

Kabir and the Avatars

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The Indian religious poet Kabir (d. ca. 1518) often referred to his God using Vaishnava names, names that refer to the Hindu god Vishnu. Kabir also uses names for God that are not specific to Vishnu and even uses Muslim names. Vishnu is said to have been incarnated in several earthly avatars. The most important are Krishna and king Ramachandra. A traditional list names ten avatars. Kabir often refers to these earthly avatars, but he minimizes their importance in various ways such as emphasizing the fact that they all died. Most modern scholars have taken Kabir's use of Vaishnava vocabulary to identify him as a Vaishnava, albeit an unorthodox one. Kabir's rejection of the avatars and his focus on a supreme God without form or personality tends to put this identification in doubt.

Keywords: Kabir; avatar; Vishnu; Ismaili; bhakti; viraha.

1. Kabir's God

Discussions about the religious ideas of the North Indian religious poet Kabir (ca. 1440-1518) often focus on how his bhakti, his devotion to God, compares to that of other religious figures of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ How should we describe the relation between the *nirgun* bhakti of Kabir and the *sagun* bhakti of Surdas, Tulsidas, and Mirabai? Related questions concern the influence of Islam and

¹ During the preparation of this essay, parts of it were discussed with Purushottam Agrawal, Linda Hess, and Pinuccia Caracchi, Patton Burchett, and John S. Hawley. Their comments clarified many points, even when we ended up agreeing to disagree. The *Kervan* readers also made useful suggestions. In the essay, the identifying song (*ramaini, pad* or *shabda*) numbers are taken from Vichardas Shastri's 1965 edition of the *Kabir bijak* and from Shyamsundar Das's 1968 edition of the *Kabir granthavali*. The *Adi granth* compositions are identified according to the page and song numbers of the official Sikh edition of the text. For the *Adi granth* songs of Kabir, I used the texts in Winand Callewaert's *The Millennium Kabir Vani* (Kabir 2000). All the translations in the present essay are my own. Full translations into English of the *Kabir bijak* by Ahmad Shah (Kabir 1977) and of the Kabir compositions in the *Adi granth* by Nirmal Dass (Kabir 1991) have been published, but not of those in the *Kabir granthavali*. The *Bijak* translation by Hess and Singh (Kabir 1983) is excellent but not complete. Many *Kabir granthavali* songs are translated in a selection by Charlotte Vaudeville (Kabir 1993). The present essay uses the transcription system for Sanskrit but does not add the diacritics except for words in parentheses or cited passages. The palatals "c" and "ch" have been rendered as "ch" and "chh", and the sibilants "ś" and "ṣ" are both rendered as "sh". The vowel "a" when silent is not written except in the cited passages.

the Nath yogis on Kabir, the extent to which Kabir intended to establish a religious tradition independent of both Islam and Hindu religion, and the extent to which he can be considered a devotee of Vishnu, a Vaishnava. Two central issues in all these discussions are the names Kabir uses for his God and how the divine reality behind these names is conceived. What are his attitudes toward the saints and heroes of Vaishnava tradition and toward the sacred texts, rituals, and social practices associated with this tradition?²

A complicating factor in all this is that even the oldest collections of Kabir's compositions likely contain compositions that his followers modified or compositions that they wrote in his name. For convenience, here I will write as if Kabir himself is the author all the compositions. Also important are the likely biases that were introduced into the collections by the editors who selected which compositions to include, an issue that will be discussed in more detail below.

Most of the many names that Kabir uses for his Supreme God are Vaishnava names, alternate names of Vishnu. Most common are the names Ram and Hari, but also used are Gopal, Govinda, Madhav, Keshav, Bhagavan, Sarangadhar, and Raghurai. Kabir sometimes mentions, directly or indirectly, the avatars of Vishnu. Krishna and king Ram Chandra are, of course, the most important avatars and are those that Kabir mentions most. In a few songs, however, he also mentions the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Dwarf, Parashuram, the Man-lion, Buddha and Kalki (Sanskrit *kalakin*) avatars. Nonetheless, Kabir usually claims that these avatars are not worthy of devotion and asserts that devotion should be directed at the Supreme God alone. In many cases, he uses names that originally denoted the avatars Krishna and Ram to denote this Supreme God. Kabir also sometimes mentions other gods like Brahma, Shiva, Indra, and Shakti, but they are never equated with the Supreme God. He rarely refers to female divinities except for Maya, a personification of all worldly delusions. Kabir also often gives his Supreme God Muslim names including Allah, Huzur, Khuda, Karim, and Rahman,³ but this usually occurs in the context of statements about the equivalence of Allah and Ram, with both the Hindu and Muslim names used to indicate the one Supreme God. Kabir is the first early bhakti poet to do this. Less specifically Vaishnava, though also Hindu, names that Kabir sometimes uses for his Supreme God are Niranjana,⁴ the Name (*nām*), the True Name (*sat-nām*), the True Guru (*sat-guru*), Para-brahma, Master (*svāmī*),

² On this last topic, see Hess (2015: 338-344); Lorenzen (1991: 32-35; 1996: 225-256).

³ Two other Muslim-linked terms that Kabir uses in several songs are *kudarat*, a term meaning "divine power," and *bismilla*, meaning "in the name of Allah." These two words are derived from Arabic and are frequently used in a Muslim context.

⁴ In the *Kabir bijak* the name Niranjana is sometimes used to refer to the god of death, also called Kal and Yama, and not to the Supreme God. In the western texts (*Kabir granthavali* and *Adi granth*), Niranjana is always used only to indicate the Supreme God.

Creator (*karatā*), Sahab, Srjanhar and Purusha. All this suggests that Kabir was a highly independent thinker but one who perhaps more resembled a Vaishnava Hindu than anything else, the identity label that most of his present day followers accept.

In a 2016 article titled “Can There Be a Vaishnava Kabir”, John Hawley suggests (p. 147) that we think of Kabir’s Vaishnavism “as ‘vulgate Vaishnavism’—something a good bit more all-embracing than the Vaishnavism propounded by some others in the world he inhabited.” The present essay attempts to show that although Kabir can be considered, in some sense, a Vaishnava, his deviation from traditional Vaishnava ideas about the avatars was truly radical and can hardly be described as constituting a vague “vulgate Vaishnavism” that was simply “a good deal more all-embracing” than the more traditional Vaishnavism of his contemporaries like Surdas and Mirabai. Sardar Jafri has proposed a contrasting view that Kabir’s religious ideas were more Muslim than Hindu, but, for one reason or another, Kabir used a Hindu vocabulary that disguised this fact (Jafri 1965: 29). This view is extreme, but it has much to recommend it.

This still leaves the initial question unanswered. How do the religious ideas of Kabir compare with other religious figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially with the ideas of Vaishnavas who preached the path of bhakti? The specific topic I want to look at in this essay is that of Kabir’s views about the avatars of Vishnu. The discussion will be limited to the three main older collections of Kabir’s songs and verses: the *Kabir granthavali* of Dadu Panth tradition, the *Adi granth* of the Sikhs, and the *Kabir bijak* of the Kabir Panth.⁵ The question of Kabir’s understanding of the avatars is a key indicator of the differences between his religious vision and the religious vision of Vaishnava poets and thinkers. Here I want to argue that a close reading of his views clearly shows that Kabir’s message of bhakti is more than simply a major variant of the bhakti of more orthodox bhakti of figures like Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai, and Chaitanya. Kabir’s bhakti is different, a difference that goes together with his radically different views on the social issue of caste and on the relation between Islam and Hindu religion.⁶

⁵ The editions mainly used here are listed in footnote 1. Other early collections that have been published and which include compositions by Kabir are those of Rajjab (2010), Gopaldas (1993), and the 1582 Fatehpur manuscript (Bahura and Bryant 1982). Also useful are the modern collection of early Kabir compositions edited by Parasnath Tivari (Kabir 1981a) and the joint collection by Jaydev Sinha and Vasudev Sinha (Kabir 1981b). These collections and editions contain many of Kabir’s compositions cited in this essay.

⁶ I deliberately avoid the use of the term “Hinduism” since it implies a doctrinal emphasis and unity that this religion does not have. See Lorenzen (1999).

In 1987 Linda Hess published an important essay comparing the three early collections of Kabir's compositions: the western *Kabir granthavali*, the western *Adi granth*, and the eastern *Kabir bijak*.⁷ In this essay, Hess listed the names for God in each of the collections and their frequency. These lists showed clearly that Vaishnava names predominate, but also that the percentage of clearly Vaishnava names for God was significantly higher in the western collections (Hess 1987: 120-21). Hess then proceeded to compare the sorts of bhakti found in the western collections and the *Bijak*. Her overall conclusion was that the bhakti of the eastern *Bijak* is quite different from that of the two western collections (Hess 1987: 140):

I have demonstrated that the two western collections of Kabir's sayings are strikingly higher than the *Bijak* in bhakti content, as indicated by language, attitudes, and themes. And I have suggested that the circumstances of transmission of pads would tend to increase devotional elements, both because they are more congenial to music than the harsher, more austere eastern style, and because bhakti—especially Krishna bhakti—dominated the regions through which the material moved. In the case of Krishna names, I have given objective evidence that they may have been added by singers as the material spread through the country.

When it came to the question of which of these two sorts of bhakti was more authentic, in the sense of representing the historical Kabir, however, Hess (1987: 141) suggested that “a proponent of each might defend him as the authentic Kabir. The reader may choose between them, or may decide that they represent two streams of tradition wherein the real Kabir is diffused like milk in water, unextractable except by some as yet unknown swan of scholarship or mystical insight.”

One obvious problem with allowing the possibility of giving equal historical plausibility to the Kabir of all three collections is the fact that the oldest manuscripts all belong to the western collections. The oldest western manuscripts belong to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while the earliest *Bijak* manuscripts are from the early nineteenth century. On the other hand, the eastern geographical provenance of the *Bijak* places it closer to the home of Kabir in Varanasi.

Winand Callewaert (Kabir 2000) clearly prefers the western collections and bases his collection of 593 songs (*pad*) of Kabir that he regards as more authentic exclusively on the presence of the songs in early manuscripts. He rates the songs on a scale from zero to three stars according to their presence in

⁷ Hess has a more in depth and nuanced analysis of Kabir's language in her recent book *Bodies of Song* (2015: 112-148), but this does not focus on the question of the religious affiliations of the Kabir's names for God.

one or more different western manuscript traditions. Not surprisingly, Callewaert has little interest in the *Bijak* collection and even less in more recent song (*bhajan*) collections.

One important scholar who has voted strongly in favor of the *Kabir-granthavali* as the most authentic and representative collection is Purushottam Agrawal. His argument is not based primarily on the antiquity of the manuscripts, but rather on what he feels is the wide and diverse content of Kabir compositions found in the *Granthavali*. Agrawal (2009a: 217) writes:⁸

Some anthologists of manuscripts bound themselves to the limits of a certain point of view. Others, without regard to such limits, compiled their collections on the basis of scientific and objective standards. Because of its scientific and objective character, the *Granthavali* is the most authentic (*viśvanīy*) source of Kabir's compositions. For this reason, it is not enough to simply consider only the texts of the manuscripts in the context of any composition. One needs to study how to understand them in a wider context.

As noted above, one well-known aspect of the three older collections of Kabir's compositions is that each collection is associated with a particular religious group. The *Kabir bijak* is the text regarded as sacred and authoritative by several branches of the Kabir Panth. Only the Dharamdasi branch centered in Madhya Pradesh does not give the *Bijak* this exceptional status, despite the fact that several compositions in the *Bijak* show clear Dharamdasi influence.⁹ The *Kabir granthavali*, for its part, is associated with the Dadu Panth centered in Rajasthan, while the *Adi granth* is the sacred text of the Sikhs. In broad general terms, we can note that the early poets of all three religious groups regarded the Supreme God as being *nirguni* in the sense of His not having an anthropomorphic form, but that each group tended to interpret God's *nirgun* status in somewhat different ways. The Supreme God of the *Bijak* is *nirgun* in a non-personal, monistic way and shows little indication of having any personality. Dadu and his immediate followers accept that God has no physical form, but do generally regard the Supreme God as having a personality, as a loving God, a God who is more personally concerned to help

⁸ Agrawal's defense of the *Granthavali* appears in the context of a very critical discussion of Callewaert's "star system." Linda Hess (2015: 124-128) has argued that Agrawal's criticism of Callewaert is somewhat unfair and that Agrawal's defense of the *Granthavali* is overenthusiastic. Some of the problems with the *Granthavali* collection are discussed below.

⁹ The *Bijak* has in fact several slightly different versions or texts, each associated with a different branch of the Kabir Panth. The dominant version is that of the Kabir Chaura branch centered in Varanasi. On this topic, see Shukdeo Singh (Kabir 1972, 1982) The clearest indication of Dharamdasi influence in the *Bijak* appears in songs (*pad* and *ramaini*), especially at the beginning of the collection, that personify death (*kāl*, *yama*) as a god with an active will and personality rather than simply a symbol of death. In several of these songs Kal is given the name Nirranjan, a name that the western collections consistently use to refer to the impersonal Supreme God.

his devotees than the God of the *Bijak*. The Supreme God of the *Adi granth* is also *nirgun* in the sense of being without anthropomorphic form, but it does have a definite personality. In this case, however, the personal traits of God emphasized are those of His majesty and power more than His loving concern for His devotees. In a general but not rigidly exclusive way, these contrasting views of the Supreme God are reflected in the choice of which of Kabir's compositions to include made by the editors of each of the three collections.

Here I will not examine the relative historical authenticity of the three older Kabir collections. I have to side with the conclusion of Linda Hess (1987: 141) that there exist no definitive criteria to decide which of the three collections best represents the views of the historical Kabir. Rather I will look at what Kabir says about the avatars in each of the three early collections, indicate the differences of emphasis in each, and show how all three collections express views that contrast sharply with the views about the avatars found in the texts of *saguni* religious groups such as those of the followers of Surdas, Tulsidas, Vallabhachya, Chaitanya and Mirabai.

2. The *Kabir bijak*

The strongest statements against the avatars are found in the *Kabir bijak*. This is also the only early collection that directly refers to the traditional list of ten avatars. Here are four songs from the *Bijak* that each refer to groups of avatars. The first is *Bijak ramaini* 54:¹⁰

mari gaye brahmā kāsi ke vāsī | sīva sahīta muye abināsī ||
mathurā mari gaye krisan guvārā | mari mari gaye dasauṃ avatārā ||
mari mari gaye bhagati jina ṭhānī | saraguna māṃ jina niraguna ānī ||
sākhī - nātha machhaṃdara nā chhuṭe, gorakha dattā vyāsa |
kahaṃ kabīra pukāri ke, pare kāla kī phāṃsa ||

Brahma has died and also Shiva,
the Lord of Kashi.
Even the never perishing [Vishnu]
has also died.

¹⁰ All *Kabir Bijak* quotes are from Kabir (1965). The translations are all my own. The italicized passages in the translations are the refrains.

Krishna the cowherd of Mathura
has also died.
All ten avatars have died
one by one.

One by one those who established
bhakti have died.
[Dead] are those who found the Nirgun
within the Sagun.¹¹

The Nath Matsyendra has not escaped.
Nor Gorakh, Dattatreya, Vyas.
Kabir calls out and tells us this:
They all were caught in the snare of Death (*kāl*).

The second song is *Bijak ramaini* 75. This is the only one of the four songs to appear in one of the other collections. It mentions eight of the ten avatars in no particular order:¹²

tihi sāhaba ke lāgahu sāthā | dui dukha meṭi ke hohu sanāthā ||
dasaratha kula avatari nahim āyā | nahim laṃkā ke rāva satāyā ||
nahim devaki ke garabhahim āyā | nahim jasodā goda khelāyā ||
prithamī ramana damana nahim kariyā | paiṭhi patāla nahim bali chhaliyā ||
nahim balirāja se māṃḍala rārī | nahim hiranākusa badhal pachhārī ||
hoya barāha dharani nahim dhariyā | chhatrī māri nichhatri na kariyā ||
nahim gobaradhana kara gahi dhariyā |
nahim gvālana saṃga bana bana phiriyā ||
gaṃḍaka sāligarāma na silā | machchha kachchha hoyā nahim jalā hīlā ||
dvārāvati śarīra na chhāṃḍā | lai jaganātha piṃḍa nahim gāḍā ||
sākhī -- kahaṃhiṃ kabīra pukāri ke, vā patha mati bhūla |
jihī rākhe anumāna kai, thūla nahim asthūla ||

Attach yourself to the side of the Lord (*sāhab*).

¹¹ The sense of this line is somewhat dubious and the readings of the original text are not uniform. Other possible translations are “Sagun [bhakti] has been erased and Nirgun has come” and “Sagun is the mother from whom Nirgun has come.”

¹² This *Bijak ramaini* 75 is roughly equivalent to *Kabir granthavali ramaini* no. 6.9 (Kabir 1968: 184-185).

Erase your sorrows and find the Protector (*nāthā*).

He never descended into Dasharath's clan.¹³

He never oppressed the king of Lanka.

He never entered Devaki's womb.¹⁴

He never played in Yashoda's lap.

He never roamed the earth to kill,

Nor dived to hell, nor tricked king Bali.¹⁵

He never battled with Bali for the world.

Nor crushed and killed Hiranyakashipu.¹⁶

He did not become Varaha to raise up the earth.

He did not kill Kshatriyas until all were gone.

He did not hold Govardhan Hill in his hand.

He did not roam the woods with all the cowherds.¹⁷

Ram is not a Shalagram stone from the Gandak,

Nor a fish or tortoise swimming in water.

He never left his body at Dvaraka.

Nor was he ever buried at Jagannath.¹⁸

Kabir calls out and says to all:

Don't forget the path.

Keep Him in mind, He is neither

Solid nor subtle.

¹³ This line and the next refer to the avatar Ram Chandra, victor over the demon Ravan of Lanka.

¹⁴ This line and the next refer to the avatar Krishna. His birth mother was Devaki and his foster mother was Yashoda.

¹⁵ These two lines refer to the avatar Parashuram (Ram with the axe) who roamed the earth killing Kshatriyas, to the avatar Varaha (the Boar) who dived to the bottom of the ocean to rescue the earth on his tusk, and to the avatar Vaman (the Dwarf), who tricked king Bali into giving away the earth.

¹⁶ A reference to the Man-lion avatar.

¹⁷ Repeat references to the Boar, Parashurama, and Krishna.

¹⁸ The Shalagram stone is a type of fossil said to represent Vishnu. Krishna died at Dvaraka. One story claims that his bones were put inside a log that eventually floated to Puri in Orissa. There the log was carved into the image of Vishnu known as Jagannath, Lord of the famous Puri temple.

The third song is *Bijak shabda* 18. It mentions eight avatars including Buddha and Kalki (Sanskrit: *kalakin*), the ninth and tenth avatars in the traditional list of ten. Here the name used for Kalki is Nikalanki (*nikalaṅkī*, Sanskrit: *niḥkalaṅka* or *niḥkalaṅkin*) meaning “without stain” or “pure”. This same name is used for Kalki in the next song presented here (*Bijak shabda* 8). The name Nikalanki is also the name used for Kalki by the poets of Ismaili Islam (discussed below). Here is *Bijak shabda* 18:

rāma guna nyāro nyāro nyāro |
abujhā loga kahāṃ lauṃ būjhaiṃ, būjhanihāra vichāro ||
kete rāmachaṃdra tapasī se, jina yaha jaga viṭamāyā |
kete kānha bhaye muralīdhara, tina bhī aṃta na pāyā ||
machchha kachchha au brāha sarūpī, vāmana nāma dharāyā |
kete baudha nikalaṅkī kete, tina bhī aṃta na pāyā ||
kete sidha sādhaḥka saṃnyāsī, jina banabāsa basāyā |
kete munijana gorakha kahiye, tina bhī aṃta na pāyā ||
jākī gati brahmau nahīṃ jānai, śiva sanakādika hāre |
tāke guna nala kaise paihau, kahaṃhiṃ kabīra pukāre ||

Ram’s virtues (*gun*) are separate, apart.

How far can fools understand?

Whoever can understand should think.

By penance many became Ram Chandra,
 But this our world would lead them astray.¹⁹
 Many became Krishnas (*kānha*) holding a flute,
 But they could never find the end.

And some took the form of the Fish, Turtle,
 Or Boar, or took the name of the Dwarf.
 Many became Buddha, many Kalki.
 But they could never find the end.

¹⁹ The meaning of the word here translated as “led astray” (*biṭamāyā*) is uncertain. In *Kabir bijak, shabda* 115, it clearly means “led astray”. The commentator Vichardas (Kabir 1965: 115), however, takes the word to mean “protected” (*surakṣit kiyā*).

Many became Siddhas, Sadhus, Sannyasis,
And lived apart, their home the forest.
Many became sages, with names like Gorakh,
But they could never find the end.

Brahma never could know His essence.
Shiva and Sanaka failed as well.
Kabir calls out and says to all:
How can anyone grasp His virtues?

The fourth song, *Bijak shabda* 8, again goes through the list of ten avatars, with descriptions of each, including the last two of the list, Buddha and Kalki. The refrain, the first two verses and last two verses of this rather long song should suffice to show its main argument:

saṃto āvai jāya so māyā
hai pratipāla kāla nahim vāke, nā kahum gayā na āyā ||
kyā makasūda machchha kachha honā, saṃkhāsura na saṃghārā |
hai dayāla droha nahim vāke, kahahu kavana ko mārā ||
[...]
vai karatā nahim bhaye nikalamki, nahim kalimghahim mārā |
ī chhala bala sabha māyai kīnhā, jatta satta sabha ṭārā ||
dasa avatāra īsarī māyā, karatā kai jina pūjā |
kahamhim kabīra sunahu ho santo, upajai khapai so dujā ||

What comes and goes, that is Maya.

Death is apart from our Protector,
He who never comes nor goes.

He has no reason to take
The form of either a fish or a turtle.
He never killed Shankhasur.²⁰
He is full of compassion and has no hate.

²⁰ Shankhasur was a demon killed by Vishnu in his Fish avatar.

Tell me, who did he ever kill?

[....]

The Creator never became Kalki,²¹
 He never killed the [demon] Kalinga.
 Maya created all this illusion,
 And led astray the good and the holy.

The ten avatars are the goddess Maya,
 But are worshipped as if the Creator.
 Kabir says: Sants, listen to me.
 Those that live and die are second (dujā).

All four of these songs clearly criticize people's faith in, and devotion to, the ten avatars of Vishnu. In two songs (*Bijak ramaini* 54 and *Bijak shabda* 8) he specifically uses the phrase "ten avatars (*dasauṃ avatārā, dasa avatāra*). In *Bijak shabda* 8 he mentions each of the ten. In *Bijak ramaini* 75 and in *shabda* 18 he mentions eight of the ten. The historical origin of this list of ten avatars is not certain. The *Bhagavata-purana*, the most important Sanskrit source for Vaishava religion in North India in Kabir's time, does not use this scheme of ten avatars. It instead refers to a larger list of full and partial avatars. Nonetheless, the scheme of ten avatars was definitely in place by the time of the Sanskrit poet Kshemendra (c. 990-c. 1070) who wrote a text titled *Dashavatara-charita* (Kshemendra n.d.). Kabir's use of this ten-avatar scheme may have a connection to Ismaili Islam as is discussed below.

In *Bijak ramaini* 54, Kabir claims that all the avatars were mortal and subject to the power of death. Even the Imperishable (*abināsi*), or Vishnu, died like all the rest. The famous Nath yogis Matsyendra and Gorakh and the sages Dattatreya and Vyasa muni also died. In *ramaini* 75, Kabir almost claims that the avatars never existed. A better reading, however, would be that Kabir is asserting that the Supreme, *nirgun* God that he worships is different and apart from all the avatars. The avatars are mere mortal beings, not incarnations of Kabir's Supreme God. In *shabda* 18, Kabir adds the claim that the avatars and various sages have all been reborn countless times in previous ages or yugas, but all failed to understand the virtues or nature of the Supreme God. Here, as elsewhere in Kabir's compositions, this Supreme God is called Ram. None of these gods and sages could "find the end" (*aṃta na pāyā*). In this

²¹ The original text has Nikalanki.

song, Kabir clearly distinguishes this Supreme and non-anthropomorphic Ram from the human Ram Chandra, the hero of the *Ramayana*, whom Kabir names in the second verse.²²

Several other songs in the *Kabir bijak* criticize people's faith in one or other of the avatars, most notably Krishna. *Ramaini* 45 opens with a verse naming famous figures who are now "gone": "Hiranyakashipu, Ravana, and Kansa are gone. Gone are Krishna (*krisna*) and the families of gods, men, and sages. Brahma is gone, who knew not the essence (*maram*). All the great, wise ones are gone. They could not understand Ram's story (*rām-kahānī*)."²³ Here the word "gone" (*gau, gae, gayal*) implies "dead" as in *ramaini* 54. The Ram of "Ram's story" has to be Kabir's Supreme God, not the hero of the *Ramayan*, although the reference is admittedly ambiguous. *Shabda* 12 mentions a large number of legendary sages and religious heroes who were "drunk" (*matavāle*) with the "nectar of love" (*prem-sudha-ras*). The only god or avatar specifically mentioned is Krishna: "Sagun Brahman was drunk in Brindavan". Here the reference to Krishna is a positive one, but it incorporates Krishna in a long list of legendary, but human sages, and identifies him specifically as a manifestation of *sagun* Brahman, not the Supreme *nirgun* Ram. A much more negative reference to Krishna appears in the *Bijak* composition Chachar 1. This text is directed against Maya, the goddess of worldly delusions (*mohani*). The last verse states: "Indra and Krishna (*krisna*) stood at her door, their eyes filled with desire. Kabir says: Only those were saved who were not filled with delusion (*moh*)."

As noted above, the references in the *Kabir bijak* to a list of ten avatars suggest a speculative but possible connection between Kabir's ideas and the ideas of some unorthodox Muslim intellectuals. Sometime before Kabir wrote his songs and verses, the Hindu idea of the ten avatars of Vishnu was modified and incorporated into the cosmology of the Ismaili Muslims, particularly those of a group called the Sat Panth. The early poets of this group composed songs called *ginans*, that are similar in many respects to the songs of Kabir and other nirguni poets. In these *ginans*, the scheme of ten avatars has an important place.²⁴ This topic will be discussed in more detail in an article I am working on with Imre Bangha.

²² Kabir's differentiation of his Supreme, *nirgun* Ram and the avatar Ram of the *Ramayana* is, in some texts, admittedly ambiguous, but another *Bijak* song that makes the difference clear is *shabda* 109. The second line says: "All the three worlds know the son of Dasharatha [i.e. Ram Chandra]. The essence (*maram*) of Ram's Name is different (*ānā*) from this."

²³ The initial refrain of this *shabda* reappears as the refrain of *shabda* 45 of the *Kabir granthavali*. This latter text, however, has only one verse besides the refrain and seems more a fragment of a song than a full song. This one verse does not mention Krishna. It says: "(A person's) dust is absorbed in dust, his air is absorbed in air. Kabir says: Everyone can see that the form dies." Was the rest of this song, including the reference to the death of Krishna, censored out of this song?

²⁴ On this topic, see especially Shackle and Moir 2000, Kassam (1995), and Khakee (1972).

Here it should suffice to note that in the Ismaili scheme each of the ten avatars has a specific demon opponent. Most of these are obvious enough: Narsimha the Man-lion has Hiranyakashipu, Rama has Ravana, Krishna has Kamsa, Vamana the Dwarf has king Bali. Two of the lesser known demons are Shankhasura, who corresponds to the Fish (Matsya) avatar, and Kalingo or Kalinga, who corresponds to the final Kalki avatar. In *Bijak shabda* 8, both Shankasur and Kalinga are specifically mentioned. It is also noteworthy that the name for Kalki as given in *Bijak shabdas* 8 and 18 is Nikalanki. Nikalanki or Nakalanki is precisely the name used for Kalki in the Ismaili *ginans*. Several of the Ismaili *ginan* authors who used this ten avatar scheme, most notably Pir Shams, lived before Kabir, although some of the *ginans* attributed to them may come from a later period. Another Muslim author, a Chishti sufi, who adopted the figure of Kalki as the world-destroyer at the end of the Kali Yuga was ‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti (d.1638).²⁵

3. Kabir in the *Adi granth*

The earliest manuscripts containing Kabir songs and verses are the so-called Mohan Pothis, Sikh collections that were assembled in the early 1570s, although the extant manuscripts may be later copies. Most of these songs and verses were eventually incorporated into the *Adi granth*. A final selection was made by the fifth Sikh leader, Guru Arjan (1563-1606), in the early version of the *Adi granth* known as the Kartarpur Vir of 1604. The only direct evidence of the criteria used for the selection and edition of Kabir’s compositions in the Mohan Pothis and the *Adi granth* are the resulting collections themselves. The discussion here in this essay will center on the role of the avatars in the Kabir texts found in the *Adi granth*. Nonetheless, a few more general comments may be useful.

The best academic scholar currently writing in English about the history and contents of the *Adi granth* is Pashaura Singh.²⁶ Unfortunately, his discussions about Kabir depend on several unlikely hypotheses. First, he suggests that Kabir died in about the year 1448. This date he explicitly takes from Parashuram Chaturvedi and Charlotte Vaudeville (Singh 2003: 82). This date is much too early. It is based on early dates proposed for Kabir’s guru Ramananda and on a claimed reading of a lost and never documented inscription from Magahar, the site of Kabir’s death. Elsewhere I have shown why the abundant evidence for Kabir’s death sometime around his traditional death date of 1518 CE—evidence that includes the religious genealogies of Anantadas and Nabhadadas and also several historical

²⁵ See the discussion of this unorthodox Muslim thinker’s cosmology in Alam (2015).

²⁶ See P. Singh (2003, 2000, 2006).

synchronisms—is much stronger (Lorenzen 1991: 9-18). Purushottam Agrawal's (2009b) more recent essay explaining how the early date for Ramananda is a scholarly hoax, shows that Kabir's early death date of 1448 is simply impossible.

A second problem with Pashaura Singh's discussion of Kabir is that he attempts to minimize Kabir's role in the creation of the *nirguni* Sant movement and then claims that in any case there is no evidence that Guru Nanak had ever heard any of Kabir's compositions. Singh (2003: 87) writes that "like most of the poet-saints of the Adi Granth, Kabir's thought is firmly rooted in the teachings of the Sant tradition of northern India." But Kabir's thought is not *rooted* in Sant tradition. Kabir's thought is the original root and foundation of Sant tradition.²⁷ The only major religious poet who influenced Kabir was Namdev, whom he mentions. But Namdev's songs lack Kabir's biting criticism of Hindu and Muslim social and religious practices; Kabir's emphasis on a formless, *nirgun* God; and Kabir's identification of *nirgun* Ram and Muslim Allah. There are no *nirguni* Sants, no Sant tradition, before Kabir. Virtually all later *nirguni* Sants, most notably those in the Dadu Panth, acknowledge Kabir's foundational primacy.

Singh's denial of any influence of Kabir on Guru Nanak (1469-1539) is also improbable, though here he is following in the footsteps of another fine scholar of early Sikh history, W. H. McLeod. Singh plausibly notes (2003: 85) that "even if the traditional date of Kabir's death 1518 is accepted as factual, there is no sound evidence to suggest that Guru Nanak ever met Kabir." True enough, but Singh's and McLeod's further claim that Guru Nanak did not know any of the compositions of Kabir is not so plausible. Singh writes (2003: 86):

In the first place, Guru Nanak does not mention Kabir in his works. Secondly, he does not comment on any verse of Kabir as he does in the case of Shaikh Farid. Thus there seems to be no reasonable ground to assert the Guru Nanak was familiar with Kabir's works, and one must look elsewhere for the inclusion of Kabir in the Adi Granth .

But if Kabir died in 1518, he died more than twenty years before Nanak. The inclusion of Kabir songs in the Mohan Pothis of the early 1570s, likely prepared by the Sikh Guru Amar Das, provide clear evidence that certainly by this date Kabir's songs and verses were well known in the Punjab and likely all over North India. Even though Guru Nanak died in 1539, some thirty-three years earlier, it seems unlikely that he did not know many of Kabir's songs and verses. The evident aim of this minimizing of Kabir's

²⁷ It is possible that here Pashaura Singh is including early *saguni* poets who composed songs in early Hindi, most notably Namdev and Surdas, in the category of Sants, but this would be unusual. The term "Sant" normally refers to *nirguni* poets of early Hindi beginning with Kabir and Raidas.

importance and denial of his influence on Guru Nanak is to exalt Guru Nanak and to claim that the conceptual universe of Nanak's compositions is completely original and is not derived, even partially, from Kabir. The only answer can be that Amar Das and Arjan looked into the past to find compositions that anticipated some of the independently conceived ideas of Nanak and found those by Kabir and some other earlier poets and then included a selection of these compositions by Kabir and the others in the Sikh collections. This is not believable. Kabir's compositions—like those of Namdev and the other *bhagats* included in the *Adi Granth*—were almost certainly a vital part of the religious life of north-western India well before Guru Nanak and must have been well-known to him.

Returning to the topic of the avatars, Kabir's compositions in the Sikh *Adi granth* mostly do not follow the *Kabir bijak* strategy of minimizing the status of the avatars by claiming that they were subject to the power of death like ordinary mortal beings. Nor does the *Adi granth* include any of Kabir songs that list all or most of the avatars. Despite the fact that the Sikh Gurus were themselves advocates of a Supreme *nirgun* form of God, the editors of the *Adi granth* include a few songs and verses attributed to Kabir that feature positive depictions of the avatar Krishna. In addition, the invocations of the God Ram in Kabir's *Adi granth* songs are sometimes phrased in a way that makes it difficult to say if the *nirgun* Supreme God is being invoked or the avatar Ram.

Here is one of the Kabir songs from the *Adi granth* that gives a positive view of the avatar Krishna. It should be noted, however, that the main purpose of the song is not to praise Krishna, who in fact is never explicitly named. Its main purpose is to affirm that God treats the devotion of common people with special favor. Vidura's simple offerings to Krishna are said to be better than those of a wealthy king (Duryodhana). Vidura, not Krishna, is the central figure of the song (*Adi granth*, p. 1104, no. 9):

rājana ka.unu tumārai āvai |
eso bhā.u bidara ko dekhio ohu garību mohi bhāvai || rahā.u ||
hasatī dekhi bharama te bhūlā sri bhagavānu na jāniā |
tumaro dūdhu bidara ko pānho aṃmritu kari mai māniā ||
khīra samāni sāgu mai pā.iā guna gāvata raini bihāni |
kabīra ko thākuru anada binodī jāti na kāhū kī māni ||

O king, who will come to you?
 I look rather to Vidur's love,
 This poor man, he pleases me.

Looking at your elephants you forgot.

You failed to recognize the Lord.
Compared to the milk you offer, for me
Vidur's water is made into nectar.

Instead of the sweet pudding you offer,
I prefer to sample Vidur's spinach.
From dusk to dawn we sing his praises.
Says Kabir: The Lord is happily playing.
Vidur's caste is of no concern.

One popular type of devotional song is put in the voice of a woman who longs for her absent lover or husband. The usual model for such songs is the longing of the female cowherds, or *gopis*, of Brindavan for the cowherd Krishna. Such songs in the *viraha* (separation) mode are, as one would expect, particularly favored by *saguni* poets like Surdas and Mirabai. They are absent in the *Kabir bijak*,²⁸ but four are found among Kabir's songs in the *Adi granth* and a larger number in the *Kabir granthavali*.²⁹ I will discuss this topic in more detail below in relation to this latter text. Three of the *Adi granth* songs mostly in the *viraha* mode use other names of Vishnu, not Krishna, for the separated male lover.

In the first *Adi granth* song (p. 327, no. 21), the refrain, apparently put in the words of an abandoned woman, says: "The person who feels it knows pain. Bhakti to Ram is a sharp arrow."³⁰ A second *Adi granth* song (p. 337, no. 65) also calls the separated lover Ram. In the refrain, the woman says to a crow that she wants it to be her messenger: "Why, crow, do you not fly off, so that I can meet my own dear Ram." A third *Adi granth* song (p. 483, no. 30) begins: "I beautified myself to meet him, but Hari, the Gosain Jagjivan, never came." None of these three songs calls the woman's lover Krishna. The fourth *Adi granth* song (p. 338, no. 66), however, clearly refers to Krishna. Here is the complete song:³¹

²⁸ Linda Hess notes for me, however, that there are several single verses (*sākhī*) in the *Bijak* in the *viraha* mode (nos. 73, 97, 98, 99).

²⁹ The four *Adi granth* songs are those (1) on p. 327, no. 21; (2) on p. 337, no. 65; (3) on p. 483, no. 30; and (4) on p. 338, no. 66. Three of these songs have somewhat similar versions in the *Kabir granthavali*, namely: (1) Kabir (1968, no. 118; 2000, no. 126); (2) Kabir (2000, no. 541; no *granthavali* version); (3) Kabir (1968, no. 117; 2000, no. 253; this song also similar to *Kabir bijak*, *shabda* no. 35); and (4) Kabir (1968: no. 76; 2000: no. 60).

³⁰ Whether or not this song can be classed in the *viraha* mode is somewhat doubtful since there is no clear indication that the devotee is waiting for her lover.

³¹ Two lines of this song (1 and 5) are found, with some changes, in a longer song in the *Kabir granthavali* (Kabir 1968: no. 76, lines 11 and 12). Callewaert found several versions of the *Granthavali* text in early western manuscripts and includes these versions together with the *Adi granth* song as a single song in his *Millennium Kabir* collection (Kabir 2000: no. 60). Whether both the *Adi granth* song and the *Kabir granthavali* song are versions of the same song, however, is questionable. The *Granthavali*

āsa pāsa ghana turasī kā biravā mājha banārasī gā.ūṃ re |
 uā kā sarūpu dekhi mohī guārani mo ka.u chhoḍi na ā.u na jāhū re ||
 tohi charana manu lāgo sārīṃgadhara so milai jo baḍabhāgo || rahā.u ||
 biṃdrābana mana harana manohara krisana charāvata gā.ū re |
 jā kā ṭhākuru tuhī sārīṃgadhara mohi kabīrā nā.ū re ||

All around were tulasi plants
 In the middle of Banaras village.
 His beauty stole the cowherds' hearts:
 "Don't go and leave us here."

"This mind of mine is tied to your feet.
 Those you meet are blessed.
 O Sarangadhar.

Krishna the enchanter lives in Brindavan.
 He grazes the village cows.
 He whose Master is you alone,
 Is me, Kabir by name,
 O Sarangadhar.

Returning to other songs in the *Adi granth* that mention the avatars of Vishnu, two of the most detailed both provide criticisms of the avatar doctrine, albeit less direct ones than those of the *Kabir bijak*. The first song describes Krishna as "Nanda's son". A version of the song is also found in the *Kabir granthavali*. The message of the song is that Kabir worships the Supreme God, here called Niranjana, who is above and beyond the avatars:³²

lakha cha.urāsīha jā joni mahi bhramata naṃdu bahu thāko re |
 bhagati hetī avatāru līo hai bhāgu baḍo bapurā ko re ||
 tumha ju kahata ha.u naṃda ko naṃdanu naṃda su naṃdanu kāko re |

song is considerably longer and is written in the style of a nonsensical "up-side down language" song. The *Adi granth* song is not.

³² *Adi granth*: p. 338-39, no. 70. The *Kabir granthavali* version is Kabir (1968: no. 48; 2000: no. 172). Although the order of the lines is different, the contents of the *Kabir granthavali* and the *Adi granth* versions are mostly equivalent.

dharani akāsu daso disa nāhī taba ihu naṃdu kahā tho re || rahā.u ||
saṃkaṭi nahī parai joni nahī āvai nāmu niraṃjana jā ko re |
kabīra ko suāmī aiso ṭhākuru jā kai mā.ī na bāpo re ||

First he wandered from womb to womb
Through many thousand births,
Then Nanda stopped exhausted.
Through bhakti, the avatar appeared
Poor Nanda got some luck.

You tell us He was Nanda's son,
But whose son was Nanda?
Before there was earth, before there was sky,
Before the ten directions,
Where was Nanda then?

He who has the name Niranjan
Never falls into danger
Or enters any womb.
Kabir's Master is the one Lord
Without any father or mother.

The second *Adi granth* song directly mentions Vamana (the dwarf) avatar and indirectly alludes to Ram Chandra (through Ravan) and Krishna (through the defeat of Duryodhan) as well as various major gods. There is also a version of this song in the *Kabir granthavali*. All of the avatars and gods are said to have appeared millions of times in earlier cycles of time. All of them are thus less than Kabir's Supreme God. Here this God is again called Sarangapani, originally a name of Ram Chandra. The full song has eight stanzas plus a refrain. Here are verse 1, the refrain, and verses 7 and 8:³³

koṭi sūrajā kai paraḡāsa | koṭi mahādeva aru kabilāsa |
duraḡā koṭi jā ke maradanu karai | brahamā koṭi beda ucharai ||
ja.u jācha.u ta.u kevala rāma āna deva siu nāhī kāma || rahā.u ||

³³ *Adi granth*: p. 1162, no. 20. The *Kabir granthavali* version is Kabir (1968: no 340). In Callewaert's *Millennium Kabir* (Kabir 2000), the song is no. 397. There are many differences among the different versions, but the general argument is the same.

[...]

*bāvana koṭi jākai romāvali | rāvana sainā jaha te chhalī |
sahasa koṭi bahu kahata purāna | durajodhana kā mathiā mānu ||
kaṁdrapa koṭi jā kai lavai na dharahi | aṁtara aṁtari manasā harahi |
kahi kabīra suni sārīṅgapāna | dehi abhai padu māṁga.u dāna ||*

He has the light of Millions of suns,
Millions of Mahadevas and Kailash mountains.
Millions of Durgas massage his feet.
Millions of Brahmas recite the Vedas.

Ram alone is all I ask for.
I have nothing to do with other gods.

His hairs are made of millions of Vamanas.
His ringlets are made of Ravan’s armies.
He embodies thousands of millions of those
who Puranas say broke Duryodhan’s pride.³⁴

He has millions of Kamas, never restrained,
Who seize the mind inside the body.
Kabir says: Listen, Sarangapani:
I beg for the gift to be not afraid.

4. The *Kabir granthavali*

As Purushottam Agrawal has noted (2009a: 217; cited above), the *Kabir granthavali* contains a much more inclusive and varied collection of Kabir compositions than either the *Kabir bijak* or the *Adi granth*, each of which was evidently edited to highlight a certain religious and social point of view. This does not mean, however, that the Kabir compositions in the *Kabir granthavali* are more authentic in the sense of

³⁴ This stanza is difficult to translate. The *Kabir granthavali* (no. 340) version of the verse is clearer and adds a reference to the avatar Parashuram. It reads: “He has numberless lines of Yamas (*jaṁmāvali*); from him the armies of Ravan fled; he took the life of Sahasra-bahu [killed by Parashuram]; he lay waste the tents of Duryodhan.” The somewhat unexpected mention of Duryodhan here suggests another connection with the ten avatars of the Ismaili Muslims since in their scheme Duryodhan is the demon who corresponds to the Buddha avatar.

more likely to be compositions of the historical Kabir. It seems reasonable to assume that the *Kabir granthavali* collection was at least as open to including compositions not actually by the historical Kabir as were the other two early collections.

What do the Kabir compositions in the *Kabir granthavali* have to say about Krishna and the other avatars? In general, the *Kabir granthavali* is more open to a *saguni* Vaishnava point of view than either the *Kabir bijak* or the Kabir compositions in the *Adi granth*. On the other hand, the *Kabir granthavali*, unlike the *Adi granth*, also includes several songs expressing opposition to the adoration of Vishnu's avatars. A good introduction to the wide range of opinions regarding the avatars and other issues is found in the introduction to Mataprasad Gupta's introduction to his edition of the *Kabir granthavali* (Kabir 1969: n.b. 36-58).

The Vaishnava influence in the *Kabir granthavali*—as also in the *Kabir bijak* and the Kabir compositions in the *Adi granth*—mostly takes the form of using Vaishnava names for the Supreme God. Several of these names refer originally to Krishna, but are most often used by Kabir to designate the Supreme God. The chief examples are the names Govind, Gopal and Madhav. Direct references to the Krishna avatar more often use more specific names such Govardhanadhar, Mohan, Kanha, and Krishna. In similar fashion Kabir most often uses the name Ram to designate the *nirgun* Supreme God, although in a few compositions he refers to Ram the avatar.

There are several songs in the *Kabir granthavali* that refer to the avatars.³⁵ The *Adi granth* versions of two of the songs have been translated above.³⁶ One song singled out by Hess (1987: 125) invokes Vishnu, here Vitthal, as “the mind's Enchanter” (*man ke mohan*), Manmohan and Mohan being names of Krishna. The song begins with this refrain: “O Manmohan, Vitthal, my mind holds fast to you.”³⁷ Here and in most other invocations of Krishna or Ram in these songs, the legendary adventures of these avatars are not their central topic. One noteworthy exception, however, refers to several incidents in the life of the Ram avatar:³⁸

hai hari bhajana kau paravāṃna |
nīṃcha pāvaiṃ ūṃcha padavī, bājate nīsāṃna || ṭeka ||

³⁵ These include Kabir (1968: nos. 17, 31, 35, 78, 104, 301, 327, 334, 336, 382, 392). These songs correspond to Kabir (2000: nos. 24, 33, 36, 118, 110, 377, 396, 422, 430, 468, 471).

³⁶ *Adi granth* songs (1) pp. 338-39, no. 70, and (2) p. 1162, no. 20; corresponding to the *Kabir granthavali* songs (1) Kabir (1968: no. 48) and (2) Kabir (1968: no. 340).

³⁷ Kabir (1968: no. 4; 2000: no. 4). In manuscript 4A the line reads: *man ke mohan viṭhalā | yahu man lāgau tohi*.

³⁸ Kabir (1968: no. 301; 2000: no. 377).

bhajana kau paratāpa aiso, tire jala pāṣāna |
adhama bhīla ajāti ganikā, chaḍhe jāta bivāṃna ||
nava lakha tārā chalaiṃ maṃḍala, chalaiṃ sasihara bhāṃna |
dāsa dhū kaum aṭala padavī, rāṃma kaiṃ dīvāṃna ||
nigama jākī sākhi bolaiṃ, kahaiṃ saṃta sujāṃna |
jana kabīra terī sarani āyau, rākhi lehu bhagavāṃna ||

The worship of Hari is our passport.

The lowly reach a high position.

They play the big drum.

The power of this worship is such

that a stone will float on water.

The lowly Bhil and the casteless whore

were taken up on his car.

Ninety thousand stars, the moon,

and the sun move in the sky.

But the servant Dhruv will never move

In Ram's royal court.

The noble Sants speak the words

that the holy texts declare.

Devoted Kabir has come for refuge.

Please, Lord, Protect me

The central point here is the low social status of the three persons praised in this song. They are all victims of social prejudice who win Ram's favor. The tribal Bhil woman, or Shabari, offers Ram some fruit she has tasted and he accepts it. The prostitute (*ganikā*) teaches her parrot to say Ram's name and inadvertently wins a place in heaven. Dhruv is a prince but is rejected by his father. He becomes an ascetic devotee of Vishnu and eventually is raised up to heaven as the unmoving pole star.³⁹

³⁹ The story of the Bhil woman is told in both Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Tulsidas's *Ram-charit-manas*. See Lutgendorf (2001). The story of Dhruv is prominent in the *Bhagavata-purana*. It is a favorite of *nirguni* story tellers such as Jan Gopal. See Lorenzen (2020). There are legendary stories about at least two prostitute devotees of Ram. The most popular is about the prostitute with the parrot. The prostitute is often invoked in *nirguni* literature, but the ultimate sources of the story are not identifiable.

In the *Bhagavata-purana* and other texts, Prahlad is a devotee of Vishnu who is persecuted by his father, the demon Hiranyakashipu. Prahlad is eventually saved by the Man-lion avatar, who kills Prahlad's father. Prahlad is often invoked in Kabir's compositions, though the man-lion avatar is rarely mentioned. The story is also a favorite of *nirguni* authors such as Jan Gopal. Both the *Kabir granthavali* and the *Adi granth* contain versions of one song with a full summary of Prahlad's story. I have discussed the Prahlad story, its diffusion, and its social implications elsewhere.⁴⁰ Here is the final verse of Kabir's song, the only verse to directly mention the Man-lion:⁴¹

mahāpuruṣa devādhideva | narasyaṅgha prakāṣa kiyau bhagati bheva ||
kahai kabīra koī lahai na pāra | prahilāda ūbāryau aneka bāra ||

The Supreme Being, the highest God,
Became the Man-lion (*narasyaṅgha*) for bhakti.
Kabir says: No one can reach His limits.
Time and again He rescued Prahlad.

The special category of songs in the *viraha* or separation mode, noted above, use the love of a woman for her absent lover as metaphor for the love of the devotee for his or her God. Often the woman is identified as one of the female cowherds or gopis who long for the absent Krishna. In an essay on the Dadu Panth poet Jan Gopal, I have discussed *viraha* songs as expressions of devotion to a hidden God or *deus absconditus*, a God who refuses to reveal Himself to His devotee (Lorenzen 2020: 147-149). In the case of Kabir, the metaphor of the Krishna and gopis had to confront the obstacle of Kabir's reluctance to equate the avatars with his formless, non-anthropomorphic Supreme God.

This obstacle has two related consequences. The first is that Kabir's *viraha* mode songs are relatively few among the over six-hundred songs in the three older collections. The second is that the *viraha* songs that are included in these collections make sparing use of direct allusions to Krishna and the gopis. In the *Kabir bijak*, not surprisingly, there are almost no songs, either *ramainis* or *shabdās*, that can be considered *viraha* songs. In the *Adi granth*, there are only a few Kabir songs in the *viraha* mode. Most have been discussed above. In the *Kabir granthavali*, as one might expect, *viraha* songs are slightly

⁴⁰ See Lorenzen (1996: 15-35; 2020). The former text also includes an edition and translation of Jan Gopal's *Prahlad charitra* (pp. 37-149).

⁴¹ Kabir (1968: no. 379; 2000: no. 459). The *Adi granth* version is on p. 1194, no. 4. The first quarter verse reads: *mahāpuruṣ devādhidev*.

more common.⁴² In these songs, however, the missing divine lover only two or three times given a specific name or epithet of Krishna, and references to the Brindavan village, the gopis, or their famous dance (*rās-līlā*) with Krishna are absent. The most common name given to the missing lover is Ram, who is not necessarily to be identified with the avatar Ram. Here as an example is one song that uses the name Ram twice and Murari (Krishna) once:⁴³

tumha bina rāṃma kavana saum̃ kahiye |
lāgī choṭa bahuta dukha sahiye || ṭeka ||
bedhyau jīva biraha kai bhālai | rāti divasa mere ura sālai ||
ko jāṃnaiṃ mere tana kī pīrā | satagura sabada bahi gayau sarīrā || ||
tumha se baida na hamase rogī | upajī bithā kaisaiṃ jīvaiṃ viyogī ||
nisa bāsuri mohi citavata jāī | ajahūṃ na ā.i mile rāṃmarāī ||
kahata kabīra hama kaum̃ dukha bhārī | bina darasana kyūṃ jīvaiṃ murārī ||

Parted from you, Ram, to whom can I talk?
 The wound you gave is causing terrible pain.

The spear of separation (viraha) has pierced my soul.
 Day and night my breast is filled with pain
 Who can know the pain my body feels?
 The Guru's word has flowed into my body.

You are the doctor, no one is sicker than I,
 With the distress I feel, how can I live apart.
 Day and night I look for you, O Ram.
 But again today you failed to come and meet me.

Kabir says: My pain is heavy.

⁴² Three *Kabir granthavali* songs in the *viraha* mode that also have *Adi granth* versions are cited above in footnote 18. Other *Kabir granthavali* songs mostly in this *viraha* mode include those of Kabir (1968: nos. 77, 230, 287, 284, 302, 305, 306, 307, 117, 360). These correspond to Kabir (2000: nos. 61, 258, 348, 332, 354, 356, 358, 357, 253, 416). The names and epithets used for the God in these latter songs include the following: Kanha, Madan-mohan, Murari, Ram (8 times), Hari (4 times), Jagannath, Madhav (2 times), Vallabh, Purush, *gosain* (2 times), *svami*, *satagur*, and *baid*. A number of the separate verses (*sākhī*) found in the *Kabir granthavali* are also written in the *viraha* mode (see Mataprasad Gupta's introduction in Kabir 1969: 42-43).

⁴³ Kabir (1968: 287; 2000: 348).

Without sight of you, how can I live,
O Murari?

In the *Kabir granthavali*, Kabir's preference for bhakti to a formless Supreme God is sometimes indicated in his use of the name Niranjan, meaning "without stain", for this God, a name without any clear link to either Vaishnava or Muslim religion.⁴⁴ It is likely that the use of the name Niranjan originated in the Nath Panth. In the *Gorakh bani* God is frequently called Niranjan. Nonetheless, it is only after Kabir that the name Niranjan get incorporated into the Dadu Panth, the Niranjani Panth, the Sikh Panth, and other *nirguni* groups as a common name for the Supreme God. Why Niranjan became a name for the god of death, Yama or Kal, in the literature of the Dharamdasi branch of the Kabir Panth (a usage that infiltrates a few songs of the *Kabir bijak*) is unclear. It is noteworthy that one song in the *Kabir granthavali* explicitly states that Niranjan is not a name for Kal, the god of Death.⁴⁵

By far the best known *Kabir granthavali* song about Niranjan is the only song from the three early collections to survive intact in modern collections of popular Kabir songs (*bhajan*). This song contrasts Niranjan with a reified Anjan (stain, mark). Anjan is said to include all the gods including Krishna (here called Govinda), the Vedas, and all the paraphernalia of traditional religion:⁴⁶

rāṃma niraṃjana nyārā re,
aṃjana sakala pasārā re || ṭeka ||
aṃjana utapati vo umkāra | aṃjana māṃḍyā saba bistāra ||
aṃjana brahmā saṃkara iṃda | aṃjana gopī saṃgi gobyāṃda ||
aṃjana bāṃṇī aṃjana beda | aṃjana kīyā nāṃnāṃ bheda ||
aṃjana bidyā pāṭha purāṃna | aṃjana phokaṭa kathahi giyāṃna ||
aṃjana pātī aṃjana deva | aṃjana kī karai aṃjana seva ||
aṃjana nāchai aṃjana gāvai | aṃjana bheṣa anaṃta dikhāvai ||
aṃjana kahaum kahām laga ketā | dāṃna puṃni tapa tīratha jetā ||
kahai kabīra koi biralā jāgai | aṃjana chhāḍi niraṃjana lāgai ||

Niranjan Ram remains apart.

Anjan is every other thing.

⁴⁴ Niranjan is also a common name for God in the songs (*ginans*) of the Ismaili poets discussed above.

⁴⁵ Kabir (1968: no. 219; 2000: no 246).

⁴⁶ Kabir (1968: no. 336; 2000: no. 43). The translation is taken from Lorenzen (1996: 218).

Anjan is the creation, the syllable OM.

Anjan is all the things we see.

Anjan is Indra, Brahma, and Shankar.

Anjan is Govinda and all the gopis.

Anjan is the songs, Anjan is the Vedas.

Anjan has made so many secrets.

Anjan is knowledge, texts and traditions.

Anjan gives lessons in worthless wisdom.

Anjan is the offerings, Anjan is the gods.

Anjan offers its services to Anjan.

Anjan dances, Anjan sings.

Anjan puts on endless disguises.

Tell me: How far and how many is Anjan?

As many as gifts, penances, spas and virtues.

Says Kabir: It's an uncommon person who awakes,

Abandons Anjan and sticks to Niranjan.

5. Final comments

There are several points to be made about this data on Kabir and the avatars. First, the inconsistencies in the ideas expressed in his compositions should not prevent us from offering generalizations about Kabir's point of view. Even if we assume that the compositions in the three early collections were nearly all the compositions of Kabir himself, the legends about his long life suggest that his songs and verses were composed over a period of forty or fifty years. Are we to assume that he never modified his opinions over all this time? In addition, it is likely that many of Kabir's compositions in the early collections were either composed in his name by other persons or modified by the singers and editors of the collections. For any generalization about his views, it is the predominant evidence that should count, not the exceptions.

Although Kabir's texts about the avatars primarily express a theological position, they also have important religious and social consequences. Two issues stand out: language and caste. In Kabir's time, and even today, the authoritative language of Hindu religion was Sanskrit and the authoritative languages of Islam were Arabic and Persian. As far as we can determine, only two important bhakti

poets who composed in early Hindi or Hindavi preceded Kabir. One was Namdev, possibly of the fourteenth century, who left songs in both early Marathi and early Hindi, and the other was Gorakh, whose early Hindi *Gorakh-bani* are of uncertain date but may well predate Kabir.⁴⁷ Kabir also had two notable early Hindi poets as his contemporaries. One was Raidas.⁴⁸ Both he and Kabir are said to have been disciples of the Brahmin Ramananda. More important was Surdas, a man of uncertain date but possibly a contemporary of Kabir.⁴⁹ A few others—notably the historically elusive woman poet Mirabai and, if his language can be considered early Hindi, Guru Nanak—overlapped with Kabir but most of their extant songs and verses were composed after Kabir’s death in about 1518. By the second half of the sixteenth century, the number of good bhakti poets who composed in early Hindi exploded. The most famous of them—and the only poet to rival the trio of Kabir, Surdas, and Mirabai—was Tulsidas, the author of the most famous Hindi retelling of the Sanskrit *Ramayana*.

Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* was written in the 1630s. In it, Tulsidas several times offers an indirect defense of having written his text in a “common speech” (*prākṛt, bhāṣā*) or “village speech” (*girā grāmya*):

A cow may be black, but its milk will be white, nutritious and drunk by all. My words may be in village speech but they praise the glory of Ram and Sita and are sung and heard by good men. [...]

I humbly bow to all those most wise vernacular poets of past, present and future who have described Hari’s adventures in common speech. May they be pleased and grant me the boon that my verses be honored among good men. [...]

If my dream for the grace of Hara and Gauri comes true, then the power of my verses in common speech will also become true (Tulsidas 1989: 15, 21, 22. My translation).

Tulsidas’s comments were motivated in part by that fact that writing out a retelling of a sacred Sanskrit text in a vernacular language was equivalent to breaking the monopoly on expounding and explaining this text held by Brahmins. Crudely put, Tulsidas was making it more difficult for his fellow Brahmins to control religion and earn a living.⁵⁰ Ramdas Lamb (1991: 237) summarizes a story from Tulsidas’s

⁴⁷ See Callewaert and Lath (1989), and Djurdjevic and Singh (2019).

⁴⁸ See Callewaert and Friedlander (1992).

⁴⁹ See Hawley (1984).

⁵⁰ A quite comparable situation developed in Europe, especially in the early sixteenth century, over translations of the Bible. The Catholic Church tried to maintain control over Christian doctrine and practice by limiting the Bible translations to the so-called Vulgate, an early translation from the original Hebrew and Greek into Latin. Early Protestants such as Luther and

disciple Benimadhavdas about the hostile reaction of the Brahmins of Varanasi against Tulsidas for having written his text in Hindi instead of Sanskrit:

According to the legend the Brahmin priests of Banaras were furious that the story of Ram had been written in a vernacular language instead of in Sanskrit, and they denounced the *Manas* as a debasement of the holy scriptures. Subsequently, Tulsidas took his work to the main Siva temple in the city where a test of its validity was devised by a respected Sanskrit scholar. That night the book was placed before the main image in the temple, and on top of it were placed [various sacred Sanskrit texts]. The temple was then locked for the night. When it was reopened in the morning the *Manas* was found on top of the pile.

Many of songs attributed to Surdas and Mirabai that survive in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts are based not on the Sanskrit *Ramayana*, but, directly or indirectly, on another seminal Sanskrit text, the *Bhagavata-purana*. The reaction of contemporary Brahmins to their retellings of the legends of Krishna is not known, but any possibly hostile reaction may have been softened by the fact that Surdas and Mirabai wrote only short poems and did not attempt to create a vernacular version of the entire Purana. Nonetheless, Surdas and Mirabai were encroaching upon territory controlled by the Brahmins who expounded the Sanskrit texts. In the case of Mirabai, this encroachment was aggravated by the fact that she was a Rajput by caste and was, scandalously, a married woman who neglected and then abandoned her royal husband.

The case of Kabir was even more scandalous. He was a man from a very lowly caste, the Julahas, a caste of mostly Muslim weavers. Worse still, he not only composed in the Hindi language, he attacked many aspects of both traditional Hindu religion and traditional Islam and claimed that at a higher level both religions became one: Allah and Ram were ultimately the same. In this scheme of things, the avatars were generally either ignored, demoted, or clearly rejected. At the least, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that Kabir regarded the avatars Ram and Krishna as secondary figures who could not compete with his formless Supreme God nor with Ram's holy Name.

A well-known legend tells how the townspeople of Varanasi, including Kabir's own mother, brought him before Sultan Sikandar Lodi and demanded that he be punished. The sultan attempted to kill him by various ordeals, but every attempt miraculously failed. This may be merely a legend, but it undoubtedly reflects a genuine and well-deserved hostility toward Kabir and his radical religious and social message. By the time Tulsidas wrote his *Ramcharitmanas*, the followers of Kabir and of other low

William Tyndale were among the first to publish translations into modern languages: Luther into German in 1522 and 1534 and Tyndale into English in 1526 and 1530. See Daniell (1994).

caste *nirguni* disciples of Ramananda like Raidas and Sen had become numerous enough to merit Tulsidas's fierce opposition. Under the pretext of describing a past Kali age, Tulsidas (1989: 185-186) wrote:⁵¹

Without any knowledge of Brahman, men and women talk about nothing else. They are so greedy they will kill a Brahmin guru for a trifle.

Shudras argue with Brahmins saying: "Are we less than you? He who knows Brahman is the best of Brahmins." They openly display these rebukes. [...]

When their women die or lose their property, persons of the lowest castes (*baranādhama*)—oilmen, potters, dog-eaters, Kiratas, Kols, and liquor sellers—shave their heads and become sannyasis. [...]

Shudras do various sorts of penances and vows. Seated on a throne they recite the Puranas.

Kabir's disregard, if not disdain, for Vishnu's avatars was, of course, only a part of his radically unorthodox approach to religious belief and practice. Nonetheless, it was an integral part, a key to his wider religious and social vision. Without a sincere faith in the stories about Krishna, Rama and the other avatars, the whole edifice of traditional early-modern *saguni* Vaishnava and Hindu religion and its keystone, the *Bhagavata-purana*, was called into question. By our twenty-first century, however, the possibilities that Kabir opened up for a new reformed Hindu religion, seem to have largely failed.⁵² Kabir has been incorporated into a capacious and diverse but largely conservative Vaishnava and Hindu religion. Unlike the Sikhs, Kabir's followers have not attempted to break away from an identification with traditional Vaishnava and Hindu religion. Kabir's message is certainly still relevant, but it has not been able persuade his followers to overcome the inertia of traditional ideas and practices. For me, this is a tragedy and not a cause to celebrate the openness and inclusivity of Indian culture.

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⁵¹ This passage also echoes a verse of the *Bhagavata-purana* (12.3.38) that describes the Kali age as one in which: "The Shudras will live by putting on the dress of ascetics and accepting [alms]. Those who do not know dharma will preach dharma and mount high thrones."

⁵² I have made this argument in more detail in Lorenzen (2014).

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