

Is It “Praying Twice?”: An Anglican Christian Comparative Theological Consideration of Chanting and Hymn-singing in Bhakti Hindu, Sikh, and Sufi Muslim Traditions



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Abstract

This paper begins with the stipulation that every religion indeed has something akin to what Guy Beck calls a “sonic theology”—an accounting for the relationship of sound (and, by extension, the relationship of recitation, chanting, singing, instrument-playing) to the divine/human economy—and a reminder that comparative theology involves taking a deep dive into a different faith via close reading of its sacred literature and other theological sources. It then proceeds to argue that sacred song and chant belong among those sources through which we can become deeply familiar with the concepts and vocabulary of a religious tradition—a major goal of comparative theology. This will involve maintenance of comparative theology’s core practice of close reading and adding to it—and even give priority to—the practice of close listening.

Keywords

sonic, comparative theology, close reading, listening, sound, chant, singing, kirtan, adhan, mantra

One day in late September of 2001, I opted to walk home from teaching in NYC’s East Village. I wanted to see the memorials that had sprung up in Union Square Park. Above the usual traffic and pedestrian noise, another sound caught my attention. I followed it to the park’s northwest corner. There sat a man, chanting—his pleasant tenor voice wafting above traffic noise and pedestrian scuffling. I was transfixed by the sound. A few evenings later, I brought my students to

the ISKCON temple at Second Avenue and Second Street.¹ (The field trip had been planned back in the summer.) To my surprise, among the other visitors that evening was that very man!

When I introduced myself, he explained: when word of the attacks on the World Trade Center reached his ashram in West Virginia, he (an ISKCON monk) immediately packed a bag and straightaway drove to New York City (where the air was still heavy with the smell of the smoldering rubble), placed himself in the spot where I had found him, and chanted—for four days!

But why? I asked. What purpose did he think his efforts served? I honestly wanted to know. “We believe that chant changes things,” the monk explained. “We believe that chanting expands what is possible for God to accomplish in that space.” As a Hindu theology of chanting, it was succinct, beautiful, and provocative of other questions—questions which, eventually, coalesce into this: what moves an interreligious conversation about chanting and singing *out of* the arena of comparative religion and *into* the arena of comparative theology?

In this brief paper, I offer some preliminary reflections on this as a multi-vocational person: a professional Episcopal musician and theologian who is also a scholar of religious manyness with particular interest in the Hindu, Sikh, and Islamic traditions.

To begin, we can stipulate that every religion indeed has something akin to what Guy Beck calls a “sonic theology”—an accounting for the relationship of sound (and, by extension, the relationship of recitation, chanting, singing, instrument-playing) to the divine/human economy. Indeed, there is plenty to compare. Given that *comparative theology* involves taking a deep dive into a different faith via close reading of its sacred literature and other theological sources, I argue that sacred song and chant belong among those sources through which we can become deeply familiar with the concepts and vocabulary of a religious tradition—a major goal of comparative theology. We maintain the core practice of close reading; to which we add—and even give priority to—the practice of *close listening*. I am in line here with Dharmic scholar Rita Sherma, who argues for development of *Critical Interreligious Interdisciplinary Theological Reflection*—a practice which, as she describes it, transgresses the boundaries of conventional “text-based Comparative Theology.”²

Chanting/Singing Scripture

Comparative sonic theology can still begin with scriptures—specifically with their fundamental oral-aural aspect. They are meant to be heard—and in most religious traditions, notes Guy Beck, they are “chanted or sung in a living context.”³ In a comparative project, participants might benefit from a reminder that, while neither would be called “singing,” the melodiousness of

¹ ISKCON: The International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

² Rita D. Sherma, “Critical Interreligious Interdisciplinary Theological Reflection: Methodological and Hermeneutical Considerations for Interreligious Studies,” in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 481.

³ Harold Coward, *Word, Chant, and Song: Spiritual Transformation in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Sikhism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

Qur’an recitation and the adhan (call to prayer) is integral to Islamic spirituality. In the Hindu milieu, they might need to know the context of the portion of scripture they heard a pujari chant during their visit to a local mandir. Or that the primary devotional practice of Sikh religion is *kirtan*—communal singing of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy book). Most of its 1430 pages contain hymns set to specific melodies. Or that Anglican Christianity has its own method for chanting the 150 prayers comprising the Bible’s Book of Psalms; and that furthermore, it has a method for the chanting of all passages of scripture appointed for a given service (although few parishes do it).

This is useful information; but, comparative sonic theology asks: in (or as a result of) this chanting or singing of scripture, what is happening?—and expects a theological (rather than a phenomenological) reply. Answering from a Muslim perspective, Ingrid Mattson explains, “In reciting the Qur’an, the very words of God are produced in the throats of the reciters and perceived in the ears and minds of the listeners. With each articulation of a Qur’anic phrase, the believer is recreating speech of a God who is as alive today as he has been forever. This is not a performance of historical speech but a rearticulation of the eternal words of the living God.”⁴

In the reciting, the chanting, the singing of scripture, what is occurring? How might representatives of the other traditions put it? We might engage in close listening to mantra practice. Repetition (either individually or communally) of a Sanskrit formula—which may be a single syllable or a complex poem. (Communal mantra practice sometimes uses call-and-response, sometimes solo and refrain.) The mantra practice of the ISKCON devotees I visited with my students back in 2001 includes collective singing of God’s name, using simple melodies, sometimes accompanied by drums and cymbals. In any case, mantra is considered a powerful means for reaching transcendent awareness and ultimate release.

Moving next to Sufi communal devotional practice, we will note that an evening gathering might begin with strophic songs (poems) in praise of the Prophet, then transition to *dhikr*: meditational remembrance of God by chanting God’s names or by repetition of phrases such as “Glory to God.” The assembly’s rhythmic chanting may provide a foundation above which a solo voice sings elaborate praise, thanksgiving, and supplication.

Comparative sonic theology wonders how these oral/aural practices (in which intense repetition plays such a major role) are understood. In time, one comes to embody one’s mantra, says one practitioner. What theological explanation might a Sufi dervish offer?

Moving on to staples of religious communal singing: hymns and devotional songs are, in essence, theology lessons or doctrinal review sessions; hence their performance is an apt topic for comparative theological investigation. What an assembly believes about God and God’s ways, about the nature of humanity, and about how human beings can know and respond to God, all contribute to the spectrum of what can be sung about in worship and devotion. We can analyze and compare the theological content of the texts. However, hymns and devotional songs wield power: didactic, polemical, apologetic. Our close listening is more apt to be fruitful, our theological comparisons more discerning if we experience them in context.

⁴ Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur’an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Blackwell, 2008), 82.

So, to the examples of communal singing already mentioned, we might investigate what, theologically, is transpiring in Vaishnava *bhajan*—informal communal devotional singing with instrumental accompaniment. Or the more formal Hindu practice of Aarthī (the evening ceremony of bell-ringing and communal singing of praise to the Lord of the Universe, while performing a simple ritual with oil lamps). We might ask the same question of *qawwali*, a South Asian song tradition originating among Muslims in the 14th century but now transreligious in its use.⁵

In comparative conversation, what would each like the other to know about their theology of religious-communal singing? For Sikhs, says Nikky Singh, “singing or listening is the mode praise of the Singular Divine; it constitutes the alpha and omega of Sikh theology, ethics, philosophy, and aesthetics. One of my favorite verses from the Guru Granth Sahib translates: ‘paradise is where *your* praise is sung.’ It means that the tongue itself is being praised for extolling the divine One.”⁶ Regarding *qawwali*, Muslim scholar Homayra Ziad says that centuries of using “well-known Indic classical...melodies” to set religious poetry in six languages has “created imaginative spaces for diverse traditions to co-create and flourish.”⁷ In response, what might a comparative sonic theologian ask? How might Hindus explain their own theology of communal singing? Guy Beck has given us two excellent books on that matter.

What about an Anglican theology of communal singing? It will be incarnational: the assembly, when singing, is the Body of Christ exploring and expressing what it means to be the Body of Christ. Regarding our direct address to God through song, I am fond of an aphorism attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo: the one who sings prays twice. Singing doubles prayer’s efficacy. It’s an interesting claim about the divine/human economy. Guy Beck says that “In the Hindu tradition the ritual singing of praise song goes beyond its mere doxological function to bring about self-transformation and self-realization.”⁸ Is this another way of saying that the one who sings prays twice?

I find that whether my other-religion friends think Augustine’s adage makes any sense at all depends greatly on their definition of “praying”. For Christians, the term “prayer” is a large umbrella covering Praise, Confession, Petition, Intercession, and Thanksgiving. We might also add Lament. But in some religions, “prayer” names praise only. Petition and so on—that goes in a different category. This is helpful for the comparative sonic theologian to know.

Mysterium

Preparing this paper offered me an opportunity to revisit my earlier work on theology of hymnody and to think about how the topic might fit into a larger interreligious project I have underway. Everything I have mentioned here is ripe for deeper exploration—as are the many

⁵ Homayra Ziad, “Meeting in the Realm of Poetry and Music: Qawwali Devotional Music,” in *Words to Live By: Sacred Sources for Interreligious Engagement*, ed. Or N. Rose, Homayra Ziad, and Soren Hessler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 103.

⁶ From a conversation between Nikky-Guninder K. Singh and Lucinda Mosher in Fall 2020.

⁷ Homayra Ziad, “Meeting in the Realm of Poetry and Music,” 103, 110.

⁸ Guy Beck, *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition* (University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 206.

concepts within each sonic tradition that I did not bring up at all. Possibilities for rich conversation abound. I am grateful to Guy Beck, Harold Coward, Terry Muck, and others who have launched comparative theological exploration. In proceeding, it is important to maintain differentiation between comparative theology and comparative study of religious phenomena. Comparative sonic theology will attend to the diverse music of two or more religious traditions—but in order to examine the power of music as a pathway to the Ineffable. Comparative sonic theology assumes that in a particular religion’s chant or devotional song practice, there is experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Evoking the numinous is what religious chant or song does; it calls our attention to “the ineffable, the beyond, the indefinable” (as Terry Muck puts it).⁹ Comparative sonic theology digs as deeply as possible into the economy of that evocation. It asks: in the reciting, the chanting, the song, what is happening? I look forward to more answers.

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⁹ Terry Muck, “Psalm, Bhajan, and Kīrtan: Songs of the Soul in Comparative Perspective,” in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 7–21 at 15.