition -- addresses a final homily to his fellow citizens.

O people, you're extremely simple minded.
As water mingles with water,
so Kabir will mingle with the dust
If Mithila is your real home, your death
will be Magahar.
One who dies at Magahar will not die;

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to die elsewhere is to bring shame on Ram.
To believe that to die in Magahar is to become an
ass, means that faith in Ram has been lost
What difference between holy Kasi and barren Magahar,
if Ram dwells in my heart?
If Kabir relinquishes his body in Kasi,
what credit is that to Ram?

Arriving at Magahar, Kabir supposedly went to the banks of the Ami River, to a sadhu's abandoned hut. Though the river was completely dry, Kabir asked for some lotus blossoms and two sheets. Then, lying down in the hut, he told the people to lock the door. Raja Birsingh realizing that this was the time for which he had come with his army, announced his intention to consign the body to flames. But Bijili Khan protested that such an evil thing would never be permitted. But before the first blow was struck a cry went up "*Jaijaikar, satyalok ko sidhara,*" and someone removed the shroud only to discover that a heap of flowers had replaced the body. The Raja took half of the flowers to Kasi, where he cremated them and buried the ashes at what is today the Kabir Caura. The Nawab buried or burned, his portion in Magahar, where he built a shrine.

The legend illustrates the element of absurdity or futility that underlies the career of a great and courageous figure who passes from public contempt to adulation. Kabir was well aware of this element in his attempt to teach what he knew. Indeed, his awareness is reflected in an irony that flickers throughout his verses, making him unique among the devotional poets of the period. He knew that people would inevitably misunderstand what he was saying, that they didn't want to hear it, that they would twist, after he had spent his life debunking ritual and slavish outward observance, his own devotees would be ready to shed each other's blood over the

question of whether his carcass should be buried or burnt, to the intonations of syllables in Arabic or Sanskrit.

O Sants, I see the world is mad.
If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
If I lie they trust me.

Another often heard story is that the infant Kabir was placed in a basket and set afloat by a Brahman widow [who, it is sometimes added, conceived him immaculately and bore him through the palm of her hand], there to be discovered and adopted by a Muslim couple. The story seems obviously concocted by those unwilling to concede the sant's Muslim origins. In fact, however, his birth and upbringing in a julaha household of Muslim weavers in Varanasi may be the only data we can take for granted about Kabir.

But to be a Muslim in North India in the 15th century often meant to be still half a Hindu. For several centuries the Muslim invaders had been waging warfare up and down the subcontinent, taking over kingdoms and propagating their faith, leaving Islam centered in a number of scattered settlements throughout the mainland and a fringe of the South Indian coast. Groups of local people -- usually low-caste Hindus, often laborers and craftspeople -- found it convenient to convert en masse to the religion of the conquerors. This did not mean that they forsook their former gods and practices, resulting in a complex sort of religious pluralism. While Buddhism had practically disappeared from the land of its birth, the strength of Jainism was confined almost completely to a relatively small region in the Western portion of the country. Orthodox/orthoprax Brahmanism reigned virtually supreme over practically the entire subcontinent. However, it had ceased to be a homogeneous sect and was in fact a heterogeneous complex of various streams which had been assimilated

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during the preceding centuries.

For the vast majority of people, both Hindu and Muslim, the essence of religion was to be found in external authority and conventional ceremony. These conventional patterns did not, however, commend universal acceptance. Customary religion had received numerous challenges and of the dissenting movements, three were of particular importance. There was, first, the ancient tradition of tantrik yoga, expressed in North India during this period by the numerous adherents of the Kanpat of Nath sect of yogis. Secondly there was the tradition of Vaisnava *bhakti*, which had spread to North India from the South, and which in the North was associated above all names with that of Ramanand. Thirdly there were the members of the Sufi orders, numerically far fewer than the adherents of orthodox Islam, but exercising a perceptible influence on the

religious thought and practice of Hindus as well as Muslims. Given the opportunity it could be demonstrated that within each of the three important movements of dissent there was a recognizable continuity, and yet none was completely isolated. Indeed all the religious groupings were to some extent influenced by one or more of the others and underwent corresponding modifications. However, in one significant case this reciprocal exchange issued not simply in the modification of an existing tradition, but in the emergence of a recognized synthesis, a new pattern, which in various respects strongly resembled other existing patterns but which in its entirety corresponds to none of them. This was the *sant parampara* of North India. Though the traditional way by no means dominant during the period, it was certainly the most fertile and of fundamental importance as far as Kabir's religious antecedents are concerned.

Originally the term *sant* referred to the individual who had gone beyond his own individuality and experienced the divine or supreme Reality. However, even before Kabir's time the term had acquired two specific connotations. On the one hand, it served to designate a school, or rather a particular group of Vaisnava bhaktas devoted to Vithoba, the famous deity of Pandharpur, Maharashtra who was otherwise known as *Varkaris*. Two of the foremost among the Varkaripanth are mentioned as Kabir's ancestors : Jnanadev and Namdev. Following them, the term *sant* applied to Kabir and his successors, who resemble them on many points. As a whole however, the *sants* never constituted a sect, which is indicative of the second specific connotation of the term, i.e., a member of the *sant parampara* of North India -- a group, or more accurately, a succession of preachers and non-conformist mystics, a *sant* of spiritual family whose members are spread from the 14th to the 18th century throughout the whole of North India and part of the Deccan. Within the tradition itself the term *sant* seems to have been used as a synonym for *sadh* or *sadhu* in the original sense of one who has "perfected" or "accomplished" the ultimate unitary experience, as opposed to the common modern and somewhat debased usage which designates an itinerant mendicant.

It is perhaps significant to note that Kabir uses the term as distinct from *bhakta*, whom he generally calls *Vaisnava* or *das*, who is a just and pious person, sincerely devoted to *Ramavatar*, but can err. The *sant* is quite distinct -- the perfected person, the ideal, who has experienced Reality, one who has attained the Vision, the *paraca* of the invisible Ram, over whom *maya* no longer has sovereignty. Indeed, the notion of *sant* for Kabir recalls exactly the notion of *sadh*, *siddha* or *jivanmukta* in the tantrik yoga tradition, though there are important differences in the *sadhana*, or spiritual discipline of Kabir and that of the *tantrik* yoga tradition.

As any serious historian of religion might suspect, these saints do not appear without precedent in the history of Indian religions. It is evident that from an early period onward

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there were groups of ascetics, the *sramanas* being the most well known, that lived apart from the mainstream of Vedic religion, with its emphasis on sacrifice and "magical" attainment of power in the universe, and sought in their own bodies the achievement of certain desirable spiritual goals. Further, from the Pali Buddhist canon is to be had an indication of the great, variety of religious groups which existed in the 4th century B.C. when the Buddhist and Jain reforms were already two centuries old. The subsequent development of the Buddhist Sangha, with its early division into Mahayana and Hinayana, partly on the basis of differing interpretations of *nirvana* and the meaning of ascetic practices, tended to create a peculiarly sensitive climate for the development of a multiplicity of sects and philosophies. Indeed, as is well known, the influence of Buddhism, especially of the esoteric type, lingered on in the land long after the final disappearance of the Sangha in its homeland.

In this period there was also an emphasis of a "personal" Deity stemming from a tendency which is evident already in the Vedas, and which developed further, in the Upanishads, to find divinity present,, imminent in nature and, by extension, in the very being of the human individual. At the same time the personalization of the divine in Vaisnava religion and in certain sects which worshipped local theriomorphic forms of the Deity tended to be countered by the general pantheistic tendencies of the Upanishads with their emphasis on the identity of the all with the One. Caught between the various sectarian developments and driven toward a personality of divinity on the one hand and accepting the monistic tendencies of much of earlier Indian philosophy on the other, the people of the land drew on the earlier tradition of asceticism to establish numerous sects of practitioners of the discipline of yoga and of wandering sadhus and yogis with differing degrees of spiritual realization and theories about the manner of achieving it.

In this *milieu* the sant parampara was essentially a synthesis of the three principal dissenting movements, which have already been mentioned: a compound of elements drawn from Vaisnava bhakti, and the *hathayoga* of the *Nath-yogis*, with a marginal contribution from Sufism. Limitations of time prevent us from describing individually these three movements or the sant parampara in general. Suffice it to note that with Kabir the tradition moves into a more complex phase. As we have already noted, P. D, Barthwal and his successors, H. P. Dvivedi and P. Chaturvedi, have

demonstrated that the basis of Kabir's religion was not, as has been commonly supposed, Vaisnava bhakti or Sufism but tantrik yoga of the hathayoga of the Nath-yogis. Kabir was, however, far from being a Nath-yogi, for to this background he brought elements from Vaisnava bhakti and perhaps from Sufism also. Indeed, his debt to the bhaktas is -evident in the primacy accorded to love, and his experience/concept suffering love or *viraha* may possibly reflect, in some measure, a debt to the Sufis. These and other elements from the same sources he compounded with his own mystical nature to produce the synthesis which is the distinctive religion of Kabir. It is a religious perception which, in true sant fashion, renounces all that is mechanical or external, affirming as valid only that which may be inwardly experienced.

Kabir, they all go to the temple
and there they prostrate themselves,
But Hari dwells within the heart,
so fasten yourself there.

Within a person's soul God may, by grace, reveal Godself. However, the revelation comes only to those who have prepared themselves to receive it by treading the bhakti marga - the path of loving devotion: a devotion addressed directly to the supreme Lord who is both transcendent and immanent, and a love which will inevitably involve long periods in the

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anguished suffering of separation. Few will have the courage to embark on this way and fewer still the persistence to follow it to the end, to the point of the mystical experience which cannot be foreseen, as it comes with unexpected suddenness at divine initiative. God, the *satguru*, discharges the arrow of the Word and the devotee is slain that in death he may find True Life.

There is inevitably much that must remain obscure in Kabir's attempts to describe his experiences, for they were of a fundamentally mystical quality and ultimately inexpressible. This frequently forces Kabir to utilize the language of absurdity and "upside-downness" [*ulathansil*], full of paradox and enigma. This he inherited from the Sahajiyas and the Naths, but in characteristic fashion adapted for his own purposes.

Frog and snake lie down together,
a cat gives birth to a dog,
The lion quakes in fear of the jackal
Kabir says, these marvels cannot be told.

Some modem commentators have tried to present Kabir as a synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam;¹⁶ but the picture is not an accurate one. True, one could argue that an intention to

reconcile is present, but not a synthesis. Conventional Hindu and Muslim belief and practice are not regarded by Kabir as fundamentally right, but as fundamentally wrong. Listen to the *julaha* himself.

The Hindu dies through excessive puja,
the Turk dies prostrating himself.
The one is burned, the other is buried,
but neither finds access to you [O God].
Talk not about the mysterious One,
rather hide his mystery.
Veda and Qur'an cannot encompass Him,
if you talked, who would believe you?

We have seen how Kabir drew on various religious traditions as he saw fit, but he emphatically declared his independence from both of the major religious traditions of his countrymen, vigorously attacked the follies of both, and tried to kindle the fire of a similar autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples. In a famous couplet he declares:

I've burned my own house down,
the torch is in my hand.
Now I'll bum down the house of anyone
who wants to follow me.

If Kabir insisted on anything, it was on the penetration and exposure of everything unessential, every layer of dishonesty and delusion. The individual must find the Truth in his/her own body and mind, so simple, so direct, that the line between "him/her" and "it" disappears. One of the formulaic phrases in Kabir's verses is *ghata ghata me*, in every body, in every vessel. The Truth is close, closer than close. Kabir perceptively understood the countless ploys by which we avoid recognizing ourselves. One form our foolish cleverness takes is our desperate, seemingly sincere searching outside ourselves. We try to find other people who have the secret, and then we try to understand them. So we have tried to do with Kabir. But he persistently evades our attempts to define or explain him. Was he a Hindu? A Muslim? Were his ancestors Buddhists? Did he practice yoga? Did he have a guru? Who was

it? The impossibility of ascertaining the basic facts about Kabir's religious life is part of his legacy of teaching.

However, there would be very few who would dispute the fact that in Indian religious history, Kabir is indeed unique: to the Hindus, he is a Vaisnava *bhakta*, to the Muslims a *pir*, to the Sikhs a *bhagat*, to the sectarian Kabirpanthis an avatar of the supreme Being; to modern patriots, Kabir is the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, to neo-vedantins a promoter of the "Universal Religion," or the "Religion of man," who steadfastly opposed the superstitious beliefs and empty

ritualism of orthoprax Hinduism, as well as, the' dogmatic pride and bigotry of orthodox Islam. In modern, progressive circles today, Kabir is held in high esteem as a social reformer, a bold enemy of Brahmanical pride and caste distinctions, a revolutionary whose scathing attacks on caste prejudices, the principle of untouchability, and all forms of social discrimination are forever famous and stimulating to the enlightened, like a breeze of fresh air. Dedicated to radical honesty, the jula has his blunt but skilful fingers into our minds and spirits, and stirs things up, exposing falsehood, from the grossest, outer deceptions to the slipperiest inner delusions. He knows that the growth of honesty, or courage, has its own gathering momentum, and he trusts the outcome. Surely Kabir is one of those rare 'persons to appear on the stage of human history, an embodiment of creativity and spontaneity, of all that is upright, free, and noble, all that is stimulating and challenging in India's rich tradition -- truly a "man for all seasons."

Notes

1. In the context of medieval Hindu religious history it is not surprising to find a characteristic degree of uncertainty with regard to data with which to construct the personal history of Kabir. Legends abound but reliable historical evidence is almost entirely lacking. In view of the fact that traditional legends and stories are so unreliable, one might be tempted to ignore them. But apart from the fact that in many cases they probably contain grains of historical truth, legends and stories may be an important source for understanding the manner and style of the man. Indeed this is evident in the case of the present legend, whose details are not verifiable. Certainly here we get a strong flavour of Kabir's iconoclastic wit, evidence of which is amply to be found throughout his poetry.

2. Lack of reliable historical dates and the conflicting voices of tradition leave us in doubt with regard to most significant details of his life. We do know that the julas were a group of relatively recent "converts" to Islam from the Nathpanthis, a sect of married yogis. However, the problem of Kabir's dates is a source of endless controversies, which produce a bewildering variety of arguments in support of many different and often extravagant claims; e.g., some Ka-birpanthis claim that Kabir lived 300 years, from Sm. 1205-1505. Without going into all the arguments, it seems justifiable to join Pandit Parasurama Chaturvedi and other Kabirian scholars both Eastern and Western, in asserting the relatively greater probability that Kabir was born in Sm. 1455 [A.D. 1398] and died in Sm. 1505 [A.D. 1448].

3. In support of his illiteracy the following verse is invariably quoted:

I don't touch ink or paper,
this hand never grasped a pen.
The greatness of four ages
Kabir tells with his mouth alone.

4. Kshiti Mohan Sen, Medieval Mysticism of India, 1930, p. 87. This is the English version of the Adyar Mookerji Lectures, delivered in Bengali in Calcutta University in 1929.

5. The Kabirpanthis are generally divided into two main branches: the Surat Gopal

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branch whose centre is at Kabir Caura, Benares, with a sub-branch at Magahar, about 10 kms. from Gorakhpur; and the more developed Dharmadas - branch established in Chattisorah, with its centre at Damakhera. Another important division of the Kabirpanth, which claims descent from Bhaggodas, the purported compiler of the Bijak, is established at Dhanauti, in the Saran district of Bihar.

6. Angelo de Gubematis, Gli scrim del Padre Marco della Tamba, Florence, 1878, p. 94, quoted in Ch. Vaudeville, Kabir, Oxford, 1974, p. 5.

7. P. D. Barthwal, "Hindi kavya me yog-pravah," Nagari Pracarini Saba Patrika, xi (vi. S. 1967 [C. E. 1930]), p. 385.

8. H. P. Dvivedi, Nath Sampraday, Allahabad, 1950; Hindu Sahitya ka Adikal, 3rd ed., Patna, 1961; Kabir, 6th edi, Bombay, 1964.

9. P. Chaturvedi, Uttari Bharat me Sant-Parampara, Allahabad. Vi. S. 2009 [C.

E. 1951]: Kabir Sahitya ki Parakh, Allahabad, 1961.

10. J. Bloch, Some Problems of Indo-Aryan Philology, For long lectures for 1929, published in Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, V (1828-9), pp. 744-8.

11. We have already noted that current scholarship favours A.D. 1398-1448 as the dates of his birth and death.

12. This is probably a "double entendre" referring both to the taste of meat as well as to the hypocrisy of both Muslims and Hindus.

13. singi: a small whistle-like instrument made of black buck or rhinoceros horn, which is part of the paraphernalia of Nathpanthi yogis.

14. A type of violin-like instrument, also known as a sarangi, typically carried by wandering minstrels and yogis.

15. The five basic elements of ancient Indian physics [akasa, vayu, tejas, apas, prithivi] were postulated as the media of sense impressions - akasa for sound, vayu for feeling, tejas

for vision, apas for taste, prithivi for smell - hence as distractions in meditation.

16. A recent book title suggests this attitude: M. Hedayetullah, Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity, Delhi, 1977.
