



Rāmakṛṣṇa's Tantric Background

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Ayon Maharaj's *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (2018; henceforth, *IPIR*) is an informative and thought-provoking book about Rāmakṛṣṇa's synthetic and supra-sectarian philosophy. The range of topics is such that in this response I will be attending to a single theme, namely, Rāmakṛṣṇa's Tantric background and context to whose significance, I think, more attention might have been paid. Maharaj acknowledges that there are affinities between Rāmakṛṣṇa's thought and Tantric philosophy (*IPIR* 61fn41). What is missing is a recognition of the extent of Rāmakṛṣṇa's inheritance from Tantric intellectual, devotional, and liturgical traditions. In what follows, I try to outline a "foundational concept or framework *internal* to his teachings that lends philosophical coherence to all of his apparently disparate teachings" (*IPIR* 26; emphasis in the original).

From 1855 Rāmakṛṣṇa officiated at the Dakshineswar complex of fourteen temples: the principal one dedicated to Dakṣiṇā-Kālī (called Bhavatāriṇī, the Savior of the World), twelve Śaiva shrines, and one Vaiṣṇava. Dakṣiṇā-Kālī is one of the ten Mahāvidyās, worshiped by the Kaulika Śākta tradition of Bengal. Kālī is an awe-inspiring goddess who delights in places of maximal impurity, such as cremation grounds, and is gratified by offerings of blood and flesh provided by the sacrifice of animals. She is displayed as a dark figure, standing on the corpse of Śiva. In one of her arms she holds aloft a bloody sword, in another, a severed human head. Her protruding blood-red tongue, garland of skulls, and girdle of human arms are intended as an affront to conventional values. Unsurprisingly, Śāktas claim that

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the repellent characteristics of the goddess do not represent the whole truth about their deepest beliefs, being but facets of a fundamental Divine Reality that is friendlier to human interests.

Shortly after his appointment as a priest at Dakshineswar, Rāmakṛṣṇa received a Śākta initiation and undertook exercises (*sādhana/upāya*) with a view to mystical realization of Kālī. He related that ecstasy-inducing hymns, the punctilious performance of ritual, and solitary meditation failed to reveal the Divine Mother. It was only when he had been reduced to a state of despair that he was granted a wonderful vision of the goddess, who revealed herself in her unlimited transcendental *niṣkala* mode rather than as the four-armed and dark-faced icon. Rāmakṛṣṇa felt overwhelming bliss in the presence of the goddess. Meditation on the Divine Mother had led to a revelation of divinity as a limitless ocean of consciousness in which he was included.

This taste of the transcendent moved him to savor more forms of the Divine Reality by following spiritual paths other than his own, including Vaiṣṇavism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. Since he thought that anything called a religion was a path to the realization of God, he was led to the controversial position that the Buddha was not an atheist. It appears that he had no interest in Jewish or East Asian beliefs, to name two absentees. (Incidentally, one might wonder why salvific efficacy is the preserve of associations conventionally called “religions.” What about secular humanisms?)

Rāmakṛṣṇa’s participation in what he took to be the experiences characteristic of other faiths resulted in the conviction that the divinities worshiped by the religions were articulations of some of the countless forms in which the highest Being—named as the Divine Mother—expresses herself. Human religions were *partial revelations* of a godhead whose forms and modes of being were unlimited. The multifarious religions of the world are manifestations of the goddess, adapted to people of various dispositions and interests, and all are means of achieving the common salvific goal of knowing the presence of God.¹

The questions are: How did Rāmakṛṣṇa’s epiphanies lead to the stupendous conclusion that there are *infinitely* many paths to God? What factors encouraged the conviction that *all* religions have “salvific efficacy”? How could he know? Such claims need legitimation. The mystical experiences, inevitably limited in range, of a single individual are insufficient to license universal conclusions about the divine dispensation. I think that to understand the impetus behind and the rationale for Rāmakṛṣṇa’s more ambitious claims we need to look at the context of the experiences. I suggest that the idea that all religions are paths from and to the godhead is an extension of an attitude characteristic of the family of Śākta traditions whose pantheon of female divinities are different faces of the godhead that creates the universe.

Rāmakṛṣṇa belonged to a Śākta-Śaiva milieu whose attitude to other religious paths was notably accommodating. That is to say, loyalty to one’s tradition did not

¹ Rāmakṛṣṇa is interested in the salvific efficacy of faiths. Human beings, *qua* human beings, are not in a position to pronounce on the salvific efficacy of anything. That is a matter for God. If any form of human association is salvific, this will be in virtue of something external to it; namely, God’s activity in animating that religion.

preclude the acceptance that other paths might have value too, even if their goals were inferior to one's own. According to the traditions of which Rāmakṛṣṇa was an heir, the sovereign deity is a co-equal Śiva-Śakti partnership. The latter is itself the initial manifestation of an incomprehensible, ineffable, and unconditioned ocean of potency, which is ineffable and incomprehensible because it cannot be objectified. When the male deity Śiva is animated and energized by his inseparable female Śakti, the partnership is in its creative mode (*IPIR* 36–38).² This godhead, infinite in the sense of being unconstrained by external forces (*svātantrya*), is immanent and active as well as transcendent and unchanging. It manifests the cosmos out of its own fullness. Of its own free will, the divinity expresses itself as individual souls and the environments that they inhabit.³ The cosmos is understood as the expansion and contraction of the self-determining godhead by virtue of its innate powers of will, cognition, and action. Souls are nothing other than limited expressions of deity as it voluntarily enacts its own exteriorization and differentiation. In the state of bondage and rebirth they are oblivious of their divine real natures because they mistakenly identify themselves with their embodied circumstances. It is for the sake of souls and in accordance with their capacities that multiple *descending* streams of scriptural revelation guide the ritual practices and moral conduct of the hierarchically ordered vehicles of salvation.

The traditions that comprised this Śākta-Śaiva world based themselves on those scriptures, in addition to those followed by Vedic orthodoxy. Some incorporated Vedic elements and accepted that the Smārta religion was salvific so far as its own claims went. Others denied of that mainstream orthodoxy any intrinsic efficacy where the attainment of final release and the enjoyment of the life divine were concerned. While some explicitly rejected caste rules and the ideology of purity through conformity to Vedic mandates, most lived lives of outward conformity to the Brāhmaṇical social code, albeit in the certainty that their salvation did not depend upon the purity that it sought to uphold.⁴ (Rāmakṛṣṇa thought that some religions are less salvifically effective than others. He is rather wary where *vāmācāra* practices are concerned; *IPIR* 96–97.⁵) There is a range of Tantric views on Vaiṣṇava religion, but for the most part Vaiṣṇavism is held to be a revelation inferior to the Śaiva religion, albeit effective in its own terms. That is to say, it provided its adherents with a form of liberation that falls short of the ultimate

² The inseparability, and indeed “ontological parity,” of Śiva and Śakti is a tenet of many forms of Tantric religion. It is a feature of the book that Maharaj attributes a greater degree of originality to Rāmakṛṣṇa than he would perhaps have claimed for himself.

³ “This divinity is the substance of the world because He manifests Himself as this world. The one who is unconditioned and undifferentiated manifests conditions other than Himself” (*Mālinīślokovārtika* 1.203; Hanneder 1998: 92; my translation).

⁴ Expressed in some versions of the formulation, “In secret a Kaula, in the public religion a Śaiva, and Vaidika in one's everyday life.”

⁵ Rāmakṛṣṇa believed that for an organization to qualify as salvific, it needed ethical value. This is perfectly compatible with the idea that there is no limit to the number of paths to God. It does, however, mean that some organizations are going to be disqualified. Who decides which? Given the overall model, it is going to be difficult to decide about exclusions. For instance, there would be many who would exclude traditions that practice the sacrifice of living animals.

felicity, omnipotence, and omniscience available to Śaiva practitioners. In the words of Abhinavagupta's *Mālinīśloka-vārttika* 1.191–193:

Those who follow other teachings, such as the Vaiṣṇava and the Buddhist, are not fully released. This does not apply to those initiated into the Śaiva religion. People who are fully initiated into the teachings of the Supreme Lord as members of the Krama, the Kula and the Trika power-traditions are re-united with the godhead at the instant of death (Hanneder 1998: 90; my translation).

And here is Abhinavagupta's direct successor Kṣemarāja explaining how belief systems correlate with destinies, specified here as different levels of manifested being (*tattva*):

The belief systems of the *darśanas* are expressions of Śiva, the autonomous light of consciousness. They are His adopted identities, like roles assumed by an actor.

The Naiyāyikas think that the soul is the same as the *buddhi*, which is the substrate of cognition and the other [*ātma*]-*guṇas*. In the liberated state, when detached from those conditions the soul has no experiences.

The Mīmāṃsakas are also destined for the *buddhi-tattva* because they think that the soul is something conditioned by experiences and given in first-personal awareness.

The Buddhists will go to this level too because they believe that people are only a series of cognitions.

The Pāñcarātrins say that the lord Vasudeva is the primary causal substrate and the *jīvas* are like sparks emitted by Him. Given their assumption that the souls are transformations of this causal substrate, they are destined for the *avyakta*-level.

Vedāntins who say that “There was only Being in the beginning” will go to the *Īśvara-tattva*.

The Śaiva-Siddhāntins say that the divinity transcends the universe. Members of the esoteric Śaiva-Śākta traditions such as the Kula say that the divinity is immanent in the universe.

But those who know the Trika say that the divinity is both immanent and transcendent.

Thus the single divinity whose nature is consciousness autonomously manifests all these roles. The differences between them reflect the hierarchy of its self-unfolding and self-concealment (*Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya* 8; my translation).

It is characterization of the godhead as both immanently present (*viśva-maya*), all-surpassing and totally other (*viśva-uttīrṇa*) that is crucial; for here we have a recognition that divinity is neither confined to or exhausted by the cosmos, nor is its nature defined by its creative activity. The godhead *per se* is variously characterized as unnameable (*anākhyā*) and empty of (*śūnya*) or undetermined by oppositions (*vikalpa*) such as essence and existence, substance and energies, potentiality and actuality, being and non-being, infinite and finite. Divinity is incomparable and incommensurable in the sense that there is no scale against which it might be

measured. On the other hand, the cosmos is neither independent nor self-sustaining; it is pervaded and kept in being by the divine powers. The godhead may be considered under two aspects: the transcendent (God's "private life"), and God in relation to us. The creative act is understood on a model of externalization into difference and return to unity. It is to religious contexts informed by such theologies that we may trace the springs of Rāmakṛṣṇa's "intimate knowledge" (*vijñāna*) that while the impersonal-personal godhead is infinite and wholly other, it is also involved in the spheres of differentiation that it voluntarily creates, holds in being, and dissolves into unity.

As we have seen, this accommodating Tantric ethos involves a belief that there is a hierarchy of revelations expressing a hierarchy of metaphysical positions. Originally intended to account for the internal variety of the Śākta-Śaiva religion by viewing that diversity as a response to different needs and capacities, the model created a climate of critical tolerance legitimized by the belief that everything in the cosmos is the freely willed self-expression of sovereign divinity. It was a short step to the inclusion of Vaiṣṇavas and others within the economy of salvation. Here is the Brāhmaṇa poet Lal Ded or Lallādevī writing in the Kashmiri vernacular:

Siva abides in all that is, everywhere;
 Then do not discriminate between
 a Hindu and a Musalman.
 If thou art wise, know thyself;
 That is true knowledge of the Lord (Kaul 1973: 107).

From this point of view, any human religious path may be seen as an expression of the divine nature's self-expression. Given the model of externalization and return as the basic structuring principle of the cosmos, every path may be understood as leading its aspirants back to God. The Śākta-Śaiva idea of divinity outlined above supplies the rationale for God's presence in finite human beings as well as being the all-pervading soul of the universe, personal and non-personal, immanent and transcendent, *saguna* and *nirguna*—without any contradiction. In the words of the opening verses of Jñānanetra's *Kālikāstotra* (1–2):

Sovereign, O Goddess, is your formless nature whose form becomes the three worlds, beyond what exists and what does not, unconditioned, accessible in the purest awareness. Sovereign is your unalloyed simple nature, called the essence of consciousness, both one and many, that without changing pervades the worlds flowing from it (*Śrīgurustuti* 1976: [47]; my translation).

We began with the worry that Rāmakṛṣṇa was drawing wide-ranging general conclusions from a limited experiential base. Indeed it is clear that his experiences were too restricted to justify his more general claims about the religions of the world. But when the vision of this Tantric priest and adept is elucidated in the context of his inherited ideology we can understand both how his distinctive position arose and the rationale by which his claims were justified. Beginning with the notion of unconditioned being that projects itself as a hierarchy of conditioned realities existing at different levels, there are no contradictions between the notions of transcendent and immanent, *nirguna* and *saguna*, personal and impersonal,

theistic and monistic, active and inactive.⁶ The inexpressible (because non-objectifiable) all-encompassing reality is such that restricted human forms of association may be conceived as capturing only part of the truth about it.

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⁶ There is no need to question the “law of contradiction.” It is well-founded. It can easily be shown that from a contradiction anything whatsoever follows.