CHAPTER THREE
HINDU AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM -
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Tirumaṅgai Ālvār

Bernard of Clairvaux
Chapter 3: Hindu and Christian Mysticism - A Comparative Study

Introduction

German scholar Rudolph Otto writes, “...it is often claimed that mysticism is the same in all ages and in all places, that timeless and independent of history, it has always been identical. East and West and other differences vanish here. Whether the flower of mysticism bloom in India or in China, in Persia or on the Rhine, its fruit is one.”¹

However, it is well known that the experiences of mystics of different religions, even of the same religion, show irreducible differences. The mystical experiences of St. Teresa and Āṇḍal, of Śaṅkara and Eckhart are not the same. This Chapter attempts to show that there are also basic differences in mystical experience in Christianity and Hinduism. A short description of the salient features of both Hindu and Christian Mysticisms has been given in this Chapter before presenting a comparative study of the Bridal Mysticism of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār and Bernard of Clairvaux.

Salient Features of Hindu and Christian Mysticisms

If there is any Biblical or Christian mysticism, it is certain that it differs from some kinds of Hindu mysticism, while it is akin to other kinds. The classical Upaniṣadic mysticism is complete harmony and union with the divine. This is the mysticism of 'absorption into the Deity'. The Yoga type of mystic who tries to realize the eternal nature of his own soul by his own efforts, and the Upaniṣadic type who seeks identity with the ground of all things but not with a personal God, have no parallel in the Bible, and little enough in any of the Christian traditions. Then there is the

Theistic mysticism which is absolute love and union with a personal God, who is the source of all things and the object of devotion. The only kind of mysticism that can claim a basis in the Bible and be characteristic of Christianity is the theistic type. This is the mystic who seeks the I-Thou relationship with God.

Christian Mysticism is Christ centered. It is the mysticism of the love of God; Christ Himself endorses this. “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

According to Christian Mysticism love is the essence of God’s nature. The love of God for man is more than man’s love for God and that is why God sent His Son to redeem mankind. The early Christians had inherited from the teachings of Jesus Christ, a firm faith in personally experiencing the presence of God.

A good deal of the Old Testament stresses God's transcendent holiness and man's sin and smallness before him. But other parts give expression to an attitude of ardent devotion that is the beginning, at least, of mystical love. Love to God is expressed many times in the Hebrew scriptures; love of his name, his house, the place where his honour dwells, his salvation, commandments, law and testimonies, all these are repeated and dwelt on in the Psalms: ‘As the hart pants after the waterbrooks, so pants my soul after thee, O God; my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.'

This is not a mere liturgical expression or communal chant, but it breathes a strongly personal spirit and ‘O God, thou art my God, early will I seek thee; my soul thirsts for thee, my flesh longs after thee, in a dry and

2 John 14:21
3 Psalm 42
weary land, where no water is. ... For thy loving kindness is better than life.’⁴ There are outstanding Old Testament examples of men in close communion with God. Jeremiah wrestled and debated with God: ‘O Lord, thou hast deceived me and I was deceived. ... And if I say I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing and I cannot contain.’⁵ This is not a completely transcendent God, and Hosea spoke often of the love of God: ‘When Israel was a child then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt I drew them with cords of a man with bands of love. My heart is turned within me, my compassions are kindled together.’⁶

**Differences between Hinduism and Christianity**

i) There are some basic doctrinal differences between Hinduism and Christianity with regard to the soul's relationship with God. In the whole Judeo-Christian tradition, God is regarded as the ‘wholly other’; He is the self-existent creator whereas all other beings (including human souls) are created things. Mystical experience may bring God and the soul closer together but they can never become one because of the difference in their nature. On the contrary, in Hinduism all schools of Vedanta hold that God is the Supreme Self and that the individual selves, which are self-existent and of the same nature as God, are only reflections or parts of Him. Mystical experience is only the realization of this integral relationship between God and souls. It may also be noted here that whereas some Hindu sects accept God as the impersonal Absolute, other sects accept Him as personal and even anthropomorphic.

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⁴ Psalm 63
⁵ Jer 20, 7-12
⁶ Hos ii, 1-7; 14, 4
ii) Another doctrinal difference is regarding the salvific value of mystical experience. St. Paul held that ordinary religious practices such as sacrifice and penance were incapable of wiping off the stain of Original Sin. Divine grace, won by Christ through his self-immolation on the cross, alone could remove that stain. This grace, known as Sanctifying Grace is communicated to man through baptism and other sacraments. A soul that is thus freed from Original Sin will attain salvation (that is, go to God's presence in heaven) after death. This makes mystical experience unnecessary for salvation. By contrast, in Hinduism mystical experience of the ultimate Reality is considered to be a sine qua non for salvation (known as mukti or mokṣa or Liberation).

iii) Yet another doctrinal difference between Christian and Hindu mystical traditions is regarding the content of mystical experience. In the Judeo-Christian tradition it is a widely accepted belief that the real Essence of God can never be seen by any living person. In the Old Testament God tells Moses, “Thou canst not see My Face, for man shall not see Me and live.” To see God's Essence, to see Him as He really is, to see Him face to face is possible only in heaven after death. Some Catholic theologians hold that there are two exceptions to this rule. Moses and St. Paul, who were granted a vision of the real Essence of God, or the Beatific Vision. All the others, even the greatest mystics, could get only a distant or indirect vision of God. Theologians of Greek Orthodox Church also hold that God's Essence can never be perceived, and according to them, what mystics see through visions is only the Energies of God.

By contrast, from very ancient times Hindu sages and philosophers have held that God's actual Essence can be directly experienced. In Bhakti

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7 Exod xxxiii, 20
schools God is regarded as having not only personal attributes but also a transcendent anthropomorphic form which is real and can be directly perceived. In the Bhagavadgītā, it is repeatedly asserted that through Bhakti it is possible to know and perceive the true Essence of God and attain oneness with it. Even Advaita Vedantins, who deny that the impersonal Absolute known as Brahman can be made the object of knowledge, assert that the attainment of the total identity of the individual Self with Brahman is possible in this very life. The famous śruti text says about jivanmukti: “When all desires that dwell in the heart are cast away, then does the mortal become immortal, then he attains Brahman here (in this very body).”  

iv) Another major area of contrast between Hinduism and Christianity is the conception of human nature and of the source of our estrangement from God. According to Hindu teaching, man is divine at the core of his being. The problem is that man is ignorant of this fact. He is deceived by his focus on this temporal and material world, and this ignorance gives rise to acts that result in bad karma and traps us in the cycle of reincarnation. According to the biblical teaching, however, the source of our alienation from God (and ultimately of all that is imperfect in this world), is not ignorance of our divinity, but our sinful rebellion against God and His purpose for our lives.

v) Yet another point of contrast is the way of salvation. According to most Hindu teaching, salvation from the cycle of reincarnation is achieved by our own efforts whether through good works, meditation, or

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8 Br Up IV.47
तदेष श्लोकों भवति यदा सर्वं प्रमुच्यन्ते
कामां वेदस्य हृदिद्रिः हि
अथ मलयोऽभिभवत् अत्र ब्रह्म समस्यति इति
devotion to a deity. According to the Bible, however, our spiritual need is for deliverance from God's judgment on our sin and for restoration to a life under His direction and care. This salvation can be provided only by God's grace. The Hindu teaching about grace sees no need for an atonement for sin, but simply offers forgiveness without any satisfaction of the judgment on sin required by a holy God. In contrast, the Christian gospel is this: God the Son became a man, died a sacrificial death on the cross, making real forgiveness of sins against God possible to those who place complete trust in Christ.

vi) Body, matter, history and time itself are not independently real, according to Hinduism. Mystical experience lifts the spirit out of time and the world. In contrast, Judaism and Christianity are essentially news, events in time like creation, providence, prophets, Messiah, incarnation, death and, resurrection, ascension and second coming. Incarnation and New Birth are eternity dramatically entering time. Eastern religions are not dramatic.

vii) The word *karma* means ‘action.’ But the religious concept has more to do with the results or consequences of actions. The doctrine of *karma* states that every thought and action results in certain consequences borne by the actor or thinker. Hindus believe that all suffering is due to one's own past actions, in this or in a previous life. Some have equated the doctrine of *karma* with the statement in the Christian scriptures that "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."⁹ It is certainly a biblical teaching that our actions have consequences - for good or ill. But this is not the same as believing that every experience in life is a consequence of one's own past actions.

⁹ *Gal 6:7*
viii) Ramanuja addresses a major question of the Christians, which is, how does the one who is perfect and complete come to create the world? Ramanuja answers that the purpose of creation is God's līla, his play. That is, God does not create because he needs to do so to fulfil some lack; the creation is a spontaneous, playful act of self-expression. Christians believe that God created this world for a good purpose. On the contrary it is common for Hindus to speak of God bringing the universe into existence simply as a "playful" exercise of His power. Also lacking in Hinduism is the Christian conception of God as infinitely holy and righteous and as the One to whom we as His creatures are accountable for the way we conduct our lives.

ix) Over and above the ways of jñāna, karma and bhakti, Rāmānuja envisages a very simple way of reaching the Lord, the way of unqualified and absolute self-surrender known as prapatti. It is also called śaraṇāgati. The way of śaraṇāgati is that of resignation: It is an attitude which enables the individual soul to discover that God is the ultimate end of realization and that the means to that realization also lies through God. The idea of God as redeemer or saviour, is important in Rāmānuja's thought: God is the redeemer of souls, who descends to the earth for the purpose of redemption. The faith in the redemptive character of the redeemer (rakṣasyati iti viśvāsaḥ) is considered to be an important element in the context of surrender of the self to God (prapatti). This kind of relationship between God and the individual souls is known rakṣya rakṣaka sambandah. The Lord is the rakṣaka and the individual soul is the rakṣya. According to this concept God is the guardian or the redeemer or saviour of souls. In the very first prayer-poem with which Rāmānuja commences his commentary on the Brahma Sūtras, he refers to God's promise of redemption of souls (rakṣaika dīkṣe). Soul-making or
moulding of souls is thus looked upon as the very purpose of the world process. As redeemer, God is accessible and gracious. Rāmānuja uses the words saulabhya and sausīlya for these qualities of God. The individual's liberation is due to the unmerited or uncaused grace (nirhētuka kripa) of God. Nirhētuka kripa is the spontaneous and irresistible grace of God. Salvation is entirely uncaused by human merit. It has its source in the grace of God alone. The Upaniṣad says, “Whom the Self chooses, by him is He attained.”

In the Biblical tradition, in the Old Testament as well as in the New, the grace of God is known in certain historical events. In the Old Testament, deliverance from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai and the return from Exile are especially occasions for the manifestation of the grace of God. In the New Testament, grace is inseparably related to a historical person. Grace came in and through Jesus Christ. This is the central difference between grace in Christianity and Hinduism. The inseparable relation of grace with a historical person gives an actuality and definiteness to the meaning of grace which cannot be found in any other situation. We do hear many familiar notes of self-surrender, grace and faith in Hinduism. But reference to a specific historic occasion and historic person is absent. Further, in the New Testament, grace is experienced and understood in relationship between the believer and Christ and also between the believers. A community of faith is essential to the apprehension and actualization of grace as it is understood in Christianity. In some forms of

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10 MUp III.ii.3

नाथमात्रा प्रवचनाद्वारा नमः ये मेघधा न वहुना न्युनतेन।
यथेवेष युक्ते तत्त्वप्रथमेष्य आत्मा विवृते न कृष्णाम् ॥
the *bhakti* cult the group character of devotional life is evident, but the emphasis is solely on an almost intoxicated and emotional attachment to the deity.

x) The main purpose of the *avatāra* of God in Hinduism is to make Himself available to various beings other than upholding *dharma* and destroying evil-doers. God’s descent to earth is to give refuge to those seeking to alleviate the sufferings of *saṃsāra*. This shows God’s loving and saving grace to humanity and other creatures. He is at once supreme and accessible. In Christian mysticism God's greatest act of friendship towards man is described in terms of receiving the divine life. 'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.'\(^{11}\) Like Lord Viṣṇu taking several incarnations to protect *dharma* and destroy *adharma*, God, the Father, sent His son Jesus Christ to the earth to redeem suffering humanity. Now when we consider the presence of God in the *avatars* and in the incarnation, we discover that the mode of manifestation is different. In Christianity the emphasis is on ‘historical presence,’ while the manifestation in Hinduism is ‘ahistorical.’ In both cases, there is a real manifestation, a real presence, but the manner of becoming manifest differs. Each kind of presence also has different implications.

**Similarities between Hindu and Christian Mysticisms**

i) Throughout its history Hinduism has been distinguished in its mystical leanings. Similarly Christianity is also a mystical religion from the beginning. In both, love and devotion directed towards a personal God is the dominant feature.

\(^{11}\) 1 John 4, 9
ii) For both Christianity and theistic Hindu religions the world is real and intelligible; material realities must be understood in the context of larger spiritual realities; there is an ultimate goal that, when attained, offers a liberation that involves radical transformation.

iii) Many theistic Hindus share with Christians even more specific views about God: there is an omnipotent and omniscient divine person who is compassionate as well as just; God and not humans takes the initiative in the divine-human encounter; God decides to become involved in the world even to the point of speaking in human words and becoming embodied in human form(s); God liberates humans.

**Being 'in God'**

The mystic is sometimes described as possessed by God. God is even possessed by man! This possession is manifested in ecstasy. Being 'in God' has a wide range of meanings, it may be dependence on God, conformity with his will, an ecstatic possession by the divine, or an absorption into the divine being. This divine indwelling is of such a nature that even a sacramental communion does not submerge the personality of the other. 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.'

This seems to be coming close to the monistic identification of the soul with God, but it would be a mistake to read this into the Bible. Even if man is akin to God in nature, his soul being the immortal breath of God, yet the fact that the breath can be regarded separately means that there is a distinctive relationship subsisting between man and God. Biblical and Christian mysticism sees beyond communion to union with God. But this is not identity, becoming

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12 *Ibid.*, 6, 56
God or being dissolved into him. Like Rāmānuja the Christian sees loving relationships with God persisting eternally. The goal of Christian mysticism is not nothingness or absorption, but union with God and the beatific vision.

**Apophatic Path in Vedanta and Christianity**

We can approach God only by analysis or abstraction. Whatever mystics try to convey about their knowledge and experience of God, however rapturously and ecstatically they express it, their vision far transcends, in fact exceeds all limits of human language. Due to this insufficiency of language, Christian mysticism distinguishes its descriptions of God by way of negation or affirmation. The most widely used and known is the negative way, the *via negativa* or apophatic way, whereby anything we say of God is so misleading that it must be denied. Since God is the Infinite, and the Infinite is the antithesis of the finite every attribute which can be affirmed of a finite being may be safely denied of God. Hence God can only be described by negatives; He can only be discovered by stripping off all the qualities and attributes which veil Him; He can only be reached by divesting ourselves of all distinctions of personality. God is so unimaginably ‘other’ that we can come to know him only by stripping away, by negating every attribute and description. The apophatic (*via negativa*) path of Christian mysticism has its counterpart in the *neti, neti* (‘not this, not this’) path of Vedānta.\(^{12}\) Eckhart says, “Do not try to understand God, for God is beyond all understanding.”\(^{14}\) He urges, “You should love him (God) as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure unmixed, bright ‘One,’... in that One we

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\(^{12}\) *Br Up II.iii.6*

should eternally sink down, out of ‘something’ into ‘nothing.’\footnote{Ibid., p.208} The Godhead, according to Eckhart, is ‘unspeakable’, ‘hidden’ and ‘unknown’ precisely because “He is pure nothing; he is neither this nor that. If you think of anything he might be, he is not that.”\footnote{Sermon 54, The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, tr and edited by Maurice O’C. Walshe, New York, 2009, p. 287} This is an example of how Eckhart spoke about God by declaring what God is not.

**The differences between the apophatic process in Christian Mysticism and Advaitic mysticism**

In Christian theology God is a personal Being endowed with many divine attributes, only his essential nature cannot be perceived by ordinary mortals. What Christian apophatism does is to deny the ability of discursive thinking and the rational mind to perceive the real transcendent nature of God. In Hinduism, according to the Advaita school of Vedanta, the ultimate Reality known as Brahman is nirguna, the impersonal Absolute devoid of all attributes. And what the apophatic process of neti, neti (‘That this is not Brahman’) does is to negate all qualities attributed to Brahman owing to ignorance. In other words, Vedantic apophatism is mainly ontological. Furthermore, Vedantic apophatism, which originated in the *Upaṇīṣads*, belongs to jñāna mārga, the Path of knowledge followed by Advaitins. In Christian mysticism the apophatic technique is applied in the path of love itself. This is what gives to Christian mysticism its uniqueness. Both Śaṅkara and Eckhart follow the negative way and reach the conclusion that the former’s Brahman and the latter’s God are above distinction. But the difference is that for Śaṅkara the Self is Brahman and Brahman alone is real, whereas for Eckhart the soul and
the Godhead are different and the Son and the Spirit are the emanation of the divine substance of the Godhead.

**Liberation according to Śaṅkara and Eckhart**

According to Śaṅkara the experience of *mokṣa* is pure spiritual identity; the experience wherein the separation of self and non-self, of ego and world, is transcended, and pure oneness alone remains. The experience celebrated by the Advaitin is one of perfect insight, bliss, and power; as one of infinite joy and understanding. In spiritual identity (*nirvikalpa samādhi*) the pretensions to ultimacy of anything else are shattered, and a complete self-realization and self-knowledge are said to be obtained. According to Eckhart releasement is no longer just a precondition to deference or even to union with God's will but is the approach to the very nature of divinity, to the Godhead which is behind God. He says in his Sermons “…where God is above being and above distinction, there I myself was, there I willed myself and committed myself to create this man. Therefore I am the cause of myself in the order of my being, which is eternal and not in the order of my becoming, which is temporal. And therefore I am unborn, and in the manner in which I am unborn I can never die. In my unborn manner I have been eternally, and am now, and shall eternally remain.” ¹⁷ Eckhart states that we, as much as God, originate from this great ground transcending being and distinction. We are co-creators of ourselves with God in terms of that which is eternal, though not in terms of that which is mortal and destined to die.’ The assertion by Eckhart that we are created in the same fullness of God's emanation of the divine substance as the Son and Spirit -- thus concluding

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the identity of human and divine in substance is widely restated in his works.

**Bridal Mysticism**

Bridal Mysticism falls under the category of “love Mysticism”, forming one of its modes which emphasizes love as a means of experiencing and uniting with God. It provides the human model of the relationship between man and woman, lover and beloved and bride and bridegroom. In almost all religious traditions we come across with examples of bridal mysticism. Their scriptures often bear witness to the glory of the divine love or pure devotion through numerous hymns belonging to the genre of bridal mysticism. They are revealed in the form of selfless love, steeped in the bliss of the divine experience by constantly remembering God. It is said that bridal mysticism (*mādhurya bhāva*) is the all-rounded, most intimate, highest ecstasy, and most exalted expression of pure transcendental love. Bridal mysticism is characteristic of pure love or devotion (*bhakti*), not lust; for, love and lust are two totally different feelings. Bridal mysticism, in its essence, acts in a way that is pleasing to the divine will (eternal law). Other characteristics of pure devotion include abandoning of all desires and fear, keeping devotion unadulterated, being steadfast in devotion to the One Divine only, and keeping mind engaged in meditation and deep reflections.

A soul fallen in love with God leaves the worldly pleasures to the worldly people and longs for union with God as her groom in body and soul. The longing and seeking of the Lord as her bridegroom is the essence of bridal mysticism. The soul in the practice and experience of bridal mysticism goes through the harrowing experience of separation from Him (*viśleṣa*) and the exhilarating experience of union (*samsleṣa*) with Him.
For enamoured souls, visleṣa appears to be stretched into eternity while, in samsleṣa, the eternity is crowded into a moment. The soul suffers the worst from separation from her Lord. She may implore birds, flowers, the dark rain clouds, and bees to be her messengers to her Lord and to bring him to her quickly. A love-stricken soul would not feel it as a humiliation at all when she goes out with her sufferings to pretty little things like flowers and bees and seeks consolation from them. It is this humility, born of love of God that helps her win the game of love. She is reminded of her Lord in everything she sees around her. After these painful efforts that get her nowhere, she decides to put up with her sorrow and places her trust in the Lord’s infinite mercy. The soul has to annihilate her ego (ahamkāra) to realize the fruits of bridal mysticism.

The love of the soul for her Lord should be selfless; love of God for the sake of love and for nothing else, not even for the sake of salvation is the true mark of bridal mysticism. God is both the path and the goal of the journey on this earth – a path in which there is no self-losing. True love brings with it deep humility, an awareness of one’s insignificance before all and helplessness before God. Bridal mysticism is an expression of the overflowing, boundless love for the divine; it is the absolute surrender of the finite to the Infinite Godhead; it is the experience sought by a lover of the beloved. Varadachari remarks, “From the moment this surrender is made the beloved is the life of her life, the source of honour, fame, fulfillment, support and all. The infinite is thus chosen and surrendered to become everything and all. The representation of this mystic union is apparently a union of two persons, a union of body, mind and soul sought with the infinite, the beloved. In mystic rapture one experiences the transformation of one’s entire being so as to appear to be that of the
beloved Himself.”18 Spiritual union with the Lord in wedlock brings to the bride utter rapture, joy, and contentment. Due to the absence of selfishness the soul would prefer that all human souls should come to experience this marvellous divine union.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava theology upholds the theory of the permanence of the human soul as an entity distinct from God, yet entirely dependent on Him. Love for God plays a vital role in this theology. The individual soul is utterly and existentially dependent on God, this relationship of dependence that obtains between the individual soul and God indicates that the former exists solely for the pleasure of the latter. The mumukṣu as a mystic has an organic craving for Brahman and he longs for love or bhakti and not merely freedom from the sorrows of saṃsāra. Even the infinite glory of Vaikunṭha has no attraction or value for him if it be merely an escape from saṃsāra without contacting God and enjoying the bliss of communion with him here and in this life. According to Srinivasachari “the mystic has the instinct of the infinite and to him the best proof of the existence of Brahman is the immediate experience of Brahman, a soul-sight of the Self here and now and a reveling in His love.”19

Brahman is the aesthetic absolute described as ‘Bhuvana Sundara’ and the culmination of the philosophy of love is the experience of the union with the Supreme ‘Bhuvana Sundara’. The soul which is feminized for both men and women expresses its desire for the divine, personified as the male bride-groom. In this particular relationship the Supreme is loved as a bridegroom and is not feared are revered or honoured or served as is

18 K.C.Varadachari, Complete Works of Dr. K.C.Varadachari, Secunderabad, pp.415-416
19 P.N. Srinivasachari, Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita, Madras, p.439
done in respect of a father or a master or a stern God or a ruler. While men have less of emotional aspect, women are much awakened to it. Subba Reddiar states, “It is most likely that religious experience which is marked by much of emotional feeling should be associated with the feminine. The mystics, therefore, are prone to treat themselves as the bride of God. The lover and the beloved – nāyaka and nāyakī are two in one and one in two like the sun and the light, or the word and the meaning or the flower and its fragrance. Kṛṣṇa-prema, the quintessence of mystic love of God through the medium of Nāyaka-Nāyakī-bhāva is unmatched in mystic literature for its moving power. The commentators of the Nālāyira-Prabandham bring out the beauty of the Akam poetry of the Ālvārs by renaming the saints as female-poetesses – Nammālvār as Parānkuśanāyakī and Tirumangai Ālvār as Parakāla nāyakī.”

In many of their poems the Ālvārs conceive themselves as the consorts of God. The reason or the Ālvār’s using the consort motif is because it is considered to be an effective tool to draw attention to the defining characteristics of our relationship with God. The notion of being absolutely dependent on God, of being firm in the decision to serve none other than God and the conviction that God is the most enjoyable object of devotion and love are all effectively personified in the bridal concept; and yet all equally signify the defining characteristics of the experience of servitude to God. It enables the poet to speak meaningfully about the experience of God. The conjugality in the poems function as symbols that are expressive of the deep, mutual and passionate attachment that exists between the individual soul and God. Speaking about Ālvār-bhakti, Charlotte Vaudeville remarks, “The theorists of bhakti entertained,

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20 S.R.Subba Reddiar, Religion and Philosophy of Nalayiram with special reference to Nammalvar., Tirupati, 1977, p.454
from the time of the Āḻvārs, a dynamic conception of bhakti, whose highest state is less a repose than a tension, an unquenchable thirst even in the possession of God, a continual yearning and stretching for a fuller apprehension of the divine Lover, who unceasingly draws all souls to Himself. There can be no satiety in divine Love; and so it was the pathetic character of the virahīṇī, the faithful wife forever tormented by the pangs of separation from her Lord and longing for Him even when she enjoys the bliss of His presence, which remained for the Āḻvārs as well as for their spiritual descendents, the most adequate symbol of Love divine."  

The religious utilisation of love-symbolism, implying an analogy between human and divine love, is a common feature of all theistic religions. The transcendental relationship is the upamaya, the human relationship the upamana: the unknown is conveyed through the analogy of the known, the inexpressible is suggested by the expressible. When poets and theologians speak and write of ‘transcendental issues’ they employ secular vocabularies, idioms and themes that are broadly well understood among the laity - to shed light on the unfamiliar we take recourse to the familiar. This is how we make intelligible issues that are otherwise overly esoteric in their scope and comprehension. The great mystics, through their poetry, invite us all to share with them the deep and profound religious experiences that animate and sustain their lives. But the more intimate and esoteric one’s relationship with God the more ineffable it becomes. So, in order to express the nature and the depth of their religious experiences they take recourse to the erotic imagery of our world through which they try to bring about the intensity, passion and deep and enduring intimacy that characterize their relationship to God.

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Narada clearly states that paramapreman, or divine Love, is mysterious and ineflable; it can only be known through experience, but it finds an analogy in human love, preman. Its characteristics include perfect self-surrender, extreme anguish at being forgotten and a continuous awareness of the infinite grandeur and majesty of the Lord. Paramapreman, therefore, is opposed to sensual desire, kama, and also to the selfish love that a mistress bears to her paramour. The gopis, by their infinite respect for their Lord, as well as their disinterestedness, are the standing example of such divine love. Das Gupta says, “In the writings of the Vaiṣṇavas of the Caitanya school the human analogy involving description of the bodily charms of the female lover is often carried too far. In the case of the Āḻvārs, however, the emphasis is mostly on the transcendent beauty and charm of God, and on the ardent longings of the devotee who played the part of a female lover, for Kṛṣṇa.”

**Bridal Mysticism and its philosophical significance**

What is the underlying philosophic significance of the love motif? Srinivasachari gives the explanation thus: “The Sanskrit word used for love is Kāma which is used in two senses. Kāma in the ordinary sense means desire for any worldly pleasure including the conjugal love. There is yet another sense in which Kāma is used in the Upaniṣad and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Here it is understood in the sense of love for Parāmatman (Bhāgavat-kāma). The love towards God is wholly spiritual and not carnal by any means. In view of this, the love exhibited by the Āḻvārs to God, though it is analogous to the sensual love of a maiden towards her lover, falls under the category of Bhāgavat-kāma.”

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23 S.M. Srinivasachari, *Philosophy and Theistic Mysticism of the Āḻvārs*, Delhi, 1997, p.159
other philosophical implication of the love motif is that, according to Vaiṣṇava Theology, the individual soul is dependent on God in the relationship of master and servant (śeṣi-śeṣa). The soul exists for the pleasure of God and its final goal is to get united with Him. On the basis of this, the Āḻvārs, especially Nammāḻvār, Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār and Āndāl, as individual souls (jīvātmans) exhibit their utter dependability, unshakable faith and strong conviction that God alone is the most enjoyable person. These characteristics cannot be personified more aptly and efficiently than as a consort of God. That is why these Āḻvārs chose to assume the role of a nāyakī to the Supreme Lord as nāyaka and pour out their heart through mystic songs, praising the glory of God. Another reason for the imposition of strī-bhāva (feminie role) on themselves by the mystics is due to the conviction that God alone is Puruṣothama and all the others are female. All jīvātmans are paratanttras, that is, not independent. Because of this reason, the Āḻvārs when they think themselves as the Lord’s dāsas, the strī-bhāva comes to them. “The love songs of the Āḻvārs,” according to Hardy, “convey the beauty and grace of Māyā (Viṣṇu). In the poetry of the Āḻvārs the senses are presented as taking in the beauty and the love displayed by the Lord through his temple image. They convey it to the heart and make it melt. This emotive response is depicted by means of the 'girl' symbol.”24 Speaking about Nammāḻvār, Dasgupta says, “The mystic, through the cessation of all inclination to ther things and the increase of longing for God in a timeless and spaceless manner, and through the pangs of separation in not

24 Friedhelm Hardy, The Religious Culture of India, Power, Love and Wisdom, Chicago, 1994, p. 288
realizing him constantly, considers himself as a woman, and through the
pangs of love loses his consciousness.” 25

All the Āḻvārs elevated this ‘bhava’ of human ‘śṛṅgāra’ to divine ‘śṛṅgāra’
where it becomes ‘bhakti’ as the relationship with the Lord as husband.
The attitude of bhakti serves as a tool to transcend all human desires
which arise when human senses come in contact with their respective
objects in the external world. All these desires which have their objects in
this world converge and become one single desire which has no object in
this material world of senses but conceives of only one single
transcendental object in the form of one’s favourite deity which is known
as ‘arcāmūrti’. It is this focus of the mind that leads to liberation or
freedom from the attachments and bondage of the world. The beauty of
icon worship is that we live ancient times in the present we live.
According to Srivaisnava theology the Supreme Lord makes Himself
tangibly present in various iconic-manifestations in response to the
request of his most intimate devotees. The devotee’s love for God is
expressed in ‘mathura-rasa’ (bridal mysticism). The Āḻvārs employ their
mystic love as an interesting mode of enjoying a relationship with the
Lord- that of imagining themselves to be the bride of the Lord- a habit
which is part of the general cult of Madhura bhakti or nayaka-
nayakībhāva. The essential dependence of the souls of the Āḻvārs on the
Lord leads them to establish this kind of intimate contact with the Lord.

There are different ways of experiencing God, like chanting His divine
names, speaking about His innumerable auspicious qualities, describing
His divine lovely and beautiful form, describing the divya desas where
He resides, praising His devotees and so on. The importance of the

25 S.N. Dasgupta, op.cit., p. 72
conception of God as Cosmic Reality becomes significant when the Lord steals our hearts as a ‘thief’. He is the *Puruṣottama* where all souls become His beloved in love with Him.

The Āḻvārs speak in their own voice when in full command of their self and when their love overflows the saints speak in many voices. By superimposing the character of mother, friend, nāyakī, gopi etc: (*strī-bhāva*) on themselves they are able to talk in their tone, their language and thoughts. The overflowing experience of God needs to be channelised like the overflowing water of a reservoir in the rainy season which is released through numerous sluice gates. In such situations we find the saints speaking in many voices as the nāyakī, the nāyakī’s mother voicing concern over the daughter’s state and as the nāyakī’s friend. Friend is one who helps the nāyakī to unite with the nāyaka. A mother is one who prevents her daughter (who is in love) from stepping out of her house in search of her lover. She asks her daughter who is in haste, not to behave in this manner and to be modest. Nāyakī is one who is in love with nāyaka. The Nāyakī who is in love with Bhagavān, who is the Nāyaka hears His *gunas*, His svarūpa, rūpa, aiswarya etc: and falls in love with Him. She forgets all her worldly relations, renounces all her worldly desires, transgresses all codes of conduct and forgets her womanly qualities. He alone is the *upaya* and he alone is the *upeya*. The ‘tvara’ or haste is due to her extreme love towards the Lord. The mother advises the nāyakī to wait till he comes. In whichever state of mind the Āḻvār is, in that state he speaks as mother, friend or Nāyakī.

The Lord plays hide and seek with the beloved soul. In the alternation between union and separation the soul is freed from sensualism and egoism and yearns for the dawn of unitive consciousness. In the state of separation, the soul which is the bride, starts distinguishing between
what is momentary and changing and what is eternal and permanent and renounces the ego-centric feeling of ‘my’ and ‘mine’ and gets purged of all pride. The bride develops anguish and lapses into depression and despair. The Divine Lover also suffers from loneliness caused by separation and yearns for communion with the soul, His beloved. Subba Reddiar observes, “In the rapture of reunion each rushes to the arms of the other and reflection expires in ecstasy. In this way the whole game of love subserves the purpose of soul-making and deification. In the furnace of love, in its austere and arduous purgation of its pride, all the fleshly feeling melt away and the soul and God are glued together in mystic union.” 26 The process of mystic union is beautifully portrayed by Nammālvār, Āndāl and Tirumangai Ālvār.

The Bridal Mysticism of Nammālvār

The Tiruvaimoli of Nammālvār is a song which is the premier instance of the doctrine of the all-pervading self with an immediacy and feeling, which has never been expressed before. The Tiruvaimoli is the saint's psychological experience of a present and absent God. The Ālvār, in his ecstatic delight, visualizes God everywhere and in the profundity of his attainment pines for more. He also experiences states of supreme intoxication, when he becomes semi-conscious or unconscious with occasional breaks into the consciousness of a yearning. To the question whether Nammālvār was one characterized by love to God (bhakti) or characterized by surrender to the will of God (prapatti), the great preceptor Emper replied that the Saint had surrendered his will entirely to God. And love to God was that by which he sustained himself. Lord Kṛṣṇa was unto him everything – food, drink and every other luxury.

26 S.R. Subba Reddiar, op.cit., p.455
Nammāḻvār starts his Tiruvāimoli as a philosopher describing the nature of the Supreme Being and the means of attaining Him. Next he gets into the mystic mood and starts extolling the saulabhya or easy accessibility of God with a reference to the episode in Kṛṣṇa’s life when, as a child, he was tied to a mortar by mother Yaśodā for stealing butter. Tradition has it that Nammāḻvār fell into a trance at this point and remained unconscious for six months as he could not bear that the Supreme Ruler of the universe could allow himself to be tied by a human being. After this the Āḻvār resorts to a mental state in which he pours out his pangs of separation and appeals to the Lord for communion. The Āḻvār gets glimpses of God and expresses his joy by praising His glory. What the Āḻvār wants to have is not a temporary vision which can be achieved through yogic perception. Nor does he want the visual perception of God in arca deities in the temples. What he seeks is nothing less than the direct vision of God in His full form and glory as in Vaikuṇṭha, which can be achieved only in the state of mokṣa when the soul is separated from the body.

The mystic saint, Nammāḻvār, who longs for such divine vision has the mental perception of God (māṇāsa-sāksātkāra). Being a born yogi and blessed with divine knowledge Nammāḻvār could perceive God without undergoing the arduous process of bhakti-yoga. Pillan, the earliest and authoritative commentator, in his preface to Tiruvaimoli states that the Āḻvār, after having experienced the Supreme Person in His true form through his mental perception, speaks out in the way he enjoyed Him out of the unsurpassable joy caused by such an experience. Mental perception of the Āḻvār leads to an ardent desire for an external physical communion with God (bahya-samśleṣa). After the vision of God the Āḻvār expresses a deep craving for a direct face to face encounter with God and desires to
converse with Him. “The divine wisdom (mati) and the loving devotion to God (nalam) together with the taste of the divine glory experienced through mental perception, thus marks the beginning of the mysticism of Nammālvār.”

All the attempts taken by the Ālvār to secure a comprehensive vision of God result only in greater disappointment, so the Ālvār makes pathetic appeals to God to appear before him in his true form with full splendour. He appeals:

O Benevolent Great, my Lord, holding the valiant discus, who churned the deep ocean and delivered the nectar, as I am eager to behold you with your lovely four shoulders, I want you to come up to me right now, greedily I look around with tears flowing in the eyes and the soul drying up.

Again in another hymn the Ālvār pathetically appeals:

Wondrous Lord, O Vāmana, O Kaṇṇa who is beyond the reach of this sinner, you possess eyes, hands and feet like freshly bloomed lotus, a gait which resembles the huge lotus pond as if in motion. May you please appear before me for a day at least. I call you many times with dried eyes and parched lips to appear before me but alas, you do not turn up to enable me to behold you at least once --- O Lord, come before me, or else call me into your presence that I may serve your lotus feet.

When direct communion does not happen, Nammālvār suffers from frustration and anguish. When he is overtaken by intense grief caused by

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27 S.M.Srinivasachari, op.cit.,p.164
28 TVM/V/7,5
29 TVM/VIII.5.1.2,7
separation from God, he gives expression to his inner feelings by different ways. He assumes the role of a woman, Parānkusānāyakī, and appeals to God through the media of birds and objects of nature such as the stork, the cuckoo, the swan, the cakravāka, the heron, the parrot and the bee. When the Ālvār nāyakī is overtaken by intense depression and anger caused by the undue delay on the part of the Lord to communicate with, she resorts to a mood of defiance and accuses God for being dishonest. Here is an example:

O Sir, do not talk to us with pretentious words, because your deceits are well-known all over the world. You should refrain from playing with our minah birds and parrots.  

The relationship becomes so intimate that Parānkusānāyakī sings of being possessed by God, taken over by the Lord's presence, and swallowed up by Him. The separate identity gets melted away. This leads the saint into the realization that the actual agent of his own songs of devotion is really God himself singing.

Instead of getting his praises sung by the great poets he comes here today gently makes me over into himself and gets me to sing of him, my lord of paradise.  

The depression at separation from the Lord is great. The girl, unable to persevere at sustaining herself because of her excessive depression says

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30 TIVM VI,2.1.3.5  
31 TIVM 4.9.6
that she will survive as the gopis did, by imitating the divine deeds of the lord of rich Dwāraka, all his works such as creating the world, etc., and becomes engrossed (in imitating the Lord). Her mother sees her in this state and tells the women who have gathered around her that her daughter is making statements like,

“\text{It is I who created the earth and the sea,}
\text{It is I who am the earth and the sea,}
\text{It is I who ate the world and the sea}^{32}\text{ which are astonishing; unless it is that the Lord has entered her, it is impossible to determine the nature of her supernatural deeds. She asks,}
\text{“Is my daughter possessed by}
\text{the Lord of the earth and the sea?}
\text{What can I tell my daughter,}
\text{who claims to know the earth and the sea?”}^{33}

This outburst from the nāyakī comes after a night of separation from her lover, totally alone. This is one of the darkest moods of the girl in the entire Tiruvāyoli. The night is compared to the endless night which precedes and follows a cycle of world-existence. A kind of obsession with the absent, physical lover causes the girl’s depression but also focuses her and gives her something to rely on, her proper dharana. This focus, gives her access to God-within, her true atman within the atman.

Finally, out of sheer frustration, the Āḷvār takes the drastic step of adopting the practice of riding on a palmyra stem as a horse in the open streets, known as madalūrtthal. In the guise of the nāyaki the Āḷvār says:

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\text{\textsuperscript{32} TVM 5.6.3}
\text{\textsuperscript{33} TVM 5.6.1}
O my friend, I shall surely resort to madal. I swear that I shall expose in all possible ways, the Lord of the celestials, who stole my mind, modesty and chastity. Shaking of all propriety, I shall ride that palmyra stem (like a horse) through every street in town and make all women shout along with me in full sympathy with accusations against him (by taking recourse to the madal); I shall procure from my Lord the cool tulasi garland and adorn myself with it.\textsuperscript{34}

The experience of the Ālvār, his moods of exultation and depression, become the primary data for Srivaiṣṇava spirituality, and each song is interpreted as exemplifying some moment in the Ālvār's journey toward the Lord. In his fullness of desire, the Ālvār immerses himself in each of the Lord's qualities; but in doing so he is unable to experience all the others fully at the same time, and so grieves.

According to Nammālvār, when one is overcome by bhakti-exultation and self-surrendering devotion to God he easily attains to truth. Nammālvār says that God is also constantly trying to woo us to love him.

"Blissful Lord, heard I, anon my eyes in floods did run,
Oh what is this? I asked. What marvel this? the Perfect one
Through friendly days and nights elects with me to e'er remain,
To union wooing me, His own to make nor let me "lone.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{The Bridal Mysticism of Āṇḍāḷ}

Āṇḍāḷ was the spiritual daughter of Periyālvār who lived at the beginning of the eighth century. With Āṇḍāḷ, the Jewel amongst the mystics, love-

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{ITM} V.3.2.9.10
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Bhagavadvīṣayam}, Bk.1 p. 571 as quoted by Alkondavalli Govindacarya, \textit{Divine Wisdom of the Dravida Saints}, Madras, 1902
symbolism strikes a more realistic note, in her intense devotion for the Lord Tirumāl (Viṣṇu) enshrined at Srirangam. Even as a child, Āṇḍāḷ developed an intense yearning to marry God and she vowed him alone for her husband and to live with him in everlasting union. Even as the tulasi plant is imbued with fragrance, Āṇḍāḷ grew through the stages of infancy, childhood and youth with para- bhakti, and para-jñāna leading to parama-bhakti. The early Ācāryas and commentators accorded a special status to Āṇḍāḷ, not merely because of the impassioned quality of her verse but owing perhaps to her gender too. Other Āḻvārs, notably Kulasekhara, Nammāḻvār and Tirumāṅgai have also composed verses in the voice of a woman yearning for her divine beloved, but as Pinpalakiya Perumāl Jiyaṟ, the author of Guruparamparāprabhāvam phrases it, the love of a man for a man is like water flowing uphill whereas that of a woman for a man is as natural as water flowing downhill.36 When Āṇḍāḷ speaks of the intense suffering that she experiences as a result of her separation from God, she speaks as an intimate devotee of the Lord; when she speaks of the felicity that her passionate union with the Lord engenders, she speaks as the Lord’s consort and when Āṇḍāḷ speaks of the nature of devotion to God, the means by which to achieve the Lord, she speaks as a saint par-excellence.

Āṇḍāḷ had a natural advantage over the other Āḻvārs in expressing her relation to the Lord. She did not have the necessity to assume a feminine persona since she was already a woman. As Ramanujan explains, "It is as if, being already female, she has no need to change anything to turn towards God.... she need shed nothing, for she has nothing to shed: neither physical prowess, nor social power, nor punditry, nor even social

By being a girl herself, Āṇḍāḷ could establish a direct analogy between the poetic girl and the mythical gopī, and the actual speaker of a Kṛṣṇa folk song. Probably that is the reason she leaves behind all the other saints in expressing her passion towards the Lord. Her budding sexual energy is transformed into a unique and fervent form of devotion to God; her volatile natural power was transformed into devotional religious fervor (bhakti) and spiritual awakening. In this regard Āṇḍāḷ is surely unique among the Āḻvārs, and even among other female mystics of later times like Mīrābāi because of her tender age and unmarried status. Her intense feelings of longing seem to be expressing the genuine lovesickness of a maturing girl. In some sense the erotic is no longer metaphoric, it is in fact literal. The beloved, the one causing the heroine the sufferings of love-in-separation is the Dark One, the Cosmic Lord who swallowed the seven worlds and then lay as a baby on a banyan leaf, who smote the demon Hiranyakashyap as a man-lion, who killed Rāvana in his avatāra as Rāma, who, as Kṛṣṇa held aloft as an umbrella the mountain Govardhana to protect His cowherd community from torrential rains, who sleeps on the hooded serpent in the milky ocean, and in Srīraṅgam.

Āṇḍāḷ’s intense yearning for the Lord, expressed in erotic language, represents theologically, an estranged soul’s longing for reunion with the Lord. Āṇḍāḷ, in the guise of a gopi in love with Kṛṣṇa, implores the Lord to consummate her desire for union with him. Āṇḍāḷ told her father that her body belonged to that Lord alone and if there was even talk of offering her body to mortal men, then she could not live. Āṇḍāḷ, considered herself an incarnation of (one of) His consorts and so could

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thus approach Him through her own devotion and be absorbed into Him, where she belonged. In the case of Tiruppanāḻvār, it was Śri who urged the Lord to not let the bard-saint remain separated from them. Both these earthly lives ended with bodily merger in the icon at Śrīraṅgam, perfect illustrations of the ultimate union of individual souls with the Supreme One, who is, in Śrīvaisṇava thought, completely incarnated in the consecrated image.

Ānḍāl’s point of view is more realistic than Nammāḻvār’s, as she considers herself as the real bride of Him whom she has vowed as her Bridegroom in her heart. It is suffused with ‘bridal mysticism’ where she says that even at the mention of the idea that she should be given to someone in marriage she would immediately collapse and die. This is the devotion she had for Lord Ranganatha. The clarity, the urgency and the depth of this kind of devotion is extraordinary.

In the Tiruppāvai Śri Ānḍāl visualizes Śri Villipputhur as Brindāvan, the grand temple as Nandagopa’s house and the presiding deity, Vatapatrasāyī as Lord Kṛṣṇā. She identifies herself as one of the Gopikas (cowherdess) waking up her still sleeping companions and calling them to the worship of their beloved lord, Kṛṣṇa early in the morning of Margaśīrṣa (December 15th to January 15th) the month most suited for divine worship, because Lord Kṛṣṇa himself says so.38 She urges them to observe along with her the pāvai nonbu, a ritual, which seems to be a variation of the ancient religious rite, called the kātyāyani vrata, mentioned in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa to obtain puruṣārtha (the choicest/highest boon) of nitya kaiṅkarya to the Lord and to have Him as their

38 BG. X.35

| बृहत् साम तथा साम्या गायत्री छ-दसामहम् ।
| मातानाम मातंशीश्चौषधुलाम् कुसुभाकरः ॥

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husband. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa describes this vrata as a prayer offered to kātyāyani (Goddess Durga) in the first month of the winter season by the shepherdesses of Brindāvan. After bathing in the holy river Yamunā each one beseeches goddess Durga that she gets Kṛṣṇa as her husband. Bathing is just not for physical and external purity alone. The bathing Pond is Bhāgavan’s satcitānanda (Existence, Consciousness and Bliss). To bathe in the pond is to get immersed in the Bliss of God.

The Tirumoli speak of the different efforts taken by Āndal to speed up some way or other her union with God. She undergoes lot of impatient and painful waiting for this union. The Nācciar Tirumoli clearly shows the devotee’s development of para-bhakti to para-jñāna and para-jñāna to parama-bhakti. Para-bhakti is the perfected stage of meditation which serves as a direct means to mokṣa (liberation), para-jñāna is the stage which enables the devotee have a direct vision of God and paramabhatti is the highest state of meditation which culminates in the liberation of the soul. Peria Vakkān Pillai observes that Āndal is put to extreme suffering by God because He wants to develop her bhakti into parama bhakti before revealing Himself to her. The reason is that if God reveals Himself to the bhakta (devotee) when he/she is not yet ready, the latter will not be able to take the sudden shock of this extreme delight. Paramabhatta stage is described as that stage where the devotee is not able to sustain his/her life any more unless there is some form of union with the Lord. It is then and then only that the Lord chooses to reveal Himself to the devotee. In the case of Āndal she first pleads to Kāmādeva for help. The

39 Bhag P X.22
हेमन्ते प्रथमे मासि नद्यक्रज कुमारिकाः, चेषवहिष्ठीभुद्रान्न्वयायाय्यान्त्यातः—नद्यावपुस्ते देवी पति कुरु ते नमः।
opening decad of Nācciār Tirumoli deals with Āṇḍal’s plea to Kāmadeva, the God of Love for help in getting united with her Lord. She asks him to use her soul as the arrow, write her name on it and then shoot it with his bow, aiming the Lord as the target. She offers food to Kāmadeva and asks him to bring Lord Kṛṣṇa to her so that she can do kaiṅkarya to Him. After that she wants to visit (holy places) to see her Lord in those places. The point reaches when she is not able to sustain her life any more unless there is some form of union with Him. It is only at that desperate point that Lord Kṛṣṇa reveals Himself to her. The lesson that the Nācciār Tirumoli teaches us is that through our troubles and tribulations in this worldly life we should never lose faith in our ultimate goal viz: the nityakaiṅkarya at His feet here, everywhere and at all times. (ingum, engum ekkālamum).

In the Nācciār Tirumoli Āṇḍal imagines herself to be a milkmaid building houses in sand with other maids. Lord Kṛṣṇa comes there, breaks those houses and plays with them giving them immense joy. 40 Āṇḍal, thus, enjoys mentally her communion with God. In another situation Āṇḍal visualises a scene from Bhāgavata in which Kṛṣṇa took away the clothes of the gopis of Brindāvan while they were bathing in the Yamunā. 41 The gopis repeatedly beg Kṛṣṇa to give them back their clothes. Āṇḍal too repeatedly appeals to Kṛṣṇa. Next, this experience as a cowherdess did not satisfy Āṇḍal and so she assumes the role of a bride to get united with the Lord. She prays to the arcā deity by name Kūḍal (at Madurai in South India) to help her to secure union with God. 42 These prayers did not help Āṇḍal to unite with the Lord. Hence she seeks the help of the cloud, the

40 Nācciār Tirumoli, II.9
41 Ibid., III, 1
42 Ibid., IV, 1
cuckoo bird etc; to be her messenger and report to her Lord her pathetic condition.\textsuperscript{43} She gets a small amount of solace from the dream she had about her wedding with Lord Krṣṇa. She narrates to her friend all the details of her dream wedding in which her Lord, the groom, surrounded by thousands of elephants walked along the street decorated with festoons and golden pots filled with water in front of the houses.\textsuperscript{44} Young beautiful ladies welcomed Him with pots of oil lamps. Amidst the sound of the beating of drums and blowing of conch Krṣṇa held her hand. Whilst the priests uttered the mantras Krṣṇa went round the sacrificial fire holding her hand. She also dreamt that she, seated on an elephant along with Krṣṇa, went in a procession round the streets.\textsuperscript{45} This Tirumoli by the name ‘Vāraṇam Āyiram’ is one of the most romantic and celebrated works of Āṇḍāḷ and a class by itself. It is an essential part of Sri Vaiṣṇava liturgy, chanted during wedding rituals even to-day along with Vedic mantras. To Āṇḍāḷ this dream serves as a good omen foretelling what is going to happen in the future. It gave some consolation to her mind yearning for a union with her Lord. According to the legend, her adoptive father Periyālvār consented to take her in wedding dress to the idol and when the bridal procession eventually arrived at the sanctum of Ranganātha, Āṇḍāḷ emerged from the palanquin and after embracing the feet of her beloved Lord, merged into the divine iconic-incarnation; the Lord extended His hands and took her in loving embrace, where Āṇḍāḷ disappeared as if in the air. Her union with the Lord, after much agony and anguish, had been finally consummated. Rāmānuja, while interpreting the Brahma Sutra in his Sri Bhāṣya says that, just as what we see in the real world with our physical eyes is true, what we see in our

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., V. 5.6
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., VI.1
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., VI.5.6,7,10
dreams is also true. The effects of punya and pāpa (good and bad deeds) come as experience in the dream as well as in real life. The experience in dreams are creations of God to give us a momentary opportunity to experience good or bad results according to one’s past karma. Accordingly, we can say that Āndāl is made to experience the joy of her wedding with her Lord. As Srinivasachari puts it, “We have a unique type of mysticism in respect of Āndāl whose ardent craving for union with Lord Kṛṣṇa culminates in her spiritual marriage in the philosophical sense of the individual soul being reunited with God.”

The Bridal Mysticism of Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār

The Bridal Mysticism of Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār emerges from the context of the love of the gopis for Kṛṣṇa in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, with the Āḻvār assuming the role of the consort of God (nāyaki). The passionate love of the gopis becomes the model or the symbol of the highest and purest form of love to God. The ardent and selfless love of the gopis rises spontaneously, making them renounce even their husbands and homes for the sake of Kṛṣṇa. The Gopi’s love for Kṛṣṇa is given by Sandilya as “the perfect example of devotion, which is both felt in the heart and single-aimed.” The Āḻvār also, like the gopis, intoxicated by divine love, has no other thought than that of God. There is another side to this mysticism of Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār which is that, his love is triggered by the bewitching beauty of the icons in the temples of Viṣṇu, which is considered to be one form of divine manifestation (arcāvatāra). The beauty of the icons is one of the important aspects of God, that draws a devotee to His presence and sustains one’s devotion. The Lord out of His grace and love for his

46 S Bh III.2.1
47 S.M.Srinivasachari, op.cit., p.208
48 Sandilya-sūtram, 1.1.1, trans. N. L. Sinha, Allahabad, 1918
devotee makes Himself ‘accessible’ in iconic form to redeem them. By worshipping Him in the temples, one can overcome the bondage of samsāra. The icon is real and not symbolic for the Ālvār. The Ālvār, in his Peria Tirumoli speaks thus:

My Lord who in the past assumed the body of a boar (Varāha) and rescued the earth submerged in the ocean, who killed the wicked demon Ravana by using the bow and arrow, is stationed here in Badari on the bank of Ganga.⁴⁹

After enjoying the vibhava, the Ālvār enjoys the arcaavatara also in between. While pointing out the unique quality of the Ālvār, in his commentary on the above verse Periavacan Pillai gives a wonderful example. He says that the prince needs ghee for every handful of food. Likewise Tirumāṅgai Ālvār needs arcaavatara every now and then. Other Ālvār’s talk about supremacy of the Lord in paratva and accessibility in arca. But Tirumāṅgai saw everything in the arcaavatāra itself.

After witnessing the beauty of the arcāmurti, and singing his glorious attributes and marvellous feats the Ālvār wants to have samśleṣa with Him, the Puruṣottama and for that he assumes the role of Parakālanāyakī. The Nāyakī pines for the samśleṣa but as the Lord does not appear, suffers from the loss of appetite, change of colour, loss of weight etc: It is here that the Ālvār takes the role of the mother of the Nāyakī. The mother of Parakālanāyakī speaks about her daughter wondering as to who has caused this pitiable condition to her. The mother watches her daughter, the Nāyakī, and her behaviour and wonders as to what happened to her. She comes to know that her daughter is in love with a

⁴⁹ PTM 1.4.1
Nayaka but does not know who he is. She is sure that it is not the transcendental God, the Vībhavāvatara, the Vyūha-mūrti, or the Antaryāmi. It must be an arcāvatāramūrti and to be sure it must be none other than the Lord of Tirukkaṇṇapuram because the mother feels that He only can bring such a transformation in her daughter. The Mother says:

He came like a big black bull and said to my daughter: "Come! Come!"

He took her by the hand which white bracelets adorned, and they abandoned the mother who gave birth to her.

Gone away, they must now have entered Tiruvali beautiful with its fields and marshy tracts.\footnote{PTM 3.7.1}

Here Viṣṇu of the local temple is envisaged as active. "This is an altogether new type of bhakti", says Hardy, "it is not the passionless bhakti-yoga of the Gīta, but an impassioned, often ecstatic abandon to Viṣṇu's beauty and modelled according to the love of a girl towards her lover."\footnote{Friedhelm Hardy, op. cit., p. 137}

The mother is worried about her daughter’s condition. She consults a fortune-teller who diagnoses the cause of this pitiable condition of her daughter as the 'lord dark as the rain cloud'. The mother expresses her concern about her daughter to her neighbours and friends. The mother, more than being worried about the ailment of her daughter, is concerned about what the cure might be. The mother wants to pacify her daughter and distract her attention by giving her favourite dolls and seeking her to play with them. But the daughter hates the very sight of them and throws them away. Her large beautiful eyes are filled with tears. She who used to sleep on her mother’s lap now refuses to do so.
The god is of course both the cause of her ailment and its cure but having
given her the terrible disease of unrequited love there is no promise that
he will also bring its cure. The mother is concerned about her daughter’s
loss of innocence and childhood. Her daughter has lost her modesty fully
aware that Laksmī, the Consort of Visnu is inseparable from her husband.
The mother speaks:

O Lord of Tiruvīdavendai! This maiden is no doubt aware of the Goddess
Śrī who possesses beautiful face like that of the shining moon, who is
born in the milky ocean along with the nectar, who is ever youthful, and
who resides in your chest, but yet she cannot give up her attachment to
you. Please tell me what you intend to do with this girl who possesses
lovely eyes and charm and who is also deeply devoted to you.⁵²

The experience of God which falls into the lot of the mystic is one of joy
and calm which could be described as the milder aspect of mysticism.
The disappointment which the mystic feels when he could not approach
God or when he/she does not have the vision of God embedded in him
shows his sufferings of pain of the negative kind. These aspects of
mysticism as experienced by the mystics continually leave indelible
impressions in them making them recount their experiences with joy at
times and with sorrow at others.

Parakālanāyakī speaks to her friend of being seduced by the beauty of the
beloved without first being aware of his divinity feared that he might be
some god. She says:

O cousin! He came and stood before me like the two, with a powerful
bow as his companion. His dark, fragrant tresses hung low over his

⁵² PTM 2.7,1
shoulders, his fish-like earrings dangled flashily on either side. His hands were like red roses, his lips, eyes, and feet too were the same. Seeing him thus we feared that he was some god (on earth.) Then she adds:

Darting furtive glances at us and then feigning shyness he made passes through songs. In a trice my eyes and my heart ran and fell at his feet. My bangles loosened, my waistband fell. His fish-like earrings and his four shoulders loomed large before me. "How far away is my Lord's abode", I asked. "Is this not my beautiful Tiruvāli?", he replied.

This reply conveys the meaning that his abode is not far away and that he is standing right in front of her. But in her stupidity she failed to recognise him. She thought only of the Lord's paratva and not his saulabhya and sausilya with the result of missing a golden opportunity to have samsleśa with God.

The Ālvār exhibits his pathetic condition in several ways. In an amorous mood he assumes the garb of a forlorn maid deserted by the all powerful Lord. Parakālanāyakī asks her mind, whom she considers as her closest friend, to rise and start towards Pullāṇi, a coastal town in Tamilnādu. It is in the Tamil culture, the coastal area called neitalnilam is the appropriate place for the separated lovers to come together. The Ālvār nāyakī has also chosen a coastal town as her destination. Parakālanāyakī tells her mind that there is no use in pining over the Lord any more and that she is convinced of giving up her self-imposed torture. She says:

The worst sinner I am! Why should I torture myself? (O Mind! Rise! We shall go and bow to the holy town of Pullāṇi where resides the Lord who

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53 TND 21
54 TND 22
had engaged me under the shade of blossomed trees that could even overwhelm the prestigious golden colour. He conquered me and departed me taking away my beautiful complexion.\(^{55}\)

She decides to take an aggressive stand and asks her mind, “What is the use of brooding and remaining here! We shall prostrate. Arise!”\(^{56}\)

Again she asks:

O Mind! By doing what can I forget Him? He came after me and left me after saying, “I will not leave you any more.” Come on, we shall go to His place, the Pullāni town and pray.”\(^{57}\)

She goes on to say:

The sinner I am! My heart burns just at recollecting the meeting we had. He decorated my hair with beautiful and sweet-smelling flowers and after uttering these loving words, “If we part, I will not survive “, He left. O Mind! We shall bow towards Pullāni, Arise!”\(^{58}\)

Parakālanāyakī is frustrated and tells her mind:

O Mind! Why should I suffer by not getting sleep night and day? Anyway he won’t be coming. Therefore let us go to Tiruppullāni where the white waves of the sea galloping like a white horse pushes pearls along with the white sand to the shore. Let us go.\(^{59}\)

\(^{55}\) PTM 9,3,1
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 9,3,2
\(^{57}\) Ibid., XI,3,3
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 9,3,5
\(^{59}\) Ibid., XI,3,7
Addressing a female friend and sharing with her the agonies of love and betrayal by the Beloved, the Ālvār uses the aspects of nature and interweaves these images with the mythology and classical form of love-poems of Tamil literature. Parakālanāyakī’s friend asks her whether there was any witness for the samśleśa she had with the Lord so that they could take him with them to her Lord and convince Him. For that the Nāyakī replies:

Alas! There was no witness. Yes, but a bee was present – it was a bee that always sucks the honey from the tulsi garland that He wears. The friend asks whether the bee would go with them as a witness to which the Nāyakī replies:

The bee always thought of his own pleasure and never bothered about my unhappiness. And it never occurred to me to have a witness for what had happened between me and the Lord.\(^60\)

While expressing anguish born out of separation from the Lord, the Ālvār often seeks to convey his feelings of grief through birds and objects of nature as messengers. This is a poetical strategy quite common in kavya literature of which Kalidasa’s Meghadūta is the finest example. According to tradition these objects employed by and other Ālvārs represent the spiritual preceptors who act as mediators between God and the individual soul. These preceptors assist the faithful by pleading on their behalf to secure divine grace.

The Nāyakī appeals to a bee:

\(^{60}\textit{Ibid.}, IX.3.4\)
O bee! It is no use if you merely blow me the essence gathered from the wild flowers grown in the fields, instead, please touch me with the fragrance of the tulsi decorating the crown of the deity of Kannapuram.\textsuperscript{61}

In the great epic Ramāyana Lord Rāma sends a monkey as a messenger to Sitā, His beloved wife. Here the Nāyakī is requesting a small bee to be her messenger to the Lord of Tiruvalundur, who has stolen her heart and tell Him about her. Before giving the assignment she wonders how can the bee, sitting happily on a flower-bed with his mate and sucking honey from the flower be enjoying such happiness when she herself is undergoing so much suffering caused by separation from her beloved. The Nāyakī bewails her condition by saying that she is so depressed that she does not like flowers, does not get any sleep and has lost her complexion. She tells the bee that she is willing to fall at its feet if only he will tell her Lord about her. She goes on to say that the bee need not even tell her name to the Lord, but only say 'a girl sent me to you' and He will understand who the 'girl' is. And this girl’s love is not for His paratva, or for His vyūha, or His vibhavāvatāra, or for the antaryāmi but for an arcāmūrti alone who deserves all kinds of bhakti. The bee’s query as to how he could recognise her Lord, the answer is that he can easily recognise who her Lord is, by looking at His eyes which are beautiful like lotus and full of love for her. The bee expresses its doubt whether it can go anywhere near her lover who is so great and who is the Lord of the nitya-sūris. Parakālanaṇyakī answers that He is easily accessible and during Krṣṇāvatāra He controlled the cattle and now in Tiruvalundur, as arca-mūrti He controls the people who are like cattle.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 8.4.8
\textsuperscript{62} TND 26
Parakālanāyakī first sent a bee as her messenger but she could not wait till he came back. Now she sends a crane as the messenger. She admires the crane's beautiful red legs and at the same time feels sad that she has to send him walking to carry her message. She entreats the crane to start immediately to Tirukkannapuram and meet her Lord at the temple there because, she says that her condition is as pitiable as that of Sitā, who was separated from Lord Rāma. Just like Sitā who could not live without Rāma even for a minute our Nāyakī will feel like a fish out of water without seeing the arcamūrti. Similarly her Lord also, like Rāma who could not be without Sitā for a moment, will not be able to sustain Himself without her. The crane asks Parakālanāyakī how he will recognise her Lord. The Nāyakī replies that His eyes will reveal all the love He has for her and he could know Him as soon as he sees His eyes which made her crazy. She tells the crane also that he need not mention her name to the Lord and asks him just to tell the Lord that it is a girl who is greatly in love with Him. The word 'love' would suffice to make Him understand the rest. She further tells the crane that her love is not like that of all the others. It is not like that of the mumukṣus (desirous of mokṣa) and not like that of the nitya-sūris. The Nāyakī promises a good reward for the stork if he fulfils this mission. She will provide a pond full of fat fish which he can eat to his heart's content along with his wife. She asks the crane to stay for ever with his mate which will make her happy and forget her loneliness. The poet speaks to the stork in the guise of Parakālanāyakī:

O Stork with lovely red feet! Go now itself to my beloved
Lord of Tirukkannapuram
And convey my love to Him.
If you run this errand,
All these rich pastures will be yours for ever!
And I will let you catch and eat all the fish you want!
You and your mates can come and live here in joyous
Happiness!
Nothing will give me greater satisfaction.63

The Saint becomes just like a young woman who suffers greatly after
union with her beloved and now being separated from him cannot bear
the separation. In her voice he makes known to the Lord his condition.
The lover does not come and so she laments. The climax of the Ālvār's
mystic disposition is displayed in the following dramatic manner:

The night has set in before the Ālvār could reach the holy shrine of
Tirukkaṇṇapuram. The Ālvār is becoming increasingly impatient to meet
the deity. The Lover does not come. The agony caused by the delay in
seeing the deity increases and unable to bear it he resorts to the
contemplation of the anguish suffered by the Gopīs during the period
when they were made to wait for the return of Kṛṣṇa in the evening from
the field. He speaks in the voice of the Maid:

I lost my mind when I began to think of that person who manifested
Himself in Mathura to release His Father imprisoned in the jail, as I am
now struggling to sustain the life until I receive His grace. The moonlight
which normally unites the lovers burns me with heat and the cool breeze
blowing on my breast torments me continuously.64

In the words of another maid he says:

63 Ibid.,27
64 PTM VIII 5.1
My mind was drawn away the moment I developed a desire for that garland which decorates the chest of Kṛṣṇa who has the complexion of dark blue cloud. I do not find any one offering me help, the moving sun in the sky is disappearing, the universe is swept by silence, the directions cannot be recognised. I do not know what I should do now.

In the words of another Gopi he speaks:

Whatever he has done to me is the effect of his magical spell. My bangles slipped off from my hands. Would He who mercilessly extracted the life of Pūtana ever show any sympathy to this modest woman? My mind still craves to listen to the melodious sound of the flute.

In another maid’s voice he states:

The Lord who wielded the bow to destroy the entire Lanka surrounded by the ocean has not yet returned, the sun shedding its bright rays has disappeared clamping darkness all over the earth; as a sinner I am unable to sleep in His absence; every moment is like an epoch to me. I do not know how to endure this suffering.65

As soon as the Āḻvār enters the precincts of the holy shrine of Tirukkannapuram, he feels the presence of the divinity and expresses his delight mystically in many ways. He beckons his fellow-devotees to join him in the worship of the deity. The Āḻvār glorifies the shrine as the Supreme Being’s chosen permanent abode. He tells his fellow-devotees that the deity in this holy shrine is none other than the Supreme Being who incarnated Himself as Mātṛya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasimha, Parasurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma. He expresses his immense joy

65 Ibid., VIII 5.2.3.6
in being a subservient devotee (*sesi*) and doing *kaiñkarya* to the Lord of Kannapuram.

Parakālanāyakī realizes that the Lord is far away from her. As there is no upper limit to His *paratva* there is no lower limit to his lowliness. The *Nāyakī* pessimistically and emphatically proclaims that she, who is like a dog, will think upon the god eternally, suggesting that union is impossible and separation inevitable. The poet who insists upon his unworthiness at the very outset of his *Periātirumoli* is a female, possessed by the god, but ultimately convinced of her unworthiness for such a blessing.

In the Ālvār's words:

The Lord of cowherd lass (*Nappinai*), who once churned, and then bridged the ocean is my Lord. He killed the demon king and all his kin with arrows shot from his mighty bow, victoriously. He lifted the mountain (*Govardhana*). He resides forever in fresh water-fed Tiruvinnagaram. He is the Lord of cool Tirukkudantai. He is the eternal one. I am as low as a dog who enters wherever the door is open. Me, who is mean like this should desire him! I sincerely wish the relationship between Him and me should continue by God's grace.\(^{66}\)

We learn from his biographical account that he attained *mokṣa* at Tirukkuṟuṅgudi, a holy shrine n extreme South India where a monument has been erected in memory of the Ālvār having entered into a *samādhi*.

Yamunācārya says that the Ālvār’s love expresses the experience of a constant companionship with God in a state of delirious, rapturous reciprocation of ravishing love. He was immersed in the fathomless depth

\(^{66}\text{TND 29}\)
of love, and was in the greatest danger of becoming unconscious and falling into a stupor - like one under the influence of a narcotic. Nammālvār, however, was in a state of urgent pursuit after God. He was thus overcome with a sense of loneliness and unconscious of his self. He was not utterly intoxicated. The energy flowing from a mind full and strong with the ardent expectation of meeting the bridegroom and beloved companion sustained him and kept him alive.  

The Theological significance of the Bridal Mysticism of Tirumaṅgai Ālvār

The individual soul or the jīvatman which is sustained by Paramātman belongs to Him and exists solely for His pleasure. None other than God is the most enjoyable person. There is such a loving relationship between the longing soul and God that in spite of the pain and anguish God gives the soul, it yearns more and more to be closer to Him and get united with Him. As far as God is concerned He is more eager than the soul to get it back because the soul is His property. This mutual love results in the game of love devised and played by the divine Artist to release the jīva from the fetters of karma and make him a mukta (liberated soul). The reciprocity of love leads to saṁśleṣa and viśleṣa.

The symbolism of marriage envisages the soul’s secret longings and self-giving joys. During viśleṣa the mystic pines and in saṁśleṣa the soul enjoys a momentary joy of union or ecstasy. “This opposition”, Srinivasachari says, “is known as the Mystic Paradox and its object is the transmutation of the earthly self into the godly by a process of spiritual alchemy ---till he becomes one with the Beloved and enjoys the eternal

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67 Bhagavad-Visavam Book VI, p.2865; also Divine Wisdom, pp. 130-31
bliss of such union. The Absolute takes a bewitching form as the arcā deity to attract the devotee to itself and naturally Tirumāṅgai Ālvār is enchanted by the beauty of the Lord and falls in love with Him. Assuming himself to be a bride and the Lord as the Bridegroom, after many moments of saṁśleṣa and viśleṣa finally gets united with Him.

Bridal Mysticism in Judaism

Bridal mysticism has never been in the mainstream of Jewish religious practice, although it was and is practised by those seeking the experience of union with God. This practice has a solid theological basis, supported by the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Isaiah says: “For your Maker is your husband, the Lord Almighty is his name.”69 “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”70 The Bible’s most striking use of bridal symbolism is found in the Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs. This book is comprised of a passionate, metaphorical conversation between God and a human soul. In this dialogue, God is represented as the bridegroom and soul the bride. As it opens, the bride says to her beloved:

Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth, for Your love is more delightful than wine.

Pleasing is the fragrance of Your perfumes; Your name is like perfume poured out.

No wonder the maidens love You!

Take me away with You – let us hurry!

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68 P.N.Srinivasachari, The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita, The Adyar Library, 1943, p.448

69 Isa 64:5
70 Ibid., 62:5
Let the King bring me into His chambers.  
Later, the bride describes a tender moment:  
He has taken me to the banquet hall,  
and His banner over me is love.  
Strengthen me with raisins,  
refresh me with apples,  
for I am faint with love.  
His left arm is under my head,  
and His right arm embraces me.  
The bride, finding her lover missing one night, searches for her bridegroom and returns with him to the bridal chamber:  
All night long on my bed  
I looked for the one my heart loves;  
I looked for Him but did not find Him.  
I will get up now and go about the city,  
through its streets and squares;  
I will search for the one my heart loves.  
So I looked for Him but did not find Him.  
The watchmen found me  
as they made their rounds in the city.  
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”  
Scarcely had I passed them  
when I found the one my heart loves.  
I held Him and would not let Him go  
till I had brought Him to my mother’s house,  
to the room of the one who conceived me.  

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71 Song 1:2-4  
72 Song. 2:4-6
The bridegroom later sings praising the dazzling beauty of his bride, using surprisingly sensuous language:
How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead.
You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.
How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!
Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon.\textsuperscript{74}

**Foundations of Bridal Mysticism in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul addressed the faithful of Corinth as follows: “...I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”\textsuperscript{75} In the Book of Revelations, bridal symbolism is employed in this metaphoric verse: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”\textsuperscript{76} Numerous passages in the Bible bear witness to an idea that in the same way that man and woman are to become ‘one flesh’, human beings should become the faithful spouse of the divine bridegroom.

\textsuperscript{73} *Song*. 3:1-4
\textsuperscript{74} *Song*. 4:1, 9-11
\textsuperscript{75} *2 Cor* 11:2
\textsuperscript{76} *Rev* 19:7
Bridal Mysticism and the Carmelite Mystics

The term mystical marriage was used by John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila to designate the highest state of Christian perfection attainable in this life. Spiritual marriage denotes the state of a human soul living intimately united to God through grace and love. It is understood as a ‘transforming’ union between soul and God, requiring extraordinary graces. The ‘transforming’ union is a permanent state higher than and distinct from the transitory spiritual betrothal. Mystical marriage constitutes a consummate union of love, total possession, a fusion of ‘lives’, in which the soul is made one with God, made divine, by participation, without losing its identity.

In ‘The Interior Castle’ Teresa bids us to consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places. She then leads us through the castle of the soul until we come to the seventh area, which is the dwelling place of Christ, the spouse of the soul. It is here that the mystical marriage is consummated. "When our Lord is pleased," she says, "to have pity on this soul that he has already taken spiritually as his spouse, because of what it suffers and has suffered through its desires, he brings it, before the spiritual marriage is consummated, into his dwelling place, which is the seventh."  

The Bridal Mysticism of St Bernard

St Bernard’s mysticism falls under the category of “Love mysticism” which emphasizes love as the means of experiencing God and uniting

with God. The Song of Song of Solomon, for Bernard is divinely inspired, in it King Solomon “sang the praise of Christ and the Church, of the gift of holy love, and the mystery of eternal union with God.” Erotically charged, it has a literal as well as an allegorical meaning and has been interpreted in different ways. Origen, one of the commentators of the 3rd Century and also the father of allegorical interpretation, in the prologue of his commentary says, “This book seems to me an epithalamium, that is, a wedding song, written by Solomon, in the form of a play, which he recited in the character of a bride who was being married and burned with heavenly love for her bridegroom, who is the Word or God.” Bernard endorses this view by saying, “It is a wedding song indeed, expressing the embrace of chaste and joyful souls, the concord of their lives and mutual exchange of their love.” In his symbolic interpretation of the Song of Songs Bernard continued the tradition of Origen.

Symbolism in the Song of Songs

The focus of the Song is the theme of love and the bride, both the Church and the individual soul and the bridegroom remain the central characters of the play. The sermons on the Song of Songs begin with a longing for intimacy expressed in the first verse of the Song of Songs. In fact the central theme of the sermons itself is the intimate love between the Bride and the Bridegroom, between the soul and Christ. Why does the Song of Songs use the image of the bride and the bridegroom? The reason is that they are lovers and the most intimate of lovers. Bernard explains why the

79 Harvey Egan, An Anthology of Christian Mysticism, Published by The Liturgical Press, USA, p.25
80 G.R.Evans, op.cit, Sermon 1 : VI.11, p.215
relationship of the bride and the bridegroom is held to be the best among all other relationships. The reason is that fear motivates a slave towards his master, desire for gain that of a worker toward his employer, knowledge that of a pupil toward his teacher, respect that of a son toward his father. But the one that asks for a kiss is a lover. No names can be found as sweet as those in which the Word and the soul exchange affections, as the Bridegroom and the Bride. For they hold everything in common, “They share one inheritance, one table, one house, one bed, one flesh. For this she leaves her father and her mother and clings to her husband and the two are one flesh (Gn 2:24). She is also commanded to forget her people and her father’s house so that he may desire her beauty (Ps 44:1).”\(^8\) The Bridegroom is not only loving, He is love itself. The bride also stands at the highest degree of love. In her love for the Bridegroom she abounds and he is content. He seeks nothing else of her and she has nothing else to give. It is for this that He is the Bridegroom and she is the Bride. This belongs wholly to the wedded couple. Bernard’s mysticism, being a love mysticism, it is quite natural that it has love as its predominant theme. As Evans aptly puts it, “Bernard’s God is huge and present and compelling, and, he ought to be the focus of the most gigantic of passions; that is what he demands and what he rewards. At the same time he is gentle and tender and woos a love from his ‘bride’, the soul, which is freely given and infinitely pleasurable.”\(^8\)

**Meaning of ‘Kiss’ according to Bernard**

The ‘kiss’ and the ‘kisses of the mouth’ have, according to Bernard, certain allegorical meaning. For Bernard, the Bride is the thirsting soul

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\(^8\) G.R. Evans, *op. cit., Sermons*, 7, 2, p.231

\(^8\) G.R. Evans, *Great Medieval Thinkers, Bernard of Clairvaux*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p.25
and the kiss is a metaphor for union with God. In Bernard’s apt words, “the happy kiss is a wonderful and astonishing honour, which is not simply mouth pressed to mouth, but God who unites with the human being.”\textsuperscript{84} The picture of God bending towards humans in order to meet them in the kiss of the mouth simply depicts God’s forgiveness, grace, peace and reconciliation in Christ.

When the Bride says, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,” a question arises, “how can a kiss kiss? The participated kiss is called “the kiss of the kiss.” Bernard says, “Felicitous, however, is the kiss of participation that enables us not only to know God but to love the Father, who is never fully known until he is perfectly loved.”\textsuperscript{85} The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the mystical contact with God such as Paul experienced when he was caught up to the third heaven. “Things which no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man were revealed to Paul by God through His Spirit, that is, through him who is the kiss of His mouth.”\textsuperscript{86} What the bride really desires and asks for is to be “filled with the grace of this threefold knowledge (of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) filled to the utmost capacity of mortal flesh---Furthermore, this revelation which is made through the Holy Spirit, not only conveys the light of knowledge, but also lights the fire of love.”\textsuperscript{87} He is in truth the spirit of wisdom and insight, who, “like the bee carrying its burden of wax and honey, is fully equipped with the power both of kindling the light of knowledge and infusing the delicious nurture of grace.”\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Sermon} 2,3
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}, 8,9
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.}, 8,7
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, 8,5
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibid.}, 8,6
Bernard carefully avoids expressions that would give the impression of pantheism in the matter of ‘kisses’ also by insisting that the spousal relationship with the Church and believers is not formed at the Incarnation, but when the risen Christ breathes the kiss, the Spirit, on the infant Church, imparting the gifts of the Spirit. In this context Bernard does not cite ‘the two shall be one flesh’ which will sound pantheistic, but instead states that the one who clings to God is one Spirit. He asks, if marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why should not a spiritual union be even more efficacious in joining two in one spirit?

**Spiritual Marriage**

Spiritual marriage is an allegory between God and the soul in the highest kind of mystical contemplation. In describing the experience of union Bernard uses the image of spiritual marriage between the soul and the Word. The idea of marriage is announced by Bernard from the first sermon on the Song of Songs: “The Canticle is a nuptial song. The chaste and joyous embrace of minds.”

When she loves perfectly the soul is wedded to the Word. According to Bernard it is a spiritual contract, a holy marriage. It is an embrace where identity of will makes two one in spirit. In Bernard’s words, “Complete and perfect marriage consists in the exchange of love. It is nothing other than love, holy and chaste, full of sweetness and delight, love utterly serene and true, mutual and deep, which joins two beings, not in one flesh but in one spirit making them no longer two but one.”

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89 Sermon 1.11
90 Ibid., 83.6
Carnal Love to Spiritual Love

However union with Christ does not begin at this level. It is preceded by a carnal love of the humanity of Christ which according to St Bernard, is a necessary stage on the path of union. He says that the love of the heart is in a certain sense, carnal because our hearts are attracted most toward the humanity of Christ and the things he did or commanded while in the flesh and that is why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. Bernard says, “God wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humility, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.”91 Carnal love of Christ remains the starting point of Bernard’s spiritual and mystical life. Loving him carnally leads to spiritual love of his divinity. Bernard goes on to show how love of Christ, at first carnal, progresses when it becomes rational, and is perfected when it becomes spiritual love, in which the images of the Sacred Humanity no longer forms part. Another thing to note is that this emphasis on love for the body of Jesus Christ is historically important in that it made Bernard a crucial figure in the medieval development of affective devotion, that is devotion to Christ, the Man.

Presence of God

God can be seen by many ways. In heaven we can see Him face to face, as He is, on earth we see Him in His creation, to the saints and prophets He revealed Himself through visions and voices. But these were all exterior manifestations. God was only outside the soul He enlightened.

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91 Ibid., 20.6
“But he sometimes deigns to enter the soul that purified by desire and consecrated by love, prepares him a place. The soul then experiences God’s presence from within. This is known as the ‘visit’. Bernard categorically asserts that God cannot be seen as He is. “God now appears as He wishes, not as He is. No wise man, no saint, no prophet is able to see Him as He is nor has been able in this mortal body.”92 Again, “I would not say that He appears as He is, although He does not manifest Himself as something altogether other than that which He is.”93 This is because the essence of God is always unknowable. For Bernard, the Bridegroom will not present Himself, even in passing, to every soul; but only to one who is proved to be a “worthy bride by intense devotion, vehement desire and the sweetest affection. And the Word who comes to visit will be clothed in beauty, in every aspect a Bridegroom.”94 Only after constant prayer and longing will this visit happen. God comes infrequently, but the desire for Him should always be there. From time to time, says Bernard, God takes the soul to Himself and delights it in His loving ecstasy. The cleaving of the mind to God brings about an intoxicating joy that quiets and stills the mind’s activity. “The state of a soul inflamed with such love that forgetting her fear and reverence for God, she dares to long for the kiss of the mystic union.”95 Gilson explains what Bernard means by ardent love: “Ardent love is love at that degree of intensity which brings forgetfulness of the infinite Majesty of God, and a

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92 Sermon 31.2, Cuthbert Butler, Western Mysticism, London, p.119
93 Sermon 31.7; ibid., p.120
94 Sermon 32.3
bold desire to enter into union.” Bernard frequently compares this ardent love to a state of inebriation.

Contemplation

Bernard likens contemplation to the sleep of the soul in the arms of God. The Word, the Bridegroom of the soul comes and goes as he pleases. Familiarity results in bravery and the soul develops a taste for the Word that has liberated her from all other distractions. ‘Taste’ refers to the sweetness that is experienced in the perception of the divine. “The soul slumbering in contemplation dreams of God; for through a mirror and in an enigma and not face to face, does it behold Him; and it warms with the love of something conjectured rather than seen, momentarily, as if in the flash of passing spark and touched scantily and barely.” The soul is full of light and operates with intense activity. While the time lasts she may look into the hidden secrets of truth, on whose memory she will feast as soon as she returns to herself.

There she “beholds things invisible and hears things unutterable, of which it is not lawful for man to speak.” Cuthbert Butler observes, “When the Lord comes as a consuming fire, His presence is understood in the power by which the soul is changed and by the love by which it is inflamed; when all stain of sin and rust of vices have been consumed in that fire, and the conscience has been purified and calmed, there ensues a sudden and unwonted enlargement of mind and the inpouring of light illuminating the intellect, either for knowledge of Scripture or

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96 Sermon 7.3; Ibid., p.139
97 Sermon 18.6; Cuthbert Butler, op.,Cf., p.120
98 Cor II,9-10
comprehension of mysteries.”  

99. The transiency of contemplation, its short duration, the recoil of the soul after an act of contemplation, and the alternations of the presence and absence of the experience (which is known as mystical paradox); all these well-known phenomena form part of the features of Bernard’s contemplation also. God’s visit does not last long but its effects remain. The withdrawal of the Bridegroom’s presence causes the soul much suffering, which lasts until he comes again. Alternating throughout life between union with and separation from her Spouse the soul enjoys the joy of his coming and the sadness of his going away. “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again.”  

100. The Bride pines away with love and is in cruel torment, having enjoyed the union with the Beloved, she finds it more painful to be separated from him. The Bridegroom’s slowness to return causes her bitter affliction and his absence only aggravates her desire and sorrow. However, she hopes, he may come soon to give her joy, but until he returns she is consumed with longing. The Bride, according to Bernard, is still a soul thirsting for God whose aim is to teach thirsting souls how to seek the one by whom they are themselves sought.

As Michael Casey puts it, “In Bernard’s view, the basis of the human beings’ yearning for the Absolute is the nature with which the Creator has endowed him. It is because he has been made to God’s image – with the natural affinity with his Maker – that the human being cannot be wholly engaged or satisfied by realities in his own order of existence. Thus he is

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99. Sermon 57: 7,8; Cuthbert Butler, Op., Ctt., P. 105
100. John 4,13
driven by a natural tendency to transcend his own order and to seek the divine.\textsuperscript{101}

The Bridal Mysticism of Tirumangai Ālvār and St Bernard of Clairvaux: A Comparative Study

Tirumaṅgai Ālvār, as an individual soul (jīvātman) exhibits his utter dependability, unshakable faith and strong conviction that God alone is the most enjoyable person. These characteristics cannot be personified more aptly and efficiently than as a consort of God. This is the reason why Tirumaṅgai Ālvār chose to assume the role of a nāyakē to the Supreme Lord as nāyaka and pour out his heart through mystic songs, praising the glory of God. The Ālvār was greatly influenced by the Bhāgavata Purāṇa which says, "May the Lord of Śrī, the goddess of prosperity and beauty, the Lord of sacrifices, the Lord of all created beings----be gracious to me,"\textsuperscript{102} meaning Lord Viṣṇu to be the husband of all the souls in the universe.

For St Bernard, love was the sole object of the Scriptures. His theology is the notion that love created us out of love to share love itself and redeemed us after we had sinned. The Song of Songs, basically, is a love song in the Old Testament, which has long held a privileged place in the mystical theology and monastic tradition of the Church. It received significant attention because it was a wedding song. For Medieval interpreters wedding day was a threshold between betrothal and sexual union which was a reflection of the life of the monastics - a life in between this world and the next, anticipation and fulfillment. Thus wedding day was symbolic of the monastic life. In the Introduction to the

\textsuperscript{101} Michael Casey, A thirst for God, Kalamazoo, 1988.p.131
\textsuperscript{102} Bhāg P II.4.20
Song of Songs by the Church Fathers, it is said to be a love story between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us and wills our love in return. This love between soul and God which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus) where the intimacy of love is specially expressed.

Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār as Parakala Nayaki

The voluminous Peria Tirumōḻi and the two smaller poems, Śiria Tirumaḏal and Peria Tirumaḏal of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār, give a vivid picture of the mystic experience of the Āḻvār in the role of the consort of God (nāyakī). As nāyakī the Āḻvār pours out his devotional love to God, who is the nāyaka. As nāyaki he gives expression to his craving for communion with God. All the psychological states of agony, joy, distress, defiance etc: of the nāyaki are conveyed through the medium of an imaginary mother of the nāyaki because the nāyakī is choked with emotion and not able to speak.

The mystic experience of Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār, first finds its expression in his Peria Tirumoḻi. The increasing desire to see the Lord makes the Āḻvār assume the nāyaki bhāva. He calls himself Parakāla Nāyaki whose mother requests the Lord to show mercy on her darling daughter and asks Him, “Oh my Lord of Tiruvividantai! My darling daughter’s love for you is intense and deep. Goddess Śrī who has the most beautiful, bright, shining golden, moon-like face, who is in her youthful form always, who was born from the huge milky ocean, and who is sweeter than nectar, always resides in the most blissful chest of Your’s. Knowing fully well of Her existence and presence for ever with you, my daughter, is still crazy and desirous of you. This girl is charming and has got the lovely, cool,
flower-like darting eyes. What is your plan for my innocent darling daughter? Please tell me a word.”\(^{103}\)

Again, the mother describes the condition of her daughter, “This girl, whose smile is so charming like that of the seed of pomegranate fruit, has not so far spoken to her friends; nor does she apply sandal paste to her breast; nor does she apply the black eye-line to the eyes; nor does she decorate her long, curly hair with flowers, but all the time she talks about Viṣṇu as the One who measured the whole earth surrounded by the oceans. What is your plan O Lord of Tiruvidaventai, for this girl, who is mad, love-sick and talks all these words of love to You?”\(^{104}\)

**Maḍal Õrtaļ or Riding the Palmyra Stem**

At one stage due to the intensity of love, agony of disappointment and the frustration arising out of helplessness, unworthiness and emptiness the Āḻvār threatens to what is technically known in Tamil poetic convention as *maḍal õrtaļ*.\(^{105}\) Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār adopts this concept to obtain God’s sympathy and thereby his communion with Him. In his *maḍal* poem the Āḻvār threatens to expose the ‘misdeeds’ of the Lord to the public. But before that, Parakāla Nāyaki pours out her heart with passion and longing. He starts the *maḍal* poem by first declaring that ‘kāma’ is the real *puruṣārtha* or goal in life. The other two *puruṣarthas*, viz; *dharma and artha* ultimately result in *kāma* as well. He says, “Thus one enjoys the sweet nectar of the lover’s smiling lips; Is not this the object of

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103 *PTM* II.7.1
104 *Ibid.*, II.7.2
105 Madal õrtaļ was an ancient traditional custom in the Tamil country by means of which a man or a woman of unfulfilled love would try to secure his or her love. The affected person would ride on a palmyra (madal õrtaļ) and expose the misdeeds of the lover to the public in order to get their sympathy and get his or her love fulfilled. The nāyaki exposes the lover to the public with charges of treachery and cruelty.
righteous living? verily this is the object of wealth as well; therefore let us pursue this ‘divine kāma.’”

If this ‘divine kāma’ is not reciprocated, what should one do? Maḍalūrtal (riding the palmyra stem) is a powerful weapon to force the issue, but that is only for men. But Parakāla Nāyaki justifies maḍalūrtal by women on two grounds. One is the unbearable nature of unfulfilled love. She pleads that she is struggling to sustain her life; the moonlight which normally unites the lovers burns her and the cool breeze blowing on her breast torments her.

The second justification deals with the repudiation of the Tamil tradition which forbids maḍalūrtal by women. The Ālvār in his Siria Tirumaḍal states that it was customary for the North Indian women to practise this maḍal (though not in the same manner as in the Tamil tradition). He quotes the examples of Sītā of Rāmāyaṇa who followed her husband out of love and Vāsavadatta of kathāsaritasāgara who went with chained Vatsarāj of broad shoulders in the festooned streets abandoning her numerous friends. Was she criticised for that?

Having established a woman’s right to undertake maḍal, Parakāla Nāyaki expresses her own unbearable passion for the Lord. She says, “The calm sea seems to roar at me; the rays of the sweet moon strikes me like scorching sun; the delightful breeze from the south fragrant with sandalwood flowers, strikes me like harsh heat wave. The sound of the sweet nothings, the two love-birds on a Palmyra tree is exchanging, sound to me like a sword cutting my heart into two pieces----What can I

\[\text{Peria Tirumadhal, x 36, Commentary by P.B. Annangaracharya, www.wordpress.com} \]
\[\text{Peria Tirumadhal, v. 61-62}\]
do? Cupid is taking aim at my heart with his sugarcane bow and flowery arrows. Is there no one to save me from these deadly arrows?\footnote{Ibid., v 83-87}

The agony of separation reaches its zenith here and Parakāla Nāyaki becomes offensive and threatens the Lord, “If my Lord refuses to grant me His grace and union what follows is nothing short of extortion.”\footnote{Ibid., v 147-48}

Tradition says that immediately after Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār finished his last prabandham Lord Nārāyaṇa consummated His eternal embrace with Parakāla Nāyakī (Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār).

**Bernard and the Song of Songs**

No interpretation of the *Song of Songs* has exerted a greater influence on Western Christian spirituality than that of St Bernard of Clairvaux which is considered to be a masterpiece of medieval monastic literature. His sermons are not exegetical, but are meant for divine reading.

The original setting and the text of the *Song of Songs*, according to St Bernard, provide occasions for thinking about the love of God and for devotional reflection. A careful reflective reading of the Song, he observes, will lead the thirsting soul to rediscover the power of love. The *Song of Songs*, for St Bernard, is divinely inspired; in it Solomon sang the praises of Christ and Church, of the gift of holy love and the mystery of eternal union with God. He views the relationship between the Divine Word and the individual soul as a spiritual marriage between the heavenly Bride-groom and the human bride. The text, according to Bernard is in figurative language and is “pre-eminently a marriage song
telling of chaste souls in loving embrace, of their wills in sweet concord, of the mutual exchange of the heart’s affections.”

The focus of the Song is the theme of love and the bride, both the Church and the individual soul and the bridegroom remain the central characters of the play. The focus of Bernard’s bridal mysticism is on the incarnate Christ, and the goal is the ecstatic union of bride and bridegroom; by being united with the incarnate Christ, the community of believers and the individual Christian soul become ultimately united with God. Bernard pointed out that in the Song of Songs this quest for union is expressed by the word ‘kiss.’ The Sermons on the Song of Songs begin with a longing for intimacy expressed in the first verse of the Song of Songs. Bernard starts with the bride’s love song where she boldly proclaims, “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.” In fact the central theme of the Sermons itself is the intimate love between the Bride and the Bridegroom; between the soul and Christ.

Bernard devoted seven sermons to the ‘kiss’ and the ‘kisses of the mouth’ and their allegorical meaning and implications for Christians. The kiss of the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. Christ gives the kiss to his spouse, or bride, whom he fills with his Spirit. The Spirit in turn unites the bride to the Father through the Son. This kiss symbolises the union of the soul with God; this union of the human and the divine shows God reconciling to Himself, all things of His creation; it indicates the presence of the incarnate Word in the soul. The kiss is a “wonderful and

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111 Sermon I. 11
inseparable mingling of the light from above and the mind on which it is shed, which, when it is joined with God, is one spirit with Him.”112

The soul contemplates the mystery of God and experiences his presence through the incarnate, Christ, the Mediator, who brings God’s mercy to man through His kiss. This is the significance of the ‘kiss’. That is why Bernard uses the expression, ‘kisses of his mouth’ and not ‘kiss with his mouth’. For Bernard the bride is the thirsting soul and the kiss is a metaphor for union with God.

Bernard, while expanding the verse ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth’ finds an allegory of ascent to the sweetest mystical union with Christ, the Bridegroom, the mediator between the sinner’s soul and the hidden God. Under the imagery of the three-fold kiss Bernard explains the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of the contemplative life. To receive this kiss, Bernard suggests, we must approach the Bridegroom in the appropriate fashion. How should you, he asks, who were recently covered with filth, touch the holy lips? There is a progression to Bernard, from the kiss of the feet to the kiss of the hands and then to the mouth. The order of the procedure is: “First we cast ourselves at His feet, we weep before the Lord who made us, deploving the evil we have done. Secondly, we reach out for the hand which will lift us up, which will strengthen our trembling knees. Last, when we have obtained that, with many prayers and tears, then perhaps we shall dare to lift our faces to the mouth which is so divinely beautiful, fearing and trembling, not only to gaze upon it, but even to kiss it.”113

112 Ibid., 1,2
113 Ibid., 3,5

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The path to the divine kiss is an arduous journey, there are many moments of prayer and tears. But the Bridegroom, by his guiding hand, raises the bride to stand before him face to face. Finally, at the moment of the kiss, when the soul experiences the face of God, the soul becomes one spirit with Him. However, she hopes, he may come soon to give her joy, but until he returns she is consumed with longing.

Next, Bernard elaborates the theme of the kiss by noting that “if anyone once receives the spiritual kiss of Christ’ mouth, he seeks eagerly to have it again and again. “It is a hidden manna and only he who eats it hungers for more. It is a sealed-up fountain ---- to which no stranger has access, but he who drinks from it thirsts for more.” 114 Similarly, in the Bhagavata Purana we find the gopis asking Kṛṣṇa, “Please bestow upon us the nectar of your lips.” 115

Union with God

According to Bernard, the final goal of spiritual union is uniting with God. There are three stages in this journey towards union. The first stage is humility, emptying oneself of one’s ego, or ‘I-ness’. In this, one is guided by the Son. The second stage is that of mercy or charity, which is reached under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is in this stage that one ‘recovers’ one’s ‘divine likeness,’ since God has created human beings in God’s ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ To reach the third and highest level, one needs to be ‘caught up’ (raptus) which is effected in it without its co-operation.

114 Ibid., 3, 1
115 Bhāg P. X. 31, 14
The state of rapture cannot be sustained permanently as long as we have the ‘body of flesh.’ From there arises the situation of the bride who feels abandoned by the bridegroom and yearns to be reunited. These levels may be compared with the three kinds of kisses. The first stage corresponds to the kiss of the feet; the second, to the kiss of the hand; and the third, to the kiss of the mouth.

The final step is the ineffable kiss of the mouth, a gracious condescension of God which ravishes the soul. This kiss is the highest favour a human being can ask for, and represents that real mystical experience in which the soul is united to God. In the spiritual marriage the soul loses all thought of itself. Such ecstasy, doubtless, is only a foretaste of eternal happiness; nevertheless, it gives the enraptured soul the highest degree of bliss which it is capable of sustaining. Bernard’s mystical life caused him to experience the reality of Jesus with intensity and in a manner altogether novel for his times.

According to Bernard, complete and perfect marriage consists in the exchange of love. He says, “it is nothing other than holy and chaste love, love sweet and tender... but which joins two in one spirit, making two no longer two but one.”\textsuperscript{116} The Word accepts the soul as his bride and two become one in spirit, while remaining distinctly two. The mystic person does not dissolve into God. Love makes the soul equal to God or like God, but not God Himself. Bernard says, “As a drop of water seems to disappear completely in a quantity of wine, taking the wine’s flavor and color, as red-hot iron becomes indistinguishable from the glow of fire and

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 83,6
its own original form disappears... it is necessary for human affection to
dissolve in some ineffable way and be poured into the will of God.”

Bernard emphasizes that bridal love loves God for his own sake.
Although as mother the soul loves the children, that is her neighbours, as
bride she desires the Bridegroom’s embrace. As Bernard puts it, “A
mother is happy in her child, a bride is even happier in her bridegroom’s
embrace.”

In terms of Bernard’s theology, the ecstatic experience of union can only
be sustained in the afterlife, as the ‘union’ between the bride and
bridegroom is consummated fully only in ‘heaven,’ where, using the
language of Bernard, the bride is transformed and ‘deified.’

**God is far away**

Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār also realizes that God is far away from him and that
union is not possible in this life and separation inevitable. The Āḻvār,
during his visits of various temples, reaches the holy shrine at
Tirukkaṇṭapuraṇam, a small town in South India, bursts out with joy, as if
he actually beheld the deity. Having reached Kaṇṭapuraṇam, the Āḻvār
expresses his delight in different ways and he gets inside the holy shrine,
he feels the presence of the deity and calls all those assembled there to
join him in the worship of the deity. He sings the glory of the deity and
says that He is none other than the Supreme Being who incarnated as
Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Vāmana, Nṛsimha, Parasurāma, Rāma,Kṛṣṇa
and Balarāma. He expresses his joy for being a servant of God and
getting the privilege to serve Him. Here, we find in the mysticism of

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118 *Ibid.*,83.6
Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār, the importance given to the Arcāvatāra theory which is the cardinal principle of Vaiṣṇavism.

Christ’s Coming into the Soul

While speaking about his mystical experience Bernard appeals to the imagery of the Song of Songs and speaks of Christ as the bridegroom coming into the soul. He comes without being seen or heard. Bernard says that the Word, when it invaded his soul, could not be perceived by his senses. But his heart suddenly became alive and its most secret faults got exposed. “When the Word left”, says Bernard, “all these spiritual powers became weak and faint and began to grow old as though you had removed the fire from under a boiling pot.”

The life of the soul’s life seems to have disappeared.

Use of Bodily senses to discuss God

Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār makes use of the five bodily senses to discuss the greatness of God and tells humans how they should love God and surrender to Him in order to get rid of their sins. He says that God has given us senses and organs to use them to have Bhagavadanubhava. Let us not use them to acquire worldly pleasures which are transitory and trivial. Āḻvār in this Tirumoḷi asks the people to follow his advice. He says,

“Our Lord is Sarveśvara. He rides on garuda vāhana like a golden mountain mounted on a bird. He is the savior who churned the milky ocean with mandara mountain as rod and Vāsuki, the big serpent as cord. The nectar that came out of it, Devas took. Bhagavān felt happy

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119 Sermon 74.7
that He could help them. Those eyes which don’t see His beautiful form wearing golden ornaments etc: are not eyes at all."\textsuperscript{120}

“Like a tiger or a lion that shrinks its body only to jump on the prey He took Vamana \textit{avatara} only to grow as Trivikrama. He begged only for three feet of land but measured the three worlds with His three steps. Those who don’t hear His glories are not worth having ears.”\textsuperscript{121}

“Those who do not speak His glories but speak other unwanted things have no mouths. Instead of speaking about how He sucked the demon Putana’s poison-smeared breasts, how He sucked Yasodha’s milk, how He resides in Tiruvali and how He is called the ‘Pure’, don’t waste your organ of speech by speaking about other men and matters.\textsuperscript{122}

“He took the unique \textit{Nṛsimhāvatāra} not seen anywhere else. He tore the chest of Hiranya Kasyap since he was the enemy of His bhakta. He is the Lord of the \textit{nityasūris} and wears a fragrant \textit{tulsi} garland. Let us sing Him alone. Any other song sung on any one else is not sweet to hear and it is not worth hearing.”\textsuperscript{123}

“He is our \textit{swami} residing in Tirumeyyam and has conch in His hand. He is dark like the sea, sapphire, dark cloud and \textit{nilotpal} flower. Let us do \textit{anjali} to Him with our hands. If we fail to do that our hands are useless.”\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{120} PTM 11.7.1
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 11.7.2
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 11.7.3
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 11.7.4
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 11.7.5
“The minds of those people who do not think on seeing any flower, “Ah! This should be offered at His feet are not minds at all.”¹²⁵

“On seeing the ocean one is reminded of His form. Then we should think of offering flowers at His feet. If we do not have the heart to think so then it is not ‘nenju’ (heart) it is ‘nanju’ (poison). One need not trouble to climb the tree like champaka or go to forests to pluck flowers. But it suffices to go to a nearby pond and get flowers.”¹²⁶

Inspired by the language of Scripture, Bernard also uses the five bodily senses to discuss God and how humans know God. When it comes to the sense of taste, in particular, Bernard of Clairvaux, makes use of the fact that, in its Latin verb form, sapere, is the root for the Latin word for wisdom, sapientia. His belief is that it is through the sense of taste, in particular, that human persons make the most direct physical contact with the body of God. To taste (sapere) the body of God in Eucharisttic communion is to gain wisdom of God (sapientia).

On the Song Bernard comments that the bride, who, while in her earthly life, can only hope for life in heaven and the clear and everlasting visit of God, can still enjoy a ‘taste’ or ‘kiss’ of her divine Bridegroom in the shadow of contemplation. Bernard often cites the Psalm “Taste and see that the Lord is sweet” to articulate how the ‘taste’ of union with God, in this life, precedes and anticipates something of the ‘sight’ of God in the next life.¹²⁷ Bernard even uses the Psalm to teach that the ‘taste’ of God in this life is prior to the ‘sight’ of God in the next. Beginning with the lowest, most bodily senses and ascending up to the highest, most spiritual

¹²⁵ Ibid., 11.7.6
¹²⁶ Ibid., 11.7.7
¹²⁷ Psalm 33.9
senses, he says that touch corresponds to love of parents; taste corresponds to love of brothers or fraternal love; smell corresponds to natural love; hearing corresponds to spiritual love, and sight corresponds to love of God. The criterion of the ordering is thus clear: spiritual vision, hearing and smell allow the soul to love objects more distant from itself, while spiritual taste and touch communicate directly, only with the friends and family who nourish the person in the flesh. Bernard, suitably conveys that union with God in the here and now is immediate and mediated, and that this union is distinct from the remote and unmediated union of God in the life to come. He postulates: “Perhaps sapientia, that is ‘wisdom,’ is derived from sapor, which is ‘taste.’” Bernard preaches that when “wisdom (sapientia) is added to virtue, like some seasoning it adds taste to something which by itself is tasteless and bitter.” Bernard emphasizes the way the human person must make immediate contact with God in order to be able to taste and to know (sapor, sapere) the sweetness of Wisdom (Sapientia). Man lost this taste almost from the creation of the human race. When wisdom enters, it makes the carnal sense taste flat; it purifies the understanding, cleanses and heals the palate of the heart.

Similarities between Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār and Bernard of Clairvaux

What we gather, after a close study of the mysticism of the Tamil Vaishnavaite saint Tirumaṅgai Āḻvār and the French Christian saint Bernard of Clairvaux is that there are striking similarities between them. For the Āḻvār it was bhakti and for Bernard, it was love towards God, which was the fundamental principle and the only means to get united with God. Both believed in the incarnation of God. For the Āḻvār, Lord Viṣṇu took

128 Sermon 85,8
129 Ibid
different incarnations from time to time to punish the wicked and protect the meek and the humble. For Bernard the invisible God assumed flesh because God wanted to recapture the affection of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually raise them to a spiritual love. Thus he strongly suggested praying with a sacred image of the God-man, like the Āḻvār who felt the presence of God in the icon.

Not only in the matter of mystical doctrines, but also in the mystical ways and experiences Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār and St Bernard of Clairvaux share many things in common. The Āḻvār chose to take the role of the nāyakī of the Lord as the best way to express his burning love to Lord Viṣṇu, the Bridegroom. Similarly Bernard also chose the Song of Songs in order to show the loving, spiritual union between the soul as the bride and Jesus as the divine Bridegroom. Bernard portrayed our relationship to God in terms of bride and bridegroom and welcomed each believing soul to see itself as Christ’s bride and receive the Lord’s tender touch, The Āḻvār also follows the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, which indicates Lord Viṣṇu as the bridegroom of all the souls in the universe. When the Āḻvār as Parakāla Nāyaki and the bride in the Song of Songs, through God’s special activity or līlā, come to realize that God is in love with them, then we must understand that the first stage of mysticism, namely the ‘Awakening of the soul’ or ‘bhakti’ has set in. Awakened by God to holiness they become very sensitive to their own sinfulness and vileness. Past sins torture them in a purifying way. Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār, immediately after he had the vision of the divine couple, Lord Viṣṇu and, goddess Lakṣmi and got initiated into spiritual life, poured out his wretchedness and remorse like this:

Born into this worldly body, a receptacle of profound sorrow,
I am wretting, I am filled with remorse, I have let myself run after beautiful women, seeking the fleeting carnal pleasures of the union they gave.

Lo and behold! through the grace of our Lord, there is a greater goal,

That which will deliver me into eternal happiness.

I have reached for this state and have now found it in the name of Nārāyaṇa.\textsuperscript{130}

After long hours of prayer, the Āḻvār and Bernard’s bride get purified of sensuality and self-love, and get mental perception of God. This stage is known as ‘Purgation’ or \textit{para-bhakti}. They feel the distance between themselves and their Lord. They grow in virtue and get the ability to self-surrender. They turn inward and feel God permeating their consciousness. This is the flaming love of God which is known as ‘Illumination’ or \textit{para- \textit{jñāna}}. This Illumination or \textit{parajñāna} instils expansion of consciousness and the loving knowledge to find God in everything and all things in God. They get clear glimpses of God or the ‘Visit’ of the Bridegroom and God’s self-communication takes hold of their entire being. During the ‘glimpse’ or ‘Visit’, there is joy in communion, or \textit{saṁśleśa} with the Bridegroom and anguish in separation or \textit{vīśleśa}. Separation is the ‘Dark Night’ of the soul when emptiness, despair and helplessness set in. There will be what is called ‘spiritual death’ or ‘mystical death’- it is the dark side of God’s loving Mystical purgation. Whenever Tirumāṅgai Āḻvār as ParakālaNāyaki gets separated from her Lord she feels like a fish out of water. In the last decad of \textit{Peria Tirumoḻi} he places himself in the deplorable position of:

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{PTM}, I, I
a storm tossed boat in the middle of the ocean,
a person who lives in the same house with a poisonous snake,
an ant that is caught in the middle of a log that is burning on both sides,
a pack of foxes caught in the middle of a flood.\textsuperscript{131}
Such is the intensity of the pangs of separation of Parakāla Nāyaki.

The bride’s longing for the Bridegroom in the \textit{Sermons on the Song of Songs} is also intensified during the periods of the Bridegroom’s absence. After each visit of the Bridegroom she exclaims “Return my beloved.”\textsuperscript{132}
It is the violence of her love which conquers all reserve causing her to disregard soberness and propriety. She implores him to return and begs him to hasten, to run swiftly like a roe or fawn. Jesus comes so that the soul will cling to him; he goes away so that the soul will call him back. He wants us to love him and takes certain steps to win our love. He gives himself so that we will enjoy his presence; he then leaves us so that we will long for it even more.

The last stage of Bridal mysticism is \textit{parama bhakti} or the Unitive Life. It is the climax of \textit{bhakti} leading to the direct, comprehensive, eternal communion with God. At this stage Tirumangai Āḻvār attains \textit{paramapada} or \textit{moksa} or liberation from bondage and gets a fuller and direct vision of God which is known in Vedanta as \textit{paripūrṇa Brahmānubhava}. He attains a status equal to that of Brahman (\textit{sayūjya}) enjoying Brahman along with his glory and doing eternal divine service. For Bernard the bride’s soul is mystically married to God and they become one, while remaining distinctly two. The Christian mystic is not

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Ibid.,} 11.8
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Sermon} 73.1
satisfied with the mystic experience he had, but goes back to the mundane world to help other men redeem themselves.