

Beyond Contextualization

A Psalmody for Jesu Bhaktas: Hindu Jesu Bhakti in the Poems of Swamy Dayanand Bharati (b. 1952)

by *Herbert Hoefler*

There is no more effective evangelism than testimonies to Jesus from within the community of non-believers. These testimonies can occur when a community member has a convincing experience of Jesus through a miracle, a healing, a vision, or an answer to prayer. In the case of Swamy Dayanand Bharati, the Holy Spirit has brought a gifted Tamil *bhakti* poet to accept Jesus as his *maha guru* (great master). Through his poetry, he demonstrates to his fellow Hindus how one can be a *Jesu Bhakta* (devotee of Jesus) as a Hindu. One can be a respected and proud member of the culture under the lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture.

Swamy Bharati is firmly in the *bhakti* tradition of Hinduism in his devotional poetry. This is a tradition in which Hindus are very comfortable, especially those in the South. Thereby, Swamy Bharati invites other Hindus to come to know and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour. Fellow Hindus admire the beauty of Swamy Bharati's poetry and intensity of his devotion, and some have come to be his disciples. He has innovated a Hindu-style devotional rite, called the *maha prasada* (great blessing) that is being used by Jesu Bhaktas in home gatherings around the country and abroad. As his devotional poetry spreads the message, we can expect many more sincere Hindus to be led by the Holy Spirit to see this path of Jesu Bhakti as the path for them too, now and for decades to come.

Roots of Jesu Bhakti

In this article on the Jesu Bhakti Hindu poetry of Swamy Dayanand Bharati, we will begin with a discussion of the strong historical roots of this piety. We will see how mystical devotion to Jesus has been a universal phenomenon, both within Christianity and beyond. Poetry is typically used to express this deep personal devotion; this is also true in the Bible.

Herbert Hoefler began his missionary service with the Lutheran Church Missouri-Synod in India in 1967, as a teacher, theological educator, and director of a research institute, before returning to teach on the faculty of Columbia University/Portland. He is widely known for his role as a research consultant on the burgeoning movements of "non-baptized believers in Christ" among the Hindu populations of India, and for the relevant research published in his ground-breaking book, Churchless Christianity (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001).

Jesu Bhakti in Religions

Jesu Bhakti is not limited to Hindu devotees of Jesus. Finding in Jesus a personal Lord and Guru is a phenomenon among devotees in all religions, interpreted within their particular worldview. Here are a few examples:

Sufi Islam

“The mystical interpretation of Jesus, in Sufism, remains highly prized, even though he is not singularly glorified but utilized as a powerful transformative idiom for spiritual development in Sufi literature.”¹

Kabbalah Mystical Judaism

“There is no knowledge that proves the Divinity of the Messiah better than . . . kabbalah.” (Kabbalah Centre, Los Angeles, CA. Pico della Mirandola [1463-94])²

New Age

People ask me all the time, “Is Jesus the only way to God?” I answer by saying, “He is my way to God.”³

Atheism

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him . . . they shall learn in their own experience Who He is” (Albert Schweitzer).⁴

**Pietism felt the rationalistic
expression of faith was neither
transformative nor personal,
but advocated a mystical expression
that would unite all.**

Buddhism

In 2001 the Dalai Lama stated that “Jesus Christ also lived previous lives,” and added that “So, you see, he reached a high state, either as a Bodhisattva, or an enlightened person, through Buddhist practice or something like that.”⁵

The singular thread through these various religious quotations is that individuals find in Jesus some kind of transformative spiritual experience. This allegiance is not just an admiration for Jesus’ teaching (such as the Sermon on the Mount) but a personal relationship, an encounter of a spiritual and devotional character. They can speak of Jesus as their Lord. Thus,

it is not surprising that there would also be such mystical devotion to Jesus within Hinduism. The Hindu Swamy Dayanand Bharati is an example of such devotion.

Jesu Bhakti in Christianity

The religious philosopher Paul Tillich has been famously quoted as saying that all religion begins and ends in mysticism. In Christianity, this mystical relationship is with Jesus. We are all familiar with the mystics in the Roman Catholic tradition, but we are less aware of the mysticism of the Protestant tradition. This tradition is generally called Pietism.

Pietism arose in the seventeenth century in Europe among the churches of the Reformation, particularly in Germany. In the theological battles between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, the Christian faith was expressed in intellectual doctrines. Such scholastic systems of faith were useful for doctrinal disputations, but not for spiritual nourishment. It also fomented disputes that splintered the church into competing factions. Besides being divisive, the leaders of Pietism felt this rationalistic expression of the faith was neither transformative nor personal. They advocated a mystical expression of the faith that would transcend denominational divisions and would demonstrate a devotion to Jesus that could unite all in a spiritual unity. They expressed and spread this approach to the faith through mystical hymns. Here are some examples:

Johann Scheffler (1624–1677)

Jesus, Savior, come to me;
Let me ever be with Thee.
Come and nevermore depart,
Thou who reignest in my heart.⁶

Johann Freylinghausen (b. 1670)

Who is there like Thee,
Jesus, unto me?
None is like Thee, none above Thee,
Thou art altogether lovely;
None on earth have we,
None in heaven like Thee.⁷

Nicolas von Zinzendorf (b. 1700)

Jesus, still lead on
till our rest is won;
and although the way be cheerless,
we will follow, calm and fearless.
Guide us by your hand
to our fatherland.

Jesus, still lead on
till our rest be won.
Heav'nly leader, still direct us,
still support, console, protect us
till we safely stand
in our fatherland.⁸

We are all familiar with the Pietist hymns that are still in common usage today, such as “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” (John Wesley), “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (Joseph Scriven), and “In the Garden” (Austin Miles). They call people of all doctrinal traditions to a uniting love and devotion to Jesus. The goal of these mystical writers and composers is to call us into a transformative personal relationship with Jesus. This Christian mysticism permeates the traditions of the faith even today, and is the same call we experience in the Jesu Bhakti poems and songs of Swamy Dayanand Bharati.

Bhakti in the Wisdom Literature of the Bible

Finally, we see that such mystical devotion is a central theme in the Wisdom literature of the Bible, especially in the Psalms of lament. This devotion is also expressed in poetic style, in the Hebrew poetic style of rhyming thoughts:

Psalm 6:2–3

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing.
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is sorely troubled. But Thou,
O Lord, how long?

Psalm 10:1

Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord?
Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?

Psalm 38:8–9

I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the
tumult of my heart.
Lord, all my longing is known to Thee; my sighing is
not hidden from Thee.

Psalm 42:1–2

As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul
for Thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When
shall I come and behold the face of God?

Psalm 130:1

Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear
my voice!
Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

Job 42:4–6

“Hear, and I will speak; I will speak and you declare
to me.
I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but
now my eye sees Thee.
Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and
ashes.”

Song of Songs 2:16, 3:1

My beloved is mine, and I am His. . . . Upon my bed
by night, I sought him whom my heart loves.

Song of Songs 4:10

How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride.
How much better is your love than wine.

Song of Songs 8:6

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon
your arms.

We will see this same emotional spiritual devotion in the Jesu bhakti poems of Swamy Dayanand Bharati. They are a psalmody for the Jesu Bhaktas of Hindu India.

Jesu Bhakti in the Poetry of Swamy Dayanand Bharati

Character of Jesu Bhakti

Hindu Character

Swamy Dayanand Bharati is a Hindu *sanyasi*, highly learned in Hindu religious and philosophical ways and literature. As a Jesu Bhakti, he is the author of a book on Hinduism, *Understanding Hinduism*.⁹ He has chosen the Hindu path of bhakti and writes poetry in the Hindu bhakti tradition. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes this tradition thus:

Bhakti (Sanskrit: “devotion”) in Hinduism is a movement emphasizing the mutual intense emotional attachment and love of a devotee toward a personal god and of the god for the devotee. According to the Bhagavadgita . . . the path of *bhakti*, or *bhakti-marga*, is superior to the two other religious approaches, the path of knowledge (jnana) and the path(s) of ritual and good works (karma).

It is evident that this Hindu bhakti tradition is very similar to the Pietism tradition in the Christian Protestant tradition and the mystical tradition in Roman Catholicism, as well as the piety of the Wisdom literature of the Bible. Jesu bhakti has arisen in Hinduism as it has also in other religions, often in the form of devotional poetry. Historically, Hindu religious literature and doctrinal beliefs have been expressed in poetic formulations, which are easily remembered and digested.

Swamy Bharati is a Hindu whose spirituality is in the bhakti tradition, which encourages and legitimizes anyone to choose the deity one is attracted to and trusts. Through a long process of struggle and searching, the Holy Spirit led Swamy Bharati to choose Jesus as his personal god and guru in life, his *ishta deva*. His bhakti poems are addressed to Jesus, though he also writes occasional poems on non-religious themes. Swamy Bharati reads many theological books and reflects on them in his poems. To date, he has composed and posted over a thousand rhyming Tamil poems on his blog with English translations and explanations (dayanandbharati.in). For the purpose of this paper, I asked him to select his favorites for me to reflect on theologically. For the most part, I have used his own English translations.

Swamy Bharati shares that he writes his poems spontaneously, as events occur in his life or thoughts arise from his readings of Scripture and theology. To quote from his blog:

Often, I think that I need not give any reason why I write poems or some articles in the name of "brainstorm." As I often say, I write only for my need. . . . Of course, there will be inconsistencies and contradictions . . . but I often write according to the need that comes in a particular situation . . . Above all, as I too evolve according to age and understanding, that too is reflected in my poems and writings. (#456)

Thus, the poetry is not intended to teach anything. It is on a different level and has a different intention than intellectual doctrinal formulations. The poems are a celebration and reflection on life, life with God in Jesus Christ, his Maha-Guru. As Swamy Bharati says in poem #668: "When unable to understand theology, only bhakti alone provides bliss."

He has written an entire poem (#802) on this theme, and some excerpts are below:

There is no limitation for bhakti, going beyond any theology.

Bhakti never sees caste and family. . . . It will embrace whoever comes within it.

If one bows calling herself as a simple one or brags herself as a learned one, both are the same before it . . .

You called me to be your bhakta, removing all the discussion about theology and doctrine, removing all kinds of unnecessary arguments.

Running in the path toward salvation, you enabled me to run making me as your own.

Ecumenical Character

As commented above, proponents of Protestant Pietism saw such personal piety as a path to bridge the gap between the warring factions of post-Reformation Christianity. Adherents to the Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic traditions could keep their personal theological beliefs but unite in devotional piety to their common Lord. This was the case also with the Hindu bhakti movement.

The origins of this movement are generally attributed to the seventh century in South India and then it gradually spread throughout the country. There was bitter conflict between devotees of Vaishnavism, Saivism, Jainism, and Buddhism; the bhakti saints sought to unite these warring factions in a mutual spirit of devotion and love to their chosen deity. In addition, these poets gathered people of different castes and

languages, enabling them to express their spirituality in their heart language. It was a piety for the general population, free from Brahmanism and Sanskrit.

Swamy Bharati writes his poetry in his mother tongue of Tamil. For the sake of his devotees around India, he typically provides a rough English translation. While the emotional impact of his poems is strongest for those who share his Tamil culture, the content and spirit of his poetry are communicated in the translations.

Denominational theologies can be highly intellectual and complex, attempting to justify and clarify differences. Swamy Bharati is not anti-intellectual. To the contrary, he is continually reading theological materials and searching for intellectual cogency in his beliefs. However, he is very clear that doctrinal formulations

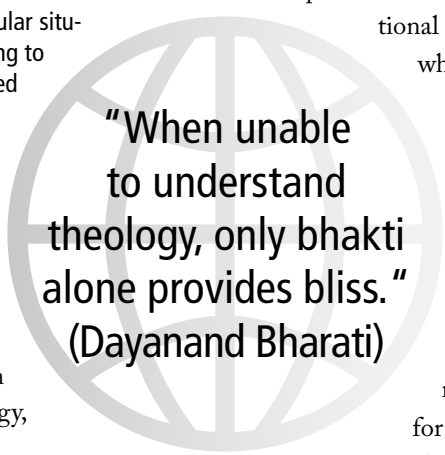
are not the heart of his faith. He continually retreats to his mystical devotion to renew and center his spiritual strength.

The ordinary worshipper can find these doctrinal formulations and arguments quite incomprehensible, distracting, and irrelevant. What they want from their faith is encouragement and strength for their daily journey and hope for their eternal future. So, too, does Swamy Bharati, as is reflected in his poetry. As the Pietists said, religion must move beyond intellectual assent to inner spiritual transformation. Jesu bhaktas can find this transformation in their heart of hearts by participating in the renewing and recentering mystical devotion of Swamy Bharati's poems.

This mystical piety can inspire devotion to Jesus across Christian denominational lines and unite Christians with the many Hindu devotees of Jesus. As with the early Hindu bhakti poets, Swamy Bharati's poetry can unite devotees of Jesus across gender (he habitually refers to bhaktas with female pronouns), caste, denominational, religious, and linguistic lines. Putting divisive arguments aside, all can experience God's love and express their love together by singing these songs.

Themes of Jesu Bhakti

In many religious traditions, the Supreme Deity is unknowable and unreachable. The Deity is a great and powerful Being who is feared and mollified. Not so in bhakti piety. Christian scriptures emphasize that God is love. He loves us, and we are called to love him in return. He calls us to his embrace.



**"When unable to understand theology, only bhakti alone provides bliss."
(Dayanand Bharati)**

Intimacy

In his poems, Swamy Bharati swims in the ocean of intimacy with the Divine. The Divine is addressed with the Tamil second person singular term used for family members and close friends. There is a feeling of warmth and an attitude of trust. One can be vulnerable and openhearted in this safe environment. It is a comforting and renewing relationship. Some quotations from Swamy Bharati's poems of intimacy:

Poem #962

We remain bound together with deep love
 We lost our sense by getting immersed in love...
 Who can understand this? If I tell this, they will mock me...
 Let us remain in a relationship which nobody can understand.
 Let us rejoice by living this forever.

Poem #780

Forgetting myself, I get completely lost in you . . .
 Silently I get lost in that bliss, transcending body and words . . .
 There is no place for separation . . .
 I will live with you always.

Poem #668

Unending bliss is flowing there
 It comes like a river of honey.
 When unable to understand theology
 Only bhakti alone provides bliss . . .
 Once you gave yourself to me, where is any separation between us? . . .
 I become a mad man by enjoying it. . . .
 Let us remain there forever, without knowing separation.

Poem #1296

I understood the special relationship
 Which you bestowed exclusively for me . . .
 (People) say that God is common to everyone
 And even try to prove it to me.
 There is no means for me to communicate to them
 What you have done exclusively for me. . . .
 One cannot understand it unless it is lived
 And experienced in life.

Poem #576

I got some kind of disturbance within me,
 And I rushed unto you to share it.
 When I come near to you, I forget all about them.
 Silently, I bowed at your feet.
 When you hugged both my shoulders.
 Forgetting myself I fall on your chest.
 Closing my eyes as I keep my head on your chest,
 Taking me kindly, you hugged me deeply within you.

Poem #459

It might be easy for you to throw me away.
 Accepting or rejecting me is your prerogative.
 But it is not possible for me to leave, who has no other refuge
 And even if you ask me to leave, that is not possible for me.

Like a Mother

Female goddesses are very popular in the Hindu bhakti tradition. It is a natural outgrowth from the sense of intimacy between the divine and the devotee. The goddess has love for all, but for her devotee children she has what in Tamil is called *passam* (tender affection.)

In the history of India, in the Indus Valley civilization of 3000 BC we have statues of goddesses. In the Upanishads, she is Pakriti, the all-pervasive energy present in all things. In the Mahabharata this creative force is personified as Shakti, who then takes many Devi forms performing all divine powers of creating, preserving, defending, destroying, and on and on. In the bhakti tradition, then, female deities like Saraswathi, Parvati, and Lakshmi, are very popular, performing these various divine duties.

**Female deities are
 very popular in bhakti tradition.
 It is no wonder that Bharati would
 express similar biblical allusions to
 the divine as female.**

It is no wonder, then, that the Hindu bhakti of Swamy Bharati should express this strong Hindu tradition, personifying The Divine as female, having the same powers and duties as Devi. Indeed, in the Bible as well, we have such allusions. Consider Jesus' famous grieving for the fate of Jerusalem: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Matt. 23:37). The prophet Isaiah found in motherhood the nature of God in his commitment to his People Israel: "You shall suck, you shall be carried upon her hip. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (Isa. 66:12-13).

Therefore, with these two strong biblical and Hindu traditions, it is no surprise that addressing and conceiving of

God as mother is a pervasive theme in the poems of Swamy Bharati, as illustrated below:

Poem #1367

A mother will make a child to cry
Then hugging it the next minutes.
Is not this the heart of a mother?
After that, as the baby becomes upset.
It will kick the mother with much whining.
Can I do that? Can I kick you? . . .
You should take me to pamper, as I am kicking you . . .
Taking and hugging me and comforting me,
You should behave like a mother.

Poem #1312

I become like an infant that does not know its
own need.
But I am in my mother's two arms,
Even though I am unaware . . .
To the infant that knows only its mother,
There exists no separate world.
It never finds separate joy,
As it has relationship with much affection with
mother.

Poem #1267

Like a mother who accepts
The beating of her baby with a smile,
Accepting my scolding as praises,
Is your nature.

Poem #1204

Is there any baby on this earth that does not know
How to change the wrath of its mother?
Whining slightly, the mother will hug it.
Don't think that I have crossed the age for whining.

Poem #294

Who is there who understood my heart?
Who will listen to me when I share? . . .
Why have you given me this many trials,
O my Lord, I cannot bear any more pain. . . .
But I know your motherly heart.
That alone is my greatest weapon.
If one hand strikes, another will hug,
And I found great joy only in this . . .
I will take refuge in you.

Poem #814 (titled "You Are My Mother")

My mother, won't you hug me,
Won't you take me to your feet? . . .
Though the mother spans,
The child will fall back on her lap . . .
I grew only seeing your face,
Drinking your grace, I grew in life . . .
But like a child I will cry

So that I will again get more of your love.
There is no comparison for this relationship.
It is the right of a bhakta to receive it . . .
Once you come as my mother,
I receive it as your child,
There is no greater joy other than this on the earth.

**In an intimate, mother-like
relationship, there is security. We are
free to be honest and forthright.
We can complain.**

Arguing

In an intimate, mother-like relationship, there is security. We are free to be honest and forthright. Like Jeremiah, we can complain, "You have deceived me, and I was deceived" (Jer. 20:7). Like the psalmist, "Why dost thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble" (Ps. 10:1)? Even Jesus on the cross cries out, "My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me" (Matt. 27:46)? So also is there a mother-child relationship in Swamy Bharati's poems, as illustrated below:

Poem #987

There is no true change within me,
I don't have the thought to live for you . . .
Even after knowing this, you don't have concern
for me . . .
I shed tears thinking of my condition.
I longed for when you would touch me.
What is the reason for further delay?
Is it right on your part to leave me alone to suffer?

Poem #963

You said that you would not go away from me—That
is your promise
But now you forgot me. That alone is cruel.
On the one side my *atman* (soul) is longing for you.
On the other side, my heart is furious toward you.
As I weep with longing, I am completely wet.
But due to the heat of my anger, I become dry . . .
Therefore, ask your heart and give answer to me

Poem #961

My melted heart is panting thinking of you.
Tears are flowing like a fountain.
When I am burnt out by living in solitude,
Where has your grace gone, leaving me alone? . . .
Is it right on your part not to dwell in my heart?
Do you not share in my shortcomings?
If I lack in bhakti, is it not a loss for you?
Don't further delay once you know this.
Don't forsake my heart anymore.

Poem #956

When soldiers fight, they have a common set of rules for combat.
 There is a rule that only two equally strong soldiers should fight with each other.
 How many times can I say that I am not ready for combat with you? . . .
 I told you several times that I am not the proper person for your lila (divine play).
 I clearly told you that I don't have energy to act on the stage further . . .
 But while I perform and faint, you alone should come to carry me.

Lament

Closely related to the theme of argument in bhakti, is the theme of lament. Lament is a feeling of frustration and disillusionment. It is exhaustion from futile arguing. Lament is a huge theme in the Bible where approximately 40% of the 150 psalms are considered psalms of lament. It is a common theme among the prophets, and there is a whole book of the Bible called Lamentations.

Lament arises from disappointment. Disappointments arise because of expectations. Expectations arise because of promises and relationships. Only in a relationship of love and trust does a lament arise. Since that is the character of a bhakti relationship, there will be heartfelt laments when things do not go as one had hoped and expected.

Most of Hindu bhakti philosophy is written as poetry, and Bharati advocates that Christian theology be expressed this way.

Because the relationship with the Lord is so firm and sure, the laments typically end in an affirmation of trust and hope. This is true, for example with the psalms of lament in the Bible. Only six of them do not end with the famous "None-theless . . ." We see this same pattern in Swamy's poems. Here are quotes from some of Swamy Bharati's poems of lament:

Poem #1293

You alone know the life that I am living.
 You alone will bestow the liberation that I seek.
 Till that time, O my Lord, give me your grace to have patience.
 The life on earth becomes a burden.

My lamentation alone became praises now . . .
 Thinking of your divine grace in my heart,
 I should live only seeking you.
 I longed only for this kind of life.
 I prayed for you to bestow only this life.
 I carry that responsibility.
 Accepting it, I will complete my duty if you ask me to.

Poem #820

There is none who can weep for me.
 There is none who will cry with me.
 No one understood my condition.
 Therefore, no one wept for me.
 You wept for the world. You also wept for your relatives.
 You wept remembering your friend, but you forgot this dog.
 Because already you redeemed me, therefore I got my comfort.
 Therefore, I stopped crying.

Poem #389

Let your grace uphold me.
 Let your compassion increase.
 I come to you seeking mercy. What else can I say? . . .
 Don't I have a place in your kind heart?
 Do I need to ask this: Does your heart not melt for me? . . .
 I lament and cry, unable to understand.
 This life on earth is a burden
 Enough is enough, please take care of me.

Poem #393

I went everywhere searching for him.
 I searched for him in so many places all the time.
 I don't know why he has this much interest
 In seeing my frustration in seeking him. . . .
 People are talking that I am struck with lust.
 Not knowing my true love, they talk like that.
 They all spoil my name, joining together,
 Not knowing my heart, they are rebuking me.
 Let anyone talk whatever they want to talk.
 Who is going to come and help me in this?
 Unless they know about my true bhakti,
 Who else will know the real treatment for my sickness?

Scripture

Swamy Bharati is highly knowledgeable not only in Christian theology and in Hindu philosophy, but also in the Holy Scriptures. He uses the term *muktiveda*, meaning "salvation scripture." He always wants to check if what he is thinking is in accordance with Holy Writ. The poems are mini-homilies.

Most of Hindu bhakti philosophy is written in the form of poetry, and Swamy Bharati advocates that it would be good if Christian theology also were expressed this way. He argues

that poetry is a form that Hindus appreciate for its artistry and tradition, and it is easier to memorize. It is similar to the use of poetic hymns the European Reformers used to teach the illiterate masses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some quotes from a few of these poems:

Poem #310

It is the word which was there from the beginning. . . .
Everything came only through that word . . .
And that showed the light to humanity,
And the darkness can never overcome that light.
. . . that light which alone will enlighten
Everyone who is born on this earth.

Poem #3

I don't have the aromatic oil on my hand
I don't have tears also in my eyes
Neither have I the courage or heart
to seek and bow at your feet
One woman got remorse on seeing her condition
She was shocked by the cruel nature of her sin
Taking courage she approached His feet
He bestowed forgiveness on seeing her condition
She was ready to accept the insult by others
And bowed at the feet of the King Muktesan (Saviour)
"Go in peace as I have removed your punishment
Which cannot be removed otherwise," He said.
Knowing my condition I came at your feet
Won't you accept me the poor man?
I don't know any other place of refuge
Save me O Lord of Grace

Poem #20

The Eternal God who pervades everywhere
The Grace who yourself
Out of overflowing love for the humanity
Who came as His only son
You lived with the divine Glory and
Why you gave up that divine nature?
You came to this earth in order to redeem
A wretched sinner like me . . .
Therefore God lifted you up and
Gave you that Glory
So that the heavenly being, men on earth and those
who dwell below the earth
Will bow before you with humility

Poem #374

When he was sobbing recalling
With heavy burden in his heart
How he lamented confessing all
And how he felt very sad?
"Even if the entire world deny you
I won't do that
And I will give myself to protect you"

Did he remember this?
When the guru came carrying the water
To wash the feet (of the disciples)
"I won't allow you to do this to me"
Did he remember these words?
"We left everything to follow you
What we will gain" as he asked
"You will receive the eternal life"
Did he remember this promise (by the Lord)
I am also in the same situation
And walk everyday denying you.
Do you have love for me?
As I was asking this, bowing my head silently
And afraid to lift up my face to see Him,
I took refuge at His feet, saying:
"You know that too, O my Lord."

Poem #379

Getting up before the sun rises
And looking all around with much fear
And rushing to the grave before others could notice
And when they reached the front of the cave
As its mouth remain opened
And they went inside with much hesitation
A man dressed in white dress
Proclaimed that noble news (to them)
"Did you come searching after the Lord?
Who hanged on the Tree?"
Look and see the place where He was kept
And the divine one is already gone . . .
Though they ran without saying anything
What all the things they were thinking in their mind
But when they conveyed the news accordingly
The disciples didn't believe their words.

Poem #397

In order to show how good is he
And asked the question for others to applaud him
To the one who has a mean mind?
The Lord turned to him and said—go and do. . . .
"Who is your neighbour?
Whom you think is your neighbour
Those who are in need are your neighbours
If you help them they will become your own"—
go and do. . . .
Yet he became very sad
As he has desire over his wealth
Though he received the apt answer to his question
Went away as if he hadn't heard,
Without giving any response (to the Lord)—
go and do.

Poem #441

Rejecting the good one
And allowing the criminal to escape
In order to preserve his position

He has done the worst thing
 But there is no point in blaming him
 That too is the will of God
 But as he failed to uphold his justice
 He earned a bad name
 Did he alone do this
 Did he commit that mistake only for others
 We too are like that
 We too transgress in order to please others.

**Such feelings of separation anxiety
 are difficult for non-mystic believers
 to understand. . . . it hurts to lose
 the nearness, even briefly.**

Viraha-bhakti (Love in Separation)

Viraha-bhakti is an experience peculiar to mystical bhaktas. In Christian mysticism, a similar experience is called “the dark night of the soul.” As we have seen in the above poems of lament, a major source of frustration and confusion is the yearning of the bhakta for a close experience of the Divine. Once you have had the joy of this close Divine Presence in your life, you want it over and over again. It is understandable to feel this absence deeply when it has been so transforming and fulfilling.

In his explanation for one of these poems, Swamy Bharati quotes from the *Canto Spiritual* of the mystic saint, St. John of the Cross, to illustrate his feelings:

Where did you hide, my lover,
 Leaving me in agony?
 You wounded me, and then fled like a deer.
 I ran outside after you, crying out,
 And you had gone.

Such feelings of separation anxiety are difficult for non-mystic believers to understand. Most believers are aware that God is near and cares, but they may never intimately experience this nearness. One might have a sense of it on a human level between lovers and parents and children. It is because the relationship is so close and enriching that it hurts so much to lose it, even briefly. You savor the memory and yearn for its return. Here are some examples:

Poem #682

I came seeking your feet.
 I can hear the sound of your gentle steps
 Like honey in my ears.
 I visualize your holy footprints,

And auspicious music is all around.
 I get ready to receive you.
 I prepared the arati¹⁰ to welcome you.
 What is the reason for so much delay?
 Are you hesitating to accept this slave?
 Every second feels like an eternity.
 Alone with my heart, the body also burns.
 The love in separation is burning me down . . .
 I become frustrated, filled with tears.
 You gave me the promise
 That you would definitely come to redeem me.
 I am waiting for you,
 Longing for you to come, to accept me.
 Enough is enough of this divine play.
 Play your pranks somewhere else,
 Saving me who suffers due to love in separation.
 Give me the joy of joining with you.

Poem #961

My melted heart is panting, thinking of you.
 Tears are flowing as a fountain
 When I am burnt out by living in solitude.
 Your grace has gone, abandoning me.
 Unfathomable fear has come.
 My heart is shivering thinking about it.
 It doubts whether you have forgotten me.
 It laments that there is no use in living anymore.
 I lived so far not knowing separation.
 So far I have lived not experiencing separation.
 When it first came, I completely lost myself. . . .
 Not forgetting me, though, you came
 And redeemed me out of love till I became completely yours.
 Is it not right on your part to dwell in my heart? . . .
 Don't forsake my heart anymore.

Poem #868

I waited for him with tearful eyes . . .
 I fell in love and never realized that he is a thief.
 I never knew about separation.
 I remembered his promise of non-separation
 Therefore, when he came and knocked on the door,
 I ran with much enthusiasm and opened the door . . .
 Before I could tell about his love, he went away.
 He made me drown in the pond of my eyes . . .
 Did he think that I am not qualified for him? . . .
 The one who bestows grace, receiving anyone, why
 did he renounce only me?
 But I won't forget the promise which he gave. I live
 only believing it.
 The one who promised to come will definitely come.
 He will bestow the opportunity for me to bow at
 his feet.

Poem #780

I was waiting for you, remaining awake.
 I was looking for your arrival, not even blinking my eyes.
 When the time was right, you came and received me.
 As my tears were pouring down, you hugged me.
 Forgetting myself, I get completely lost in you.
 I closed my eyes. My hair stood on end.
 I kept both your feet in my heart.
 O my God, I was worshipping at your feet.
 Silently I was drowned in bliss, transcending body
 and words.
 I was with you. I lived without needing anything more.
 Offering myself, I was bowing at your feet.
 But when I woke up, I realized it was all just a dream.
 The vision that I had was not true, I realized.
 Whether true or not, once you came within my thought,
 There was no more separation, I realized.
 Once I had the relationship. there would never be
 separation.
 Therefore, I don't wait on you anymore.
 I will live with you always.

**Though the bhakti relationship
 is one of intimacy and trust, it is a
 Master-Servant relationship, one of
 humility and submission.**

Humility/Submission

Though the bhakti relationship is one of intimacy and trust, it is a Master-Servant/Disciple relationship. Jesus' disciples called him Master. Only he could presume to call them friends (John 15:15). From the standpoint of the bhakta, it is a relationship of humility and submission. This is illustrated below.

Poem #425

A mother will have extra concern over a sick child.
 As I become good for nothing, you too had this kind
 of compassion on me.
 Though I don't know even the word "thanks,"
 But like a dog I will stay at your feet,
 For the leftovers that you will throw from your table
 for me.

Poem #23

Only a burning lamp can light another one, is true in life.
 I don't find any use for my learning
 Unless my heart with the power of the Spirit
 Becomes a burning lamp by receiving light (from you).
 Having eyes, I became blind; became deaf having ears

Became a fool, even though I have intellect
 And became a poor man in my heart.
 Without you in my heart, I became empty . . .
 Show mercy to this poor man in this life on earth
 To become a burning lamp through your eternal Words.
 Give your words as the un-quenching lamp to this slave,
 Who sought your feet.

Poem #973

What are the final answers to everything?
 Let people give it to me if possible . . .
 There is no final answer for everything
 Until God tells it clearly.
 Those who realize this will leave it to God
 And remain humble.

Poem #954

I cannot bear the burden of sin.
 I cannot understand the nature of sin. . . .
 When I wandered seeking an answer to this,
 You came as the answer to me.
 You shed your blood for me on the cross for this . . .
 I am unable to bear that burden alone.
 I beg you to give mercy and remove it.

Poem #953

As long as I live, my sinful nature,
 Which is rooted with me, won't go from me . . .
 As your atonement reminds me again,
 I come to you, begging again . . .
 I beg for you to give your grace
 For me to fight against it till the end
 I call upon you to carry me when I stumble, not to
 fall again.
 When I lie down wounded after a fight,
 I call upon you to come and put balm on my wounds.
 Healing me again, standing with me by giving company
 To struggle again until you take me to the further shore.
 Till then, remain as my guru, to show me the way.
 I give myself to you, for you to lead me each day.

Poem #456

There is nothing in my life to parade (before others).
 I have nothing to say to the world.
 What is there to give others from an empty vessel?
 This is not pseudo-humility.
 This is the fact which I tell after full realization . . .
 On which greatness could I brag
 When I don't have anything.
 Even what little I had is gone
 Once I understood the Truth
 Physically, appearance has disappeared very quickly.
 I don't see any greatness even in my birth (as a Brahmin).

I never achieved any greatness in my education,
 And what all I learnt never came to any use.
 And I never found the things which I searched for.
 Now what is there for me to brag in any of them?
 I made noise like an empty vessel
 And put a mask on all through my life.
 Finally, when God came and redeemed me,
 I found the true greatness about it.
 That greatness is enough for me, and I will take
 pride in it.
 All other greatness is nothing but rubbish,
 And all are mere loss for me.

I have called my poems "bhakti
 theology songs." A theologian need
 not be a poet, but without bhakti/
 faith one cannot do theology.
 (Dayanand Bharati)

Worship

Of course, the fundamental relationship of the human to the
 Divine is worship. Here are excerpts from Swamy Bharati's
 poems of worship:

Poem #1267

However I sing, my heart won't find fulfillment.
 I cannot utter your sweet name simply in words.
 Like a mad person intoxicated with bhakti,
 However much I write (songs), they are not enough for
 me
 Though I lament, complaining against you so many
 times,
 The one time I sing your praises my heart is fulfilled.
 As you accept both scolding and praising equally,
 As I sing about you, I feel joy in my heart.

Poem #11

The embodied Light
 Became a Graceful Word,
 Incarnate to save this world;
 Hail to You!
 Remaining primordial God,
 You became His gracious Son;
 Creator of everything,
 You came to this world, Hail to You!
 Crossing beyond mind and words,
 Becoming the form of Light
 and the source of Life,
 You are the essence of Grace; Hail to you!

You remain as Grace upon Grace;
 You became Light to this world
 And showed light in darkness;
 Lord Muktinath, Hail to you!

Poem #84

In this calm evening when I sit with my Lord,
 As a melodious music surrounds me, I forget
 myself.
 Birds with their gentle voices praise the Lord,
 And my heart too rises up to worship Him.
 What other pleasure will I seek in this contra-
 dicting world,
 Other than sitting at His feet, to gently massage
 His feet.

Poem #534

You come to give something to me,
 But I don't know what it is . . .
 I cannot reject it as mere emotion.
 I didn't accept it as feeling of my heart.
 Yet, there is some kind of bliss, and I am unable to
 understand it.
 My hair stands up, and tears are coming.
 My tongue gets twisted, and my pulse is going down.
 And I want to dance. More than that, I experience
 some kind of peace
 But my tongue hesitates to share. Yet, my heart is
 forcing me to do it.
 But words are hesitant and unable to share.
 What actually happened to me?
 Yet, I need to share all this so others might get the
 same bliss.
 They should experience this joy in themselves,
 And they should drown in this divine bliss.

Poem #1

The day has dawned and birds are singing.
 Let us praise the Holy Lord Muktesan.
 Sun has risen and the devotees have gathered.
 Let us sing a joyful song and glorify Him.
 Flowers have blossomed and the world has woken up.
 Let us praise the Holy Lord Muktesan.
 Temple bell is calling the devotees.
 Let us glorify Him by singing joyful song.
 The saints are glorifying Him and
 The angels are adoring the divine name of the Lord
 Muktesan.
 Come ye all devotees to bow and serve Him
 Who removes all our sorrow and gives holiness.
 All the nations glorify Him and the Holy Scriptures
 praise Him.
 Let us also daily glorify Him, bowing at His holy feet.

Conclusion by Swamy Dayanand Bharati

I asked Swamy Bharati to write the conclusion for this article, as these bhakti poems are his life:

I have called my poems "bhakti theology songs." A theologian need not be a poet, but without bhakti/faith one cannot do theology. Likewise, a bhakti poet inevitably uses theology. However, she is not bound by abstract, intellectual formulations. She can express her bhakti, which is mainly based on her personal relationship with *Bhagavan* (Lord God), using the medium of poems. I found my solace in the poems as it gave immense personal freedom and joy to celebrate my relationship with the Lord. Of course, it is a private world and personal *sadhana* (devotion or meditation). Yet, a bhakta always calls others to join her to celebrate this personal relationship with the Lord.

Another advantage that I have as a Hindu bhakta of the Lord is to inherit a rich bhakti tradition in India, not keeping it within the academic discipline of theology. The Hindu tradition of so many bhakti saints from various sects only added richness to express my relationship with the Lord through my poems. Of course, those who are strictly brought up in "Christian tradition" cannot understand this. As I cannot disown my roots and Hindu tradition, not minding others' criticism, I with much joy use my own Hindu tradition to express my bhakti theology.

A special example are my poems of *viraha-bhakti* (love in separation). Some followers of the Lord feel uncomfortable to use such poems; however, my Hindu tradition gave me the personal freedom to express my bhakti in this genre.

I was immensely blessed by a rich Tamil heritage to express my bhakti in the Lord by writing poems. (Dayanand Bharati)

I always thank God that I was born not only in India but also that I know Tamil as my mother tongue. It is one of the richest living languages in the world, and its religious literature was almost always expressed in poetry. I was immensely blessed by that heritage to express my bhakti in the Lord by writing poems.

So, though I have written poems only for my personal need and private *sadhana*, still I am happy to share with others, requesting every follower of the Lord to use one's own birth tradition while celebrating her relationship with the Lord. I hope this paper will give some small hope for a few to rethink their personal view about their own birth traditional values that are a gift from God.

Postscript by Hoefler

I would like to conclude by quoting in full a poem that I think expresses well the depth of Swamy Bharati's bhakti:

Poem #24

You are the Mother, you are the Father
You are my Master, You are my Refuge
You are my dear Friend
You are my compassionate Brother
You are the centre of my love
You are the Lord to my soul
Who stole my heart with affection!

I sing unto you in melodious music
With a melting heart and
Emotional spirit with bhakti
The eternal Being
God of God and True Jyothi (light)
The blissful Light
Refuge to the bhaktas

Where can I find language?
To praise you
How can I tell you
The longing of this poor man's spirit?
How can I utter them to you?
Don't you know my heart?
The Eternal one
God my Master

By cleansing my inner being
With blissful tears and forgetting myself
Like a girl who is
Struck with love
Seeking the face of the beloved
And every day approaching you
I offered myself unto you
Protect me; I took refuge at your golden feet

My heart melts in you
And the hairs stood up at the end
Tears flowing from eyes
Bowing at your feet with folded hands
I come unto you as my refuge
O Mother I am your child
I cannot find on this earth
Any other refuge other than your feet. **IJFM**



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Endnotes

- ¹ Milad Milani, "Representations of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the 'Sufi Jesus,'" *Literature and Aesthetics* v. 21 n. 2, (December 2011): 49 (on web, p. 5).
- ² "Texts from the Kabbalah. . . highest purpose they serve is external dialectical confirmation of the truths already possessed within Christian doctrine as the triune character of God, the reality of the Incarnation, and the divinity of Christ as the fulfillment of messianic prophecies."
Pico della Mirandola: New Essays, M. V. Dougherty, ed. "Three Precursors to Pico della Mirandola's Roman Disputation and the Question of Human Nature in the Oratio" (New York, NY: Ohio Dominion University, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 131–32 (cf also, pp. 156, 163–64, 172).
- ³ Steve McSwain, "Jesus: The Original New Age Thinker" (Beliefnet.com, response to question no. 3).
- ⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 403.
- ⁵ "My attitude toward Jesus Christ is that he was either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisattva of a very high spiritual realization." His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1996).
- ⁶ *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), #356 (Johann Scheffler, "Jesus, Savior, Come to Me").
- ⁷ *The Lutheran Hymnary* (Minneapolis, MN: Austana Publishing House, 1913), #30 (J. A. Freylinghausen, "Who is There Like Thee?").
- ⁸ *The Hymnal* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), #386 (Nicholas Von Zinzendorf, "Jesus, Still Lead On").
- ⁹ Dayanand Bharati, *Understanding Hinduism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Monoharlal Publishers, 2005), 336 pp.
- ¹⁰ One important type of puja in Indian temple and private worship is arati, the waving of lighted lamps before an image of a deity or a person to be honoured (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/puja>).