

Article

Saints, Hagiographers, and Religious Experience: The Case of Tukaram and Mahipati

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Received: 27 December 2018; Accepted: 12 February 2019; Published: 15 February 2019



Abstract: One of the most important developments in Hinduism in the Common Era has been the rise of devotionalism or *bhakti*. Though theologians and others have contributed to this development, the primary motive force behind it has been poets, who have composed songs celebrating their love for God, and sometimes lamenting their distance from Her. From early in their history, *bhakti* traditions have praised not only the various gods, but also the devotional poets as well. And so hagiographies have been written about the lives of those exceptional devotees. It could be argued that we find the religious experience of these devotees in their own compositions and in these hagiographies. This article will raise questions about the reliability of our access to the poets' religious experience through these sources, taking as a test case the seventeenth century devotional poet Tukaram and the hagiographer Mahipati. Tukaram is a particularly apt case for a study of devotional poetry and hagiography as the means to access the religious experience of a Hindu saint, since scholars have argued that his works are unusual in the degree to which he reflects on his own life. We will see why, for reasons of textual history, and for more theoretical reasons, the experience of saints such as Tukaram must remain elusive.

Keywords: religious experience; bhakti; Tukaram; Mahipati

One of the most important developments in Hinduism in the Common Era has been the rise of devotionalism or *bhakti*. Though theologians and others have contributed to this development, the primary motive force behind it has been poets, who have composed songs celebrating their love for God, and sometimes lamenting their distance from Her. From early in their history, *bhakti* traditions have praised not only the various gods, but also the devotional poets as well. And so hagiographies have been written about the lives of those exceptional devotees. It could be argued that we find the religious experience of these devotees in their own compositions and in these hagiographies.

This article will raise questions about the reliability of our access to the poets' religious experience through these sources, taking as a test case Tukaram (1608–1649; [Tukaram 1991](#), p. vii). Though Tukaram is remembered for poems that dramatically describe his encounters with God, we will focus here on his conflictful relationship with his wife. It may seem as if this is something that does not belong in an article about religious experience. Yet we will see that in the hagiographies, Tukaram's conflict with his wife is presented as the result of his devotion to God, as she upbraids him for failing to provide for his family because of this devotion. So this article is at least about the social impact of Tukaram's religious experience. And even if Tukaram's marriage is categorized as a secular matter, it is still a good place to begin a discussion about how confidently we know *any* aspect of his experience.

Tukaram was one of the four great poets in the Varkari tradition, which is the most popular *bhakti* movement in the Indian state of Maharashtra. In the Marathi language, a "Varkari" is a person who performs a specific type of pilgrimage. And this label is appropriate for this movement, since its central ritual is a twice annual pilgrimage. Devotees from around Maharashtra travel on foot, sometimes for more than a hundred miles, to the town of Pandharpur to worship at the temple of Vitthal (more

informally known as Vithoba), who is understood to be a form of Krishna. As they walk, the pilgrims sing the poems of Tukaram and the other Varkari saints in praise of Vitthal.

After his own poems, for Varkaris, the most important sources about Tukaram are the works of Mahipati (1715–1790; [Tulpule 1979](#), p. 430). As indicated by the work of Christian Lee Novetzke and Jon Keune, Mahipati was the magisterial hagiographer of the Varkari tradition ([Novetzke 2008](#); [Keune 2011](#)). The geographical range of Mahipati's works is not limited to Maharashtra, as he includes profiles of north Indian devotees as well, and acknowledges a debt to the great Ramanandi hagiographer Nabhadras and his Gaudiya commentator Priyadas ([Tulpule 1979](#), p. 430; and see [Hare 2011](#)). One of those north Indian saints whose life is described at length, Kabir, was the subject of Kabirpanthi and Dadupanthi hagiographies that have been studied by David Lorenzen ([Lorenzen 1991](#)). About Tukaram, substantial accounts are found in at least two of Mahipati's four lengthy hagiographical compendia, the *Bhaktavijay* (1762) and the *Bhaktalilamrt* (1774; [Tulpule 1979](#), p. 431).

Tukaram is a particularly apt case for a study of devotional poetry and hagiography as the means to access the religious experience of a Hindu saint, since scholars have argued that his works are unusual in the degree to which he reflects on his own life. His is "personal confessional poetry" ([Tukaram 1991](#), p. xx). In his songs, he "expresses his own subjectivity" ([Tukaram 2012](#), p. 27). This article will begin with hagiography in general, before moving on to take up Tukaram and Mahipati, and finally landing on more theoretical questions about religious experience.

1. Encountering Saints through Hagiography

A recent book about the comparative study of hagiography includes an article about another Varkari saint, Jnaneshvar, that describes a temple dedicated to him in his home village of Alandi. This is said to be the location of Jnaneshvar's *samjivan samadhi*, that is, the place where the saint voluntarily had himself entombed while still alive in 1296. Contemporary devotees hope to obtain blessings by worshipping at this site, Mark McLaughlin says in this article, as they believe that Jnaneshvar is still present here. This belief is illustrated strongly in an earlier century by a story that is told about yet a third Varkari saint, Eknath. A hagiography reports that Eknath had a dream in which Jnaneshvar called to him to come and restore the shrine of his *samadhi*. McLaughlin writes that "He entered the cavern and there he found Jnaneshvar seated in meditation, as young and alive as the day that he had entered the cavern nearly three hundred years before" ([McLaughlin 2016](#), p. 77). And even now, some four centuries after Eknath, here Jnaneshvar still sits.

At the end of his analysis of the contemporary worship at Jnaneshvar's temple, McLaughlin takes a detour in the direction of theory. He writes: "The compound does not simply memorialize past events. The ritual activities of the space are not simply forms of remembrance of something that has gone. To perceive this space through a lens of absence, as the historiography of modern discourse offers us, is a mistake. This is a culture of presence—a presence anchored by the perceived occurrence of Jnaneshvar having taken *samjivan samadhi* in the space. Such happenings Orsi calls abundant events because the foundation event that establishes the presence in the space informs all subsequent events there" (pp. 87–88). There may be a naïve positivist historiography that would describe this temple as only a memorial, since the historian's metaphysics cannot accommodate a saint meditating in a subterranean room for the better part of a millennium. But the metaphysics of contemporary devotees are more capacious, or so McLaughlin argues.

In making this argument about presence, and even in invoking Robert Orsi, Mark McLaughlin is following the editors of the book in which his article appears. In their introduction, the editors write that they seek to move beyond a framework in which hagiography is disparaged as "mere myth or legend" ([Monge et al. 2016](#), p. 1). In a separate theoretical chapter, one of the editors, Rico G. Monge, attacks a dichotomy between hagiography and history, in which "history is construed as representing objective truth. Hagiography, on the other hand, is that which disassembles, whitewashes, and idealizes, and thus carries with it the connotation of falsehood" ([Monge 2016](#), p. 9). Citing the work of Hayden

White, Monge highlights “the fundamentally fictive character of historiography,” as historians rely on some of the same devices to construct their narratives as novelists. Monge argues that just as “Marxists, feminists, deconstructionists, psychoanalytic theorists, queer theorists, and the like” all compose accounts of past events according to the canons each of her own methodology, so does the hagiographer (p. 17). Monge insists that “hagiographies in fact *do* what any historian does—they interpret the data about their subject’s lives in a way that is intended to provide real, meaningful knowledge about them” (p. 18). At least Monge is arguing that believers can find hagiographies meaningful even if they recount tales about which historians are skeptical—that the analysis of the historian may not capture the power of the hagiography for the believer. But then at the end of his article, Monge recommends an approach that follows on the work of Robert Orsi in which “hagiographic modes of discourse would no longer be simply demythologized or mined for their anthropological value; rather, they would be allowed to speak truths on their own terms as manifestations of an ‘abundance’ that exceeds the limitations of modern historical-critical methodology” (p. 20). Here, I believe that Monge is going beyond my earlier second-hand academic formulation that hagiographies recount things that believers take to be true, or that even believers take to be the Truth, but that they also convey truth to the scholarly analyst as well.

As they make the case for a metaphysics of presence, both Mark McLaughlin and Rico Monge cite an article by Robert A. Orsi, “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity.” There, Orsi argues that in the west before the modern period, “the woods, homes, and forests of Europe, its churches, statues, relics, holy oils, and waters, and its shrines were filled with the presence of saints” (Orsi 2009, p. 218). By contrast, “Western modernity exists under the sign of absence. Time and space are emptied of presence” (p. 219). Yet a sense of presence persists at the site of Marian apparitions, even in our modern age, and this is something that should challenge modernity’s exclusions. These are the sites of what Orsi calls “abundant events,” where believers are transformed by their face-to-face encounter with Mary’s power, which “radiates out from the really-real event along a network of routes, a kind of capillary of presence, filling water, relics, images, things, and memories” (p. 223). Orsi argues at least that the scholar must take into account this sense of presence in her analysis of Marian sites. But he also suggests that for the scholar (and here, he writes about a historian, but it could be an anthropologist, a sociologist, and so forth), abundant events “may very well draw the historian himself or herself, too, into an unexpectedly immediate and intimate encounter with the past” (p. 225). As with Monge, for Orsi, too, it seems an encounter with the saint’s presence is not only possible for the believer but also for the scholar.

Perhaps these themes are carried to their logical conclusion, or perhaps they are pushed beyond breaking point, at the end of the “Afterword,” by the comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney. The very last sentence of *Hagiography and Religious Truth* reads: “If, as the volume tells us, boundaries among the several important understandings of truth and value ought now to be recognized as in fact permeable, it seems plausible, even if not explicitly stated in the volume, that collecting in one place these studies in hagiography might also draw readers (along with authors) into a kind of interfaith communion of the saints that is indebted to each saint’s tradition but reducible to no one community, religious or academic” (Clooney 2016, pp. 203–4). Of course, “the communion of saints,” a phrase found in the Apostles’ Creed, is generally understood to refer to the church, especially as it includes not only those Christians now living, but to those in heaven and even in purgatory. As *Hagiography and Religious Truth* is about saints in the “Abrahamic Traditions” (here, Islam and Christianity) and the “Dharmic Traditions” (here, Hinduism and Buddhism), clearly the communion Clooney conjures is “interfaith,” “reducible to no one community, religious.” And to the extent that scholars are invited to share in this communion, as well as believers, it is also “reducible to no one community, . . . academic.” It is the church of the Islamic/Christian/Hindu/Buddhist/believer/scholar.

Practically speaking, our encounter with a saint, regardless of whether as believers or scholars or some hybrid of the two, is dependent upon the sources that give us access to the saint. The next section is about the problems with those sources, particularly for Tukaram.

2. Tukaram and His “Cantakerous Wife”

Good people will have a great regard for you;
 And the world will view you with growing respect.
 Think of your cattle as dead
 And of your pots and pans as stolen by a thief.
 Think of your children as though they were never born.
 Give up all desires and make your mind
 Hard as Indra’s warhead.
 Spit out all mean pleasures
 And receive pure bliss.
 Says Tuka, you will be rid of great turmoil
 Once you break free from the bonds of this world. (Tukaram 1991, p. 48)

This appears in the collection of poems by Tukaram translated by Dilip Chitre. Though most of the poems in this book do not have a title, this is the ninth of ten headed “Advice to an Angry Wife.” In the first five of this set, the speaker is mostly not Tukaram, but his wife, who complains about his failure to provide for his family. For example, in the first poem, she asks rhetorically, “What can I feed these starving children?” (p. 42). Each poem ends with a response by Tukaram, which is either angrily or ironically dismissive. In the sixth through the eighth poem in this series, the tone changes, as the poet himself appears to complain that he is the victim of God’s heavy demands, for example, asking, “Who would protect me from Him? /Where else can we go to escape Him?” (p. 47). Finally in the ninth poem, the one quoted above, there is yet another shift, as the poet seems to embrace a life “free from the bonds of this world,” and urges his wife to do the same. Here, the poet’s attitude seems to be more positive both toward his own self-denial and toward his wife, though the sacrifice he asks of her is extreme. His wife must regard her own “children as though they were never born.”

In his earliest and most important hagiographical compendium, the *Bhaktavijay*, Mahipati appears to paraphrase this poem, including using many of the same words.¹ This hagiographer offers a much longer biography of Tukaram in a later compendium, the *Bhaktalilamrt*, and there, too, he seems to summarize this poem.² As Mahipati tells the story, this preaching was remarkably effective. According to both the hagiographies, this dialogue occurs when Tukaram’s wife, Jijai, confronts him and demands that he return home. Though Tukaram would regularly come to their village to sing the praises of Vitthal, he spent the rest of his time out in the forest. Tukaram accedes to Jijai’s demand, but with a condition. He says, “If you listen to my advice, and if you give me your word for it, then I will now come home at once” (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 222). As soon as Jijai agrees to this and they return home, Tukaram gives her a lengthy sermon about detachment from the things of this world, which includes the paraphrase of the poem that I quoted in its entirety above. The wife is so moved by Tukaram’s teaching that she invites Brahmans to her home to take whatever they want and they pick the place clean. But then Jijai immediately begins to regret that she has done this. When Tukaram gives away her last piece of clothing to a woman from the untouchable Mahar caste who comes begging, Jijai “flew into a rage” (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 229). Actually the *Bhaktavijay* says that Krishna’s wife, the goddess Rukmini, merely dons the disguise of a Mahar (vol. 2, p. 228).

Mahipati praises Tukaram’s lack of concern with worldly life, and this is repeatedly dramatized by conflicts with his wife such as the one just described. Tukaram receives a sack of grain, which he

¹ Compare (Chitre 2001, p. 55) (poem 1987) with Mahipati (1974, p. 383) (49.92–96), available in English in (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 225)).

² Mahipati (1988, p. 295) (34.44–45), in English Abbott 2000 (2000, p. 184).

immediately gives away, and his wife “flew into a rage” (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 215). Jijai miraculously receives a handful of silver coins, but then donates them to Brahmans at her husband’s urging (vol. 2, p. 237). When the saint is given a load of sugarcane, all of it but one stalk is taken from him by the children of the village—he does not bother to save more for his own children. When Jijai sees that, she, once again, “flew into a rage,” and hits Tukaram with the cane so hard that it breaks into pieces (vol. 2, p. 242). It may be that Jijai really was quarrelsome, but it is also true that Mahipati admits that her worldliness is a lesson for Tukaram and for his reader. In his later hagiography the *Bhaktalilamrt*, which is also full of such conflicts, Mahipati praises God’s providence: “When Thou lookest on Thy *bhaktas* with the look of mercy, they at once break friendship with their worldly affairs, and Thou dost break the net that binds them to this earthly life. If Thou shouldst give to any *bhakta*, a wife who was all goodness, his love would bind him to her. So Thou dost give him as companion a cantankerous wife” (Abbott 2000, pp. 162–63).

And Jijai is not the only “cantankerous wife” that we find in the lives of the saints that Mahipati recounts. In terms of the length of his biography, the chief saint in the *Bhaktavijay* is the fourteenth-century poet Namdev. He is criticized for failing to provide for his family both by his mother Gonai, and by his wife Rajai, who complains to her mother-in-law, “my garments are torn and exceedingly old. I have not enough to eat. I have come, therefore, to your house to live my poverty-stricken life” (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 1, p. 65). In an incident that seems to be clearly composed to parallel a story about Tukaram’s wife mentioned earlier in this article, gold coins are given to Rajai by no less than Krishna himself, when he visits her disguised as a wealthy merchant. But then Namdev cannot keep this wealth, despite its divine source, and he “called the Brahmans of the town and gave to these twice-born the money, garments, and the ornaments” (vol. 1, p. 76). It is not the case that all of the male saints in Mahipati’s books struggled with worldly wives. For example, in his Ph.D. dissertation about the Varkari poet and saint Eknath, Jon Keune notes, “In stark contrast to the wives of the Marathi sants Namdev and Tukaram, Girija is remembered to have supported and encouraged Eknath’s activities with unwavering enthusiasm” (Keune 2011, p. 27). But some of the saints did struggle with their wives.

Perhaps it is obvious, but it is worth noting that there is a certain gender bias in these stories. Though one encounters women saints in India today, and even women who have renounced the world, this is something that is relatively uncommon historically, with the classical law codes only permitting renunciation for men. The authors of the law codes probably could not brook the idea of women enjoying that much independence, but they may have also assumed that the religious life was not something that women would even aspire to, mired as they were in their attachment to their children and other things of this world. If these gender prejudices helped to shape Mahipati’s stories of domestic conflict, it should also be pointed out that he does tell tales of women saints as well as men, though these are relatively uncommon. Of the fifty-four saints whose stories are prominent enough to appear in the chapter titles of the English translation of the *Bhaktavijay*, only six are women.

It may have been the case that Tukaram’s wife was coincidentally vehemently opposed to his way of living out devotion. However, it is also certainly the case there is a broader motif of spiritual saints fighting with worldly wives that recurs in Mahipati’s hagiographies. If this motif was common at the time that Tukaram lived, we might even argue that, driven by this understanding, he chose a “cantankerous wife.” However, the details of Tukaram’s life story militate against this, if we are to accept Mahipati’s accounts. In both the *Bhaktavijay* and in the *Bhaktalilamrt*, Tukaram seems relatively satisfied with worldly life when he marries Jijai. It is only some time later, when Tukaram sees his first wife die during a famine, and then he endures a series of business failures, that he realizes that there is no lasting joy to be found in this world.³ It is then that Tukaram says to himself, “This earthly life is

³ The *Bhaktalilamrt* actually says that Tukaram lost not only his wife, but also a son in the famine (Abbott 2000, p. 80; 28.123). The *Bhaktavijay* does not mention the son’s death.

unreal. It is the outcome of *maya* (illusion). The human body is perishable, I have spent my life for nothing, and I have forgotten the Lord of Pandhari [that is, the god Vitthal, worshiped in Pandharpur]" (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 204).

In his book *Religion and Public Memory*, which is a study of the historical development of the biography of another Varkari poet-saint, the aforementioned Namdev, Christian Novetzke contrasts hagiography and history. He describes works such as the key north Indian hagiographical compendium the *Bhaktamala* (whose title could be translated as "The Garland of Devotees"), as "splendidly circular compositions, like a necklace" (Novetzke 2008, p. 36). It is no surprise to find themes reiterated in a hagiographical compendium, as the stories of various saints are assimilated to a common model of saintliness. The reader might even find whole incidents recurring in the life of more than one character.⁴ History, by contrast, Novetzke says, aims "to ward off the nonrational, replicative, and mimetic" (p. 36). Seeing the same incident repeated is something that is liable to make a historian suspicious of the veracity of the hagiographer's account.

Yet there is evidence that Tukaram had a conflictful relationship with Jijai, not only in Mahipati's hagiographies, but also in Tukaram's poems themselves, as in the poem quoted earlier. While they *may* be a reliable indicator of the saint's experience, there is no guarantee of that. In the introduction to a translation of some of his poems, Dilip Chitre admits that Tukaram's oeuvre has dramatically expanded over time. Chitre begins his introduction by describing a manuscript in Tukaram's home village of Dehu, which is said to be in the poet's own hand, and which contained, at the beginning of the twentieth century, "about 700 poems." By the time of Chitre's writing, "[s]ome scholars believe Tukaram's available work to be in the region of about 8000 poems" (Tukaram 1991, p. vii). If those seven hundred poems are the only ones certainly by Tukaram, that would mean that over 90 per cent of the poems now attributed to the seventeenth century saint were not written by him. In the history of devotional poetry in India, it is quite common for later followers to write in the style of a revered saint, even explicitly claiming that their work is by their illustrious forebear (Hawley 1988). As was the practice by the Varkaris, and in devotion poetry in Hindi and in other Indian vernaculars, each poem by Tukaram ends with his name written into the last verse. However, it appears to be the case that later followers would style themselves as Tukaram, working his name into the close of their poems.

As *Religion and Public Memory* describes it, the study of this process is particularly compelling for Namdev. Scholars have theorized that they have put their finger on later poets who identified themselves with Namdev in their poems, but who also left traces of their individual identity. So, for example, at the end of some of the poems, the author is identified as Vishnudas Nama. This could simply be the Namdev of the fourteenth century, since it is conceivable that he might call himself a "servant of Vishnu," which is what Vishnudas means. And this is probably how most devotees have understood this signature. But Vishnudas could also be a personal name, and there are some scholars who believe that this was a poet in the sixteenth century who wrote in the fashion of Namdev. Styling himself Vishnudas Nama, he was simultaneously claiming that he was the same Namdev and telegraphing that he was different. And Vishnudas Nama is not the only separate author that scholars believe they have isolated in the Namdev corpus. So Novetzke heads his chapter about this "Namdev and the Namas." This is a tradition of "remembering through imitation with variation" (Novetzke 2008, p. 137). *Religion and Public Memory* further clarifies: "This is not a case simply of borrowing a portion of a previously famous author, but a method of tapping into a complex cultural system of public memory that uses authorship to maintain a performative genealogy, and interconnection of authors over centuries" (p. 150). So later authors, steeped in the stream of Namdev's compositions, drew poems from it, but also poured their own compositions back into it, compositions

⁴ An anonymous reviewer of this article suggested that there may be hints here of a darker South Asian conception of repetition in history, as articulated in David Shulman's analysis of the *Mahabharata*, in "which time cooks all creatures, and time crushes them" (Shulman 2001, p. 26).

that would be recognized as appropriately labeled Namdev's because they were in his style. And the same has apparently happened in the case of Tukaram.

Crucial to Namdev's legacy, and that of other Varkari saints such as Tukaram, according to *Religion and Public Memory*, is the practice of *kirtan*, described as follows: "A *kirtan* performance in Marathi involves a lead performer, a *kirtankar*, who invokes one or two famous songs or stories and gives a narrative philosophical interpretation of selected texts. This is combined with music, dance, theatrical flourishes, and often a call and response with the audience" (Novetzke 2008, p. 81). To range backward chronologically, Novetzke notes that modern printed editions of Namdev's songs have been compiled from notebooks of *kirtan* performers. Before those printed versions (and even since), it is primarily through *kirtan* that devotees would have come to know of Namdev. And Namdev himself was a *kirtankar*—he composed for performance and was the originator of this genre of performance. *Kirtan* is largely the medium that has shaped the saint's public memory. Like Namdev, for Tukaram *kirtankars* learn his poems from other performers, sometimes adding their own compositions. The primary limit to the creativity of the *kirtankar* would be a general sense of the kind of poetry that Tukaram wrote, including a sense of who Tukaram was.

For most devotional saints, the poetry they wrote or at least the poetry attributed to them is constitutive of their hagiography. Mahipati's accounts include frequent reference to his subjects' compositions—he sometimes admits that he is paraphrasing their poems. It is significant that when he introduces Mahipati, Christian Novetzke labels him first a "*kirtan* performer" and then an "author" (Novetzke 2008, p. xii). Mahipati often depicts the Marathi saints in performance. *Religion and Public Memory* argues that Mahipati's hagiographies not only contain *kirtan*, but that they were composed to be presented as *kirtan*. It is certainly the case, as Novetzke notes, that Mahipati frequently addresses his audience directly. He ends each chapter in the *Bhaktavijay* with an exhortation to pay attention, for example: "Therefore listen, O pious ones, to the deeply delightful forty-eighth chapter; it is an offering to Shri Krishna" (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 217). Novetzke even claims that Mahipati's text "appear[s] to be a transcribed *kirtan*, word for word" (Novetzke 2008, p. 121). Regardless of whether Novetzke is right about the extent to which the written text preserves an original performance, it is certainly the case that, once Mahipati's hagiographies were written about Tukaram, they would have provided one of the criterion by which the later tradition would have judged the appositeness of poems attributed to him.

There is a particularly suggestive analysis of the circular relationship between the compositions of the poet saints and their hagiographies in John Stratton Hawley's book about the sixteenth century north Indian devotee Surdas. To a Krishna worshiper today, there is something poignant about the rich imagery of Surdas's poems, as he is remembered to have been blind from birth. And there are poems attributed to Surdas in which he speaks of his blindness. However, Hawley's conclusion is that there is no unambiguous evidence of this condition in the earliest collections of Surdas's work. There are early poems in which the author calls himself blind, but in them "the blindness the poet bemoans in himself is of a spiritual, not physical nature" (Hawley 1984, p. 29). It may have been the case that "the historical Surdas" was not blind, but that his sight was taken away by the later tradition, both in hagiographies about him and even in poetry attributed to him, which read his metaphors too literally.

To return to Tukaram, we cannot know for certain that his wife Jijai was "cantankerous," even though Mahipati says so, especially given that this is a theme in the lives of some of his other saints, as noted previously in this article. And we cannot know this for sure, even though Tukaram's own poems say this, since it is almost certain that many of the poems now attributed to him were written after his time. Perhaps the compositions that excoriate his wife are the product of a certain gender bias in the greater Varkari tradition, which is also found in Mahipati.

This is a particularly interesting problem for Tukaram, because his poetry is often characterized as marked by a certain modern self-expressiveness. In the critical introduction that precedes his translation of a selection of Tukaram's poems, Dilip Chitre writes:

Tukaram gave *Bhakti* itself new existential dimensions. In this he was anticipating the spiritual anguish of modern man two centuries ahead of his time. He was also anticipating a form of personal confessional poetry that seeks articulate liberation from the deepest traumas man experiences and represses out of fear. Tukaram's poetry expresses pain and bewilderment, fear and anxiety, exasperation and desperateness, boredom and meaninglessness—in fact all the feelings that characterize modern self-awareness. (Tukaram 1991, p. xx)

For our purposes, particularly interesting is Chitre's claim that we find in Tukaram's work a new "form of personal confessional poetry." Perhaps it would be appropriate in Tukaram's case to speak of his poetry as conveying his experience, at least according to Chitre's analysis, since we find in that poetry an expression of the poet's individuality, a reflection upon his inner life. One thing that is problematic in this usage is that Chitre himself admits that Tukaram's oeuvre has dramatically expanded over time, as we have noted. When Chitre claims that he finds in this tradition "personal confessional poetry," he may mean that he has developed the hermeneutical skills to identify the works that were really by the seventeenth century devotee. But I doubt that he means this, as he implies that even the experts have not had much success in isolating the historical core of Tukaram's work. On the other hand, Chitre may mean that there is a kind of confessional tone to many of the poems attributed to Tukaram, whether an individual work is by him or not. However, if this is what Chitre intends, it seems to stretch what might be called "personal confessional poetry," since that may have become self-conscious adherence to a style that is only apparently personal, expressing the anxiety and desperateness that the audience has come to regard as characteristic of Tukaram, whoever is the author of specific poems.

Like Dilip Chitre, in their translation of a selection of the poems of Tukaram, Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar credit the devotee with a certain modern sensibility. They write, "Tuka, however—perhaps as befitting a poet of the seventeenth century, a century emerging into modernity—gives his own extended commentaries on his life. More than any other *sant*, his song-poems are personal and compelling" (Tukaram 2012, pp. 21–22). Later, they say that Tukaram "expresses his own subjectivity, something that might be taken as a sign of modernism and a new concern with the individual" (p. 27). *The Songs of Tukoba* describes the poet as from "an age entering into modernity," a time of "rational questioning," which here is "turned into themes of questioning the divine" (pp. 35–36). The book goes on to note that this was during the same period when traditions in Europe were shaken up by Descartes, Galileo, Hobbes, and Locke. Omvedt and Patankar assert that "[t]hese trends had their correlates in India, though we find more of the themes emerging from the subalterns rather than from a dissident elite, and being cut-off by their conflict with an establishment" (pp. 36–37).

Central to Omvedt and Patankar's argument here is that they present Tukaram as a strong critic of caste oppression. In fact, he is only the most prominent representative of what Omvedt and Patankar argue is a tradition of "radical bhakti," that also included other poet-saints such as Basava, Namdev, Kabir, Nanak, and Ravidas. Within the context of this article, it should be noted that Omvedt and Patankar argue that the eighteenth century was a time of "conservative consolidation" in Maharashtra, and they see Mahipati's hagiographies as significant evidence of this (p. 44). "Mahipati's Tukaram tells Shivaji to follow *varnashrama dharma*" and return to his royal responsibilities, for example, while in his own poems, Tukaram wants nothing to do with kings, Omvedt and Patankar argue. And Tukaram humbly accepts the chastisement of the Brahman Rameshvar Bhat (p. 18).

In *The Songs of Tukoba*, Dilip Chitre comes in for criticism similar to Mahipati. Omvedt and Patankar argue that Tukaram not only criticizes caste, but also rejects "the traditional goals of Brahminism of absorption in the divine" (p. 37). Then they add in an endnote, "Here we are disagreeing with most of the interpretations of Tuka by scholars including Chitre and More. The fact is that to maintain their position of Brahminized orthodoxy, the Brahminic scholars simply have to ignore a large number of songs" (p. 50n6, and see also p. 19). So Chitre represents, according to this, a category of "Brahminic scholars" who advance "Brahminized" interpretations of Tukaram.

Within the context of an article about hagiography, an interesting example of the conflict among Tukaram's biographers is the story of the end of the saint's earthly existence. In the *Bhaktavijay*, the hagiographer Mahipati recounts that Tukaram was miraculously taken to heaven even while still alive: "Then (later) Tuka went to *Vaikunth* (Vishnu's heaven) with his body" (Abbott and Godbole 1999, vol. 2, p. 294). In his later work, the *Bhaktalilamrt*, Mahipati tells this story in much greater and more dramatic detail, as God calls Tukaram to "the luxurious Pushpak chariot of light" (Abbott 2000, p. 313). Chitre admits that "Varkaris believe that Vitthal Himself carried Tukaram away to heaven in a 'chariot of light'" (Tukaram 1991, pp. xiii–xiv), and he lists some other opinions about the poet's end. He concludes: "Reading his farewell poems, however, one is inclined to imagine that Tukaram bade a proper farewell to his close friends and fellow-devotees and left his native village for some unknown destination with no intention of returning" (p. xiv).

When Omvedt and Patankar take up the question of Tukaram's end, they present three alternatives. The first is the "orthodox account," "that he was carried off to heaven directly" (Tukaram 2012, p. 41). The second alternative, for which they cite Chitre's book, is "the modern Brahminic secularist explanation," "that he simply bid everyone good-bye and wandered off on some unnamed pilgrimage" (p. 41, citing Tukaram 1991, pp. xiii–xiv). It is apparent why *The Songs of Tukoba* labels Chitre's account "secularist," since it seeks to offer a stand-in for Mahipati's miracle story. Why Chitre's position is "Brahminic" is only clear when Omvedt and Patankar present their third alternative: "Non-brahmins believe that he was murdered by his enemies." This seems to be the conclusion that Omvedt and Patankar lean toward. They refer to a book by A. H. Salunkhe, which "cites many bits of circumstantial evidence in favour of this" (Tukaram 2012, p. 41). Omvedt and Patankar stigmatize Chitre's position as "Brahminic," as he seeks to absolve the Brahmins of the crime of Tukaram's murder.⁵

For his part, Chitre mentions the theory that Tukaram was murdered, but dismisses it. He was "phenomenally popular," such that his assassination "would not have escaped the keen and constant attention of his many followers." Since they did not pass down any account of this, Chitre concludes that "such speculations seem wild and sensational" (Tukaram 1991, p. ix).

On the issue of the end of Tukaram's earthly existence, Chitre and Omvedt and Patankar have something important in common: they are secularists, in that they seek a nonmiraculous explanation. But there is also a substantial difference between them, which turns on Omvedt and Patankar's more basic critique that Chitre's Tukaram is too "Brahminic," that Chitre does not sufficiently emphasize the devotional poet's radical critique of caste. And there is something similar and characteristically different in how *Says Tuka* and *The Songs of Tukoba* deal with the question of the modernism of Tukaram's poetry. Though there is no sign of Chitre's existentialist "anxiety" and "desperateness" and "meaningless" in Omvedt and Patankar, they do allow that Tukaram "expresses his own subjectivity" in his poetry. However, they argue that this subjectivity includes a strong caste consciousness that is watered down in *Says Tuka*. In other words, in both of these readings, something that is characteristic of Tukaram's work is its self-expression, but it seems that the selves expressed are somewhat different, one with a greater sense of anti-Brahman resentment. Or, to shift to the rhetoric of experience, it would seem that for Omvedt and Patankar, Tukaram's experience was more strongly marked by caste oppression and opposition to it. This is something that you will not find in Mahipati's hagiographies, according to *The Songs of Tukoba*, because the hagiographer's work represented "The Conservative Consolidation of the Eighteenth Century" (Tukaram 2012, p. 40). And this is something that you will not even find in Chitre's translation of a selection of Tukaram's own poems, since he "ignore[s] a large number of

⁵ The opposition between the "Brahminic" view and that of "Non-brahmins" serves Omvedt and Patankar's overall activist agenda, but also lumps people together into groups that they might not otherwise choose to join. Certainly, that Tukaram was murdered is not a view that is subscribed to by all non-Brahmins. There is evidence of conflict with sanctimonious Brahmins throughout Varkari history. Tussles with Brahmins are common in Mahipati's hagiographies, though they generally lead to a reconciliation in the end. Omvedt and Patankar's more radical view of this may be in part a product of the development of a more militant Dalit consciousness in Maharashtra in the late twentieth century.

songs" (p. 50n6). It seems that in a corpus of thousands of poems, the translator enjoys some latitude to constitute the self and experience of the poet.⁶

3. Religious Experience as a Problem

One of the tricks to getting at the religious experience of Tukaram is that we do not have reliable sources. But another trick may concern the nature of experience itself. An influential critique of experience is a 1998 article by Robert H. Sharf. Before turning to that article directly, we might take a moment to consider a point that he makes, that "experience" as an analytical category has a history. In his book *Shelter Blues*, Robert Desjarlais provides a brief genealogy of "experience." It is something that is not only internal, but also personal and unique to the individual. It is authentic and true, as opposed to artificial. Within a self that is understood to be composed of a complex of multiple interior layers, experience is deep and meaningful, subject to reflective interpretation by the experiencer. At a time in recent history marked by the rise of the modernist novel and of psychoanalysis, experience is assigned its meaning in a narrative of the development of the person. So, Desjarlais concludes, "In much the same way that the truth of sexuality grew out of an economy of discourses that took hold in seventeenth-century Europe, so discourses of depth, interiority, and authenticity, sensibilities of holism and transcendence, and practices of reading, writing, and storytelling have helped to craft a mode of being known in the modern West as experience: that is, an inwardly reflexive, hermeneutically rich process that coheres through time by way of narrative" (Desjarlais 1997, p. 17).⁷ My account of the progress of this notion of experience implies something that Desjarlais argues explicitly: there is nothing about this understanding of the self, or of a life narrative, or of experience itself that is universal across cultures. This is a conclusion that is significant for Desjarlais as an anthropologist. Writing about "experience" in the analysis of another culture, the ethnographer may be unwittingly imposing an alien life world.

Let us now return to the critique of religious experience expressed by Robert H. Sharf. The rhetoric of experience, his essay begins, valorizes the "the subjective, the personal, the private," over "the 'objective' or the 'empirical'" (Sharf 1998, p. 94). This is a particularly appealing rhetorical move, since it saves both religious people and scholars of religion from an empiricism, which deconstructs religion, and a cultural pluralism, which delegitimizes parochial western claims. However, Sharf comes to the conclusion that it is a mistake for scholars to rely on this rhetoric. For Sharf, it is not just that "Scholars of religion are not presented with experiences that stand in need of interpretation, but rather with texts, narratives, performances, and so forth" (p. 111). So we do not have access to the experience, but only to discourse about it. And it is not just that "a given individual's understanding and articulation of . . . an experience will be conditioned by the tradition to which he or she belongs" (p. 96). So there is no such thing as a "raw experience" that is not culturally mediated. It is not even just that the contemporary discourse of religious experience only developed since the beginning of the nineteenth century, so that this rhetoric "anachronistically imposes the recent and ideologically laden notion of 'religious experience' on our interpretations of premodern phenomena" (p. 98). Rather, for Sharf, the problem with the rhetoric of religious experience is that it is incoherent. "The word 'experience,' in so far as it refers to that which is given to us in the immediacy of perception, signifies that which by definition is nonobjective, that which resists all signification" (p. 113). So the rhetoric of experience is "a mere place-holder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning" (p. 113).

⁶ It is noteworthy in this context that Omvedt and Patankar do not include any of Chitre's "Advice to an Angry Wife" poems in their collection, though they do note in passing that she is "depicted . . . as an almost complete shrew" (Tukaram 2012, p. 32).

⁷ In the sentence quoted, Desjarlais cites Foucault (1978). Though I refer to Desjarlais's original here, I initially found this anthologized in Martin and McCutcheon (2012).

June McDaniel takes on Sharf's critique of experience in her very recent book, *Lost Ecstasy: Its Decline and Transformation in Religion*. Here, McDaniel argues that experience and, especially, ecstatic and mystical experiences have been marginalized in both religious studies and theology. One consequence of this is that people in the modern west have come to seek ecstasy outside religious channels, even in ways that are self-destructive, such as through violence, or so McDaniel states. *Lost Ecstasy* deals with Sharf most directly in the eighth chapter, "The Case of Hinduism: Ecstasy and Denial." McDaniel opens the discussion by boiling down Sharf's critique to three points:

1. Ideas of religious experience are not really indigenous ideas—they are "a relatively late and distinctively Western invention."
2. What earlier ideas exist in Asia about religious experience show that it is unimportant. There is no pre-colonial emphasis on experience; its importance only comes from Western-trained writers such as Radhakrishnan. Religious authority is rarely based on "exalted experiential states."
3. There are false, inconsistent or dubious claims about religious experience, such as claims of alien abduction. Since some claims of subjective religious experience are false, therefore, all claims on the topic are false. (McDaniel 2018, p. 235; citing Sharf 1998)

Most of the chapter is given over to a refutation of the second point, with McDaniel presenting accounts of authoritative mystical experience from a broad range of Hindu literature from the Vedic period to the present. In a section about "The Dharma Tradition," the author admits that there is little room for mysticism in works about one's worldly obligations based on caste and stage of life, but this is presented as being exceptional. The phrase "exalted spiritual states" appears in Sharf's article in a brief discussion of Buddhist works about meditation, which concludes, "the authority of exegetes such as Kamalasila, Buddhaghosa, and Chih-i [who wrote such works] lay not in their access to exalted spiritual states but in their mastery of, and rigorous adherence to, sacred scripture" (Sharf 1998, p. 99; citing Sharf 1995). Here, the critic admits that the Buddhist tradition has preserved accounts of meditative states, but that those accounts are represented in works that depend on a kind of scholastic authority. This kind of interdependence of spiritual experience and scholastic authority is not a very clear subject of McDaniel's Chapter 8, though throughout the book she charges that contemporary Christian theology has worked to narrow the range of accepted experience.

About McDaniel's third point summarizing Sharf's article, it is certainly true that it includes accounts of alien abductions. Sharf does not claim that these are religious experiences, but he does treat them as analogous. John Mack and other scholars argue that these accounts are so consistent that this is proof that something close to the events described did take place. However, Sharf is skeptical about this. It is more likely that there is no "experience" at all at the basis of these accounts. After citing this example, Sharf critiques the conclusion of a book about possession by Felicitas D. Goodman. That author agnostically admits that she cannot know whether her research subjects were actually possessed: "No one can either prove or disprove that the obvious changes in the brain map in possession . . . are produced by psychological processes or by an invading alien being" (Sharf 1998, p. 112; quoting Goodman 1988, p. 126). About this tergiversation, Sharf comments derisively, "Goodman's agnosticism is but a small step away from John Mack's qualified acceptance of existence of alien abductors" (Sharf 1998, p. 112). Here, it seems that Sharf is attaching to Goodman's possession the opprobrium that seems to go with the accounts of alien abductions—we all know that these things did not happen. Perhaps Sharf reaches this conclusion because he is a thoroughgoing materialist, beginning his analysis with the assumption that there are no supernatural beings, so all the tales of encounters with them must be subject to some other kind of explanation. If that is Sharf's starting point, I cannot follow him that far. As a professor of religious studies in a state university in the United States, I am not prepared to issue a universal declaration of my own view about the existence or nonexistence of supernatural beings. However, it is not clear if that is Sharf's starting point—he does not make that explicit.

In my reading of McDaniel's book, there is little in Chapter 8 about the first point in her summary of Sharf. *Lost Ecstasy* does claim that "As we compare understandings of religious experience in Hinduism and in the Judaeo-Christian West, what is striking is their similarity" (McDaniel 2018, p. 251). But nowhere here or elsewhere is there a discussion of the kind of genealogy of experience in the modern west that we find in Sharf and Desjarlais. I assume that this is because McDaniel does not find such a genealogical analysis to be necessary to compare accounts of ecstatic experience across cultures, accounts that are manifestly similar.

Though I do not agree with all of Sharf's critiques of religious experience, I do think that there is at least one that is worthy of serious consideration. If Sharf and Desjarlais's genealogy of experience is correct, we should be careful about imposing our own cultural framework on Tukaram, if we seek access to his experience. Since the claim is made that Tukaram's poetry is particularly modern, it might seem as if this problem should not arise, that this collapses the cultural difference between the seventeenth century poet and the contemporary scholarly analyst. Yet, as noted in the second section of this essay, there are problems with this claim. Omvedt and Patankar do briefly discuss the emergence of a kind of modern critique in seventeenth century Europe, but provide no analysis of how this development occurred in South Asia. In Chitre's book, the context in cultural history becomes irrelevant, since he argues that in its "new existential dimensions," Tukaram's poetry "was anticipating the spiritual anguish of modern man two centuries ahead of his time" (Tukaram 1991, p. xx). Tukaram has apparently somehow leaped over the cultural changes that have led in the west to a modern sensibility. Of course, the historical rupture that Chitre suggests is cast into some doubt by the fact that the body of Tukaram's poetry has been added to over the centuries. More fundamentally, as discussed above, it seems that the modern self that Chitre finds in Tukaram is substantially different from the one that Omvedt and Patankar uncover.

The contemporary devotee's encounter with Tukaram, through his poetry and through the hagiographies of Mahipati, particularly during the Varkari pilgrimage, deserves to be labelled an "abundant event," in the language of Robert Orsi, as described in the first section of this essay. It is certainly the case that the devotee believes that she knows Tukaram and his experience. Orsi and Monge insist that such an encounter can have a transformative effect on the scholar as well. But it seems to me that whether the scholar is encountering Tukaram at all must depend at least to some extent on the sources that provide access to him. As noted above, we cannot rely entirely on Mahipati's hagiographies, since they were written a century after Tukaram lived, on the basis of uncertain sources, and by an author who did not have a contemporary historian's concern about his sources. We cannot even depend on Tukaram's own poems to get back to him, at least without a successful critical study of their history, since it is likely that many of the poems that are now attributed to him were written later. At best, Tukaram's oeuvre as it currently exists only gives us access to how the Varkari community has represented his experience over time. At the beginning of this essay, I argued that we find in the story of Tukaram's relationship with Jijai an account of the social impact of his religious experience. This is a story that celebrates indifference to worldly concerns, embodied by Tukaram, however much that may provoke the censure of the worldly, represented by his wife. However, because of the nature of the sources that (may or may not) take us back to the seventeenth century, we cannot be sure that this social teaching is really based on Tukaram's experience.

There have been devotional poet-saints in the history of Hinduism whose compositions were fixed in their own lifetime, but this has been relatively unusual. More common is that a saint's output has expanded over the centuries. For some poets, there are manuscripts that can be studied to analyze this development. But even this will not lead to certain knowledge of the original works of most saints. So, for reasons of textual history, if not for more theoretical reasons, the experience of saints such as Tukaram must remain elusive.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The author gratefully acknowledges suggestions about an earlier draft of this article from Jon Keune, Russell McCutcheon, June McDaniel, and Christian Novetzke.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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