

An Exploration of The Concept of Spiritual Union in The Poetry of George Herbert and Tukaram

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ABSTRACT

The *summum bonum* of every human soul, according to men and women of faith, is union with God in mutual love. There is a quest within human beings to be united with God. The union is the convergence of physical and spiritual worlds, reason and matter, soul and body, flesh and Spirit. People want to coexist with the all-encompassing Spirit known as Brahman, or God. It demands harmony between being and becoming, immanence and transcendence, and contemplation and action. God is the creator of all things. The universe cannot tell us exactly who God is or what he is because the passing world cannot comprehend this mystery. The grace of oneness with the divine is given to a spiritual person when he or they have reached the illuminative stage. The paper begins with defining the basic concepts and ideas of spiritual union according to the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets George Herbert, a British, and Tukaram, an Indian, followed by a short description of Christian and Hindu tradition. While Herbert explains being united with the Almighty without losing one's identity as a creature, Tukaram points out that to be in union with the Lord is to lose one's identity and become one in the Lord. Thus, this study explores the vast array of mystical experiences and sentiments of divine connection found in their poetry. It delves into their deep cultural and religious traditions, emphasising the significance of love, surrender, adoration, and the transformative influence of the divine presence in their poetic works. This paper highlights a deeper awareness of the intricacies of human spirituality and various paths that lead to the intimate relationship with the Divine by pointing to the similarities and distinctiveness in their poetry. It further encourages investigating profound spiritual communication and relationship with the divine through different traditions.

Keywords: Eastern and Western theology, *Atman* and *brahman*, *Jivatman* and *Paramatman*, Spirit and Union, The human soul and the divine soul.

Introduction

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The finite human beings of this passing world are constantly searching for ways, means, and methods to unite with the infinite God. They cannot comprehend the infinite God with their littleness. It aims at the spiritual union of the creature with the creator—a subject recurrent in

Eastern and Western theology. God cannot be changed because he is everlasting, all-pervading, and all-knowing. Several saints and mystics of various religions have occupied a prominent role in India and the Western world with their religious and traditional meditation and contemplation. God dwells in the heart and is present in each soul with his Spirit, where he makes his eternal abode. When a man experiences this truth, he will be united with the

Supreme.

Meister Eckhart, a German philosopher and mystic, writes, "God is neither this nor that; God is One." (Otto 11) To meet God, the soul isolates itself from all objects, allows itself to be detached from all attachments, relinquishes worldly recognitions, seeks quiet amidst the bustles of life, and gathers composure from all turbulences. Eckhart describes the ground of the soul as "becoming one" and "becoming nothing." (205)

The paper will help us understand the concept of spiritual union and the similarities and distinctiveness discussed by seventeenth-century metaphysical poets: George Herbert, a Christian poet who was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, and Tukaram, a Hindu poet who was a devotee of Lord Vitthal, an incarnation of Lord Krishna.

The religious beliefs of people have frequently served as inspiration for literary authors, such as poets, novelists, and other writers. Metaphysical poets, even today, serve as beacons of light for the people, sustaining their spiritual tempo through their poems. Several poets and writers have expressed their ardent desire to get closer to God. Religious poetry, which parallels metaphysical poetry, significantly impacts today's culture and tradition. Reason and emotion (feelings) coexist, and they affect human beings. The metaphysical poets emerge from different religious backgrounds: George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and Traherne are Protestants; Richard Crashaw and Cleveland are Catholics; John Donne is a satirist; and Edward Taylor is an American clergyman.

1.1 The Spirit and Union—the Union of *Jivatma* with *Paramatma* (Human with Divine)

The terms "spirit" and "union" refer to linguistic roots pertaining to the dynamic and vital aspects of humans and animals. The English word "spirit," derived from the Latin "spirare" (meaning "to breathe") or "spiritus," is rooted in the concept of breath. As defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, "spirit" pertains to the element

within an individual encompassing their intellect, emotions, and personality rather than their physical body. Thus, it refers to the soul of a person, something superior, as an embodied spirit where the body envelops it.

The mysticism of God will always overpower the mysticism of the soul. According to Thomas Aquinas, the primary creature among all is man, in whom God has concentrated perfections of the created world. Only man among creatures can reach the ultimate end, while others can only reach a certain degree of similarity to God. (Charles 300) The Latin term "anima," which denotes "that which animates" or "that which provides life," is where the English word soul originates. Every living creature possesses a soul, an ethereal, spiritual substance. (Charles)

The term "union" is the action of joining or linking multiple elements into a singular entity. When two objects come together, a union occurs. According to Kardec, three things exist in the human body: a) the body, or material being; b) the soul, or immaterial being; and c) the link that unites the soul and the body (32). During this process, the divine and human souls merge into one. Thus, the soul, Spirit, and God become not two but one. This type of union will unite the soul with the everlasting love of God on physical, mental, and spiritual levels.

1.2 Spiritual Union in Christian Tradition

Christian mystics liked to use Christ's crucifixion as a symbol of unity. To be united with God, one's self has to be purified; for this, the soul has to return to God with contrition and reconcile oneself with God. God can reveal himself to humans through asceticism, prayer, meditation, and contemplation. The lost presence of God can be regained through the examination of consciousness, which helps the person examine the actions performed against the Almighty. The mercies of the Lord will be poured out upon the soul that repents and changes its life. Life is in the hands of the Lord; he shapes and adjusts it as the potter would fashion the pot. Though the process is complicated, the outcome is beauty and the experience of freedom. Christians hold to the triangle image of spiritual union: Trinitarian – Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. In his book *Mysticism of the Soul*, Eckhart claims that the soul is the spark and the inner citadel. According to the description of creation in the Bible, the perfect godhead is made up of God and man (Atman and Brahman) (cf. Otto).

1.3 Spiritual Union in Hindu Tradition

Hinduism emphasises mysticism, which enables a person to comprehend and realise that he is an integral part of the everlasting being through which *Atman* transforms into *Brahman*. They also hold that the Spirit permeates, generates, and transcends the universe. This invisible being is called *Brahman*.

We cannot rationalise mysticism; it is a felt experience of the heart. It is transformative, vibrant, and creative and helps us live the principles that help us grow spiritually. It is a mystical clench of the aims and hurdles of life that give us meaning in life. When we aspire to be mystics, specific disciplines are to be part of life. One should have a pure mind and heart, purity in thoughts and actions, be a loving person, be content in everything, have an abasement of oneself, and focus on God. Mysticism is the unmediated union of the soul with God. Everyone resolves their karma to discover the path toward liberation or emancipation. Hinduism provides the wellspring from which mystics worldwide have drawn, seeking freedom from sin and malevolence.

Hinduism believes that after death, the physical body enters another life. The deeds of the past will determine who he will be in the next life. The shining self is eternal, not subject to death. Beyond good and evil represents a liberated soul devoid of worldly desires. The soul rests firmly in the divine grip.

1.4 George Herbert (1593–1633)

George Herbert, a metaphysical poet, is a direct descendant of John Donne. He is a crucial character in the group of religious, metaphysical poets. *The Temple*, a collection of his poetry, is a basic, direct, and melodious expression of his humility, self-effacement, simple devotion, and genuine Christian kindness. His philosophical pretensions are under control and simple to understand. He was likely more successful as a religious poet despite lacking Crashaw's brilliance and Vaughan's profundity. "The Pulley" and "Love", two of Herbert's poems found in any collection, serve as sufficient examples of the tranquil, calming nature of his poetry. In his book "George Herbert: His Religion and Art," Joseph H. Summers specifically contends that George Herbert's literary significance hinged on the English poems included in "The Temple" (11). He was a renowned poet known for his religious poetry. Besides prayers and hymns, he wrote reflections on various topics like sin, salvation, and the nature of God. He could combine profound intellectual and spiritual insight with extraordinary language. In his

poetry, Herbert uses complex conceits and philosophical and metaphysical comparisons to express his religious beliefs and deep-seated faith. In much the same way morality plays did, his poetry frequently dramatizes abstract ideas to make them vivid and understandable. T. S. Eliot wrote that when Herbert used parables to describe the connection between the soul and God, he "had recourse to numerous and even mutually contradicting metaphors and symbols to convey the inexpressible." (Eliot 20)

George Herbert fought a personal battle between two choices before choosing his career: to respond to the call of a pastor or to focus on life in the royal court. His poems result from these soul conflicts between powers, honour, and dedicating his life to Jesus.

Poetry is nothing more to Herbert than prayer—an encounter with God's presence. His poetry highlights that he always felt God's presence in his life. Herbert had a strong belief that God is the one who can read the script written in the crooked lines of his poems and who makes the crooked lines straight. The undulating lines of these poems represent human fragility, while the unconditional love of God brings about perfection. Though humans' disorderliness intruded on the heavenly orderliness, God, in his kindness, forgave our sins and made us eligible to participate in the mysteries of salvation through the Eucharist.

The theme "Spiritual Union" has been selected against the background of seventeenth-century literary works. Herbert's life as a religious man, a Protestant priest, has much to fall back on in reforming the religion. His Anglican faith imposed constraints on writing poetry. His adherence to the rules and regulations of the Church is remarkable. Writing poetry gave Herbert the courage of a spiritual person who secures a spiritual home when he feels peace and tranquillity. When offered a choice between poetry and state, he chose to serve the altar of God and his people. The readers of Herbert's works could be divided into two categories: firstly, religious readers who appreciate his religiousness, and secondly, literary readers who applaud him for his wit, originality, vocabulary, and the language he uses in bringing about the theme. In her essay titled, *A Reading of George Herbert*, Rosamund Tuve highlights the influence of Christian tradition on Herbert's poems. According to her, "Herbert's dependencies show up as the most important factor in his originality." (Tuve 61) Additionally, he gave the impression of being a prophet who foresaw the struggle against ecclesiastical strife. Herbert sacrificed knowledge, honour, and pleasure to grow closer to the Lord and his talent for music and every string he plays, as is written in the poem "The Thanksgiving". The relationship between the

divine and humans is described in "Love III.". The poet talks about the divine banquet the Lord has prepared and how the Lord invites the poet to come and dine. The banquet table is a table of communion, or the altar, where the power of the Lord goes to every faithful person. God's initiative in trying to elevate the poet is evident in "The Pulley," where the Lord, who has showered so many gifts on him and kept him in hope".

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by;
.....
Let the world's riches, which are dispersed, lie.
Contract into a span.' (Lines 1-5).

The above lines suggest that human existence is temporary and that it is essential for a person to return to God in the same pure and spotless state they were in at birth, in appreciation for God's love and goodness in creating him.

In the poem "Clasping of Hands," Herbert poses the person in the position of prayer. Herbert depicts his relationship with God, who is more of a friend than an instructor. They are no longer two but one. He is one of God's parts. It shows that he has unwavering faith and devotion to God. He abandons himself in the hands of God and declares that whatever he is and will be, it is by the grace of God. The "I" and "Thee" relationships are illustrated to show his intimate relationship with God in the poem.

He also expresses his nothingness before God and acknowledges the supremacy of God in his life. A child will always clutch their parents' hands when they foresee a threat. In the above poem, the author discusses how God's hands-on embrace gives one bravery and courage. The person understands how God, who is concerned for the sheep, fights conflicts, not the person alone. There is an intense desire to be with God.

In his poem "The Altar," Herbert parallels his heart and a fragmented altar. He constructs a broken altar, O Lord, using a heart and binding it with tears. The altar, made from stone, is carved and crafted with a depiction of the Last Supper, representing the timeless love of God. The Eucharist is celebrated on the altar to commemorate the total self-giving of Jesus on the Cross. He further reveals that the idea of God's love and supreme sacrifice puts him in a

contemplative mode and fills him with amazement. To be in union with God, the soul has to purify itself and prepare to meet God.

Thus, the poems of George Herbert convey a message of God's intense love for humanity. According to Herbert, one can achieve spiritual union by praying, devoting, and surrendering to God's will. This union represents the transformative potency inherent in a personal relationship with God.

1.5 Tukaram (1608—1650)

Sant Tukaram, a Shudra by birth (Abbott x, Chitre xxi) and trader by profession is from the village of Dehu. He acknowledges his roots in his Abhang: "Good for me, God, I am a peasant." (Chitre 110) He was a *Varkari* saint, a spiritual poet, and a mystic. He deeply loved God; nothing in this world would distract him. The Spirit within him served as his mentor and teacher. God became the core of his life, serving as his all-encompassing source of nourishment. Tukaram was someone who was of the masses and for the masses. No one could ever compare his spiritual life to that of other gurus. He was indeed a spiritual guru par excellence. He taught that even an ordinary devotee could have direct communication with God. No mediation is required. He sang the bhajans in praise of God. His words came from a heart overflowing with passion for God and compassion for humanity.

Spirituality is the overarching theme of Tukaram's poems. His Abhangs (poems) communicate not just his wisdom but his life's worldly and spiritual journey, with its smoothness and upheavals, hopes and disappointments, and great love for the divine. According to Dilip Chitre's translation in his book, Tuka expresses the belief that each person holds the ultimate responsibility for their own spiritual liberation. Tuka's mysticism does not arise from dismissing reality; instead, it emerges from embracing reality completely and responding to it with vitality as an essential aspect of life. (xxxiii) Tukaram's poems are not just his own; they are also relevant to the present day. The reader is drawn to travel with him. They serve as a roadmap for everyone travelling towards achieving their ultimate objective. He strongly emphasises singing the name of Vitthal rather than engaging in rites that will offend him. The Vedas should not constrain a devotee due to their study. His poetry no longer represents the viewpoint of an individual but of all the generations yet to come. He writes, "Punya is doing

good to others." (Mhatre x). "Tukaram's only refuge and anchor was Vitthal, his family deity. Complete surrender to Him seemed the only way." (Sharma 50)

Tukaram advises his followers to make Vitthal the focal point of their lives, as being connected to Vitthal brings delight. The environment we live in is purely horrible. He advises them to do so and let the Lord capture their thoughts and hearts. When connected to the Lord, a serene mind is never subject to anguish or agony; one experiences inner freedom.

The most significant aim of Tukaram was to grow in union with his God, Vitthal, as he compares himself with God and finds no difference. In the following Abhang, he gives the experience of his union:

There is no difference between you and me

I am simply making fun.

You are exactly my shape and size

You can stretch me as you will

.....

With my mouth, it is you who speak;

Inside you, I just stay cool

Says Tuka, O God

Our names get so mixed up." (Lines 1-4; 9-12)

In the book "Life of Tukaram," Justin E. Abbott explains that Tukaram embraced asceticism not to gain spiritual benefits but because he elevated God to such a prominent position in his thinking that he became disinterested in his physical body. (vii) Relinquishing worldly cravings and ambitions, he made God his only priority. For this sake, he considered everything, including his family, property, and power, dung and valueless. Meditation and contemplation helped him to gain Vitthal. With time, he feels formless with Vitthal. He acknowledges that it is no longer he who speaks but Vitthal who speaks in him. He experiences calmness when Vitthal is residing in him.

Tukaram had abandoned his earthly life in pursuit of spirituality. He expresses his yearning and hunger for God through the following Abhang cited in the book translated by Chandrakant Kaluram Mhatre, One Hundred Poems of Tukaram:

For your visit,

My soul craves

Night and day

Waits for you (78, Lines 1-4)

There is a loving conversation between him and Vitthal. He is impatient about meeting the Lord and compares his wait to the moon and the stars and to a newly married bride who waits to celebrate the first festival of lights. These forms of waiting are intense, and when they are met, they feel lost in each other's company. Tukaram compares himself to salt, water, and camphor. The ego is shed as he boldly declares, "I have dissolved God, the self, and the world to become one luminous being." (Chitre 151) According to Tukaram, Vitthal is formless; he is infinite and all-pervading. It is like an incarnation where both become one and lose their form. He writes:

“You are not finite, you have no form,
You are not visible, you do not change,
You have no property, you are pure being and awareness,
O exquisite one!” (Chitre 84 Lines 5-8)

When a person loses his or her identity in God, the whole world becomes nothing but a god. The mystical poems maintain their paradoxical nature: "Tuka is as vast as the sky, even though he is too scarce to occupy an atom." (Chitre 150).

Through his poems, Tukaram helps readers and devotees see the world favourably. Though we encounter negativity, Tukaram instructs us to sow positivity so that the negativity can be transformed into positivity. In the book *Tukaram's Teachings*, S.R. Sharma writes that Sadhana (meditation) is a spiritual endeavour, striving on the pathway to God. According to Aurobindo, it synthesises internal yoga (mind, body, and soul). (Sharma 50) The spiritual consciousness will lead to integration, which helps transform oneself to attain divinity. Our entire being is tuned into God's consciousness. Tukaram believed that to write about God, a person needed to be a Bhakta and have God experience, both of which Tukaram did not possess. Understanding Brahma entails purity of mind, mental calmness, and frequent self-introspection to analyse our faults and nothingness.

The enlightened person dares not return to the past; he lives in the present and entrusts the future to divine clemency. His heart, body, and soul will be what he reflects. Tukaram writes, "I shall sing of him forever; I shall raise His slogan forever... Good and evil cannot enter me."

(Chitre 157,158) Tukaram's final desire and ultimate goal are to see the flamboyant face of the Ultimate. This is not just a simple gaze but an intoxicating gaze where he slips into mysticism. He expresses his urgency in seeking the Lord. He was impatient until he experienced God. He explains his longing through the metaphor of a hungry child crying for milk. The child will be quiet only when his mother feeds him.

It is an attempt by Tuka to have a spiritual union with Vitthal, where he surrenders himself totally to him and dissolves himself with God, where he sees no other world other than the blissful world of Vitthal. He wishes to remain in this bliss forever. Tukaram dissolves himself and the world with Vitthal because he wants to be enlightened. Losing one's identity is a sign of union with God.

II. Conclusion

An effort is made to closely read the poets George Herbert and Tukaram's views on the spiritual union. In a busy world chasing after our desires and needs, one must stop to talk spiritually with God and oneself. Both George Herbert and Tukaram, belonging to different cultural backgrounds and times, felt that the world's values led them nowhere, but following the values of God led them to God. Both of them, despite belonging to different eras and cultures, shared a profound faithfulness to their religious traditions and desired to share their experiences of God with the people through the techniques they employed. Herbert's poetry delved deep into the intricate relationship between God and man and their union of them without losing one's identity. A Christian way of thinking is that, at the resurrection of Jesus, we are raised to life. God is a person who incarnated himself and lived as a man without losing his divine nature. Through prayer and surrender, one can be in union with the divine. Tukaram expressed his devotion to Lord Vitthal and manifested his faith in him. His way of thinking of union is to dissolve oneself into the divine and become one with him, losing one's identity. For Tukaram, God becomes only consciousness, and he is formless. Deep within, there is a feeling that we were not created solely for our service but to serve the Almighty and the people around us. A peaceful mind is always free from alien thoughts that prompt our actions.

God is always the supreme and superseding being. Spiritual union with God is possible when we have silenced our being and, in that silence, experience God, the Supreme Being. Both poets

deeply understood the universal human quest for spiritual fulfilment and the transformative power of faith and devotion.

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