

Article

Kabir and Pedagogy: Teaching the Politics of Religion through the Hagiography of an Indian Saint

Patton Burchett

Department of Religious Studies, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795, USA;
peburchett@wm.edu

Abstract: This essay discusses the virtues of hagiology-driven teaching and the pedagogical value of the saint in the religious studies classroom, focusing on how a series of class assignments and activities centered on the Indian devotional saint Kabir function in an undergraduate introductory-level religious studies course to effectively engage student learning, and develop students' understanding of the politics of religion and the crucial interplay of affect, memory, and storytelling in religious life.

Keywords: Kabir; hagiology; hagiography; pedagogy; saint; Hinduism; South Asia

1. Introduction

Pedagogically speaking, what can the study of the lives of saints offer to the religious studies classroom? Here, I discuss the way in which a series of class assignments and activities centered on the Indian devotional saint Kabir function in an undergraduate introductory (200-) level religious studies course to effectively engage student learning and develop students' understanding of the politics of religion and the crucial interplay of affect, memory, and storytelling in religious life in South Asia and in general. Before delving into the details of this hagiology-driven pedagogy, it will be helpful to provide a bit of context on how I approach saints and why I see them as such useful teaching tools.

2. The Figure (and Pedagogical Value) of the Saint

In my courses, and for the purposes of this essay, I conceive of a "saint" as a person whom a religious community or "public"¹ venerates and understands to have exemplified its values or achieved its highest aspirations. All religious communities have such revered figures, yet it is crucial to note that regardless of their charisma, good deeds, miracles, teachings, and hard work, an individual only becomes a saint when communally recognized and remembered over time as such by a social group. In this sense, a saint is a collective memory, and thus is continuously constructed and reconstructed through time in a social process, a process that is always political and in the service of the historically contingent interests of particular groups. In another context, I have argued that the figure of the saint often has a "totemic" function in a religious community, with the saint's remembered life and deeds embodying and giving tangible expression to the intangible values and sentiments that bond and mobilize that particular community (Burchett 2018).²

As the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) has shown, collective memory works and functions as a living past that constructs and legitimizes the social identity of those who share the memory (Halbwachs 1992). The memory of a saint in a religious community persists in and through ritualized social practices—including storytelling—wherein the performance of embodied ritual and narrative discourse work together to inscribe and internalize particular values and identities in individual minds (Connerton 1989).³ Expanding on Halbwachs' work, Jan Assmann explains that "When collectives 'remember,' they thereby secure a unifying, 'connective' semantics that 'holds them inwardly together' and reintegrates their individual 'members' so that they possess a common point of view" (Assmann 2006, p. 11). We might consider the figure of the



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saint—from the Jesuit Ignatius of Loyola and the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabī to the Japanese Buddhist monk Kūkai and, my focus here, the Indian devotee–poet Kabir—as a mythic figure who acts as a ‘site of memory’ (Assmann 2006, p. 9) in which a community or tradition’s core values are concentrated, preserved, and accessed (often in and through hagiographical narratives) in order to renew and maintain social identities, legitimate authority structures, naturalize power relations, and cultivate religious experiences.⁴

Hagiographical narratives must capture the imagination of followers by producing an inspiring memory of the saint. The remembered saint is the “ostensible subject” of the hagiography, but at deeper level, the subject of these narratives is not so much a historical individual (the figure of the saint) as a cherished value or ideal of the tradition embodied in and through their life and deeds (Stewart 2010, pp. 229, 237–39). This perspective helps us see why saints’ identities are contested and variously represented, why different communities tell or emphasize different stories about a single saint, and why the memory of a saint can change over time. Indeed, it seems fair to say that any given saint continues to be remembered within a community insofar as the narrative of his life and deeds continue in service of some greater “truth”, articulating principles of ongoing importance to the community, principles that may shift with new social and political contexts and agendas. In summary, I present the figure of the saint as a collective memory, continuously constructed and reconstructed through time in a social process that is always political and in the service of the historically contingent interests of particular groups. In many instances, the politics of “making a saint” are none other than the politics of building and sustaining a religious community, and for this reason saints make an especially effective focal point for teaching about the politics of religion.

3. Kabir in the Undergraduate Classroom

I teach at a selective public liberal arts institution in Virginia with an undergraduate population of about 6500 students. The pedagogy discussed in what follows comes from my “Introduction to Hinduism” class, a 200-level course with no prerequisites, with a typical class size of approximately 35 students. One section of my course focuses on the fifteenth–sixteenth century Indian poet–saint Kabir, one of the most popular devotional (*bhakti*) saints in the Indian subcontinent. Through the figure of Kabir and exposure to the different ways he has been and continues to be remembered and interpreted by contemporary South Asians (i.e., an Indic case study in the politics of sainthood), students develop a grasp of the politics of religion, a tangible sense of religion’s intimate, emotionally-charged, and historically shifting links with social identities and agendas.

For readers unfamiliar with Kabir, allow me to provide some brief background on this renowned Indian saint. Kabir was most likely born in the mid-fifteenth century into a low-caste (*shudra*) community of weavers in Varanasi (Benares), India, and passed away in 1518 CE.⁵ He “had an enormous impact on the life of his times” through his “unforgettable” songs (Hawley 2005, pp. 268–69) of social critique and religious devotion to a *nirgun* Divine (a God “without qualities”, beyond form and conception, in contrast to *sagun*—anthropomorphic deities like Krishna, Rama, and Durga). These songs, composed in a mix of the Avadhi and Brajbhāṣā dialects of the Hindavi language (pre-modern Hindi), spread far and wide in North India as they were orally performed and (within a century of his death) also written down in three major manuscript collections (Hess 1987). As John Stratton Hawley writes, in a text (*Songs of the Saints of India*) that I assign to my students, Kabir has, along with a small handful of other Indian devotional (*bhakti*) poet–saints (including Mirabai, Nanak, Surdas, Tulsidas, and Ravidas), “contributed more to the religious vocabulary of Hinduism in north India today than any voices before or since” (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004, p. 7). Kabir seems to have held the social identity of a Muslim, and many of his compositions are consistent with Sufi ideas and attitudes, but overall, his corpus shows a more intimate understanding of the philosophical, theological, and ritual aspects of Hindu traditions (as well as those of the Nath Yogis) (See Dharwadker 2003, pp. 10–11; Offredi 2002), and it is especially among Hindus (often of

lower caste)—though certainly also among South Asian Muslims (particularly Sufis) and Sikhs—that Kabir is remembered today. He is one of the most well-known saints in the Indian subcontinent. Many, if not most, North Indians can recite you a poem or a few verses from Kabir. Over the course of his lifetime, Kabir developed a strong reputation as a poet, a social critic, and a model devotee. While Kabir is often remembered today as a great spokesman of Hindu–Muslim unity, in fact, he viciously criticized and made satirical jabs at both Hindu and Muslim traditions, highlighting the delusions and cruelties of their ritual practices and doctrinal commitments while exposing the hypocrisy, greed, ostentation, and pretension of their respective religious elites (brahmans, yogis, mullahs, sheikhs, etc.). In a bold, impassioned, and blunt style all his own, Kabir stressed the immediate accessibility of truth and spiritual liberation to everyone within their very own bodies (and thus, the uselessness of priestly mediators), the preciousness of life (given death’s tragic and inescapable nature), and the consequent urgency of the spiritual opportunity before each of us.

Richard Davis has written about how Indian *bhakti* poetry can be used in the classroom to effectively “enable students to enter into a subjectivity that is different but human, challenging to their own values and assumptions but also sympathetic”, and that it does so “powerfully and accessibly without requiring undue professorial explication” (Davis 2019, p. 215). Kabir, I would argue, represents *bhakti* at its most powerful, accessible, and subjectivity-shifting; indeed, the corpus of poetic compositions attributed to him seems to have a strong and easy appeal for most students. His critiques of organized religion and the hypocrisy of social-political elites clearly resonate with many students today. More than this, Kabir’s compositions and hagiography provide students with a look at a fascinating period of Indian history (and, specifically, Hindu–Muslim relations in North India), an instance of a major genre of Indian vernacular literature/poetry and performance, and an example of an important stream of socially critical, inward-oriented Indic religiosity centered on devotion (*bhakti*) to a formless (*nirgun*) Divine. Kabir is at the center of a series of assignments I give in the latter portion of my “Introduction to Hinduism” course. After initially describing the assignments, I will then expand upon their pedagogical logic and benefits.

4. The Assignments: Guided by the Saint

In preparation for a class day focused solely on Kabir, students are given a reading assignment which includes: (a) secondary (historical–critical scholarly) material on Kabir’s life, (b) major features of and incidents in his remembered life story, and (c) primary source material (poems and songs attributed to Kabir). Students are asked to come to class having singled out a favorite poem and prepared to talk about it. I begin by lecturing on Kabir (historical context, personal background, poetic style and themes, hagiography) and reading some of his songs aloud (ones not included in their reading assignment).⁶ I stress to students that while they have engaged Kabir’s compositions *in translation* and *as poems to be read*, they were originally composed orally, in verse, in the Hindavi language, *as songs to sung and heard*, driving home this point by showing a recording of a contemporary musical performance of one of his songs.⁷ I then call on a handful of students to read out their favorite Kabir passage and to tell me what they think it is about (what core themes it addresses) and why, specifically, they like it. Having now gained familiarity with Kabir and his poetic style, for the following class, students are asked to write their own Kabir poem.⁸ This is the assignment prompt:

Please write your own Kabir poem, i.e., a poem in the style and spirit of Kabir. You may write one poem on the model of the longer poems of his that you have read, or you may write two of the shorter (epigram) poems. You can imagine yourself as Kabir, or as living in his day and age; or, you may simply “channel” the spirit of Kabir to compose, in his style, a critique of aspects of our own modern-day society or address more mystical–spiritual themes. Post your poem(s) on our course Blackboard Discussion Forum.

The next class session opens with a handful of student volunteers reading their Kabir poems aloud. In the past, with the students' permission, I have sometimes posted these student Kabir poems on our departmental website.⁹ Following another class (lecture and readings) on the topic of Hindu nationalism, students are given an assignment to view and respond to the documentary "*Had-Anhad* (Bounded-Boundless): Journeys with Ram and Kabir", a film centered on Kabir and his teachings and memory in modern India and Pakistan. The film introduces the various (sometimes contentious) ways in which Kabir is remembered and represented by different social groups in South Asia, while compellingly contrasting his open spiritual and social perspective (as showcased by a number of contemporary performers of Kabir's songs) with the narrowness of sectarian religious traditions and the rise of Hindu nationalist perspectives. This is the assignment prompt:

Film Response and Analysis Paper Assignment (2 pages, single-spaced):

- Watch and write a response to the film "*Had-Anhad* (Bounded-Boundless): Journeys with Ram and Kabir".
- In your two-page, single-spaced essay, respond to the following questions. Your essay should show *detailed engagement* with the film:
- What is this film about? What do you think are its core themes and intentions? Introduce the film, answering these questions, in your first paragraph.
- What is *bhakti* and how did the film inform your understanding of *bhakti*? How did it inform your understanding of the *bhakti* poet-saint Kabir? Discuss specific scenes/quotes in answering.
- How did the film inform your understanding of the 1992 Ayodhya mosque (Babri Masjid) destruction and its continuing relevance in India? How did it inform your understanding of Hindu nationalism more generally? Discuss specific scenes/quotes.
- "*Had-Anhad*" means "Bounded-Unbounded". Why was the film given this title? In what ways is it concerned with both the making and the transcending of boundaries and borders? [This will require some elaboration.]
- What struck you most in the film? What were your primary takeaways from it?

5. Pedagogical Logic and Benefits

The young adults that are our students today are part of a generation that has grown up entirely amidst and had their lives saturated by digital and online technologies and media, which have led to distinctive ways of thinking, communicating, and learning (Barnes et al. 2007; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005). Many of our students spend a huge proportion of their waking hours on email, social media, video games, and online entertainment, and comparatively little time on coursework. While there can be significant differences from institution to institution and from student to student, in general, today's college students report spending just 14–15 hours a week on class preparation—including reading, writing, studying, and lab work. Research indicates that they are not only reading considerably less than previous generations of students but also comprehending and retaining less of what they do read (Baron 2021). Given this, how do we best go about teaching our courses?

In terms of learning style, students today generally prefer independence and autonomy, varied and more interactive forms of communication, and self-directed and personally meaningful learning experiences (Barnes et al. 2007). Our digital-age students have distinctive ways of thinking and learning, and part of effective pedagogy is being aware of these and adapting our teaching methods to resonate productively with them, but this does not necessarily mean "catering to" student preferences for certain kinds of classwork and assignments. Put differently, it is true that students today, having grown up in a world of digital technology and social media, possess particular cognitive tendencies and strengths (and related learning preferences) that we should let orient our teaching methods to some significant degree, but they also have distinctive weaknesses—often in information literacy, critical thinking, and the ability to maintain extended focus/attention on (the contemplation of) verbal material (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005; Carlson 2005)—that need to be trained

and developed. This may necessitate some activities and assignments that are less popular with today's students, but are nonetheless key in facilitating the growth of crucial skills. The multiple class activities and assignments (as well as different communication modes and media forms) involving the saint Kabir that I use—standard reading assignments and lecture, reading aloud in class, composition of poetry, open class discussion, viewing of video clips, and written analysis and interpretation of film—are intentionally varied not simply to avoid monotony and to keep things lively but to give students the opportunity to learn in different ways, utilizing and drawing upon different mental resources and skills. As the authors of *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (2014) show, students “have multiple forms of intelligence to bring to bear on learning, and you learn better when you ‘go wide,’ drawing on all of your aptitudes and resourcefulness, than when you limit instruction or experience to the [learning] style you find most amenable” (Brown et al. 2014, p. 4).

In the class assignments and activities discussed above, I have especially sought to follow (however imperfectly) two interrelated and research-supported pedagogical principles: (a) the value of a personal, experiential dimension in (some) assignments, and (b) the effectiveness of targeting student emotions. In contrast to still pervasive assumptions that learning is most essentially about “unemotional consideration of the facts”, Sarah Rose Cavanagh has argued that to truly educate our students, we need to target their emotions (Cavanagh 2016, p. 1). Neuroscientific and psychological research has shown that the neural mechanisms underlying emotion, cognition, motivation, and learning are intertwined in crucial ways. Emotions influence motivation and learning by “tagging certain experiences and skills as important and thus critical to both attend to and remember” (Cavanagh 2016, p. 3). Indeed, there is increasing evidence that “emotions grab attention, hijack working memory, enhance long-term memory for information, and engender motivation” (Cavanagh 2016, p. 11). It therefore makes a great deal of sense to try to incorporate class activities and assignments that can maximize the sorts of affective states that lead to greater engagement and enhanced learning.

Stories of saints and traditions of practice surrounding their remembrance and veneration are often very rich in affective elements. In the case of Kabir, many of his poetic compositions are emotionally evocative, even more so when hearing their musical performance. Indeed, Kabir's songs were originally orally composed and musically performed, only being set down in writing later, and only in recent times being more frequently read than heard. After reading some of his songs aloud, in translation, so as to convey their often impassioned content, I play an online video clip of a traditional performance of a Kabir song (with the Hindi lyrics translated in English captions), allowing students to get a sense of the aesthetic appeal and a feel for the associated emotional impact of traditional *bhakti* (devotional) performance. The documentary film (“*Had-Anhad*”) that students watch for their Film Response and Analysis assignment centers on a group of modern-day Kabir singers in South Asia—including Muslim Sufis and Hindus—and is filled with live performances by these musicians as they sing Kabir's words of inner spirituality and inspired social critique with palpable emotion, often dripping with perspiration. Not all students like this style of music, but a great many are clearly impacted by hearing and seeing its performance in the film. “*Had-Anhad*” nicely shows how different devotees of Kabir remember him in different ways (even contesting each other's representations of Kabir), and consistently do so with passion and conviction. The saintly figure of Kabir thus emerges in the film as a site of emotional saturation and contesting memories, one sentimentally charged in a fashion parallel to the physical site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, with both possessing the capacity to mobilize collective action through shared feeling and narrative. The film shows powerful raw footage of Indians ardently expressing anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistani, Hindu nationalist attitudes, which are contrasted with the perspectives of the open-minded Kabir singers and their messages of love. This juxtaposition comes to life in a series of striking scenes (e.g., one where Ayodhya shop-keepers sell videos of the destruction of the Babri Mosque, gleefully celebrating and fervently defending this

destruction; and another at the India–Pakistan border flag ceremonies) through which the filmmaker (Shabnam Virmani) illustrates how powerful “religious” emotion so easily finds (or is manipulated into) political expression. Even as the students *learn about* emotion (and its political mobilization through religious idiom), nearly all *experience and express* (in their response papers) their own significant emotional reaction to these scenes and to the contrast the filmmaker develops.

In a related way, students are given the opportunity to connect emotionally and personally to the course material when they are asked to choose a “favorite poem” of Kabir’s and to think about and articulate why they like it, as well as when I ask them to write their own Kabir-inspired poem. Having students compose their own Kabir poems is a simple enough assignment on the surface, but in my experience it has proven to be “hagiology-driven pedagogy” in a particularly effective form. By writing *as Kabir*, the student engages in a saintly mimicry and emulation akin to what the devotees and followers of saints have done across cultures and historical periods.¹⁰ To write as Kabir is step into his saintly shoes to attempt to view the world through his saintly eyes. In this, the student’s effort would seem to mirror, in a secular academic form, the engagement of the devotee who seeks to take on the holy qualities of the saint. Embodying the saintly persona of Kabir to produce original poetry (of both social critique and existential reflection and wisdom) from his perspective is here not a “religious” act; nonetheless, in it we can see core processes of hagiology and sainthood in action, with the memory of Kabir (and what he has come to stand for) brought to life and perpetuated by my students in and through their emulation and personal expression of this saint.

As I suggested above, telling students to choose a favorite Kabir poem (and talk about why they like it), and to write their own Kabir-inspired poem, are relatively easy “asks” but nonetheless pedagogically powerful tasks. How so? Firstly, these tasks require effort. In asking a student to read or listen to a poem or an academic argument/point, we of course cannot expect the content of the poem or argument (its beauty, logic, etc.) to sink in “on its own” or to itself generate an impact upon the student. We know the mind is not a sponge simply absorbing insights and information; it must be actively engaged—at work—for real learning to happen. Indeed, research has shown that “Learning is deeper and more durable when it’s *effortful*. Learning that’s easy is like writing in sand, here today and gone tomorrow” (Brown et al. 2014, p. 3). These simple assignments work well not only because they require effort but because that effort has a personal element that allows students to creatively draw on and incorporate their own perspectives and experience. When students work to make course material their own, the core concepts in that material are granted a space in which they can interpenetrate with and potentially transform, students’ perspectives. As Ann Burlein has pointed out, “there is a lot more happening in experiential assignments than simply that my non-intellectually inclined students think better when they relate academic knowledge to their own experiences.” As she explains, assignments with a personal, experiential element “can facilitate, create, and enrich a mediating realm” between student experiences and academic concepts; a mediating realm that enables them to “drink deeply” from the material to which they are exposed when they otherwise would not (Burlein 2011, p. 147). At the heart of the method of teaching (and of teaching about saints) that I try to implement (with as many failures as successes, I must add!) in my Introduction to Hinduism course is the idea that when an assignment is personal, creative, and effortful, students experience more positive emotions like excitement and interest, which leads to more cognitive activation, greater engagement with the material, and thus enhanced learning performance (Cavanagh 2016). Hagiology—in and through the saintly figure of Kabir—plays a vital role in my classroom in pursuing this aim.

6. Conclusions

As Eugene Gallagher has remarked, college students today, “whether they are deeply or shallowly involved in the practice of a religion, hazily conscious of some of the roles

religions play in American civic life or simply vaguely aware that religion is something that some other people do, they are unaccustomed to thinking critically about religion” (Gallagher 2009, p. 210). In this short essay, I have sought to show how hagiology—the study of saints—is an especially productive pedagogical tool for teaching students how to think critically about religion, specifically for developing their grasp of the affectively charged politics of memory and representation in religious life. In my course, through the saint Kabir, his remembered life and poetic compositions, and his continuing presence in performance traditions and contemporary South Asian political debates, the Indian devotional (*bhakti*) tradition and the modern Indian political and religious environment come alive for students in a tangible way. Weaving the saint into a pedagogy involving multiple forms of media and sensory engagement, opportunities for students to effortfully connect with the material in personal and emotionally-targeted ways, and written assignments demanding careful analysis, thoughtful interpretation, and critical reflection on the interconnections of multiple course topics, can provide students with a powerful learning experience in the religious studies classroom. The figure of the saint lies at the heart of this pedagogical approach, and for good reason. In studying the saint, whose memory so often embodies and evokes the very shared sentiments and ethos that bond a religious community together, students are led to an engagement with some of the most fascinating and valuable lessons about religion as a form of social life.

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Notes

- ¹ Such a religious community need not be a formally organized one but may be more of a “public”, which Michael Warner describes as a social entity that comes into being in relation to discourse and its circulation and is thus different from a crowd, audience, or group in that it is a community embracing otherwise unrelated people who all participate in the same discourse at different times and places (Warner 2002).
- ² By “totemic function”, I mean that the saint often functions not unlike a Durkheimian totem, “a symbol, a tangible expression” “in which. . . [the] intangible substance” of moral principles, spiritual ideals, and collective sentiments “is represented in the imagination”, with the community’s own identity intimately tied to that of the saint (Durkheim [1912] 1995, pp. 208, 191).
- ³ On the power of remembrance to evoke shared sentiment and bind together communities, see especially the work of Jan Assmann (2006) and Bruce Lincoln (1989). As Assmann points out, “The simultaneously collective and ‘connective,’ bonding nature of memory is expressed with particular clarity in the English-language words re-remembering and re-collecting, which evoke the idea of putting ‘members’ back together (re-remembering and dis-membering) and ‘re-collecting’ things that have been dispersed” (Assmann 2006, p. 11; emphasis in original). Lincoln shows that often when separate individuals (making up a community) remember a specific moment or figure from a shared past, they not only recall their common links and attachment to that moment/figure, they also “reawaken their (latent) feelings of affinity for, and attachment to, one another. In that very moment and by that very act of memory, they (re-)define themselves as kin” (Lincoln 1989, p. 20).
- ⁴ For an example of this approach applied toward the interpretation of the regional memories and “many lives” of the Hindu saint (Rāmānandī ascetic) Krishnadās Payahārī, see: (Burchett and Rao 2021).
- ⁵ As one might expect, Kabir’s exact dates are disputed, but David Lorenzen makes a strong case that his traditional death date of 1518 CE is accurate, though his traditional birth date of 1398 CE is likely considerably too early (Lorenzen 1991, p. 18).
- ⁶ Students read Chapter 2 (“Kabir”) in (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004), which provides a historical introduction to Kabir along with translations of many of his poems and epigrams, as well as an excerpt of Chapter 7 (“Fighting Over Kabir’s Dead Body”) from Linda Hess’s *Bodies of Song* (Hess 2015). The translated Kabir songs I read out in class come from (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2004; Hess 2015; Dharwadker 2003).
- ⁷ See Prahlad Singh Tipaniya’s performance of Kabir’s “Kahaan Se Aaya Kahaan Jaaoge?” (with English translation in subtitles), see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRuOAJnY5aQ> (accessed on 15 November 2023).
- ⁸ The original idea for this assignment came from my friend and colleague Todd French, of Rollins College, whose thoughtful and creative pedagogy have been a source of inspiration and enrichment to me for many years.

- ⁹ Here are two examples of some of my undergraduate students' Kabir-inspired poems published online: <https://therevealer.org/poems-in-the-style-and-spirit-of-kabir/> (accessed on 17 November 2023).; <https://www.wm.edu/as/religiousstudies/undergraduate/undergraduate-research/student-projects/kabir-poems/index.php> (accessed on 17 November 2023).
- ¹⁰ I am indebted to Todd French (email exchange, 8-25-23) for most of the insights in this paragraph on the way "writing the saint" has meaningful parallels with the devotional emulation of saints and how the power and value of this assignment (writing as Kabir) has much to do with the hagiological framework in which it occurs.

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