LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

NEXUS: The Liberty Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Spring 2024*

Article 6

June 2024

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ENGL 301-001

02 December 2023

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A Culturally Subversive Understanding of Kabir's *Simple State*

Kabir, a 15th century Indian mystic, is one of those unique writers in literary history who was both a product of his culture and a herald of the next. Though little is known of Kabir's upbringing, the majority of scholars agree that "he grew up in a Muslim weaver's family…[and] was born in Kashi, one of the primary religious destinations for Hindu devotees" (Banerjee). Banerjee also notes that Linda Hess, a prominent scholar on the subject, argues that Kabir's "understanding of religion, his immersion was deeply in Hindu structures of thought" (Banerjee). Kabir's childhood can then be seen as a melting pot of these two ideas as the Muslim culture of his home collided with the Hindu culture of his hometown. In this way, Kabir's early life also mirrored the religious state of India at the time. Historian J. M. Roberts describes a series of Muslim raids into India from the 8th to 11th centuries, followed by a series of conquests and the establishment of Muslim kingdoms in the 12th century. Islam soon became an established part of Indian culture and proved to be "the greatest challenge yet seen to India's assimilative powers, for its active, prophetic, revelatory style was wholly antithetical…to Hinduism" (Roberts, 435-436). It was into this fractured world of religious ideologies that Kabir was born, and it formed a deep-seated aversion to institutional religion that would last a lifetime and find its outlet in his prolific writing. Kabir's composition of the *Simple State* in Hindi and its critique of rigid

religious practice and pilgrimages offers a strong rejection of both the Hindu and Muslim religious traditions in Indian culture.

With his poetry in general, and the *Simple State* in particular, Kabir broke with religious tradition in India by writing in the tongue of the common man. Kabir's vernacular composition first and foremost removed the linguistic barrier of religious instruction from the common people in India. Debjani Banerjee writes that "his verses are composed in Hindi and not Sanskrit; Sanskrit was the language connected with religion and it was often the prerogative of upper caste scholarly practices" (Banerjee). Similar to the situation developing in Europe at around this same time, religious instruction in India could only be read and delivered by those who had been taught the official language of the religious elite. Just as in Europe, this also created a clear power structure that could be and often was weaponized against the laity. By writing in the vernacular tongue of India, Kabir made it possible for the common people to be instructed in their spiritual lives without the intercession of the religious elite.

Drawing upon his own humble beginnings, Kabir also wrote in a way that was both comprehensible and appealing to the laity of India. Banerjee notes that Kabir's poetry "use common metaphors and symbols drawn from daily life - markets and temples, boats and rivers, clay and idols." In the *Simple State*, Kabir writes about the Hindu god Rama and Muslim Rahim and the idols and songs of both Hinduism and Islam to make his point that those religions have lost their meaning (93). These references would have resonated with his intended audience, as each were public and well-known aspects of their respective religions. Rather than using high-sounding religious jargon and needlessly muddled phraseology, Kabir's pithy and relatable style allowed his writing to resonate with his intended audience. The egalitarian spirit that undergirded Kabir's decision to compose the *Simple State* in the vernacular Hindi and employment of

accessible metaphors and imagery is a radical divergence from the strict stratification of 15th century Indian society.

The guiding principle of Kabir's religious philosophy as laid out in the *Simple State* is that of a wholesale rejection of institutionalized religious dogma. Renu Josan, of Dayalbagh Educational Institute in Agra, argues in his article that Kabir's teachings were meant to help humanity understand "the futility of religious dogmas, rituals, and bigotry" (Josan). The life work of Kabir was devoted to pushing back against the rampant religious radicalism that dominated Indian society. Torn between the irreconcilable worldviews of Islam and Hinduism, Kabir sought to free himself and his disciples by exposing the futility of their respective traditions. In the *Simple State*, he attacks the ritual bathing of the Hindu *brahmanas*, the "business tricks" of the Muslim *imams*, and the pilgrimages, religious wars, and proselytizing practices of each religion (93-94). Each of these he finds to be mere religious posturing, practices meant to make the devotee feel spiritual rather than traditions meant to draw the devotee nearer to the divine. Kabir's repudiation of the institutionalized religions of Indian society dominated his religious thought and transformed his poetry into a form of laity pushback against the religious elite.

The *Simple State* also provides a glimpse into the response of the Indian religious authorities to the radical religion of this weaver's son from Kashi. Throughout history, religious elites have not taken too kindly to dissension, especially from among the laity, and 15th century India proved to be no different. Kabir writes that "when I tell the truth, people run to beat me up…when I tell lies, they believe me" (92). The Norton Anthology's introduction to Kabir furthermore notes that he likely faced persecution equally from "orthodox Hindus, conservative Muslims, and political authorities for his outspoken criticism of society and organized religion"

(87). Clearly, the teachings of Kabir did not exactly massage the egos of the religious leaders in India. Kabir's radical rejection of institutional religion of all forms in the *Simple State* makes this persecution easier to understand; he was intentionally and incisively cutting at the threads of the major religions of Indian society. Much as the Catholic Church reacted to the incendiary theses posted by a simple German monk, the religious elites of Indian Hinduism and Muslim traditions must have seen the teachings of Kabir as an assault on their well-established social, political, and religious positions. Yet the *Simple State* shows that Kabir would not be intimidated, as he categorically criticized the leading institutions of Indian culture.

In his poem the *Simple State*, Kabir offers a withering critique of both the Hindu and Muslim tradition of pilgrimage. He argues that the tradition of pilgrimage in both religions has become so institutionalized that they no longer mean anything. Born and raised in Kashi, one of the most prominent and holy sites in Indian Hinduism, the young Kabir would have been familiar with the Hindu practice from a young age. Growing up in a Muslim household, he also would've learned in his religious instruction that the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca was a religious duty. On either side of the religious isle, the tradition of pilgrimage was of immense cultural importance. Yet, Kabir believed that the tradition was a worthless one. "They're so proud of their pilgrimages," Kabir writes, "[but] they forget the real thing" (93). In other words, the underlying purpose that gave rise to the tradition has been lost. Within this rejection of pilgrimage there is also a glimpse of Kabir's egalitarian ethic; man need not travel to a holy site to find "the True Master," (94). Union with the godhead can be achieved without such grandiloquent gestures. This strong critique leveled by Kabir struck at the heart of both Hindu and Muslim religious practice and exposed the weak foundations of their respective religious fundamentalism.

It is evident from the way Kabir lived that he took his own teachings against pilgrimage to heart. Vinrod Verma, a member of the English Department at the University of Delhi, writes that "Kabir…chose Maghar, a common town, which he preferred to Kashi, a holy town known for its sacredness, for spending last days of his life" (Verma). He intentionally modeled his own life after his teachings and went to great lengths to display his contempt for the pompous pilgrimages undertaken by his countrymen. Once again, the anti-establishment and decidedly democratic ethic of Kabir is made apparent in his choice of Maghar over Kashi as his final home. In essence, he chose the common over the religiously significant. This mirrors his decision to write in Hindi so that he may be understood, read, and taught by the common man of India instead of the Sanskrit of the religious elite. In both cases, Kabir emphasized the sacramental importance of the ordinary over the arbitrary sense of spirituality vested in certain deeds, locations, and languages by the religious elites. This simple creed, laid out in the *Simple State*, guided Kabir's life and teaching and cut against the fundamental grain of Indian's highly religious society.

Kabir and his *Simple State* were certainly incendiary topics in 15th century India. Composed in the vernacular Hindi and notable for its attacks on regulated religiosity such as pilgrimages, Kabir's *Simple State* amounted to nothing short of an attack on the religious structure of Indian society. Kabir's rejection of the Sanskrit of the religious elite and emphasis on everyday imagery and metaphor opened his religious instruction to the whole of literate India. Likewise, his denouncement of rigid religious practice and pilgrimages weakened the authority of the Hindu and Muslim religious structures in India and paved the way for a more personal understanding of the divine that was not increased or lessened by geographical location. This culturally subversive work laid the groundwork for the infusion of egalitarian religious thought

in a cultural climate defined by social strata, and opened up a channel to the divine that could be pursued by the laity as well as the clergy. Despite its ultimate failure to end the religious violence and bigotry that Kabir despised so much, the critiques offered up in the *Simple State* and the egalitarian emphasis of the author remain compelling points of contention and dissension down into the modern day.

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