



Can spirituality be used as a tool to withdraw religious orthodoxy?

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Abstract

Though spirituality and religion can have mutual elements shared with each other. But when religious orthodoxy takes the position at one end, spiritual enlightenment struggles to take the similar position at another end, as the congregation is visible at various belief-system, due to certain factors. This paper does not look at those factors in details but attempts to draw a parallel between such two convictions. It starts through the interpretation of discourse and encounters between *Sufi's* and *Nathyogi's*. It also discusses the convergence of Islam and Hinduism through two peaceful movements; *Bhakti* and *Sufism*, how they rejected the sectarian hierarchy and promoted the path of enlightenment, liberation and reason by granting benefit of theological doubt. It argues by positing an argument, if in 21st century, there existed such movements; spirituality might have curtailed some amount of religious orthodoxy witnessed today.

Keywords – religious orthodoxy, enlightenment, spirituality

Spirituality: Any Definition?

It is not fair to pin down a specific definition of spirituality, as spirituality in itself is an evolutionary process; scholar's practitioners, observers about spirituality, are defining various notions. If spirituality is considered as an internal quest of one's existence, the ontology of self; there exists an osmotic boundary between spirituality and religion. On the contrary if spirituality is externalized, then it takes the position of a religion in a form of movement, ritual, or belief system. Apparently, religion has a set of rules, schema and principles associated to it. A faith when follows a code of conduct, inclusive principles derived from theology showcases the characteristics of religion. This paper attempts to draw a vertical relevance where a person, either falls at the bottom of the notion (orthodoxy) or at the top (enlightenment). The key argument here is to configure a relationship or association between enlightenment and orthodoxy respectively, which eventually push and pull the individual and its conscience. The imposition of one over the other has a major role to play in an individual's behavior. Instead of examining the micro aspect of such perplexing thought we

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will overlook the macro phenomenon. What happens if dissonance is exceeded, it changes the symmetry of society, who gains under such circes?

Esoteric Agenda

In West, enlightenment is distinguished as a ‘period’ or ‘process’, Kant focused on process rather than period, which was regarded as a time that pulled Europe out from darkness of religious dogmatism, social hierarchy, political absolutism to the light of egalitarian society, liberalism and new thoughts of natural and cosmological sciences. Some critics also label enlightenment as anti-religious, anti-church, and conspiracy to bring down the order of the church. No matter why significance of individuals like Galileo, Newton, Bacon, Descartes was rejoiced much later in history. One becoming enlightened is a transformative experience, correction of neither ‘just’ nor particular errors but the entire process of thinking. As Plato describes, the process – “*as a matter of ascending from dark cave of unsystematic opinions into the sunlight of rational theorizing*”. However to define ‘enlightenment’ in itself is a difficult question. For the better understanding of this paper, lets just assume that an esoteric agenda leads to enlightenment. An agenda in which human beings come out of self absorbed darkness to the self less truth, a set of practices to bring salvation from evil, a tool to pierce the veil of *maya* and have a union with oneself and the supreme or unknown. This idea further leads to postulate the human being as a microcosm, or to use the Sanskrit term, *ksudra brahmanḍa*, the whole world, god(s) included, is analogous with and/or present within the hidden aspects of the human body and mind. This orientation determines the typically esoteric mode of spiritual attention, which is often characterized by the inward turn and the rejection of trappings of external (exoteric) religion.¹ ‘Kocku von Stuckrad’ and ‘Lee Irwin’ advise against the usage of the reifying noun ‘esotericism’ and suggest instead, and as more appropriate, the adjective ‘esoteric.’² The occult practices rest on the assumptions of esoteric theory. Hugh Urban explains the concept as follows: "Derived from the Greek term ‘esoterós’, esotericism refers to what is ‘inner’ or hidden, what is known only to the initiated few, and closed to the majority of mankind in the exoteric world.”³

Our argument here is to alleviate *one* from ‘tacit’ phase to ‘enlightened’ phase. The tacit phase is where the maxima are observed in terms of population, the concavity signifies majority of people reside here. The conscious ferry from tacit to enlightenment is esoteric in nature. To simplify the esotericism certain movements that burgeoned into the society, Bhakti and Sufism are explained.

Bhakti and Sufism

‘Nath sect’ which originated around late 9th century, influenced not only other religious thought but also impacted the common human. ‘Guru GorakhNath’ is considered to be the chief architect of this sect, although he was a disciple of Guru Matsyendranath, which

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supposed to have initiated a new path of esoteric thoughts and notions, but it was only Guru Gorakhnath who was able to propagate the idea of nath panth. However, there are critics who proclaim that Nath Yogi's did nothing rather just reformed the traditional thought existed in Sanatan Dharma from centuries. Whatever is the scenario, Guru Gorakhnath is well known across all sects for his mysticism, spiritual prophesy, tantricism and yogic practices. He disseminated *Hath Yoga* (a technique of breath control and penance) to the masses as a tool to hold a union with the self and supreme. The metaphysical aspect of this form of yoga implies the possibility of achieving immortality by inwardly drinking the elixir, produced through the sublimation of semen and the awakening of latent energies in the body. This position places the Nāth Siddhas within the broader milieu of Indian tantra, which was also known as '*kundalini awakening*'.⁴

It is also observed that in Vaishnavite sect, such practice of Yoga and the preservation of semen is essential for attaining liberation. They also try to reverse the flow of semen to prevent it from falling into the vagina during sexual intercourse. Though among the Bauls and Vaishnava Sahajiya sect, celibacy is not encouraged and Sadhan Sanginis (woman partners) are a part of their religious practice, certain yogic postures and rechak and Kumbhak (techniques for controlling the breath) are practiced to retain the Bindu (semen) during intercourse leading to a feeling of real love. This practice has its roots in the Kaula Tantric tradition of founder of Nath Pantha, Matsyendra Nath.⁵ A popular belief around the followers of Guru Gorakhnath was that he possessed occult powers. Nath yogis managed to control religious belief of certain people in that period, it was said that they tend to possess occult powers, According to Tiryakian's analysis occult practices rely on hidden forces in nature and the human mind in order to produce empirical results. The occult disciplines include magic, alchemy, divination, astrology, and the like. The NathYogi's were believed to have eternal bodies, through which they can fly through the air, generate living beings out of ashes, and perform all sorts of other magical feats – generally associated with the eight supernatural powers or siddhis.⁶ So was this the period of enlightenment for India? Or it was just the age of seekers who needed spiritual guidance.

However in Islam, there was a Sufi named *Sheikh Farid ud- Din Ganj-i-Shakar* also widely known as Baba Fareed, whose name is popular across various literatures. From adolescence only, family members and neighborhood witnessed his saint like abilities in Khatwal, Multan (now in Pakistan), where he used to meditate in a mosque. Few years later when he shifted to Multan, he joined a seminary where he was acquainted with Khwaja Qutub-ub Din Bakhatayar Kaki and desired to be his *shishya* (disciple). Under the guidance of Khwaja Qutub-ub Din Bakhatayar Kaki he practiced and performed ascetic exercises. Even Khawja Moinuddin Chisti was impressed by his relentless spiritual practices, although Baba Fareed was not satisfied with his routine, hence his zeal for learning and performance made him to observe *chilla*, a difficult technique where one has to suspend itself upside-down inside the opening of a well, without eating anything for forty days. It is believed as per the story that due to hunger when Baba Fareed ate pebbles present inside the well, they were converted to sugar, although he spat them out, but when repeated the same action, pebbles were again converted to sugar. It is only when he continued to pray and it was on the

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approval of his master he accepted the sugar as a gift from the unseen or supreme. Hence he is also referred to as “Ganj-i-Shakar.”

From that incident onward he rose as a renowned *Pir* in its vicinity and later termed to be as one of the most prominent Sufi Saint ever lived in Indian subcontinent, but during that time his fame around Delhi restricted him to perform meditation and prayers. It was only in the outskirts of Ajodhan, he settled himself at *jamat-khaana*. This place became an assembly and common platform for the Muslim Sufis and Nath Yogis where mystical topics were discussed. “The topics discussed at the Jama’at Khana gathering of Baba Farid were of great interest to visiting Siddhas whose beliefs were founded on Hath Yoga.⁷ His final settlement was in Pak Pattan, where he took his last breath.

Encounters of Sufis with Naths

Not everything was smooth in the beginning as the *Pirs* and *Naths* want to outdo each other; a sense of competency was examined. According to Nathpanthis “The contacts and conflicts between Sufis and Yogis became more frequent and meaningful. Wandering yogis significantly influenced the various branches of Qalandars and Sufis of the Rifa’iyya order, confined mainly to Turkey, Syria and Egypt. Unfortunately existing literature throws little light on Yogis who are constantly referred to as ‘Jogis’ In one reference the perfect yogi is associated by *Shaikh Nasirud-Din Chiragh-i-Delhi* with the Siddhas.⁸ There existed an orthodox temperament in Sufi Muslims, which gradually changed after frequent exchanges of spiritual thoughts, rituals, yogic practices, convergence of paradigms. The contact with the Hindu Vaishnava Vedantic Bhaktas of the Bhakti Movement and also the Yoga practices taught by the Nathyogis had a powerful impact on the Sufis, they also imbibed the principles of Monism and wifely love and devotion for the Almighty from Hindu Vaishnava Vedantic Bhaktas in their philosophy.⁹

Sheikh Muhammad Ghaus Gawaliari, the Sufi who initiated the great musician of Akbar era, *Tansen* into Islam was influenced by the practices and philosophy of Nath Pantha. He had knowledge of Hindu Tantric practices including the techniques of controlling the breath practiced by Nath Panthis and had written two books titled *Kaleed-e-Makhazin* (The key to the treasures) and *Bahr-e-Hayat* (The ocean of life) that described the techniques of breath control practiced by Nath Yogis.¹⁰

Utopia, Dystopia and the Process of Transcendence

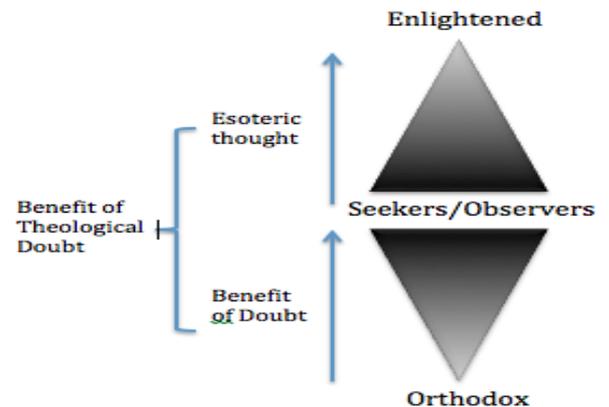
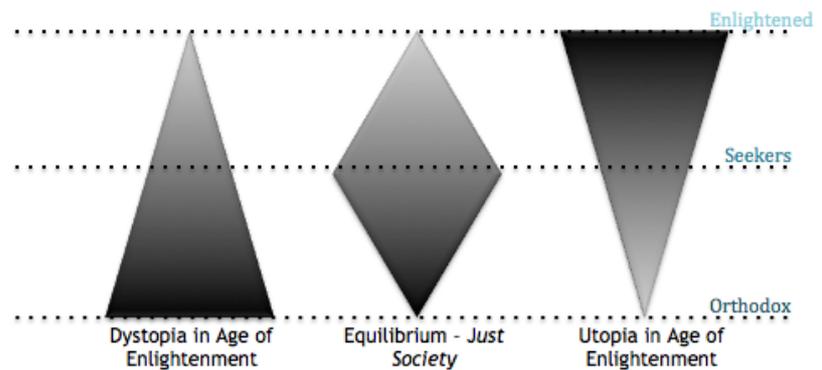
With mere individuals questioning the epistemology and ontology of religion, would not give clear answers to the questions of importance, but it does generate new set of ideas within humanity. If the emphasis is given to ‘period’, the world has witnessed evolutionary ideas from the age of enlightenment and continues to be in an evolutionary phase. What if due to such ideas there existed a utopia, dystopia and equilibrium condition?

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Age of utopic enlightenment will be manifested in such a way that maximum population will be enlightened irrespective of their paths or ways and less individuals will fall on the bottom, practicing fundamentalist thought or creation of new orthodoxy. Whereas dystopia will be observed when certain individuals have reached the epitome of enlightenment. In such scenario the concavity are the seekers, though very less become followers and majority of them are pulled towards belief systems. It is the dystopia that may raise religious orthodoxy of any kind and nurture fundamentalist thought which later can be transformed into extremism. Religious extremism of any kind is dangerous for the society as it destroys the ethos of social fabric and develops struggles among the actors present in a society. If spiritual movements or spirituality diminish, then religious orthodoxy concretizes the society and people tend to believe on a particular set of thoughts without reason.



Core Argument and Conclusion

As an observational study we discerned how spiritual personnel from distinct belief systems, religion, faith were able to confluence with each other due to exchanges in thoughts, metaphysical

association, mutual learning, though, in order to facilitate any such association for prolonged period, one needs to tolerate another, there always exist a push and pull from both ends 'spirituality' and 'orthodoxy'. In the beginning even Sufi's were redundant and orthodox in their beliefs, according to them Islam was the only pure religion. But the concordance can be achieved only through 'tolerance' and 'understanding'. As Rama Chandra Gandhi suggests, one should give 'benefit of doubt' to another, and Hindus and Muslims to give each other the benefit of theological doubt, doubt regarding whether the 'other' religion is acceptable to God or not. Quite clearly, Allah is not displeased with Hinduism. Quite clearly, Ishvara is not displeased with Islam. This simple knowledge about one another is the discovery that tolerance is not error or weakness. Aurangzeb, in the eighteenth century, did not tolerate some of the saints of his time like Dara Shikoh. Dara Shikoh gave the benefit of doubt to Hinduism; he did not think that Hinduism was going to undermine or overwhelm Islam. He was a mystic; he understood the mystical heart of Hinduism. Guru Tegh Bahadur likewise did

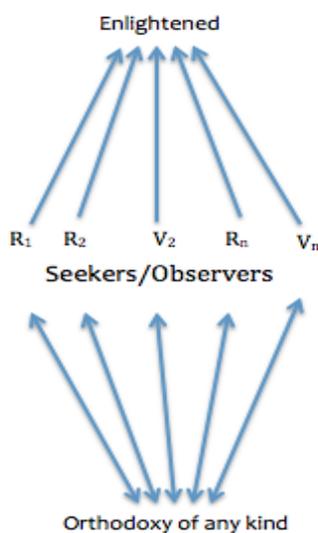
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not think that Hinduism or Islam were going to overwhelm his own very specific tradition of Sikh bhakti, which sought and received nourishment from both Hinduism and Islam. ¹¹ Through this benefit of doubt one can gradually pull out from orthodoxy and fall in the category of seekers, once landed in such space of seekers there are 'n' number of ways to achieve enlightenment.

Orthodox → Seekers → Enlightened



According to Schneiders - If there is ultimate value, spirituality is a way to reach that ultimate value through self-conscious development, life integration, self-transcendence and experience. The scope of this excerpt was limited to Indian subcontinent for better understanding, and both religious orthodoxies within (Hinduism and Islam) were succumbed into one and shown at the bottom whereas all ways or paths to spirituality are defined at one point i.e enlightenment, (at the top). Here R_1 , R_2 , V_2 , R_n , V_n represents $(Religion_1)$, $(Religion_2)$, $(Value based belief System)_1, \dots, (Religion)_n$ and $(Value System)_n$. Our focus here was to take two prominent religion or belief systems of this region and explain the association among seekers, orthodox, and enlightened, by providing the references of the movements existed in this part of the world and their spiritual-struggle against the orthodoxy. The outcomes of

both the movements were that it minimized the differences between Hinduism and Islam; it also curtailed other social evils up to some extent as Bhakti movement consisted followers from all caste, sects and creed. Spirituality in this time period reached a new zenith, as people were shown a different path of transcend. Such movements also transfused new notions among the existing dialects and developed new literati. Hence in order to tackle orthodoxy, spiritual movements like Bhakti and Sufism are needed which transcends across praexological aspects.

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-See Kocku von Stugrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London and Oakville:Equinox, 2005). Consonant with Stugrad's position, Lee Irwin argues: "What exactly is the meaning of the term 'esoteric' in the context of the history of ideas? Perhaps 'esotericism' is more an adjective than a noun, a descriptor whose function is to denote an interest whose salience or significance is more emergent, exploratory and creative speculation than a factual account signifying membership in a given order or holding a particular view of the world. Perhaps "esotericism" is a signifier whose reference is more a process of discovery and exploration than a simple statement of cultural identity - particularly with reference to its most creative representatives." Lee Irwin, "A World Full of Gods: Panpsychism and the Paradigms of Esotericism." A paper delivered at the 3rd International Conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism, College of Charleston: May 29- June 1, 2008; unpublished manuscript

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-"The eight supernatural faculties, viz., Animā (the power of becoming as small as an atom), Mahimā (the power of becoming big), Laghimā (the power of assuming excessive lightness at will), Garimā (the power of becoming as heavy as one likes), Prāpti (the power of obtaining all objects at will [sic.; 'will' is meant]), Prakāmya (the power of obtaining all objects of pleasure at will),

Īśitva (the power of obtaining supremacy over everything) and

Vaśitva (the power of subduing, fascinating or bewitching) are well known in the school of yoga. ... These powers are generally known as the eight powers of the lord Siva himself, who is the lord of yoga. The Nāth Siddhas ... displayed throughout these eight supernatural powers." Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 212. The locus classicus indicating these powers (aiśvaryas) is Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* III: 44, glossed by Vyāsa and Vācaspati Miśra. See also, inter alia, *Haṭhayoga pradīpikā* III: 8; *Śiva Saṃhitā* III:52, 78, V: 142; and *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* 152

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