

SEEKING THE ANDROGYNOUS GOD:

Exploring Ardhanarisvara and the Desire for a Non-Gendered Divinity

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How we see God, Talk to God, Connect to God

How do we talk and think about God? Thomas Aquinas says that all theology is metaphorical.¹ When we talk about God, the only words we can use are the ones we have already created to talk about the world we see around us. We have no way of talking about the parts of God that do not reflect some experience we've had in the world, because those parts of God are generally unknowable or at the very least, are quite literally unspeakable. Paul says this too, in Romans 1:20, where he postulates that in order to understand the nature of God, we must look at his creations.² Aquinas uses this scripture to come to his understanding. Theology is always an analogy.

It then seems natural that when we do seek to connect with God, we desire to use analogies and images that reflect the lives we lead. We look for the face of God that mirrors our own. While historically, the face of God has reflected those in power, as marginalized groups have found their voices in the world, they have also found ways to change how God is seen. During the Women's Movement, many



¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Herbert McCabe. (1266; reprint, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 66

² Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. Romans 1:20, NRSV

women flocked to Wicca to discover the Goddess. African American Christians have long celebrated the Black Jesus and the Black Madonna. Queer theology has provided new interpretations of God, Jesus, and Biblical Characters that mirror the lives of people in the Gay and Lesbian community. In this time of heightened transgender visibility and an ever growing dialogue around the reimagining of gender, where can we look for gender non-conforming faces of the divine? What would a transgendered God look like? Is there a place for a face of God that is not just the representation of the tidy sum of the male/female forms or even the linear gender spectrum, but a God that is truly beyond gender?

In one of the earliest religious texts of Hinduism - the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad - we find an androgynous tale about the beginning of the world. According to the text, this is at the very beginning of the universe when only Atman existed. After discovering loneliness, Atman split himself into two, creating man and woman. It was through the sexual union of these two beings that all of life springs into existence.³⁴ As Carl Olson puts it, "Thus the original universal principle is androgynous."⁵

Olson is right. Androgyny is universal. In her writing, Goldberg mentions that the androgyne motif has a long history in Western culture that ties it to "kabalistic Judaism, Gnostic writings, medieval alchemy, Platonic and neoplatonic writings, Jungian psychology, and numerous literary sources including Shakespeare, Woolf, and others" as well as discussing, " its pervasive presence in Indian, Greek, Native American, African, and Australian culture."⁶ Androgyny them seems to be an innate part of the human experience. We know how to be, or at least how to recognize the desire to be gender-less. But what does it look like to try and connect with a genderless God?

³ Carl Olson, "The Saiva Mystic and the Symbol of Androgyny," *Religious Studies* 17, no. 3 (1981):377

⁴ Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanarisvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 134-135

⁵ Olson, "The Saiva Mystic and the Symbol of Androgyny," 377

⁶ Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 145

In his article, Olson discusses the Saiva Siddhantra tradition where the relationship between the human soul and God is discussed "in terms of conjugal love."⁷ Now, it's important to avoid confusing gender, sex, and sexuality, but it's obvious that they are all well tied together in the realm of human identity. In this religious case, Shiva is portrayed as the lover and the bridegroom in this spiritual relationship, which Olson argues then relegates the human into the feminine role. It's clear that Olson's gender theory is rather archaic and includes not just assumptions about heteronormativity, but also a perception of gender as dualistic and in opposition. At the conclusion of his article, he writes that, "although all (people) are potentially androgynous, it is only the mystic who has realized this condition."⁸ For Olson, the process of becoming a mystic is the process of androgynization because along the mystical journey, the individual becomes more and more joined with what he calls "the opposing forces of the cosmos and finite existence."⁹ This is an interesting idea. Mystical engagement with the divine makes us more androgynous because we become closer tied to that which we do not have within us. It is easy, however, to see that Olson's made some pretty basic assumptions, including the idea that we are unable to experience androgyny in our own selves but must seek the divine and walk a mystic's path to take in the other. What if we already have the other within us? Are there forms of God to reflect that?

Ardhanarisvara as an example of an Androgynous God

Ardhanarisvara is a form of the God Shiva, who is one of Hindu's primary deities and is the focus of one of the four main branches of Hinduism. Appearing between 30 and 375 C. E. in the Kushan region of India, Ardhanarisvara is unique in that this aspect is presented as half male and half female. In fact, their name - Ardhanarisvara - translates as the *lord who is half female*, which indicates some of the

⁷ Olson, "The Saiva Mystic and the Symbol of Androgyny," 383

⁸ Ibid, 386

⁹ Ibid, 384

sexism and dualistic assumptions that are rooted in the creation of this face of God.¹⁰ Ardhanarisvara is pictured here, showing how the aspect's gender is clearly split down the middle. While some sources talk about how Ardhanarisvara is the combined form of Shiva and Sakti/Parvati, others describe them as a personification of Shiva himself, showcasing how he truly is an all encompassing God.

It is important to look at the images of this deity. The creation of Hindu sculpture is an important way that Indians extrapolate on the sacred texts. Indian religious iconography is complicated: the positioning of the legs, the placement of the feet, the hand gestures, the number of arms, the inclusion of ritual items, animals, and adornments - all of these things have complex historical meaning.¹¹ While there is not enough space in this paper to get into depth about these topics, in her book on Ardhanarisvara, Goldberg discusses at length the many ways that the positioning of Ardhanarisvara's two halves reflects the subordination and weakness of their female half. Having the feminine foot placed farther back than the masculine foot or having the feminine side have fewer numbers of arms are just simple examples of a much more complicated and comprehensive theological statement about power and gender roles.



It is clear that Ardhanarisvara is part of the male religious discourse in India. However, Goldberg argues that the role and presences of their female self - Parvati/Sakti - holds both a lot of information about feminine divinity and the opportunity for feminist reinterpretation and empowerment. Parvati, through her myths and the transformation of her character in the Hindu pantheon, is often seen as having

¹⁰ Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 1-2

¹¹ *Ibid*, 9-55

great agency and representing a lot of potential energy. As Goldberg puts it, "clearly, her story can be told or interpreted as a voice of resistance, reason, freedom, and strength, as well as silence, obedience, and collusion."¹² More importantly for our focus, Goldberg says that understanding Ardhanarisvara as the divine androgyne gives us an opportunity to talk about the nature of human origins and the psychological process in which an individual attempts to regain a deep and undifferentiated state with the universe.¹³ Moving back to universal spirituality, Goldberg argues that all human beings are tied to Ardhanarisvara because of the wholeness and completeness that exists within the God's form.

The apparent paradox that exists within the form of Ardhanarisvara is not uncommon for Shiva. In fact, paradox is a key aspect of his mythology. While the contradictions sometimes stem from historic changes, those who follow the Hindu God have found ways to create meaning. Most famously, Shiva is known for encouraging both a deep asceticism in his followers and an overwhelming engagement with the erotic. As outsiders, we must be wary to read too much contradiction into these relationships. In her article, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes that we must strive to see opposition from an Indian point of view, as "correlative opposites that act as interchangeable identities in essential relationships."¹⁴ For instance, the contrast between the erotic and ascetic reflects two stages of desire, one with potential and the other with expression. I think that O'Flaherty's argument about the paradoxical nature of Shiva comes in handy as we try to understand the dual gendered nature of Ardhanarisvara which are "not diametrically opposed like black and white, or heat and cold, where the extreme presence of one automatically implies the absence of the other."¹⁵ The state of femininity and masculinity are not mutually exclusive. This is made all the more clear through the image of Ardhanarisvara, whose androgyny does not come from

¹² Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 153

¹³ *Ibid*, 152

¹⁴ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Siva. Part 1," *History of Religions* 8, no. 4 (1969): 300-301

¹⁵ *Ibid*

expressing a lack of masculinity or femininity, but from the conflagration of expressing both, distinctly and in unison. ¹⁶

In the end, what does Ardhanarisvara offer the gender non-conforming community as a face of the divine? Rooted anciently in Indian history, the traditional interpretations of Ardhanarisvara are obviously filled with problematic sexism. However, there is much empowerment to be found in this aspect of the divine. The role of Parvati as the "other half" of this aspect of Shiva offers opportunities to read an elevation of the feminine face of the divine to balance out our own internalized spiritual sexism. However, the understanding of Ardhanarisvara as the sum total of all that is, and thus a reflection of the full cosmos from which all humanity has been born, seems to me to hold even more potential for not just balancing our understanding of internalized gender but for breaking beyond them into a way of being beyond gender.

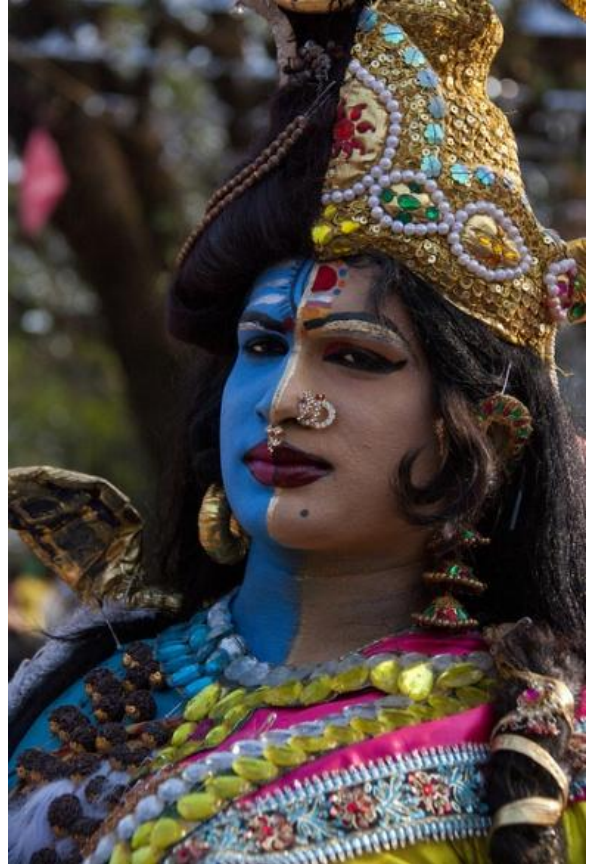
Problems with this Idea of Androgyny

While the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's story of Atman and the Ardhanarisvara form of Shiva provide some wonderful fodder for finding the non-gender conforming face of the divine, we must be wary of how we engage this material. The history of Hinduism is long and like all histories, much has been lost. Understanding Indian thought is far easier when you've grown up within that culture, a process that anthropologists call enculturation. As our base understanding of the world is deeply colored by the cultural lenses through which we are raised, translating ideas across cultural lines can be tricky. As members of a powerful country that can offer freedoms and privileges to its citizens that India cannot, it is important that we be aware of the power dynamic and historical context of this colonial cross-cultural

¹⁶ O'Flaherty, "Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Siva," 300-301

engagement. We must avoid shallow engagement and the historical colonial mistakes of orientalizing and fetishizing the other.

This becomes even more important within the realms of sexuality, gender, and spirituality, where the conversations are already complicated, changing, and where the meanings can be easily misconstrued. The outsider's engagement with the Indian hijras - members of the Indian third gender - are a perfect example of this. In her article, Viney Lal says that the hijras have been "described variously in scholarly and popular literature alike as eunuchs, transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals, hermaphrodites, androgynes, transsexuals, and gynemimetics; and as if this multiplicity of terms were not enough, they are also referred to as a people who are intersexed, emasculated, impotent, transgendered,



castrated, effeminate, or somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional." ¹⁷ This list speaks volumes to the difficulty that scholars and outsiders have had in trying to understand the ways that Indian culture conceptualizes gender identity. Lal says that despite these complicated labels, "the hijas themselves most often distinguish between those who were born hijras - that is, with ambiguous genitals - and those who are made such through castration." ¹⁸ This is an excellent example of the ways that a shallow engagement with different cultural ideas can lead to assumptions, misunderstandings, and a complete mislabeling of a whole community.

¹⁷ Vinay Lal, "Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality," *Social Text*, no. 61 (1999): 119

¹⁸ *Ibid*

Conclusion

In his work, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber argues that not only do we need God, but God needs us. He writes, "How would you be, if God did not need you? You need God in order to be - and God needs you, for the very meaning of your life."¹⁹ Part of the fulfillment of our need for the divine is reflected back in the way that divine energy needs us to create meaning in our lives. If Paul is right and we can know the power and nature of God by looking at his creations, then the meaning we make in our lives is necessary for the creating, forming, and reimagining of God. An empowered God who is built up from the lives of gender non-conforming people can be envisioned as one beyond gender, a way of tying to our sacred innate spirituality without the labels of male/female. This is a way that could do much to liberate not just the trans* community, but anyone who is struggling and suffering from the limitations and oppression that they experience from the pressure of gender roles.

We have to speak nongenderedness into being. We cannot create and understand a face of God that we cannot wrap our minds around. And yet, perhaps it is through this attempt to know the ungendered, multigendered, ubergendered, extragendered, hypergendered God that we can begin to understand the potential gender fluidity of humanity. As we truly move beyond the perceived dualism of our genitalia, perhaps the growing visibility of the transgendered community will offer all people insights about the nature of God.

¹⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. Gregor Smith. (1923; reprint, New York: Martino Fine Books, 2010), 82.

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