

Devotional Detachment: The Islamic Virtue of *Zuhd* & Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Upadeśāmṛta*

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Abstract

The Islamic virtue known as *zuhd* was an essential component of piety in classical Arabic texts. Often translated as asceticism or renunciation, it indicates a preference for spiritual aspirations over material pleasures. Widely revered texts such as *al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya* discuss the varying ways in which Muslims conceptualize the meaning of *zuhd*. Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Upadeśāmṛta*, a concise Sanskrit text from the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, also advocates a similar approach known as *yukta-vairāgya*. Rūpa wants to create an ethical foundation for a devotee's mystical ascent to contemplation of Kṛṣṇa. A modern commentator, A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami, explains Rūpa's ethical insights in response to economic and political conditions of the twentieth century. By putting these two conceptual frameworks of devotional detachment in conversation with each other, important light can be shed on a comparative ethics of asceticism for an overtaxed planet in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Islam, Comparative Ethics, Asceticism, bhakti

Two of the greatest ethical challenges of the twenty-first century are the following: first, the continually growing human population of the planet and our impact on the planet's ability to provide us what we need and want; and second, the diversity of human languages, beliefs, and ethical traditions that inform our ways of living in seemingly conflict-prone ways. One can explore possible responses to these challenges through an examination of various textual traditions, such as the Islamic tradition expressed in Arabic and the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition in Sanskrit. Although many of these texts were written before European colonial modernity transformed human life on planet Earth, they are still sources of inspiration and authority for millions of Muslims and Hindus in the present. By examining their conceptions of "devotional detachment," they each urge human beings to consider the role that individual choices play in both human impact on the world and their ultimate fate as conscious beings. By exploring these traditions in tandem, we can articulate a mode of ethical reasoning that is both rooted in

profound respect for pre-colonial ethical traditions and also cognizant of the troubling realities of twenty-first century human life.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues that “the highest ethical moment is found in the reaching of a sub-other to another subject in a position of sub-alterity.”¹ The secularity of the Euro-American academy is something that all religious people must negotiate, and it is most often the case that the religiously identified scholar is engaged in an intellectual exchange with their secular counterparts. Speaking generally, this is the case with both Hindu Studies and Islamic Studies. It is very rare when the efforts of the Hindu or Muslim scholar turn away from the dominant secular (and less often, Judeo-Christian) paradigms within American academic institutions, and instead engage with each other. This is, at least in part, a vestige of European colonial modernity. The twenty-first century Hindu and Muslim scholar-practitioner, each heirs to an intellectual tradition that was an object of colonial power for hundreds of years, is often very busy justifying their existence, and whole careers in both fields can be rooted in trying to overturn the contention of 19th-century British colonial official Thomas Babington Macaulay (d. 1859) who stated that, “A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”² Maldonado-Torres rejects the supposition that only through gaining power can ethical discourse be possible; rather, he asserts that ethics are always already there. If two people, both historically subjected to ridicule, can form bonds of ethical solidarity at the margins, then the lie that only the master can affect the form of human relations is exposed. By spending time learning across traditions subject to colonial domination, it is possible to create new intellectual and social possibilities that foster thriving for all peoples and not simply the thriving of those who identify with more hegemonic worldviews within Euro-American lifeworlds.

The Islamic Virtue of *Zuhd*

In attempting to characterize the role of *zuhd* in Islamic thought, it is important to note that the Arabic root *z-h-d* appears only one time in the Qur’an (12:20).³ Part of the lengthy story of the Prophet Joseph (*Nabī Yūsuf*), the verse states that his brothers did not make much money from selling him into slavery, and so they are described as “from those who are satisfied with little (*min al-zāhidīn*).” Roughly a thousand years later, the Qur’anic exegete al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1680–81) felt it was important to mention narrations concerning the price they received, and how little it actually was.⁴ The twentieth-century Qur’anic exegete Muhammad Shafi (d. 1976) contends that the point of this verse is not to praise them for their contentment, but to show how truly unconcerned they were with the price.⁵ They had an objective—to get Joseph out of their life—

¹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Race, Religion, and Ethics in the Modern/Colonial World,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no. 4 (2014): 705.

² Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Education (1835),”

http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealcac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html.

³ Abdullah Abbas Nadwi, *Vocabulary of the Holy Qur’an* (Chicago: Iqra’ International Educational Foundation, 1996), 248.

⁴ Muḥsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, *Tafsīr Al-Ṣāfi*, ed. Ḥusayn al-A’lamī, vol. 2 (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A’lamī, 2008), 226.

⁵ Muhammad Shafi, *Ma’ariful Qur’an: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Quran*, trans. Muḥammad Shamīm, vol. 5 (Karachi: Maktaba-e-Darul-Uloom, 1998), 53.

and they just wanted to get the transaction done. Put simply, they were not particularly attached to the issue of price; rather, the price was a *means* to an end.

But this Arabic root, in the form of the word *zuhd*, became a critically important concept in early Islamic ethical discourse. *Zuhd* was linked to complementary concepts such as contentment (*ridā*), trust (*tawakkul*), having short hopes (*qīṣar al-ʿamal*), and being diligent and cautious when it comes to ethically doubtful issues (*warāʿ*). Debates about its implications focused on whether or not a life of voluntary poverty and simplicity were inherently admirable. Those who defended a less ascetic path invoked another set of complementary concepts: patient perseverance (*ṣabr*) and worshipful gratitude (*shukr*). If a Muslim was given some material blessing and used it within the limits of the religious law (*sharīʿah*) with the intention of worship (*ʿibāda*), then voluntary poverty was not necessary. In addition, if a Muslim was given a tribulation that removed a material blessing, and they patiently persevered, then that too was spiritually valuable. Ultimately, those seeking to emulate prophetic virtues should be attached to God more than they are attached to anything material that God gives to them or takes away. However, the world is tempting, and so even those who affirmed the possibility of spiritual progress amidst material bounty warned against the potential pitfalls of overindulgence. One had to engage in vigilant reflection (*murāqaba*) over even their emotions, to discern what made them happy or sad and interrogate the reasons why. In this regard, Leah Kinberg felt that *zuhd* was an absolutely core concept of an Islamic ethical framework that applied to all Muslims.⁶ Historically, those identified as practitioners of *zuhd* as an emblem of piety predated the appellation *ṣūfī*, which did not emerge until 9th century Baghdad.⁷

At least by the time of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996), the concept of *zuhd* was read back into Qurʾanic verses that did not use the root *z-h-d*. In the story of Korah (*Qārūn*), when he appears in public and the people wish they had what he had, those who were given knowledge (*ʾutūʾl-ʿilm*) reply that God's reward (*thawāb Allāh*) is better (28:80). Al-Makkī sees this as implying *zuhd* in regard to matters of this world (*dunyā*), and brings forth other verses as well.⁸ The idea that *zuhd* was compatible with the Qurʾanic ethos was never questioned inherently, but the discussion around what it actually meant to be a *zāhid* (pl. *zuḥḥād*) indicates the fluidity of the concept. Both Qurʾanic commentarial literature (*tafsīr*) as well as early ethical discourses presumed that the issue of wealth was relevant to properly defining *zuhd*, and it was against that backdrop that further clarifications and refinements were articulated. The writer of the earliest surviving treatise specifically on *zuhd*, ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 797), had to contend with this issue, and make plain in his speech and behavior that wealth was not a hindrance to true piety.⁹ This spiritual virtue was articulated against the backdrop of the Christian celibate ascetic ideal which had prevailed for centuries in the Levant and North Africa prior to the arrival of Islam.¹⁰

⁶ Leah Kinberg, "What Is Meant by Zuhd," *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985): 27–44.

⁷ Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–7.

⁸ Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt Al-Qulūb Fī Muʿāmalat al-Maḥbūb Wa Wasf Ṭarīq al-Murīd Ilā Maqām al-Tawḥīd*, ed. ʿĀṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 2005), 403.

⁹ Feryal Salem, *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunnī Scholasticism: ʿAbdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunnī Identity in the Second Islamic Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 111–14.

¹⁰ Philip Sheldrake SJ, *Spirituality and History*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 68–69.

Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) is a well-known figure in Islamic intellectual history.¹¹ His early treatise (*risāla*) on Sufism is a common source quoted in both Shī'ī and Sunnī texts. His method is to quote various preceding authorities on Sufism and give occasional analysis. He points out that the authorities (*al-nās*) on the subject of *zuhd* have some differences (*ikhtilāf*) regarding the proper way of conceptualizing *zuhd*. He roots his analysis of these differences in Islamic legal categories. For instance, some argue that *zuhd* should only be connected to the category of the forbidden (*ḥarām*), and that should God bless the servant (*ʿabd*) with some blessing that is then used for worship (*ʿibāda*) in a state of gratitude (*shukr*), it would be more or less irrelevant whether or not that person chose to renounce anything beyond the forbidden or keep it. But others contend that it is best to continue to ascend the ranks of detachment in regards to anything that might distract or tempt one away from God.¹² In this regard, later on he quotes Ibn Ḥanbal that there are three levels of renunciation: that of the commoners (*ʿawwām*), which is to leave the forbidden (*ḥarām*); that of the elect (*khawwās*), which is to leave the excess *ḥalāl*; and the knowers of God (*ʿarīfīn*), which is to leave whatever distracts from God.¹³

After al-Qushayrī's time, the issue of *zuhd* vis-a-vis wealth continued to be debated, with al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) representing a stricter ideal, and Ibn Taymīya (d. 1328) advocating for a viewpoint that downplayed the value of renunciation in exchange for a fideistic legal categorization of all human actions. In this regard, poverty was discussed as both a “social concept” as well as a “religious ideal” within medieval Muslim societies.¹⁴ According to Ibn Taymīya and others with similar views, if someone is extremely rich but all their money is *ḥalāl* and everything they spend it on is *ḥalāl*, then there is absolutely no issue with that, as poverty in and of itself is not a religious ideal. But clearly al-Qushayrī's discussion of *zuhd* is focused on describing it as a necessary characteristic of those who deepen their knowledge of God, as opposed to simply following the letter of the law. Whether it involves simply leaving the *ḥarām*—no small feat in a sensual and materialist twenty first century—or whether it involves a Gandhi-like detachment from anything beyond one's own basic needs (as one Muḥammad b. al-Faḍl states, “those with *zuhd* prefer others over themselves once they have enough [*ūthār al-zuhhād ʿinda al-istighnā*”]), the point is that God is the central focus.¹⁵ It is a devotional detachment, meant to improve one's attachment to the Creator through detachment from the created. In this regard, al-Qushayrī quotes Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 830) as stating, “*zuhd* is to leave whatever distracts one from God.”¹⁶ This falls under what Faraz Sheikh calls an “*ʿabdī* subjectivity,” in that the subject is functioning as a servant of God who is focused on God.¹⁷ Grappling with the meaning of *zuhd* is a pedagogical technique to get the servant to reflect on where their attachments to the created are strong, and thus need to be overcome in order to arrive at higher levels of attachment to God.

¹¹ Martin Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar: Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹² Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd al-Sharīf (Cairo: Matābiʿ Muʾassasat Dār al-Shaʿb, 1989), 218; Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism: Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya Fī ʿilm al-Tassawuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 134.

¹³ al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya*, 222; al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle*, 137.

¹⁴ Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8–31.

¹⁵ al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya*, 221; al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle*, 136.

¹⁶ al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya*, 220; al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle*, 136.

¹⁷ Faraz Sheikh, “Being an Intelligent Slave of God: Discursive Strategies and Subject Formation in Early Muslim Thought,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 1 (2019): 125–152.

Rūpa Gosvāmī and Devotional Detachment in the *Upadeśāmṛta*

There is a direct historical link between a Hindu official in the pre-colonial Bengal Sultanate of ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Ḥusayn Shah (r. 1493–1519) and the worldwide expansion in the second half of the twentieth century of a form of the Hindu tradition known as Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Rūpa Gosvāmī (d. 1564) had a successful career in the Bengali Muslim court, but then left it to pursue an ascetic devotional life of scholarship under the direction of the charismatic figure Caitanya (d. 1533).¹⁸ In 1965, a guru from the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava school named A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda (d. 1977, hereafter Prabhupāda) brought the works of Rūpa Gosvāmī around the world. In 1970, he published an English abridgement-commentary of a foundational Caitanya Vaiṣṇava text of Rūpa Gosvāmī’s, *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, and entitled his work *The Nectar of Devotion*. Then later in 1975, he published a direct translation and commentary on another Rūpa Gosvāmī text known as *Upadeśāmṛta* (The Nectar of Devotion). In the introduction to both texts, Prabhupāda emphasized that Rūpa Gosvāmī was the source of authority for the details of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava orthopraxy, as Caitanya himself had not written any systematic treatises. Prabhupāda’s textual interventions in English mark the beginning of the globalization of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, and he complemented his textual work by training thousands of disciples around the world in the detailed praxis of the tradition.

Upadeśāmṛta is part of a larger work known as *Stavamāla* and is a poetic summary akin to the *mukhtaṣars* so common in Islamic law.¹⁹ The number of syllables in the meter gradually expands as the text rises to a climax. In this regard, the title can be understood esoterically, based on etymological derivation, that one is “approaching the place (*upadesa*)” of the “world of immortality (*amṛta*).”²⁰ As such the beginning of the text is about laying an ethical and devotional foundation for subsequent mystical experience. In his commentary, Prabhupāda contends that it consisted of the “first instructions for neophyte devotees.”²¹

The first verse states that, “whoever can control the urges of speech, mind, anger, the tongue, the belly, and the genitals, that sober person is qualified to be a teacher to the world.”²² The Sanskrit word translated as “urge,” which is repeated often in this verse, is *vegah*, which could also be translated as “force.” This urge acts through aspects of the senses that then bring that urge into material reality. In commenting on this verse, Prabhupāda reiterates his demand that his disciples adhere to the “four regulative principles,” which are abstaining from meat as well as avoiding intoxication, gambling, and illicit sex.²³ But he makes clear that such abstention from very common pleasures is not meant to lead to a state where one feels empty, but rather is

¹⁸ David L. Haberman, *The Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu of Rūpa Gosvāmī* (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2003), xxxii.

¹⁹ Mohammad Fadel, “The Social Logic of Taqlīd and the Rise of the Mukhtaṣar,” *Islamic Law and Society* 3, no. 2 (n.d.): 193–233.

²⁰ Graham M. Schweig, “The Upadeśāmṛtam of Rūpa Gosvāmī: A Concise Teaching on Essential Practices Kṛṣṇa Bhakti,” in *Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Philosophy: Tradition, Reason and Devotion*, ed. Ravi M. Gupta (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 164.

²¹ A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda, *The Nectar of Instruction* (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedānta Book Trust, 1975), ix.

²² *vāco vegam manasaḥ krodha-vegam jihvā-vegam udaropastha-vegam | etān vegān yo viśaheta dhīraḥ sarvām apīmāṇṁ pṛthivīm sa śīḡyāt ||*

²³ Prabhupāda, *The Nectar of Instruction*, 4; Satyārāja Dasa, *The Four Principles of Freedom: The Morals and Ethics behind Vegetarianism, Continence, Sobriety and Honesty* (Brooklyn: Folk Books, 2002).

coupled with replacing these pleasures with spiritual pleasures. The mind and speech that are controlled do not lead to silence or a “vacuum,” but to “always thinks of Kṛṣṇa and how to serve Kṛṣṇa best.”²⁴ The way to control the belly is not through renouncing the pleasures of food, but engaging in the ritual practice of offering all one’s foodstuffs to the Lord before partaking, known as *prasādam*.²⁵ For those unable to remain completely away from sexual activity, one directs one’s intentions in sex to producing new servants of the Lord.²⁶ Fasting is encouraged to assist this over all process.²⁷

The second verse states that, “Devotional service is destroyed by six things: excessive eating, exertion, idle talk, attachment or neglect of following rules, mixing with people, and greed.”²⁸ Excessive eating is plain enough, but Prabhupāda glosses exertion (*prayāsaḥ*) as spending too much time in collecting diverse foodstuffs, or even going too far beyond local food production. Here he repeats his common teaching to focus on “plain living and high thinking,” which is another way of saying devotional detachment. One needs to free oneself from the world in order to dive into contemplation of Kṛṣṇa. In this section, Prabhupāda also talks about Islam, as he wants to make the case that religious “*dharma*” in general leads us away from “material entanglement,” as our proper exertion should be “to inquire about the Absolute Truth.”²⁹ In regards to mixing with people (*jana-saṅgaḥ*), he compares networks, associations, and clubs meant for material advancement to those meant for spiritual goals.³⁰ This is rooted in the shared conception of heavenly realms in both Islam and Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism that they are not just abstract states, but rather real places with real people, filled with social solidarity and joy that is far beyond this world. This is tied to what is said about excessive attachment or careless neglect of following rules (*niyamāgraha*), for the point of the rules is to lead one to God. Therefore, the intentionality should be for God, not for the sake of the rules themselves (which is excessive attachment) nor neglecting them due to selfish desire or carelessness. On this point, greed (*lauhya*) is glossed as not just the normal material kind, but also greed for mystical states and/or powers for their own sake.

Prabhupāda also makes the point that both communists and capitalists see wealth as primarily for material gratification, and connects “excessive eating (*ati-āhāraḥ*)” to this issue, as he sees this as a general characteristic particular to humans that animals do not do.³¹ For the reality is that all wealth and resources belong to Kṛṣṇa, and so there should always be enough for everyone if we are rooted in devotional detachment.³² Ascetic discipline is often termed *vairāgya* in the Hindu tradition, and Prabhupāda insists that the real *vairāgya* is *yukta-vairāgya*. In his commentary on Gītā 9.28, he states that:

²⁴ Prabhupāda, *The Nectar of Instruction*, 4–5.

²⁵ Anna S. King, “Krishna’s Prasadam: ‘Eating Our Way Back to Godhead,’” *Material Religion* 8, no. 4 (2012): 440–65.

²⁶ Prabhupāda, *The Nectar of Instruction*, 7.

²⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁸ *atyāhāraḥ prayāsaś ca prajalpo niyamāgrahaḥ | jana-saṅgaś ca laulyaṁ ca śaḍbhir bhaktir vīnaśyati ||*

²⁹ Prabhupāda, *The Nectar of Instruction*, 18–20.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 18.

³² Ibid., 23–25.

Rūpa Gosvāmī says that as long as we are in this material world we have to act; we cannot cease acting. Therefore, if actions are performed and the fruits are given to Kṛṣṇa, then that is called *yukta-vairāgya*. Actually situated in renunciation, such activities clear the mirror of the mind, and as the actor gradually makes progress in spiritual realization he becomes completely surrendered to the Supreme Personality of Godhead...Such a person always thinks of himself as an eternal servant, dependent on the supreme will of the Lord. As such, whatever he does, he does it for the benefit of the Lord. Whatever action he performs, he performs it as service to the Lord.³³

Detachment is not the point; rather, devotion is the point, and it is assisted by detachment. The parallel between this perspective and a number of aspects of the *zuhd* discourse in Islam is notable. Prabhupāda's guru, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (d. 1937), emphasized *yukta-vairāgya* in a late colonial context, even though he himself was extremely detached (for example, by taking a lifelong vow of celibacy when he was young). He would encourage his disciples not to renounce the world, but to use whatever they had of the world (wealth, status, cars, and so on) in the service of Kṛṣṇa. In this regard, he advocated for a modernized and practical version of *vairāgya* that was not only devotionally theistic, but attuned to the changing social patterns of colonial India.³⁴

Conclusion

The value of comparing these two concepts is primarily pragmatic and functional. The planet Earth needs to sustain increasing numbers of human beings, and there is clearly not enough to go around. Not everyone can have everything, from a materialistic point of view. But why should someone let go of certain things when they are not forced by immediate circumstances to do so? The Muslim *zuhhād*, Rūpa Gosvāmī, and Prabhupāda urge us to consider the role of higher non-material pleasures as replacements for our excessive physical and bodily wants. We do not need unlimited food, unlimited sex, unlimited intoxicants, and so on. We need to find a balance, but not a balance for the sake of balance. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote years ago, “[these metaphysics] can most of all dispel the illusion about the existence of a purely economic being whose indefinite material progress is supposed to be the goal of every social and political organization.”³⁵ Balance over one's bodily needs and wants becomes the basis not for a better material life *per se*, but the basis for higher aspirations of devotion to our Lord. Prabhupāda's “high thinking” is not necessarily the path of a scholar obsessed with texts, but a mind fixed on contemplating the highest possible realities, at the summit of which is the Source of all that is. Ayatollah Khomeinī (d. 1988) commented on this contemplation by stating:

Thus, this light of nature guides us to the fact that the hearts of all the members of human species, from the people inhabiting far-flung regions of the world to the dwellers of

³³ A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda, *Bhagavad Gītā As It Is*, Second Edition. (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedānta Book Trust, 1983), 409.

³⁴ Ferdinando Sardella, *Modern Hindu Personalism: The History, Life and Thought of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203–9.

³⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1997), 133.

civilized countries, from believers in materialism to the followers of various religious creeds, all yearn by nature and from the core of their hearts to attain immaculate perfection. They long for an absolute beauty and perfection which has no defect, for a knowledge that has no trace of ignorance in it, for a power and domination that is not accompanied with impotence and weakness, for a life that has no death, and, ultimately, the Absolute Perfection that is the beloved of everyone. All the existents and the entire human species declare unanimously with one heart and in eloquent and lucid terms: We are lovers of Absolute Perfection; we are enamored to Absolute Beauty and Majesty; we are in search of Absolute Knowledge and Absolute Power.³⁶

Islam and Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism want to pave the way for authentic devotion. The complementary concepts of *zuhd* and *yukta-vairāgya* center an ascetic practice that essentially clears distractions away and provides a proper epistemic frame to appreciate divine *fullness*. Apophatic theology, by contrast, often tends to overemphasize ascetic practice, as the human emptied of all desires is meant to then experience a sort of unity with divine emptiness.³⁷ Since God owns everything, renunciation is not an inherent virtue; rather, it has a purpose to center the ethical subject's focus on the source of all pleasure. The dualism of desire is not inherently wrong or meant to be extinguished; rather, desire is meant to be redirected towards its highest aspiration, the Divine. Love requires duality, and both the exponents of *zuhd* and Rūpa's path of *bhakti* retain the dualism necessary between the Owner and the owned, the Master and the servant (*ʿabd* in Arabic, *dāsa* in Sanskrit). In this way, paths of devotional detachment convey a powerful message for a world craving more and more: do not worry about giving up a little of this world, for the Divine Fullness is never ending and always satiating. It also has a universal appeal, based on the concept that no matter who one is and where on Earth they are, they have access to the highest human possibilities that are not dependent on worldly position. Of course, the challenge has always been to believe that this is possible. If the claims of religion are all chimera, and there is no proof in the pudding, then it is a false promise. However, it addresses the very human and natural aspect of deferring gratification for the sake of something better. Why should someone labor away for fifteen years in school if they are not going to get some social and financial capital at the end of it? The contention of the thinkers examined in this article is that the path of devotion is its only reward, and in comparison, the fleeting pleasures of life on Earth just do not compare. This allows someone to let go of whatever they grasp too tightly, whether it is money or power or their own desires; it allows them to better approximate justice for the sake of the Earth and the Lord Who brought it into being.

As a convert to Islam, I have spent the last twenty-five years fighting my desires (*jihād al-naḥs*) for the sake of my Lord, and I have seen a similar struggle amongst my Caitanya Vaiṣṇava sisters and brothers. The point is not for the Muslim to be convinced of the Hindu argument, nor vice versa, but for both to appreciate that they share a desire to transcend a materialistic worldview, and to dispose of their property in ways that help and do not hinder their highest aspirations. If a billion Muslims and a billion Hindus can actually do that, it goes a long way to assisting an overly taxed planet to regenerate its resources for future generations to come, as well as better distribute

³⁶ Imām Khomeinī, *Forty Hadīths: An Exposition of Ethical and Mystical Traditions*, trans. Mahliqā Qarā'ī and 'Alī Qulī-Qarā'ī (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imām Khomeinī's Works, 2003), 200.

³⁷ Jeffrey Vogel, "Growing into the Darkness of God: The Inseparability between Apophatic Theology and Ascetic Practice," *Spiritus* 15 (2015): 214–30.

those resources amongst a radically stratified populace of eight billion souls or more. Of course, Muslims committed to attaining the station (*maqām*) of *zuhd* and Hindus committed to the embodiment of *yukta-vairāgya* are also embedded within political and economic structures that contribute to the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century. Challenging these structures is also necessary, and one can reasonably conceptualize that paths of devotional detachment may serve as a foundation for a revolutionary politics rooted in spiritual transformation. But fleshing out the contours of such politics across the current divide between Hindus and Muslims is challenging, to say the least. It is hoped that this article can help bridge the divide in some meaningful way, and plant seeds of conversation and shared earthly struggle that might blossom in the future in unexpected and mutually beneficial exchanges and projects. In regards to both the environmental crisis and conflict between Hindus and Muslims, in a very real way we must struggle to be the change we hope to see in the twenty-first century to the best of our ability.

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