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Kirtan in the Americas: Music and Spirituality in a Transcultural Whirlpool

By

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Kirtan (Sanskrit: कीर्तन; IAST: Kīrtana) is a broad term referring to various forms of devotional singing commonly done in South Asian traditions. It is a core practice in the Hindu and Sikh faiths that is becoming increasingly popular around the world among people of all ethnicities. Beyond its expected propagation within Hindu and Sikh diasporas, kirtan is also spreading among members of new religious movements such as ISKCON and the 3HO/Sikh Dharma, who may engage in this practice as part of their daily cultivation. Even more broadly, a form of what has been called “neo-kirtan” has been gaining popularity in the yoga and New Age communities, with several kirtan artists nominated for the Grammy awards over the years. Moreover, in the wake of the mindfulness and yoga movements, there is an emerging engagement of kirtan singers with public healthcare and correctional institutions. Thus, we can say that kirtan is developing as a transnational and transcultural phenomenon. Indeed, the broader cultural implications and deepening social penetration that this practice has achieved over the past five decades suggest that it is attaining permanent status in the world’s religious soundscape. This research explores the practice of kirtan as it has been re-created in the United States, Canada, and Brazil through multi-sided interactions that generate new cultural patterns in an ongoing process of cross-pollination. Approaching kirtan as a type of ‘technology of the self’, this research combines textual, historical, and ethnographic sources to address the questions of how this practice is adopted and adapted in the Americas and how it has been shaping identities, communities, and traditions.

Keywords: mantra, kirtan, yoga, bhakti, music, new religious movements, transculturation.

To the masters of all times and places who inspired my journey.

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कलेर्दोषनिधे राजन्नस्ति ह्येको महान् गुणः ।
कीर्तनादेव कृष्णस्य मुक्तसङ्गः परं ब्रजेत् ॥ ५१ ॥

*kaler doṣa-nidhe rājann asti hy eko mahān guṇaḥ
kīrtanād eva kṛṣṇasya mukta-saṅgaḥ param vrajet*

O king, the age of Kali, which is an ocean of faults, certainly has a great quality: simply by kirtan of the names of Krishna one is freed from material association and achieves the supreme. (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 12.3.51)

कल महि राम नाम सारु ॥

Kal meh rām nām sār

In this Dark Age of Kali, the Lord's Name is essential and sublime. (Guru Nānak, *Guru Granth Sahib* Page 662, Line 18)

कलजुग महि कीरतनु परधाना ॥

Kaljug meh kīrtan pardhānā

In Kali-Yuga, kirtan is the primary and preeminent [form of worship]. (Guru Arjan, *Guru Granth Sahib* Page 1075, Line 19)

कलजुगि नामु पूयानु पदारथु भगत जना उधरे ॥

Kaljug nām pardhān padārath bhagat janā udhre

In Kali Yuga, the Divine Name is the supreme wealth; it saves the humble devotees. (Guru Ram Das, *Guru Granth Sahib* Page 995, Line 6)

Chapter 1: Introduction

It was a cold and foggy morning in December 1997 when I first landed in New Delhi. At the time, I was a newly graduated Army officer in Brazil who, going after a spiritual quest, had decided to spend a month traveling alone in India during my vacations. On my ‘to do list’ were popular destinations like Rishikesh, Agra, and Varanasi, but an Indian man sitting next to me in the airplane convinced me to skip the days I had planned in New Delhi: “go straight to Vrindavan, which is Krishna’s land” he said. That simple suggestion would turn out to be a decisive step leading to the writing of this dissertation almost twenty-five years later.

In fact, as I wandered through the streets of Vrindavan with my backpack searching for a place to stay, the first person I met was a middle-aged monk dressed in saffron robes, but he was visibly not Indian. His white skin and marked accent soon gave away his Italian origins and I, who in my childhood had lived in Italy for three years, naturally connected with him. This Italian devotee was part of the *Krishna-Balaram Mandir 24 Hour Kīrtan Maṇḍalī*, an international group dedicated to singing kirtan continuously in the Vrindavan temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). My new Italian acquaintance invited me to stay in the ashram with the kirtan party – where I would get accommodation and meals free of charge – with the condition that I would sing kirtan with them for two daily shifts of three hours each. Moreover, in between our shifts in the kirtan schedule, the Italian devotee would guide me through the main attractions in the Vrindavan area.

As I came to learn during that stay of about ten days in Vrindavan, the 24-hour kirtan had been established in 1975 by ISKCON founder and later developed into a major project under the leadership of an American devotee named Aindra Das. It is hard to overestimate the impact of Aindra and his kirtan group on younger generations of ISKCON devotees around the world.

Definitions and Scope of the Study

The term kirtan comes from the Sanskrit *kīrtana* (*lit.* praising, celebrating) and refers to the recitation or singing of sacred texts, devotional poems, and divine names. It is a core practice for Hindus and Sikhs and is often done in a call-and-response fashion. Although used in texts like the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* mostly in the sense of praising the deity and reciting sacred lore, for at least a thousand years the word kirtan has assumed the connotation of congregational singing and is now a most prevalent category of Hindu and Sikh devotional music both in India and in the diaspora (Edelmann 2009, 37; Beck 2015).

The popularization of kirtan in India is linked to the growth of the bhakti movements since the sixth century CE and gaining momentum after the twelfth. Indeed, sacred texts and spiritual masters have emphatically recommended kirtan as the primary religious practice in this age due to its great effectiveness in evoking devotional sentiments. But this emotional quality should not lead one to mistakenly assume that kirtan is a sentimental practice devoid of substantial scriptural foundations. Rather, the apparent simplicity of kirtan rests on a sophisticated understanding of sacred sound that relates back to the hymns of the *Ṛg Veda* and traverses the ages engaging many of the most brilliant minds in various Pan-Indian schools of thought and religious movements.

As kirtan comes to America in the 1960s through the counterculture, new religious movements, and immigration, it certainly undergoes unescapable processes of transculturation, and this has been a main concern throughout this research. As such, this investigation aims at uncovering the processes involved in the *translation of kirtan as a religious practice*. While changes and adaptations in kirtan practice have always been the norm and find clear precedents in the history of Hindu and Sikh movements, here we examine the American context to see how these adaptations are being made, to what extent, by whom, and under what circumstances.

In its most concise formulation, the leading question for this project is ‘how is kirtan adopted and adapted in the Americas?’. Of course, this central question invites many other inquiries on cultural appropriation, decolonization in the study of religion, and epistemological parity. It also leads to an investigation on the patterns of adaptation used to make kirtan not only appealing, but also portable and transposable in new environments. I approach kirtan in the Americas as a transnational and transcultural phenomenon – that is, a practice involving people of various national/ethnic backgrounds and developing as a new product that combines elements from both Eastern and Western cultures. Thus, I understand that kirtan has not been simply transplanted in America but is being re-created through multi-sided interactions that generate new cultural patterns in an ongoing process of cross-pollination.

Furthermore, one would expect kirtan’s expansion to follow a path similar to that of other South Asian practices such as yoga and mindfulness that have a longer and more documented history in the West. Thus, a review of the scholarship available on these practices has informed our view of the contours of kirtan as a globalized movement. Indeed, the works of Elizabeth De Michelis (2004) and Mark Singleton (2010) on yoga, as well as the work of Jeff Wilson (2014) on mindfulness reveal how these movements have paved the way for kirtan to expand in the West and how they partially share a community of people interested in such practices.

Moreover, the expansion of yoga and mindfulness can provide us with insights on future developments of kirtan. As documented in the edited volume *Eastspirit* (Borup & Fibiger 2017), these movements follow a common trajectory, mostly moving from Asia to the United States and from there to other parts of the world. Going full circle, they finally get back to their place of origin. As this research will show, the recent international popularization of kirtan contributes to a revival of this practice both in India and in Indian diasporas around the world.

For the sake of delimiting what is otherwise a very broad field of study, *this research centers mostly on practitioners with no ethnic roots in India* seeking to understand in which ways they develop interest in kirtan and how they engage with this practice in their lives. To put it another way, this is a study on how people of different cultural backgrounds adopt and adapt kirtan. It looks at the transculturation of kirtan in the Americas – something that has been called ‘*neo-kirtan*’ to distinguish these recent adaptations from heritage kirtan as performed by Hindus and Sikhs. For the sake of practicality, however, I mostly write ‘kirtan’ throughout this dissertation, while using ‘*pada-kīrtana*’ or ‘*Gurbāṇī kīrtan*’ when referring to specific traditional forms.

The geographical area includes the United States as kirtan’s primary port of arrival and also Canada and Brazil as two major areas to where kirtan has expanded subsequently. My inclusion of Brazil is partly due to pragmatic reasons – the vast familiarity I have with the field – but also because of the academic value I see in comparing the reception of kirtan in two very different environments. As we shall see, Brazilians’ attitudes toward Eastern peoples, ideas, and practices tend to differ considerably from those of North Americans due to cultural factors and a history of profound religious syncretism in Brazil (Droogers and Greenfield 2001).

Regarding the time frame, this research considers historical developments beginning in the mid 1960s, when the counterculture, changes in immigration policy in the US and Canada, and the founding of new religious movements by Indian gurus opened widely the doors for the circulation of Eastern ideas and practices, including kirtan. Moreover, it looks back at the early nineteenth century for tracing the development of what Catherine Albanese (2007) calls the American metaphysical religion. Finally, hoping to promote a deeper engagement with Indian intellectual traditions, a chronological sketch on the development of ideas on mantras and kirtan in pre-colonial India is presented based on primary and secondary sources.

Religious significance of kirtan

As a practice gaining visibility in the American scenario over the past fifty years, there is no doubt that kirtan as music has attracted significant scholarly interest, including the creation of a dedicated Chair in Sikh Musicology in the Music Department of Hofstra University since 2011. Indeed, the majority of studies on kirtan has been conducted by ethnomusicologists, while scholars of religion have given limited attention to the topic. The only two doctoral dissertations on kirtan conducted from the perspective of religious studies that I was able to identify were the works of Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa (2014) and Charles Townsend (2015), both dealing with *Gurbāṇī kīrtan*.

Thus, more research is needed on kirtan's religious significance within other communities. Indeed, the growing popularity of kirtan, as well as the broader cultural implications and deepening social penetration that this practice has achieved over the past five decades, suggests that it is attaining permanent status in the world's religious soundscape. In this scenario, the topic proposed is relevant a) as a corrective to previous research – highlighting the centrality of sacred sound in Indian traditions; b) as a case study examining the encounter of multiple cultures and the convergence of various groups through kirtan; and c) as a ground-breaking investigation on the socio-religious significance of kirtan.

a) The Centrality of Sacred Sound in Indian Traditions

Sacred sound beginning with the chanting of Vedic mantras – as well as the recitation or singing of mantras and hymns belonging to later revelations – constitutes one of the most widespread religious practices in South Asian traditions. And yet, previous scholarship in religious studies informed by Christian categories has often focused on the textual and visual dimensions of religion, not realizing the extraordinary role of sound in Indian culture.

In significant ways, this lacuna has been addressed in the works of Harvey Alper (1989), Guy Beck (1993; 2012), André Padoux (1990; 2011), Harold Coward (2019), Bob van der Linden (2013; 2019) Francesca Cassio (2010; 2022), and others who emphasized that a whole new horizon in the study of South Asian religions can be opened up through attention to sacred sound. Following their lead, in this dissertation I investigate the transculturation of kirtan seeking to understand not only the nature of Indian religions, but also the impact of Indian ideas and practices in contemporary Western societies.

b) Fusion of Horizons and Convergence of Communities through Kirtan

Kirtan practitioners in America are men and women of all ages and coming from every sort of ethnic, religious, and social background. This heterogeneous formation contributes to an exchange and fusion of cultural elements. And while these practitioners certainly form discernible kirtan ‘tribes’, each with its own singularities, institutional boundaries remain permeable for many, allowing for a convergence of various groups around the practice of kirtan. Moreover, in contrast with the kirtan performed in more conservative settings, there tends to be a high degree of experimentation among Western kirtan singers – which is somewhat expected in the face of their personal background, their audience, and the complex transcultural nature of contemporary music. Thus, Western singers have been successful in promoting a popular kind of kirtan that engages a wide variety of musical instruments and styles.

Another feature of kirtan in America is the convergence of people coming from various communities. As observed by Jubilee Cooke (2009) and confirmed by my research, often the same people attend kirtan at different places – such as yoga studios and guru-affiliated centers – and kirtan artists from all affiliations often perform and record albums together.

c) Development and Impact of Kirtan in the Americas

The kirtan community comprises millions of Hindus and Sikhs living in North America for whom kirtan is a central religious practice, as well as a growing number of people from all backgrounds who have adopted kirtan in their lives. Those in the latter group – who are the main focus of this research – may be yoga practitioners, converts to new religious movements, or people who simply see themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious.’ The size of this fluid community is not easy to estimate, but their impact on society can be inferred from kirtan’s presence in the media.

A quick look at the most popular kirtan singers on Spotify and similar streaming platforms reveals a significant community of regular listeners (see Appendix 3) and some of these artists have been nominated to Grammy awards in recent years. Transformational festivals in North America featuring kirtan attracted thousands of people every year before the COVID19 pandemic. Then, when people were unable to come together physically for musical events due to lockdown, there suddenly appeared so many online kirtans that it was hard to keep track of them. Moreover, since musicians were impeded to travel and physically reach their audiences, they created and launched online kirtan courses in an unprecedented manner.

On public institutions the impact is still incipient, but there are groups and individuals who have been conducting regular kirtan programs in healthcare and correctional institutions. Most importantly, however, is the fact that kirtan is contributing to the development of a new religious paradigm that mirrors Indian ways of organizing and perceiving religion. In fact, I argue that kirtan functions as a soft means of institutionalization, as in the bhakti traditions; it also encourages embodied and engaged practices in ways that resonate with a tantric worldview, and it operates well within plural environments as discussed in Chapter Six of this dissertation.

This worldwide development of the kirtan movement has been richly portrayed in the feature-length documentary *Mantra: Sounds into Silence* (Wyss 2018). Seeing the broad interest and social engagement this movement evokes, one wonders about the reasons for kirtan's appeal to contemporary audiences and the needs it fulfils in society. Above all, the centrality of kirtan for multiple religious communities now present throughout the world invites scholars of religion to investigate its relevance as a religious/spiritual practice and its role in community formation.

Approaches and Critiques on South Asian Studies

A suitable framework for studying the impact of South Asian ideas and practices in the West must grapple with issues of orientalism – in its multiple dimensions – as well as with theoretical and methodological issues in the study of religion. Moreover, such a study must acknowledge and pay close attention to the ongoing processes of mutual transformation between Western and Eastern cultures. In other words, research in this field requires special attention to historiographical and epistemological critiques related to South Asian studies, awareness of theoretical assumptions and methodological trends in current scholarship, and the application of a transcultural framework highlighting the dynamic nature of cultural encounters.

Furthermore, since a phenomenon like devotional music involves multiple dimensions of human experience – such as the social, historical, cultural, aesthetic, and metaphysical – this research combines 1) a constructive examination of canonical and historical sources; 2) a lived-religion approach informed by a multi-sited ethnographic research; 3) a critical consideration of emic worldviews that can help displacing typical Eurocentric assumptions. Indeed, I shall argue that research on kirtan should not be confined to the field of ethnomusicology, as has been the tendency in recent scholarship, but should rather be a fundamental concern in the study of South Asian religions, such is the role of music and sacred sound in these traditions.

Orientalism and Epistemological Fences

A major criticism of scholarship produced on the Middle East and Asia from the eighteenth century onwards has been the charge of orientalism, especially as articulated by Edward Said (1978) in his seminal book by the same name to indicate stereotyped and demeaning conceptions of non-European cultures. I suggest that a post-orientalist approach should be concerned with issues such as power, agency, and the challenge of translation across cultural boundaries. It should also acknowledge the more constructive outcomes of the momentous intellectual encounter between East and West while recognizing deep-rooted Eurocentric attitudes curtailing the influence of Eastern thought in the Western academic milieu even today. My main motivation for reflecting on these topics is a desire to represent Eastern thought in a way that is both respectful and fruitful, giving due credit to the sources of knowledge and engaging with that knowledge in a productive manner. Thus, overcoming orientalism implies not only counteracting prejudice and exploitation, but also transcending the epistemological fences that prevent Eastern ideas to be harnessed as valuable sources for global thinking.

Much has been written on this topic with scholars expressing a wide range of perceptions and highlighting different aspects of the encounter between Western and Eastern cultures. Broadly speaking, Said depicts orientalism as an ideological construct meant to justify and reinforce European power over the Orient, with much of his attention devoted to the Middle East. For the purposes of this project, I here discuss the contributions of scholars who have applied and further developed the orientalist critique more specifically within the South Asian context. Initially, it is important to take notice of how the term “orientalism” has been used in more than one way and refers to a multifaceted phenomenon with clear political and economic bases, but also involving significant cultural, intellectual, and religious dimensions.

Commenting on this, Arvind-Pal Mandair (2009) distinguishes between two usages of the term. On the one hand, what he calls “Orientalism¹” is used to indicate a body of knowledge produced by scholars who knew Asian languages such as Sir William Jones and Charles Wilkins along with the repercussions of their work among European thinkers such as Voltaire and Schelling who tended to “represent knowledge about India in a positive light, using it as means for critiquing contemporary forms of Christian orthodoxy and understandings of European modernity” (Mandair 2009, 107). On the other hand, he calls “Orientalism²” the reaction to those critiques and the ensuing “representations of Asia that arose out of a disaffection and anxiety produced by the comparative valuations of new knowledges of India produced by Orientalism¹” (Ibid.). In other words, the early orientalist critique of Europe (orientalism type 1) gave rise to an impulse to demarcate intellectual, religious, and cultural boundaries that could safeguard European identity in the face of this encounter with the other (orientalism type 2).

In a related manner, in his book *Oriental Enlightenment* John J. Clarke (1997) argues that orientalism should not be defined monolithically or reduced to a mere annex to colonial power. Instead, it should be perceived as a product of multiple, often opposing intentions. Thus, while acknowledging the wielding of military and economic force side by side with the “application of organizing and classifying schemes which ‘place’ the East within a Western intellectual structure”, Clarke sustains that these factors alone do not characterize orientalism. Rather, these are common tactics deployed by expansionist nations everywhere. Thus, Clarke continues, “what is peculiar in the case of orientalism is the degree to which *the colonised ideas have been elevated above those of the coloniser* [italics added] and have been used to challenge and disrupt the master narratives of the colonising powers” (Clarke 1997, 9). This vast but often unacknowledged influence of the East on the West is a theme thoroughly developed in *American Veda*, by Philip Goldberg (2010).

Keeping these distinct but interwoven threads of orientalism in mind – namely a certain fascination with Eastern cultures accompanied by a desire to integrate their knowledge *versus* the imperialist impetus to dominate and to exploit the other while safeguarding one’s own identity – I wish to address two major areas of inquiry for the current research: 1) in what ways can post-orientalist scholarship repair or at least avoid causing more damage to non-Western cultures and societies? 2) What has prevented and continues to prevent the rich South Asian intellectual legacy from being engaged meaningfully in the academia and how can we move out of this standstill? To be sure, these are deep questions that have preoccupied scholars in the field for almost half a century by now, so I will limit my discussion here to some key ideas presented in the literature under review describing the problems and pointing to possible solutions.

In his analysis, Mandair advances the position that, due to a vast asymmetry of power, the colonial interaction precluded any proper dialogical or intersubjective communication. Indeed, he maintains that Indian subjectivities and cultural traditions were radically transformed through the imposition of the colonizer’s conceptual and linguistic framework (Mandair 2009, 105). Central to his argument is the problematization of ‘translation’, implying that a foreign concept such as ‘religion’, far from being universal, is in actuality historically and culturally specific. This linguistic and “conceptual violence” (ibid., 423) is then further aggravated with the inculcation of the Hegelian schema placing Indian thought on a lower stage of development, justifiably in need of European patronage (ibid., 152). Thus, for Mandair the colonized subjects were drastically uprooted from their indigenous cultures and curtailed in their agency, remaining enmeshed in a particular regime of discourse to which they had no option but to accede (ibid., 195). Despite this pessimistic diagnosis, Mandair points to a possibility of decolonization by breaking the cycle established by the colonial logic along with the stereotypes it has created.

As a starting point, Mandair suggests that Hindus and Sikhs replace structures of transcendence with historical/secular understandings of their respective traditions for this would allow them to move beyond a quest for “an essence or original identity” (ibid., 379). He also envisions a space for a “renewed intellectual encounter between colonizer/colonized” within movements like postsecularism and political theology (ibid., 380).

Insisting on the limits of language, Mandair wishes that the term ‘religion’ – or rather its original Latin form *religio* – could have remained untranslated. The advantage of keeping an “untranslatable”, he contends, is “to refuse the ruse of transparency” that allows terms like religion to pass as universals (Mandair 2009, 429). In this way, as the dominant discourse incorporates foreign words and concepts into its lexicon, and if the temptation to “demand inclusion within the semantico-political field of the global fiduciary” is resisted, it may be viable to decolonize and establish a multipolar global order of competing universals (ibid., 430-431). It is hard to do justice to Mandair’s work within such a brief synopsis. His arguments are well developed and presented in a compelling manner. At times, however, he seems to push some ideas too far.

There are a couple of issues I wish to comment upon here. The first is the challenge of translation and Mandair’s suggestion that the term ‘religion’ be left untranslated. The two extremes on the spectrum of possibilities here are on the one side the dismissal of the problem of translation, and on the other side an assumption that cultures are so completely alien to one another that any attempt at a meaningful communication is futile. On this, Clarke (1997, 182-186) presents a nuanced analysis concluding that the hermeneutical process through which ideas can be conveyed is indeed challenging, but certainly possible even between disparate cultures. Likewise, Thomas Tweed develops a compelling argument that the category ‘religion’ should be retained and be ever refined, since it is the “constitutive term” demarcating the field of study (Tweed 2006, 53).

The other issue I find problematic in Mandair's work is the denial of real agency for the colonized subject. His point of the imbalance of power is well taken, and I surely agree that the constraints and conditionings imposed on Indian individuals were overwhelming. And yet, I am not convinced that a human being will ever cease to be a creative agent even under the most trying circumstances. In this, I find support in Andrew Nicholson's book *Unifying Hinduism*, where the author not only upholds the creative agency of modern Indians, but also challenges the theory "of the British invention of almost everything in modern India" (Nicholson 2010, 18). The picture that emerges from his analysis shows the gradual formation of a Hindu unity through the ingenuity of pre-colonial indigenous thinkers, whose influence is then felt on modern Indian intellectuals. Having clarified my position on these issues, I now turn to the second question regarding the apparent intellectual insularity of the West preventing Eastern concepts and theories from making a more substantive contribution to a global history of ideas.

In *Hindu Worldviews*, Jessica Frazier (2017) undertakes an ambitious project of "doing with India's Sanskritic cultures what Western scholars have long done with classical Greek and Roman ones – that is, creating genealogies of key ideas and developing them into theories that are illuminating in themselves, potentially across different eras and regions of the world." (Frazier 2017, 1). In doing so, Frazier is following in the footsteps of Max Müller, who in his time attempted to promote a synthesis of European and Asian philosophies, and sharing the enthusiasm of Arthur Schopenhauer, who expected that the access to Sanskrit sources would provoke a profound intellectual revival in Europe. But this expectation did not come to pass – at least not in any way close to its presumed potential, and this is a widespread concern in contemporary South Asian scholarship.

Some of the reasons given to this lack of serious engagement with Eastern thought are as follows: a) Eurocentric bias in the academia, where a sophisticated segregation of knowledge persists (Clarke 1997; Mandair 2009; Nicholson 2010; Peetush 2021); b) The challenges of translating across cultural boundaries (Frazier 2017; Mandair 2009); c) The abrupt interruption of Indian intellectual traditions with the advent of colonialism (Mandair 2009; Frazier 2017); d) Postcolonial trepidation about misinterpretation and misuse of Oriental sources (Frazier 2017; Fisher 2017); 5) A relative ignorance about India's intellectual history (Frazier 2017; Nicholson 2010); 6) Unhelpful stereotypes, such as that Asians are mystical or poetical rather than analytical (Mandair 2009; Nicholson 2010); and 7) A perception of Indian thinkers and their ideas as existing outside of any historical context, making one feel inadequate engaging with them philosophically as one does with Greek or Western philosophers (Mandair 2009; Nicholson 2010).

The fact that there is so much convergence among the scholars mentioned above and many others whom they quote offers hope that old boundaries are slowly disintegrating and giving way to a promising fusion of intellectual horizons. Indeed, drawing on Gadamer's concepts of "hermeneutical conversation" and "fusion of horizons", Wilhelm Halbfass (1988, 164-166) advocates for such an open exchange with other traditions, especially in the context of the encounter between India and Europe.

Conceptual Framework for Studying Kirtan

Due to the transnational and transcultural nature of the topic proposed, a suitable theoretical framework must be able to account for the movements of people, ideas, and practices across national and cultural borders. It should also be capable of explaining what happens at the confluences of traditions and how people adopt and adapt foreign practices. Finally, it should value emic views when these are available and offer new possibilities of interpretation.

To begin with, I find Thomas Tweed's (2006, 54) definition of religions particularly helpful for this research since it draws on aquatic and spatial tropes that highlight movement: "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries".

I present this definition here as a useful starting point for it goes well with a lived religion approach as conceived by Meredith McGuire (2008) and Robert Orsi (2005). One advantage of this conceptual framework is its capacity to highlight the combination of apparently unrelated beliefs and practices in the religious lives of individuals, especially migrants and seekers, in a way that naturalizes syncretism and denaturalizes the idea of pristine traditions. Indeed, according to McGuire all traditions are ultimately syncretic, but it is "the contest over authority that makes syncretism a theological and political issue" (McGuire 2008, 189-190). Thus, the pejorative connotations of the term, although common, are unwarranted.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to clarify my use of this somewhat controversial concept. Syncretism has a long history through which the term has assumed multiple connotations, including pejorative ones that led it to be nearly disregarded by scholars in recent decades. However, more recent scholarship has been rehabilitating the term by employing it to describe dynamic encounters between cultures: "in antiquity or in contemporary culture, syncretism shows not static traditions encountering one another but sites of continual negotiation" (Kane 2021, 249). Indeed, this way of defining syncretism comes very close to the idea of transculturation:

Instead of using syncretism within a racialized imagining of the world or a patriarchal tendency to define others, use of syncretism can have precisely the opposite effect. It can disrupt those very categories that obscure and disempower. Anthropological literature on syncretism has done precisely this by showing the creative agency of people on the underside of globalization. Syncretism here is a sign of creativity rather than deviation from a norm. Using syncretism in this way helps address contemporary challenges of race, for it questions notions of ahistorical cultures with static purity, it attributes agency to those on the underside of white domination, and it encourages productive cross-pollination between traditions – religious and otherwise. (Ibid.)

As we see, the above description of syncretism resonates with a transcultural stance as I define it in the beginning of Chapter Four. On the one hand, the overarching theoretical framework I have adopted for this research is transculturation – which “alludes to a form of ‘cultural adjustment’ in the creation of a third element” (Arroyo 2016, 137) and from its inception has been deployed “to negotiate the ever-changing racial and social dynamics of modernity and capitalism” (Ibid., 141). On the other hand, the term syncretism is amply used by Brazilian scholars and by the practitioners interviewed by me. Thus, I do not discard it either, but use it in this work as a way to acknowledge emic views and terminology.

Coming back to the advantages of the ‘lived religion’ approach, another substantial benefit is that it provides an opportunity to pay closer attention to more tangible aspects of religion beyond matters of faith and doctrine. In other words, there is an interest in observing what people actually do when they practice religion instead of simply assuming what they believe based on their affiliation. This movement is part of a broader trend in the field shifting the attention away from cognitive aspects into a more culturally focused study of religion. While this opens new venues for investigation and is certainly a welcome development in the discipline, one should guard against the propensity to overreact.

For instance, overreacting previous characterizations of religion as something *sui generis* risks blurring the boundaries of the discipline and reducing religion to mere social, economic, and political forces. A more balanced view, however, accepts that “religion is *sui generis* in that weak sense of the term, as are other constitutive terms – culture, space, music, and literature” (Tweed 2006, 60). Similarly, the Christian-centric bias of past scholarship does not justify going to the other extreme but begs for what Orsi calls “a third way, between confessional or theological scholarship, on the one hand, and radically secular scholarship on the other” (Orsi 2005, 198).

This “third way” is especially useful in the study of kirtan, which is simultaneously a theologically profound and culturally rich phenomenon. Following this approach, in his *Sonic Liturgy* Guy Beck (2012) explores the connection of ritual and music in the Hindu tradition. The author highlights the importance of being attentive to the “actual practice of living religions, which is rarely silent and almost always sound-full, musical, and frequently noisy” (Beck 2012, 3). Interestingly enough, Beck finds a significant engagement with music by two pioneer scholars in the study of religion – Rudolf Otto and Gerardus Van der Leeuw. Since then, however, Beck identifies a tendency to neglect the sonic dimension of religion in favor of its visual aspects. Beck tries to explain this lack of engagement with music in terms of the Protestant notion of “silent religion” (ibid., 5), but one would suspect that there is more to it.

Could it be that along with a rejection of the *sui generis* views espoused by Otto and Leeuw, much more has been lost? Or to use a common expression, have we thrown the baby out with the bathwater? The point I wish to emphasize here is that an investigation on music in South Asian traditions should attend equally to the theological and cultural dimensions involved. Not doing so would give a one-sided picture and I see no reason why these two dimensions should be seen as opposed rather than complementary perspectives. In a related manner, I refrain from endorsing any unwarranted metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) assumptions but strive to remain open to the worldviews expressed by the practitioners informing this research as well as to acknowledge emic epistemologies. Thus, from the start a conscious effort has been made in trying to identify and counteract various types of personal and methodological bias.

In this regard, I question the commonplace assumption that the only suitable departing point for scientific inquiry would be a stance of Methodological Materialism, or “the claim that science should only recognize the undirected causes of chance (random events) and necessity (law-

governed events)” (Menuge 2010, 376). This is often taken as a fundamental part of the scientific method aiming at minimizing human bias and promoting objectivity. However, the fact is that Methodological Materialism “decides in advance that there are certain conclusions science may not derive, no matter what the evidence is. This is not a means of counteracting bias. It is the incorporation of bias, a tendentious assumption about metaphysics and epistemology, into scientific activity” (ibid., 392).

Moreover, research in South Asian studies can profit greatly from the application of emic worldviews that allow for alternative and often more compatible interpretations of the phenomena observed. In this regard, Jessica Frazier (2017) advocates for “an Indian-influenced methodology for studying Indian materials” and she quotes Wilhelm Halbfass:

the reflections and constructions of traditional Indian theorists are no less significant than the observations and paradigms of modern Western historians and social scientists. Indian thought has its own ways of dealing with the reality of the Indian tradition through the medium of Indian theoretical and soteriological reflection (Halbfass 1991, as cited in Frazier 2017, 19).

As an example of recent scholarship applying this idea, in an edited volume organized by Barbara Holdrege and Karen Pechilis (2016), the various authors investigate issues of embodiment in South Asian traditions while keeping front and center the concept of ‘theory parity’. This approach certainly enriched the range of interpretations, since the authors were familiar with Western ideas on embodiment but chose to privilege emic perspectives. To illustrate with but one case study how this can be applied, Holdrege’s chapter titled *Bhakti and Embodiment* analyses devotional practices through the lenses of the *rasa* theory in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition. To me this seems a very interesting and significant contribution to the study of religion in a postcolonial era.

It is important to acknowledge that the secular viewpoint is not at all neutral. It is a product of European history that carries substantive metaphysical assumptions, and it was forged through

a combination of certain theological views and a series of deeply traumatic events. As summarized by Ashwani Peetush (2021, 80), although the work of “the great medieval philosopher and theologian Aquinas (1265–1274) provides a systematic and detailed philosophy that attempts to prove the existence of God on the basis of reason”, such balanced use of reason and faith was rejected by the “English theologian and empiricist William of Ockham (c. 1327)”.

The nature of the antagonism between faith and reason has its roots with the work of this English theologian and empiricist who contends that belief in God is never a matter of reason, but solely one of faith. From this the great historical and conceptual divide continues with the Protestant Reformation and Wars of Religion. The chasm deepens with the rise of empiricism and science, instigated by the Copernican revolution, Galileo, and Newton. The rift further expands through the Enlightenment. It is strengthened by the overthrow of the political power wielded by the Catholic Church, which gives birth to liberalism and the modern secular world, and the separation of church and state, grounded in the work of philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Kant. Kant cements the divide by placing religion beyond the objects of possible experience and beyond the ken of knowledge and rationality, as a matter of faith. (Peetush 2021, 80)

To sum up, my conceptual framework for studying the transculturation of kirtan adopts a lived religion perspective to investigate how people adopt this practice in their lives, often in ‘unorthodox’ ways. My approach also strives to find a ‘third way’ between a former use of Christianity as the ‘measuring stick’ for evaluating non-European traditions and the reaction to that in the form of the equally Eurocentric bias of secular scholarship. For this, my research seeks a constructive engagement with the ideas of Indian theorists when studying Indian materials.

Although these are deep issues that I cannot fully discuss here, an intended consequence of my theoretical framework is to problematize Eurocentric and reductionist approaches to the study of religions. Thus, I hope to promote awareness of some inconsistencies and drawbacks I have encountered in the course of my research, while contributing to the development and decolonization of the field.

Methodology

Looking at recent scholarship dealing with the propagation of South Asian religious ideas and practices across cultural and national boundaries, I was able to identify common methodological patterns that go well together with the theoretical concerns discussed above. For instance, both Charles Townsend (2015) and Amanda Lucia (2020) apply multi-sited ethnography to investigate, respectively, Sikh and Spiritual but not religious (SBNR) communities that are constantly on the move. In a related manner, Jeff Wilson (2012) studies Buddhism in the United States with close attention to “regionalism”, highlighting contrasting conditions across geographical areas. In another work, Wilson (2014) combines history, ethnography, and literature review to investigate the propagation of the mindfulness movement in North America. Another common methodological approach for this kind of study is participant observation. This method is especially helpful when combined with a lived religion approach, as done by Townsend (2015), where he analyses religion as localized and always in process. Moreover, Townsend focuses on embodied practices and remains accepting of the reality of “sacred presence” for practitioners, allowing for “multiple ways of being in the world” in line with Orsi’s (2005) idea of “a third way”.

Taking the above into consideration, this research combines textual studies, historical evidence, and ethnography as follows:

- a) **Constructive examination of canonical sources:** this entails a creative examination of primary and secondary sources to see how ancient ideas inform contemporary views and discourses. The aim is to study the transculturation of kirtan in light of the refined theology of sacred sound that pervades Indian traditions. I propose that engaging in this kind of constructive enterprise allows an evaluation of how much these ideas on sacred sound are being

assimilated in the West and how they may dovetail with the views of what has been called the “American metaphysical religion” (Albanese 2007).

b) **Review of the relevant literature available:** as research dealing directly with kirtan from a religious perspective is still somewhat limited, this review also includes scholarship on Hinduism, Sikhism, ethnomusicology, yoga, mindfulness, and other related topics. A review of the relevant history of ideas and of religious movements is included too.

c) **Systematic research of social media, news articles, websites and online pages of the main individuals, groups, and organizations promoting kirtan in the Americas:** this has provided an estimative of the social impact of kirtan and has helped me in identifying the communities formed around this practice.

d) **Semi-structured interviews with kirtan artists and practitioners:** due to the restrictions during the COVID19 crisis, the interviews have been conducted online including fifteen kirtan practitioners from different groups identified with the main vectors of transmission.

e) **Participant-observation in courses and related events such as kirtan retreats and festivals:** Despite causing much trouble, the global crisis has had its positive outcomes as well. For the kirtan community, it triggered an online revolution: as kirtan artists were unable to travel and perform in public venues, they had to adapt to the situation by offering online kirtan performances, retreats, and courses – and this trend is likely to continue. I was able to attend nine of these online courses remotely. I was also able to participate in a few in-person kirtan events in Brazil and in Canada that took place after the lockdown restrictions were lifted. Moreover, I have over two decades of participation in kirtan events in India, Europe, and Brazil. These previous experiences may also be counted as participant observation and naturally contribute to my understanding of the literature and fieldwork on kirtan.

Positionality

At the beginning of this research, as I reflected on my own positionality and planned strategies for optimizing the advantages while minimizing the pitfalls it offers, I came across a footnote in which Thomas Tweed (2008, p. 252) explains that scholars “are not permanently or fully inside *or* outside when they study religion”. In fact, while researching one often needs to move closer to one’s subjects in order to understand their values and ideas, but then one also needs to distance oneself from the object of study in order to analyze it critically. So, I asked myself, to what extent am I an insider when investigating kirtan?

Well, I lived in India for twelve years and have been studying about and practicing kirtan for over two decades as part of my daily spiritual discipline – even if on most days it simply means singing mantras with my family in the evening. While in India I was initiated in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava lineage, more specifically in ISKCON, and kirtan is highly emphasized in this tradition.

And to what extent am I an outsider to the communities I am engaging with? First, I am not Indian, and I am new to North America, where most of my research is being conducted. Then, even while identifying myself as a devotee of Krishna, my institutional engagement is minimal and my experience living as a *sādhu* (itinerant monk) in India is vastly different from the typical North American or Brazilian converts to ISKCON. Besides, this is only one group among many studied in my research. Finally, I am clearly an outsider to the Sikh panth (community) and even to the yoga community to a great extent.

What are the advantages on my side? I have experienced kirtan deeply through study and personal practice for almost 25 years. I also have many contacts who can facilitate my access to kirtan singers and practitioners in various groups. In fact, after returning from India to Brazil in

2014 I have traveled widely in my country teaching workshops, courses, and retreats centered on kirtan. I also created an online course on mantra recitation and recorded the album *Mantra-yoga* (Gurusevananda 2019) which is available on most music streaming platforms. The main disadvantage posed by my positionality is the temptation to stay in the comfort zone – researching within the circle of practitioners I am already familiarized with. Thus, I have made an endeavor from the very beginning to reach out to those communities where I have less connections and give them equal attention and adequate space in my research.

In terms of language skills, I am fluent in English and Portuguese, the two languages in which I will be conducting interviews; I know Italian, which has been useful for reading articles by Francesca Cassio, who is a leading scholar in the field. And I have a working knowledge of Sanskrit that allows me access to primary sources as well as a clear understanding of mantras used in kirtan. All this, combined, places me in a unique position to investigate the transculturation of kirtan in the Americas.

Chapters Overview

This dissertation begins with a synopsis of how ideas on sacred sound have evolved in Indian thought from the Vedic understanding of language (*vāc*) as the structuring force of consciousness and the Upaniṣadic ontological category of the Sound-Absolute (*śabda-brahman*), through the Mīmāṃsā viewpoint of *varṇavāda*, the Grammarian’s notion of *sphoṭa*, the concept of *nāda-brahman* in the yoga traditions and Indian music, the influence of tantra, all this culminating in the usage of mantras and kirtan in the bhakti movements and the Sikh panth. While appreciating serious engagements with these ideas, I also problematize the occasional dismissal of emic views of sacred sound by contemporary scholars who read them through incompatible ontological and epistemological frameworks.

Chapter Three outlines key historical events and identifies what I have called ‘vectors of transmission’, or networks of individuals and groups contributing to the propagation of kirtan. It explains how changes in immigration policies in North America allowed kirtan to be imported not just as a something performed by Hindus and Sikhs in diaspora, but as a practice adopted by people of all ethnic backgrounds due to the influence of charismatic Indian gurus. A comparison with yoga and mindfulness also helps to identify patterns of propagation and common strategies used to make South Asian ideas and practices transposable in different cultural contexts.

Chapter Four develops the idea of kirtan as a transnational and transcultural product, discussing its appeal to contemporary audiences for whom it constitutes a type of ‘technology of the self’ – a concept used by Foucault to indicate techniques that allow people to transform their lives in search for happiness, wisdom, and other types of perfection. In this regard, we discuss how kirtan has been dovetailed with what Catherine Albanese has called the American Metaphysical Religion and we look into how this practice has been hybridized and applied in different places, highlighting some peculiarities in the Brazilian context.

This leads to considerations on the dynamic nature of traditions in Chapter Five, with a concomitant discussion on the role of adaptation as a means to preserve the live tradition instead of a fossilize version of it. This section also problematizes the idea of the commodification and the marketing of kirtan, tracing parallels with the practices of *kīrtanīyas* in India and in the Americas as they try to navigate a changing market in a globalized context. Claims of cultural appropriation are also discussed through critical analysis and the testimony of kirtan artists whose positionality challenges standard notions of insiders and outsiders to the tradition. These issues are summed up with a discussion about authenticity as a dynamic tension between demands for conformity and aspirations for freedom of expression.

The themes developed up to this point are then combined in Chapter Six to evaluate the subtle but widespread influence of kirtan in American societies. Initially, using the development of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava lineage as a case study, it is discussed how the transmission of kirtan can often take place independently from hard institutions while at the same time constituting in itself a soft means of institutionalization. Other practices such as festivals and pilgrimage have also functioned as soft institutions in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava contexts, and kirtan is integrally related to them. Moreover, embodiment and engagement are key features highlighting the impact of kirtan in what some people have referred to as the rising of a ‘Secular Church’. Chapter Seven concludes by weaving together the answers to some of the leading questions in this research.

Note on Language

The ethnographic research quoted in this dissertation was conducted in English and Portuguese, and in the latter case, it was translated by me. The translations of Sanskrit passages are also by me, unless noted otherwise. For Sanskrit terms incorporated into the English language (e.g., kirtan, ashram, guru, yoga, mantra, and tantra), I have removed diacritics and italics. When referencing less frequently occurring Sanskrit terms (e.g., *āsana*, and *prāṇāyāma*) and to identify Sanskrit texts (e.g., *Bhagavad-Gītā*, *Yoga-Sūtras*), I have retained italics and diacritics to help readers with pronunciation. I have maintained English pluralization norms (e.g., ashrams, mantras).

Chapter 2: Indian Theories of Sacred Sound

*catvāri vāk-parimitā padāni tāni vidur brāhmaṇā ye manīṣiṇaḥ
guhā trīṇi nihitā neṅgayanti turīyaṁ vāco manuṣyā vadanti*

Speech has been measured in four divisions as understood by the wise who are knowers of Brahman. Three of these remain hidden as imperceptible vibrations, while the fourth stage is what people ordinarily describe as speech. (Rg Veda 1.164.45)

Sound plays a key role in religious revelation, practice, and soteriology in South Asian traditions.

To begin with, the Vedic revelation was not recorded as a written text on a slab of stone nor was such knowledge preserved in the form of books like the Bible. Rather, the Vedas were received by sages called *ṛṣis* and passed down through meticulous mnemonic techniques meant to keep intact their sonic quality. The chanting of this sacred sound in the form of Vedic mantras – as well as the recitation or singing of mantras and hymns belonging to later revelations – constitutes one of the most widespread practices in South Asian religions. Naturally, therefore, in one way or another these various religions attribute a salvific quality to sacred sound as a potency capable of purifying and connecting the practitioner to the very source of that sound.

To be sure, there is no one single account explaining the nature of sound and its application. For several millennia, bright minds belonging to various schools of thought originating in India have grappled with the key elements of the older Vedic sonic ideology, either challenging these ideas or developing them into more sophisticated doctrines and systems of practice. Thus, aiming to promote a deeper engagement with Indian intellectual traditions, this chapter introduces Vedic mantras and then briefly discusses contributions advanced by various traditions, including the Mīmāṃsā viewpoint called *varṇavāda*, the grammarians' view of *sphoṭavāda*, the concept of *nāda-brahman* in the yoga traditions, the pan-Indian influence of tantra, and kirtan in the bhakti movements and Sikh faith. This shall provide a foundation for discussing, in subsequent chapters, how these ideas remain alive today and undergo transformations in our globalized world.

Mantras in the Vedas and Upaniṣads

Mantras are the preeminent expression of sacred sound in the Vedic and other Indian traditions. In a seminal essay titled *The Indian Mantra*, Jan Gonda states that the “significance of mantras in the Indian religions can indeed hardly be overestimated. They are one of the elements of the Indian culture which existed already before the dawn of history and survive, until the present day, in a variety of functions and applications”. (Gonda 1963, 260)

But despite the centrality and apparent familiarity of the concept, one should keep in mind that mantra is a multivalent term that cannot be adequately translated by any single word in English. The etymological interpretation of mantra according to Yāska (6th century BCE) is that it comes from the root *man-* (to think, contemplate) and acquires an instrumental connotation when combined with the suffix *tran*, meaning ‘that by which thinking is done’. Another derivation is given by Sāyaṇa (14th century CE), who explains mantra as coming from the root *matr-* (to consult) plus *ac* or *ghañ* used in the sense of “speaking secretly” (Timalsina 2010, 402).

Accordingly, the Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary glosses mantra as “instrument of thought”, “sacred text or speech”, “a prayer or song of praise”, “Vedic hymn or sacrificial formula”, “a sacred formula addressed to any individual deity”, “incantation, charm, spell”, as well as “consultation, resolution, counsel, advice, secret” and more. While these are useful descriptions, they fail to encompass the broad semantic range of the word mantra. Thus, in the absence of formal criteria to define what they are, André Padoux (2011, 5) suggests that “mantras are those ritual formulas or utterances that are pronounced as such by the tradition to which they pertain”. For our current purposes, here I describe some key features that help illuminate the nature and functions of mantras starting within the Vedic context.

To begin with, in the Vedic view mantras are eternal and authorless, having been “received, fashioned, and spoken by the ‘inspired’ seers” (Gonda 1963, 255). In the *Ṛg Veda*, mantras are defined as *kaviśastā*, or the statements ‘pronounced by the seers’ (cf. *Ṛg Veda* 1.152.2; 6.50.14; 10.14.4; Findly 1989). The word *kavi* (a wise, or sensible man), as well as the related term *ṛṣi* (a seer, inspired poet, or sage), has been used to indicate those individuals who had intuitional knowledge of the cosmos. The mantras left by them become sacred formulas chanted in the performance of *yajña* – in itself “a symbolic replication of creation” (Findly 1989, 24) – with the intent of confirming and reinforcing cosmic truth (*satya*) and order (*ṛta*). In a post-revelation stage, the focus shifts from personal connection with the divine as sought after by *ṛṣis* and *kavis* to concerns with precise pronunciation as an attempt to harness the original insights of these wise men and preserve the presumed sonic potency of the revealed mantras. Thus, the development of the concept of mantra in the *Ṛg Veda* suggests an earlier, creative stage of more theistic sensibilities followed by a later period of increasingly ritualistic concerns (Findly 1989, 16).

Due to this ritual usage, scholars have described mantras not as discursive, but performative language: in Vedic *yajña*, “each spoken mantra corresponds to one ritual act” (Coward 2019, 19). It has been argued that even in the post-Vedic period and extending to the present day, mantras continue to function as speech acts used for invoking a deity, for purification, for protection, and so on (Gonda 1963, 261-268). One may contend that speech acts are by definition dialogical and intersubjective, but some mantras are meant to bring self-awareness through silent contemplation,¹ not ritual performance (Timalsina 2010, 414). Acknowledging this, Findly (1989, 28) writes that speech act theory applies to the Vedic ritual, but not necessarily to later mantra practices.

¹ Consider a mantra like *satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ brahma* (brahman is truth, knowledge, and endlessness) from the Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1

Finally, Vedic mantras are understood as expressions of *Vāc* (voice, sound, speech, etc.) which is described as a creative feminine potency later associated with the Goddess of learning, Sarasvatī. Indeed, *Vāc* is conceived as the primary potency originating the cosmos, being inseparable from consciousness (Beck 1993, 25-35) and it includes not only human speech, but is “manifest in every sound, from mantras down to animal noises” (Gerety 2015, 128).

Having said that, Vedic mantras are often counted as exclusive knowledge, mostly meant for the male members of the three higher classes – *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, and *vaiśyas*. There is a broad consensus about how women and the lower classes known as *śūdras* were restricted from reciting these mantras (Gonda 1963, 260; Sharfe 2002), and yet there were exceptions and variations in how this understanding has been applied through the ages. For instance, Hartmut Sharfe argues that “pupils in general education are usually the young members of the upper three classes called *ārya*-s, but there are a few odd statements that include the *śūdras*” (Sharfe 2002, 197). There is also much evidence suggesting that in the early Vedic period women were formally initiated and entitled to learn the Vedas, although the issue is contentious (Lipner 1994, 80; Sharfe 2002, 199-211). In any case, one must keep in mind the discrepancies between the prescriptions in the *śāstra* literature and the much more nuanced practices by people in the past and today.

Moving forward in time, the Upaniṣads develop sacred sound from the “mythological notion of *Vāc* into an ontological reality in itself known as *Śabda-Brahman*”² (Beck 1993, 42). Further, this *Śabda-Brahman* is equated with the syllable *Om*. Significantly, this conceptual shift is accompanied by an internalization of the Vedic *yajña*, again placing importance on spiritual insight and adding a dimension of soteriological aspiration. In this context, the syllable *Om* is

² According to the Monier-Williams Dictionary, *śabda* means sound, voice, word, speech, etc., while *brahman* here indicates ‘the Absolute’, ‘the ultimate source’, or simply ‘consciousness’. Thus, the compound *Śabda-Brahman* can be understood as consciousness expressed through speech or as the Absolute manifest as sound, i.e., the Vedas.

proclaimed the source of the Vedas, and therefore of the cosmos, as well as an instrument for achieving transcendence, or *mokṣa*. A metaphor from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (2.2.4) aptly illustrates this point by comparing the syllable *Om* with a bow, the self (*ātman*) with an arrow, and the Absolute (*Brahman*) with the target to be aimed at.

The bow is Om, the arrow's the self,
the target is *brahman*, they say.
One must strike that undistracted.
He will then be lodged in that,
like the arrow, in the target. (Olivelle 1998, 447)³

The above provides glimpses of a worldview diametrically opposed to our prevailing scientific paradigm concerning issues of consciousness, and so I wish to open a brief parenthesis here. The Vedas, far from endorsing physicalist assumptions and asking how consciousness arises from matter, assert from the very beginning that consciousness with its structuring potency *Vāc* is primordial and constitutes the basis of the cosmos. This ontological incongruity poses a significant challenge for contemporary engagement with Vedic thought, as we shall discuss later.

The Mīmāṃsā School and Varṇavāda

Vedic exegesis is a central concern for the school of thought called Mīmāṃsā. As such, great exponents of Mīmāṃsā took up the task of providing a theoretical framework for explaining the power of mantras. Based on Jaimini's early treatise titled the *Mīmāṃsa-Sūtras* (c. 300 BCE), as well as the works of later commentators like Śābara (1st century BCE?), Prabhākara (c. 650 CE), and Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa (c.700 CE), Mīmāṃsa advances the thesis that *dharma*⁴ can be known only

³ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.2.4: praṇavo dhanuḥ śāro hyātmā brahma tallakṣyamucyate apramattena veddhavyaṃ śaravat tanmayo bhavet

⁴ *Dharma* is another term that is better kept untranslated. The word *dharma* is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ* – to bear, to maintain, to preserve – and has a broad semantic spectrum. Being closely related to the concept of *ṛta*, or cosmic order, *dharma* can be understood in the sense of 'universal law' and 'virtuous conduct' that preserves balance in the cosmos. *Dharma* can also be understood as 'religion', 'justice', and as a specific kind of 'duty' that harmonizes a person with her essential nature. On sources of *dharma*, cf. Hiltbeitel (2014) and Olivelle (2016)

from the Vedas. To substantiate the infallibility and utter reliability of the Vedic mantras, they propose that words are eternal and the relationship between words and their meanings is natural and fixed. In other words, according to the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of *varṇavāda*, the association of word and meaning is not due to human convention, but eternally given (Beck 1993, 55-57).

A question then arises that, if words have power and meaning in themselves, what makes the Vedas different from ordinary language? The answer is that the uniqueness of the Vedas resides in their particular arrangement, in the order in which these words are combined (Beck 1993, 58). This reinforces the idea of the *ṛṣis* as those who, by dint of their purified consciousness, were able to perceive universal order and reveal it in the form of mantras. But according to Mīmāṃsā, the Vedas are authorless not simply because the *ṛṣis* acted as transparent mediums; on this account there is not even the need for a creator god to play any role authoring the Vedas. Thus, ultimate reality is posited as nothing but the eternal words of the Vedas (Coward 2019, 20). These ideas are to some extent challenged and modified in the Grammarian tradition, to which we turn next.

The Grammarian Doctrine of Sphoṭavāda

The two major exponents in the Grammarian tradition who engage in a philosophical investigation of language are Patañjali (c. 2nd century BCE) and Bhartṛhari (c. 5th century CE). While they agree with the Mīmāṃsā notion of a fixed relationship between word and meaning, they disagree on the nature and location of *Śabda-Brahman* (word-consciousness). In the grammarians' view, word and consciousness are intertwined, and as such *Śabda-Brahman* exists both externally in the world and internally within human consciousness. Moreover, they distinguish between external objects and the internal mental cognition of them. Thus, the grammarians affirm an eternal relationship of words with mental cognition, not with any external referent (Beck 1993, 63-65).

Indeed, in his *magnum opus Vākyapadīya* (1.131) Bhartṛhari affirms that every act of cognition presupposes a degree of conceptualization and is thus intertwined with language: “In the world there is no cognition unaccompanied by speech (*śabda*). All knowledge is impressed on the mind as if intermixed with speech”.⁵

But how does communication happen on this account? Bhartṛhari advances a doctrine called *sphoṭavāda*, the term *sphoṭa* meaning ‘to burst forth’. *Sphoṭa* is what we call a linguistic sign, which has two facets: its acoustic or phonic side as the signifier and its semantic or mental side as the signified. In the process of communication, the departure point is a conscious perception of a meaning-whole. For the sake of expression, that unitary idea takes the form of *sphoṭa* with its two aspects as word-sound and word-meaning. Since *Śabda-Brahman* exists within everyone, the person hearing the words is then able to integrate sound and meaning within her consciousness, and in this way the original idea bursts forth, becoming manifest in her mind (Coward 2019, 22).

Thus, for Bhartṛhari the whole is prior to the parts. The *ṛṣis* first have a unified vision of the truth, then they codify it as a sequence of uttered words, and finally the hearer decodify it to obtain the intended meaning. A visual metaphor may help to illustrate this process. A painter sees a flower, then uses different colors to depict it on a canvas, and finally people are able to perceive the complete flower by looking at the painting (Coward 2019, 22).

Bhartṛhari gives yet another important contribution to the understanding of mantras as he analyses three levels in the experience of language. The first level is called *vaikharī* and refers to the sound of uttered words. Even while a person, due to being covered by ignorance, is unable to access the meaning of a mantra, this level remains meaningful because each repetition evokes the

⁵ Vākyapadīya 1.131
na so ’sti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamād ṛte / anuviddham iva jñānam sarvaṁ śabdena bhāsate

sphoṭa afresh until the meaning of the mantra is perceived. The intermediary level is called *madhyamā* and consists of unuttered words or inner thoughts. Here a distinction between the sequence of sounds and meaning remains. Finally, at the level called *paśyantī* there is an integration of sound and meaning allowing an “intuitive flashlike understanding of the meaning of the mantra as a whole” (Coward 2019, 23-24). In the verse from the *R̥g Veda* quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, a fourth stage is indicated which is sometimes called *parā* and refers to the most essential form of *Vāc* (Chakravarti 1933, 48-50).

Curiously, despite the important contributions by the grammarians, their doctrine called *sphoṭavāda* was rejected by most of the orthodox schools in India, including Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Nyāya, and Sāṅkhya, as well as the theistic movements (Beck 1993, 76). The notable exception is Patañjali’s yoga tradition, even if there is no certainty that the Patañjali of the Grammarian school is the same person as the Patañjali⁶ who systematized yoga.

Nāda-Brahman in the Yoga Tradition and Indian Music

Apart from great similarity with the grammarians’ views, in the Yoga tradition the Vedic concept of *śabda* (word) is largely replaced by the broader idea of *nāda* (sound) highlighting a non-linguistic dimension of sacred sound. With this, the emerging concepts of *nāda-brahman* and *nāda-yoga* exert a significant impact not only on the various yoga schools and treatises, but also play an important role in the development of Indian music. Most interestingly, this concept of *nāda* opens a possibility for bridging the gap between *sphoṭa* and *varṇa* through a bipolar understanding of the Absolute as Śiva-Śakti (Beck 1993, 81-102).

⁶ On Patañjali’s identity, Dasgupta (1922, 238) believes that the grammarian is also the author of the *Yoga-Sūtras*. James Woods (1977) disagrees. For a survey on traditional and scholarly opinions, cf. Bianchini (2007).

Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtras* (YS 3.17) imparts the doctrine of *sphoṭavāda* (Bryant 2009, 368). Indeed, Patañjali's characterization of *Īśvara* (God) corresponds to the Grammarian concept of *śabda-brahman*: an eternal, fully cognizant entity designated by the syllable *Om* (YS, 1:24-29). Moreover, Patañjali (YS, 1:28; 2:44) and Bhartṛhari (*Vāk* 1.5) agree in diagnosis and prescription: the ignorance that prevents insight can be removed by the constant repetition of the mantra *Om* (*japa*) or the recitation (*svādhyāya*) of the Vedas (Coward 2019, 25).

This can be better appreciated by considering the yoga worldview with its underlying ideas about *karma*. According to the *Yoga-Sūtras*, every action one performs or any thought one thinks leaves a “memory trace or karmic seed” in the unconscious mind, and this is called *samskāra*. These ‘seeds’ eventually sprout forth as a predisposition to repeat the same action or thought again and again, creating habits (*vāsanās*). For Patañjali, the chanting of mantras sows desirable seeds and establishes wholesome habits able to prevent one's *karma* from bearing fruit. So, despite the unwholesome inclinations one may have due to previous conditioning, there remains always the possibility of overcoming these inclinations by making use of one's free will – and mantras become a “powerful psychological tool to use in directing this process” (Coward 2019, 14-15).

Patañjali's classical yoga system finds further elaboration in the *Yoga-Upaniṣads*, in the teachings of Gorakhnāth, and in the Haṭha-Yoga treatises, where an intricate system of *Nāda-Brahman* meditation is developed. A striking feature pervading these texts is the characterization of the syllable *Om* as the perfect embodiment of the masculine principle Śiva with the feminine Śakti. Indeed, all sound vibration is regarded as expressing the amorous play of the divine couple. According to Beck (1993, 100-102) this can be understood as a synthesis of the *sphoṭavāda* and *varṇavāda* doctrines for it combines the masculine, Śiva-like conception of *sphoṭa* as all-pervading consciousness with the feminine, Śakti-like nature of *varṇa* as receptacle and matrix.

Finally, Indian music can be traced back to the singing of the Sāma-Veda and to instrumental musical performance during Vedic *yajña*. The main instrument used was the *vīṇā*, which was often played by the wife of the officiating priest (Beck 1993, 107). Other musical instruments are also mentioned in Vedic texts, including different kinds of flutes, drums, and cymbals. Eventually, the guidelines for *Sāman* music were codified in a genre of literature called *Gandharva-Veda* and reflected upon in the Upaniṣads, where the term *śabda-brahman* appears. The same terminology is used in Bhārata Muni's *Nāṭya-Śāstra*, a seminal work on music and drama composed no later than the 4th century CE. Finally, the word *śabda* is replaced by *nāda* in another important text from around the 8th century CE: the *Bṛhaddeśī* authored by Maṭaṅga (Ibid.,108). Both terms, *śabda* and *nāda*, can be translated as 'sound', but *śabda* often refers to 'word' or 'language'. Thus, *śabda-brahman* means the Absolute manifest in the words of the Vedas. On the other hand, the concept of *nāda-brahman* is used more broadly in the Āgamas and yoga treatises encompassing linguistic and non-linguistic sounds.

Music is thus understood as more than a form of entertainment or even artistic expression: it is accepted as a manifestation of *nāda* and a means to access the highest reality. As explained by Francesca Cassio (2010), *nāda* is conceived as simultaneously the seed of the universe and the means through which the *yogī* returns to the origins of creation. Moreover, Beck (1993, 109) suggests that it is not by chance that the twenty-two *nādīs* (subtle arteries in the body as postulated in yoga treatises) find direct correspondence with the twenty-two *śrutis* (microtones) of Indian music. Such correspondences and the high evaluation of music as an efficient soteriological practice are not only affirmed in ancient treatises, but also confirmed by the testimony of music teachers in India who to this date continue to emphasize the importance of *nāda-yoga* techniques of breathing and voice production as a process meant for communion with the Absolute.

Sacred Sound in Tantra and the Theistic Traditions

As described thus far, speech first appears as *Vāc* in the *Rg Veda*; then it is called *śabda-brahman* in the Upaniṣads – which is taken as the ultimate truth in Mīmāṃsā and identical to consciousness in the Grammarian school. In the yoga traditions, again, the feminine aspect of speech is highlighted, and even more so in tantra and the theistic traditions. Thus, as Harvey Alper (1989, 5) puts it, sacred sound theories in India are like “variations on a theme [...] comparable to the development of a *rāga*”.

Tantra, indeed, is a widespread movement that has had a profound impact on the Asian religious landscape for over a thousand years. As described by David Gordon White,

Tantra has persisted and often thrived throughout Asian history since the middle of the first millennium of the common era. Its practitioners have lived in India, China, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Mongolia, as well as in the "Greater India" of medieval Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Burma, and Indonesia. No form of medieval Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism has been without a Tantric component; and some South Asian Islamic traditions have, as well, borne a Tantric stamp (White 2000, 7).

Mantras play a vital role in Tantra, and thus in the three major theistic traditions – Śākta, Śaiva, and Vaiṣṇava. Some common features of mantra doctrine and practice in these traditions are the notion of sound as *śakti*, or divine energy; the practice of *dīkṣā* or initiation; the extensive usage of the non-linguistic *bīja-mantras*, and an emphasis on divine grace.

In Śākta-Tantra, which comprises a set of traditions centered on the Goddess, speech or *Vāc* is regarded as identical with the Goddess herself. As such, *Vāc* is the eternal principle that “emits the universe, animates it and reabsorbs it” (A. Padoux 2011, 57). Conversely, in Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions *Vāc* is identified with the divine energy of Śiva or Viṣṇu, respectively. In other words, she is described as the consort and creative potency (*śakti*) of the male deity, who himself represents “supreme Being and supreme Consciousness” (*ibid.*).

The divine potency present in the mantras, however, is not so openly accessible. A typical feature of the tantric path is that it usually begins with *dīkṣā* or initiation by a *guru*. On this occasion, the practitioner receives a mantra or set of mantras specific to the joined tradition. Received in this manner, a mantra is said to become highly effective. Indeed, the mantra is regarded as non-different from the deity it represents (Coward 2019, 29). To illustrate this point, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the sage Nārada, after imparting a mantra and giving instructions on the process of worship, declares that the deity is directly embodied in the mantra (*mantra-mūrti*).⁷

Mantras are often preceded by *Om*, the most famous of all sacred syllables. But there are numerous other *bīja* (seed) mantras, each said to contain in condensed form the energy of a deity. For instance, the *bīja-mantra* for Gaṇeśa – the remover of obstacles – is *gaṃ*, because that sound in itself is understood to impel movement. Interestingly, *gam-* is a Sanskrit root for words and verbs related to movement. Thus, *bīja-mantras* are widely used in tantra based on the notion that each syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet has a specific energy inhering in that sound.⁸

In the theistic traditions, however, the power of mantras is not assumed to be without a source, as in Mīmāṃsā. Rather, mantras are expressions of divine grace, sound incarnations of the deity. Thus, it is by their own volition that the Goddess, or Śiva, or Viṣṇu make themselves easily accessible as mantras for the benefit of the devotee. For instance, in the Lakṣmī-Tantra (24.3), the Goddess declares: “For the welfare of all living beings, I voluntarily appear in the forms of Mātrkā-mantras, made of Śabda-Brahman” (Krishnamacharya 1959, 80).

⁷ See BhP 1.5.38 *iti mūrty-abhidhānena mantra-mūrtim amūrtikam yajate yajña-puruṣam sa samyag-darśanaḥ pumān* Thus, he is a man of perfect vision who worships the *yajña-puruṣa* (Viṣṇu) in the form of sound representation, for Viṣṇu, who has no [ordinary] form, exists in the form of mantra. See also BhP 4.8.54-58.

⁸ A few more examples of *bīja-mantras* are: ‘aim’ for guru and Sarasvatī mantras; ‘śrīm’ for Lakṣmī mantras; ‘krīm’ for Kālī mantras; ‘klīm’ for Kṛṣṇa mantras; and so on.

But besides the recitation of mantras in these theistic schools, the role of sound also finds a lively expression in devotional music, or kirtan, where there is a preference for the singing of devotional poetry, scriptural passages, and divine names. This is because of the understanding of mantras as exclusive knowledge, going against the more democratic aspirations of kirtan. And yet, there are exceptions to this rule: the main one is the *Hare Krishna* mantra revealed in the *Kali-Santarāṇa Upaniṣad* where this mantra is presented as the best means (*upāya*) for destroying the evil influences in this age of quarrel (*kali-kalmaṣa-nāśanam*). Furthermore, the text unequivocally encourages anyone – whether in a pure or impure state – to recite this mantra constantly for there are no rules (*viddhi*) governing the circumstances and methods for its use.

Historically, the main group emphasising this mantra is the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava lineage. More recently, the mantra was popularized worldwide by its international offshoot, the Hare Krishna movement. The justification for the unrestricted propagation of the Hare Krishna mantra relies primarily on the authority of the *Kali-Santarāṇa Upaniṣad* and then on the fact that, although technically a Vedic mantra, this formula consists entirely of divine names in the vocative case – not in the dative case and not preceded by *bīja-mantras* nor accompanied by expressions such as ‘*namaḥ*’, ‘*svāhā*’, etc., which are typical of mantras.

In a thorough analysis of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava perspective on this, Kostyantyn Perun concludes that the “Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra is thus simultaneously ‘*nāma*’ (God’s name) and ‘mantra’.” Thus Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas call it “‘*hari-nāma-mahā-mantra*’ or ‘the great mantra of the Lord’s names’” (Perun 2016, 215). Of course, both in India and elsewhere, concerns regarding who is entitled to recite mantras are not as prominent today as they might have been once. Thus, it is common for contemporary kirtan leaders to sing all sorts of mantras, as it is common for people to listen to them on media, despite some contrary conservative opinions.

Back to our historical outline, devotional music becomes increasingly popular with the development of the bhakti movements since around the sixth century but especially after the twelfth. Kirtan is thus adopted as a central practice by certain Hindu and non-Hindu groups alike, most notably by Sikhs, and *sants* (truth-exemplars, holy persons) coming from different communities such as Kabir, Ravidas, and Namdev. This is also a period of converging influences in which Hindu sound ideology and Indian music combine with Islamic elements transforming the religious soundscape of the Indian subcontinent.

Kirtan in the bhakti movements

Kirtan is the pulsating heart of the devotional movements which began to flourish in medieval India. John Stratton Hawley (2015, 295) describes these movements in the plural as the “bhakti network”. Indeed, kirtan was and continues to be the prime means used by *bhaktas* (devotees) to express their devotion and propagate their message.

Derived from the Sanskrit root *kīrt-*, “to celebrate, praise, glorify”, the term kirtan has an interesting parallel with the concept of *kīrti* (fame, renown, glory) which played an important role in courtly culture in medieval India when countless eulogies were written by court poets recounting “the deeds and accomplishments of emperors” (Ali 2004, 83). Just as these eulogies were meant to establish the authority and expand the influence of monarchs, kirtan was a way for *bhaktas* to celebrate the divine and at the same time spread the teachings of their community through singing about the names, beauty, qualities, and deeds of their chosen deity. Though grounded on the sonic doctrines developed in Vedic, Yogic, and Tantric contexts, these kirtan practices had their own unique values and features, being characterized by accessibility, inclusion, and spontaneity.

This is vividly illustrated in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a most influential text whose final redaction is estimated around the ninth century CE. As an example of accessibility, the text [BhP 11.27.45]⁹ affirms that one should praise the Lord making use of ‘ancient’ (i.e., Sanskrit), hymns, as well as of compositions in *prākṛta*, or local languages. Surely, the earliest records of bhakti literature composed in a regional language appears in Tamil around the 7th century (Prentiss 1999, 218), perhaps predating the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. And yet, the passage quoted above seems to have provided a “scriptural sanction” for broadening this process, causing a “radical switch from Sanskrit to vernacular languages as found in the flood of medieval bhakti poetry and temple music traditions” (Beck 1993, 32).

Also typical of bhakti is inclusiveness, as indicated in other passages of *the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, such as when princess Devahūti proclaims that those who have the divine names on the tip of their tongues are worthy of respect even if born in the lowest of families [BhP 3.33.7].¹⁰ All, including foreigners, outcastes, and aboriginal tribes are purified if they approach such devotees who live under the shelter of the Lord [BhP 2.4.18].¹¹ Thus, kirtan is understood as a practice open to all and most effective regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social status.

Furthermore, kirtan is said to overflow spontaneously from the experience of communion with the divine. In this regard, the sage Nārada describes his life change after an epiphany:

Devoid of shame or any concern with formalities, I began reciting the names of the Unlimited One while remembering his mysterious and auspicious acts. I thus lived without pride or envy and kept travelling the Earth with a satisfied mind purified of hankerings, in this way anticipating that final moment [of death and reunion with the Lord] [BhP 1.6.26].¹²

⁹ BhP 11.27.45 stavair uccāvacaīḥ stotraīḥ pauraṇaiḥ prākṛtair api, stutvā prasīda bhagavann iti vandeta daṇḍa-vat

¹⁰ BhP 3.33.7 aho bata śva-paco ’to garīyān yaj-jihvāgre vartate nāma tubhyam tepus tapas te juhuvuḥ sasnur āryā brahmānūcur nāma gṛṇanti ye te

¹¹ BhP 2.4.18 kirāta-hūṇāndhra-pulinda-pulkaśā ābhīra-śumbhā yavanāḥ khasādayaḥ ye ’nye ca pāpā yad-apāśrayāśrayāḥ śudhyanti tasmai prabhaviṣṇave namaḥ

¹² BhP 1.6.26 nāmāny anantasya hata-trapaḥ paṭhan guhyāni bhadrāṇi kṛtāni ca smaran gāṁ paryatāṁs tuṣṭa-manā gata-sprḥaḥ kālāṁ pratīkṣan vimado vimatsaraḥ

Similar examples of spontaneity and disregard for public opinion in the path of bhakti abound in the *Bhāgavata* narrative, including emperors like R̥ṣabha [BhP 5.5.29] and Bhārata [BhP 5.9.3], queens like Kuntī [BhP 1.8.42], children like Prah̥lāda [BhP 7.4.40], and especially women like the young milkmaids (*gopīs*) whose intimate relationships with Kṛṣṇa are guided by boundless love [BhP 10.29.4-11]. This last point is vividly summarized in the following passage:

Social customs, scriptural injunctions, bodily demands, fruitive action, shyness, patience, bodily pleasures, self-gratification and the path of varṇāśrama-dharma, which is difficult to give up — the gopīs have forsaken all these, as well as their own relatives and their punishment and scolding, for the sake of serving Lord Kṛṣṇa. They render loving service to Him for the sake of His enjoyment.¹³ (Prabhupada 1974)

Thus, these young lovers of Kṛṣṇa epitomize the bhakti ideal of spontaneous and selfless love to the Supreme. Most importantly for the topic at hand, from beginning to end the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* emphasizes kīrtan of the divine names as the principal means of deliverance in the current age, as exemplified in the following passage: “O king, the age of Kali, which is an ocean of faults, certainly has a great quality: simply by kīrtan of the names of Krishna one is freed from material association and achieves the supreme” [BhP 12.3.51].¹⁴

These are recurrent themes in the bhakti literature that not only pervade Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śakta traditions but also include communities like the Sikh panth. All these communities developed through cross-pollination processes in a plural environment. As Elaine Fisher (2017, 13) puts it, these are “dynamic social systems composed of networks of religious actors, institutions – temples, monasteries, lineages – and the religious meanings they engender”.

See also BhP 11.2.40 regarding indifference to public opinion (*loka-bāhyah*)

¹³ Śrī Caitanya-Caritāmṛta Ādi 4.167-169

loka-dharma, veda-dharma, deha-dharma, karma, lajjā, dhairya, deha-sukha, ātma-sukha-marma
dustyaja ārya-patha, nija parijana, sva-jane karaye yata tāḍana-bhartsana
sarva-tyāga kari' kare kṛṣṇera bhajana kṛṣṇa-sukha-hetu kare prema-sevana

¹⁴ BhP 12.3.51: kaler doṣa-nidhe rājann asti hy eko mahān guṇaḥ kīrtanād eva kṛṣṇasya mukta-saṅgaḥ param vrajet

Sikh Kirtan

From the very beginning, the musical setting of the sacred word (*śabad* or *bāṇi*) has played a central role in the Sikh community. Guru Nānak (1469-1539) transmitted his message through sung poetry and his teachings greatly stressed the value of singing as a pathway to the divine.

To Gurū Nānak, who defined himself as the *dhādhī* (bard) of the *Akāl Purakh* (Timeless Creator), are attributed 974 śabads (lyrical hymns) in 19 *rāgas* and their melodic variants. These constitute the ground of a poetical and musical repertory that flourished during the time of the following nine Sikh gurūs, between the late fifteenth century and the early eighteenth century. (Cassio, forthcoming)

Thus, Guru Nānak's approach was followed by subsequent Sikh gurus who contributed thousands of hymns and also included selected poems from fifteen bhakti and Sufi poets to the already rich legacy of inspired compositions left by the founder. This vast collection of hymns forms the Sikh scripture called the *Guru Granth Sahib* and is regarded as the final and permanent 'Living Guru' for Sikhs. The singing of these hymns is *Gurbāṇī kīrtan*, a most revered practice for Sikhs of all times that reveals many connections and also unique insights on pan-Indian notions of sacred sound.¹⁵

Interestingly, one finds a remarkable convergence of genres in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. For instance, the adoption of compositions by authors coming from a variety of social, religious, and geographical backgrounds such as Jayadeva (1170-1245), Sheik Farid (1173-1265), Ravidas (14th or 15th century) and Kabir (1440-1518) bears witness to the inclusive nature of the Sikh Scripture. Moreover, the variation and flexibility of the tunes and styles of singing used in kirtan – as well as the variety of vernacular languages – indicates the “*pluriversal* nature of the divine Word that ‘speaks’ to all” (Cassio, forthcoming).

¹⁵ This observation is not meant to minimize the internal coherence and independence of the Sikh panth in regard to other communities, but only to acknowledge the continuities and dynamic interactions taking place in a vibrant plural environment that India has been since pre-colonial times (*cf.* Fisher 2017).

In this connection, Pashaura Singh (2006, 159) adds that when addressing a Sufi audience, the gurus “would employ the *Kāfi* class of *rāgas* in singing. Similarly, they would employ folk tunes to address the rural people”. Therefore, even if music was given primacy as a means for approaching the divine, musical style was malleable and subordinate to the message of the gurus.

To indicate the primary importance of the Word over the musical rendition, Sikh scholars and practitioners unanimously designate Sikh kīrtan as *śabad pradhān* (‘text-driven’). In this epistemological context, the musical setting is intended as subservient to the Word-Gurū and, therefore, this genre of singing is known as *śabad kīrtan* or *Gurbāñī kīrtan*. (Cassio, forthcoming)

This is important because while the Sikh Scripture indexes the hymns according to *rāgas*, the ways of singing reveal a remarkable degree of flexibility with multiple possibilities of expression. Still, the musical dimension is an integral part of *Gurbāñī* and it would be misleading to consider it a mere ornamentation of the written Word. As Cassio (2022, forthcoming) maintains, the *pada* (verse) and its musical setting constitute “one aesthetic unit made of lyrics and music”.

A tension exists, therefore, between the notion that *Gurbāñī* is created with an intrinsic *rāga* structure and the affirmation that the message takes precedence. This paradox is expressed in the words of Bhai Baldeep Singh (2019, 24) as follows: “Gurbāñī, or the *śabada* is the Gurū, but neither *rāga*, *tāla*, nor *surti* are accorded the same status, even though without them, Gurbāñī Kīrtana cannot exist”. As an aside, in many ways this tension in the Sikh panth prefigures what will be discussed in upcoming chapters regarding kirtan’s transformations in the Americas.

In any case, the central message of the Sikh gurus is that through the practice of kirtan and by the continuous repetition of the divine name (*nām simaran*) Sikhs can purify their lives and consciousness. Indeed, communion with the divine through sacred sound is an integral part of Guru Nānak’s own transformative experience and a key element of his teachings since the formative years of the Sikh community.

On this, Charles Townsend (2015, 63) writes that “In several hymns included in the Ādi Granth, Guru Nānak describes his role as that of a 'mouthpiece' through which the Divine Word (*shabad/bāṇī*) is revealed”. Furthermore, Guru Nānak explains that the entire cosmos is pervaded by “the 'Unstruck Sound' (*anhad nāda*) eternally emanating from Akāl Purakh, which is the source of all knowledge” (ibid., 64).¹⁶ On the one hand, the above shows striking similarities with pan-Indian notions of sacred sound and closely resonates with the religious experiences of other *sants*. On the other, Guru Nānak’s experience is unique to him and imprints distinct features to the Sikh panth. Other Sikh gurus continue this pattern of adopting ideas and practices from the surrounding traditions while critically applying them to their community. For example, echoing a recurrent Puranic teaching, Guru Arjan writes that “in this dark age of Kali Yuga, kirtan is the primary, most excellent [*paradhānā*] [form of worship]” (*GGS* page 1075, cited in Townsend 2015, 67).¹⁷

But despite embracing a rich variety of pan-Indian elements, Gurbāṇī Kirtan should not be regarded as a peripheral variant of a Hindu tradition. Rather, it emerges as a distinct expression developed in dialogue with parallel traditions and revealing its unique flavour. For instance, the *Guru Granth Sahib* features some rare *rāgas* found nowhere else (Cassio 2022, forthcoming). Moreover, “in distinction from other Hindu *kirtan* and Sufi *qawwali* traditions current in their time and South Asian milieu, the Sikh Gurus eschewed dancing and clapping as distractions from the ideal tranquil atmosphere that allows focus on the Divine Word” (Townsend 2015, 71).

¹⁶ The referred passage from the *Guru Granth Sahib* translates “The Guru's Word [*Gurbāṇī*] embodies all scriptural knowledge (*Veda*) and the eternally sounding vibration (*nāda*) that permeates all space.” (cited in Townsend 2015, 64). The terminology used in this passage makes apparent a relationship with previous Indian doctrines of sound, though the Sikh claim of ‘*Gurbāṇī* embodying *Veda*’ is meant to indicate that the Guru’s Word supersedes other literary traditions, including the older Vedas through what can be called ‘inclusive subordination’ – a process that rather than reflecting continuity, it is a polemic move comparable to modernist Hindu ‘inclusivity’.

¹⁷ On the recurrence of this theme, cf. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 12.3.52 *kr̥te yad dhyāyato viṣṇuṃ tretāyām yajato makhaiḥ dvāpare paricaryāyām kalau tad dhari-kīrtanāt* - Whatever result was obtainable in the *Kṛta* age by meditation, in the *Tretā* by performance of fire sacrifices, and in the *Dvāpara* by worship, that can be attained in the age of *Kali* through *hari-kīrtana*. See also *BhP* 12.3.51; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.2.17; *Bṛhan-Nārādīya Purāṇa* 38.126

One important point to keep in mind regarding the ideas discussed here is that despite their traditional status, these are not some distant realities of the past. Rather, they remain alive and keep undergoing constant transformations, as well as transforming the world's religious landscape. As dynamic processes, traditions are formed and evolve in contact with other groups, through ongoing appropriations and unavoidable syncretism. Thus, instead of thinking of these traditions as reified essences, I propose an open dialogue enriched by diverse voices and epistemologies.

Contemporary Engagement with Ideas on Sacred Sound

This chapter has given an overview of the main Indian accounts of sound as well as early developments of kirtan in India. Some Indian traditions like Buddhism and Jainism were not discussed here since they have from the very beginning rejected the high evaluation of sound in the Vedas. And yet, mantras play an important role in Buddhism and devotional music has always been part of Jain worship (Coward 2019; Linden 2019). Moreover, much could be written on the striking similarities found in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought and practice regarding music, the Word and the names of God. In the final portion of this chapter I wish to briefly address some repercussions of Indian theories of sound in modern scholarship, as well as to reflect on the nature of language and its relationship with consciousness.

The impact of the 'discovery' of Sanskrit by European scholars is well-known and it gave significant impetus for the modern study of linguistics in the West. It is not by chance, therefore, that much in this field can be traced to Indian notions of language. Thus, Guy Beck (1993, 50-51) suggests that the work of Ferdinand Sassaure, who acted as a professor of Sanskrit at the University of Geneva, must have been inspired by the ideas of Bhartṛhari and others. Similarly, he points to the thought of phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty who in their writings have reaffirmed the Indian notion of the inextricable relation between words and thought.

For instance, in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Husserl writes: “Thinking is always done in language and is entirely bound up with speech. Thinking, as distinct from other modalities of consciousness, is thus always linguistic, always some use of language.” (Husserl, 1929, 19. Cited in Beck, 1993, 50). Thus, the link between consciousness and language is affirmed both in ancient and modern thought.

As pointed out previously, the *Yoga-Sūtras* formulate a cogent explanation of how the chanting of mantras can purify consciousness, and other Indian texts do the same in greater detail. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* describes sound (*śabda-mātram*) as the initial element in creation. It is first produced when the potency of the Supreme Being transforms the inert physical substance allowing for the sky, the sense of hearing, and all other cosmic ingredients to evolve subsequently.¹⁸ To put it briefly, sound is described as expressing ‘God’s thought’, so to say, and as such it affects matter acting as the organizing principle of the universe.

But epistemological and ontological challenges arise if we wish to engage meaningfully with these ideas, and not just respect them from a distance. No matter how consistently an argument might be constructed, it will make little sense if judged outside certain parameters. In the case of the traditions discussed here, they assume the primacy of consciousness. Thus, a productive debate on the idea that the cosmos originates from consciousness and is structured by language/sound cannot be accomplished without a re-evaluation of contemporary theories of consciousness. This problem becomes evident looking at the works of Arvind-Pal Mandair (2009) and Robert Yelle (2003) who, taking for granted a post-Enlightenment secular paradigm, end up reducing sophisticated theories of sacred sound to issues of socio-political power and rhetoric.

¹⁸ Regarding the progressive manifestation of ever denser elements beginning with sound, cf. BhP 3.26.32 *tāmasāc ca vikurvāṇād bhagavad-vīrya-coditāt śabda-mātram abhūt tasmān nabhaḥ śrotraṇi tu śabdagam*

Although space here does not allow for a detailed response to the positions advanced by these scholars, I wish to at least identify what I perceive to be the root problem. First, with the aim of providing what he calls a “materialist sketch of Nānak’s teachings”, Mandair (2009, 364) outlines but then dismisses Vedic ideas on sacred sound on the basis of what he describes as an “ideological link between orientalism and Brahmanism”. He also proposes that the high valuation of sound in Vedic thought would be “intrinsically part of an ancient indigenous power structure” (ibid., 331) put in place by the Brahmins for the institutionalization of caste. He uses the expression “Vedic economy” to describe this “historical complicity between orientalism and Brahmanism” (ibid., 334) and points to the instrumentalization of this Vedic economy by Hindu nationalists today. Thus, by making negative associations with orientalism and Hindu nationalism, Mandair argues against notions of sacred sound in order to free Sikhism from the pernicious influence of Indology coupled with Brahmanism. To me, this is a clear example of the association fallacy which tries to discredit something through unjustified negative connections with something else, thus appealing to emotion to induce a perception that the qualities of one thing are inherent in another. Clearly, ideas of sacred sound precede orientalism and Hindu nationalism by thousands of years and these associations are unwarranted.

Moreover, it is ironic that Mandair is proposing to decolonize Sikh teachings by first reinterpreting them with heavy doses of Derridean deconstruction. On the one hand, he expresses a desire that Sikhs may overcome colonial prejudices manifest as a sophisticated epistemological segregation of knowledge to participate in a fruitful “dialogue with Western thought in more equal terms” (ibid., 380). On the other hand, and as if a condition for that, he proposes a new reading of Guru Nānak’s foundational experience with Akāl Purakh (*lit.* the Timeless Being) to fit a temporal, historical framework favored by secular scholars.

Does decolonization mean a switch from the previous Christian-centric European worldviews to contemporary secular ones, still based on European assumptions? For how long will such universalizing claims persist as if they were a neutral standard? Why not allow for alternative views and read South Asian religions through their homegrown epistemologies and metaphysics instead, thus allowing them equal voice and space at the multicultural table? Fortunately, a more nuanced decolonial approach seems to be underway, especially regarding Sikh kirtan, to which we shall refer in the course of this work.

I see merit in much of what Mandair has to say in other parts of his work, such as his insightful assessment that overcoming orientalism implies not only counteracting prejudice and exploitation, but also transcending the epistemological fences that prevent Eastern ideas to be harnessed as valuable sources for global thinking. However, his dismissal of a pan-Indian understanding of sacred sound simply fails to do justice to Guru Nānak's religious experience, the teachings left by him and the entire lineage of Sikh gurus, and even the prevailing Sikh self-understanding to this day. Besides, to assume that socio-political power was the whole story behind thousands of years of philosophical inquiry on the nature of sound is simply unjustifiable even in the face of the sad historical scars left on the Sikh panth by orientalism and Hindu nationalism.

In a related manner, in *Explaining Mantras* Robert Yelle (2003) advances an argument that mantras should be analysed not only semantically, but also rhetorically. Based on a detailed analysis of the structures of mantras, which he compares to poetry, Yelle reduces Hindu sonic ideas to a sophisticated system of persuasion by means of various rhetorical devices.

Poetry is not reality but rhetoric, not the revelation of a natural connection between signifier and signified, but the exploitation of the appearance of such a connection. Tantric ritual uses various rhetorical devices, including fictitious etymologies, to motivate ritual actions with respect to their purported function (Yelle 2003, 64)

His overall conclusion that semiotics ought to play a more central role in the study of religion is well-taken, but his reasoning implies a conceptual framework that takes physical objects as the only fundamental reality while assuming consciousness to be an epiphenomenon of matter.

Where Indian traditions develop a refined account of the creative power of sound and of how consciousness structures reality through its inseparable potency, which is language, Yelle (2003, 14) dismisses such claims based on secular bias, explaining away mantras as “magic words” like “hocus pocus” and “abracadabra”. As such, Yelle exemplifies the tendency to naturalize certain metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, creating an unsurmountable obstacle to the dialogue he wishes to promote. But can he prove the precedence of physical reality?

On this, Donald Hoffmann (2008) points out that the usual formulation of the mind-body problem as conceived by most scholars today goes along the lines ‘how do conscious experiences arise from brain activity?’. This is obviously a biased questions assuming that matter is the foundation of reality. However, despite the close correlations between brain activity and consciousness, there is currently no scientific theory explaining how the brain can create or form the basis for conscious experience. Hoffmann then proposes a theoretical model departing from the reverse assumption that consciousness comes first.

Similarly, in *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, Phillip Goff (2017) develops a meticulous philosophical argument against physicalism and towards a post-Galilean kind of metaphysics. His methodological starting point is that “phenomenal consciousness is a hard datum that any adequate theory of reality must accommodate” (Goff 2017, 3). These are but two examples of contemporary scholars proposing alternative solutions to the mind-body problem.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cf. David Chalmers (2018) on “The Meta-Problem of Consciousness”. Also, cf. *The Monist* (Ganeri and Shani 2022) for a recent volume on South Asian philosophies of consciousness published in this influential journal.

Of course, these are unresolved issues among contemporary scholars, and this is precisely the point I wish to emphasize: as discussed in the Introduction, since we are dealing with open questions it is fair and sensible to acknowledge the emic worldview and place it in parity with other perspectives, especially when there are contemporary philosophical positions advocating that consciousness is indeed a fundamental ontological category, and as such they go well together with the Vedic understanding of sacred sound.

In this regard, in *Survey of Hinduism* Klaus Klostermaier (2007, 3) writes about a predisposition in South Asian scholarship to try “to prove a Freudian, a Jungian, or some other psychological or anthropological thesis, playing around with structuralist, functionalist, or other theoretical models which are clever and appear plausible to Western intellectuals, but explain little and often distort a great deal of Hindu reality”. Is this not what Mandair and Yelle are doing in their attempts to explain away the value of sacred sound as understood in South Asian traditions? How can we expect to decolonize scholarship if the frame of reference remains one shaped by European values and worldviews alone?

In any case, this research does not really depend on a solution for the body-mind problem, nor does it require the *a priori* acceptance of any worldview. My only reasons for bringing up such contested issues here are to stimulate a reflection on common Western prejudices and to create space for an open enquiry. For our purposes, the main concern is to identify what concepts and theories of sacred sound inform practitioners in the US, Canada, and Brazil. Thus, in the following chapters we shall turn our attention to the vectors of transmission and then to patterns in the reception, assimilation and propagations of ideas and practices involving mantras and kirtan today. The guiding questions then become what discourses on sacred sound circulate and how they transform our contemporary religious soundscape.

Chapter 3: Kirtan comes to America

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence. I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach. Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord.

(Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* 2)

After publishing *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (Tagore 1912), which consisted of English prose translations of religious poems, the author of the passage above achieved worldly renown as the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Tagore then traveled extensively “lecturing and reading from his work in Europe, the Americas, and East Asia” (Robinson 2022). At the same time, nowhere is Tagore’s influence more deeply felt than in his homeland, where his poems and vast collection of over two thousand songs became a marker of Bengali identity.

Tagore considered music “the purest and most unimpeded form of creative expression” and it is significant that his “aesthetically unique musical oeuvre” known as *Rabindra Sangit* flourished in the context of the imperial encounter (Linden 2013, 107-109). Indeed, Tagore’s innovative work expresses his eager attempts to create bridges for cross-cultural communication. Tagore “was highly influential in introducing Indian culture to the West and vice versa” (Robinson 2022) and, in fact, can be considered a pioneer in the transculturation of kirtan.

A major aim of this chapter is to identify key historical agents and events facilitating the arrival of kirtan in the Americas. It also looks at other movements, namely yoga and mindfulness, to understand modes of transmission and patterns of adaptation commonly used in the process of translating Eastern ideas and practices to Western audiences. In my transdisciplinary approach, the historical factors discussed here are meant to provide a link between the philosophical ideas of Chapter Two and the transcultural analysis coming up in Chapter Four.

Meet the Protagonists: Agents and Vectors of Transmission

Kirtan arrives in the Americas not by any centralized or coordinated endeavor, but through the agency of individuals and groups forming channels that I call ‘vectors of transmission’. These channels allow for the continuous flow of people, ideas, and practices beyond national and cultural borders.

Immigration, therefore, is one important factor to be considered, along with the drastically increased circulation of individuals around the globe in recent decades. Also, in a counterflow to colonialism, gurus from India started traveling around the world establishing their missions especially in the United States. Around the same time, during the counterculture many young Westerners went to India in search for alternative ways of living and expressing spirituality and they brought back with them various ideas and practices, including kirtan. Famous musicians and other celebrities also contributed to the popularization of kirtan and Eastern spirituality. Together, these agents form networks of practitioners disseminating kirtan in ways that mimic the global propagation of yoga and mindfulness, as we shall discuss shortly.

More recently, the internet and new communication technologies opened important channels for the global dissemination of kirtan as well, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. In a post-pandemic scenario, however, the digital trend is likely to continue only as a complement, not a substitute, for in-person engagement.

Although each of the coming sections focuses on a particular vector of transmission, it is important to recognize that this transnational kirtan movement results from the confluence of various factors and develops through the adoption of certain adaptative processes that help make the practice more easily transposable in different cultural settings.

Immigration

Immigration contributes to the spreading of kirtan as a core religious practice for Hindus and Sikhs. As such, wherever there are mandirs and gurdwaras, or even Indian families living together, kirtan is most likely taking place there. Not only first-generation Hindu and Sikh immigrants perform kirtan quite naturally as part of their worship, but this practice tends to increase with the growing enthusiasm of the second generation. This is especially noticeable in the Sikh diaspora in the United States – where the youth was called the “kirtan generation” by Charles Townsend (2018). I am not aware of studies showing a comparable phenomenon among young ethnic Hindus, but there is great engagement in kirtan for second-generation ISKCON devotees, whether they come from Indian families or any other ethnic background (Brown 2012, 197). The same applies to the second-generation in the 3HO movement, as we shall discuss shortly.²⁰ In any case, the change in the immigration policies in the United States and Canada since the mid-1960s is a major factor allowing for the spreading of kirtan in North America.

Despite its importance as vehicle for the propagation of kirtan, the Indian diaspora is not the focus of this research – rather, this is a study on the transculturation of kirtan by people of all ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, Indian immigration is not uniform throughout the world. And yet, kirtan is growing as a significant religious phenomenon even in places like Brazil, where the presence of Indians is negligible. This shows that kirtan is not confined to ethnic spaces but is developing as a transnational and transcultural practice through multi-sided interactions that generate new cultural patterns in an ongoing process of cross-pollination.

²⁰ ISKCON stands for International Society for Krishna Consciousness. It was established in New York by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1966. ISKCON is a new religious movement in the American context, but it is an offshoot of a longstanding tradition in India: the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya. The 3HO (Happy, Healthy, and Holy Organization), also known as ‘Sikh Dharma’, was established in America by Harbhajan Singh, also known as Yogi Bhajan, in 1969. Devotees in both institutions usually share great enthusiasm for kirtan, especially their youth.

Kirtan might have come to America with the very first Indian immigrants as part of their religious practices, but it starts being performed by Westerners when Indian gurus establish their missions in the United States. Indeed, kirtan is introduced with various levels of emphasis as part of the yoga and Vedanta movements inaugurated by Swami Vivekananda, Swami Sivananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Satchidananda, Swami Muktananda, Satya Sai Baba, and others (Beck 2015). Moreover, kirtan is given great importance and becomes a regular public performance in America in the late 1960s via the two religious movements mentioned above – ISKCON and the 3HO – being a core practice in the bhakti and kundalini yoga processes that they promote, respectively.

In the case of ISKCON, in 1966 the founder A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda led a three-hour public kirtan at Tompkins Square Park, in New York. Beat poet Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) was participating in the event, which made a headline in the *New York Times* with the title *Swami's Flock Chants in Park to Find Ecstasy: 50 Followers Clap and Sway to Hypnotic Music at East Side Ceremony* (Sikes 1966). As ISKCON developed, Prabhupāda instructed his disciples to perform kirtan profusely, singing for hours in the streets every day as part of their *sādhana* and outreach strategy. Through such public performances, the names Hare Krishna soon became household words, and many young men and women were inspired to join the movement. As remarkable as this might be, the kirtan style and looks of ISKCON devotees appeared too exotic and sectarian for many, somewhat limiting its impact in mainstream society. In other words, if in theory devotees would say that anyone could perfect their lives simply by chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, implicitly people would sense an expectation for them to join the movement and radically change their lifestyle.



Figure 1: First public kirtan by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda in the Tompkins Park, New York 1966.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAoBJz4NdFE>

Members of the 3HO/Sikh Dharma have also emphasised the daily practice of kirtan since the early days of their movement. As described by singer Snatam Kaur, this is at the core of kundalini yoga and the Sikh lifestyle (Rosen 2008, 170). Despite differences in doctrine and style when compared to the Hare Krishnas, their performances were no less exotic in terms of music or dress code. The point I am trying to make is that while pioneer members of these two movements took kirtan very seriously, the strong communal orientation prevalent in ISKCON and the 3HO during their early stages kept these devotees – together with their ideas and practices – fairly disconnected from wider society.

In this regard, when during an online course I asked pioneer kirtan artist Jai Uttal about the early days of kirtan in the United States, he readily acknowledged that the Hare Krishnas were the first to promote kirtan in the streets of America. And yet, he noted that many people had a hard time relating to their presentation because of their looks. But when he, Krishna Das and others started singing in parks and yoga schools dressed in usual Western clothes, a wider public started getting involved in kirtan (Jai Uttal, *The Art and Practice of Kirtan* 2020).

However, this situation changes considerably with second-generation ISKCON devotees, who tend to have a more ecumenical attitude. Their parents had turned away from society and tried to create idealized spaces in urban ashrams or rural communities. In practice, however, communal life did not work as imagined, eventually leading families to seek reintegration with mainstream society (Rochford 2007). One result of this was a change in their attitude toward outsiders. In the words of a second-generation kirtan singer: “I grew up hearing devotees call outside people ‘*karmis*’²¹. I don’t like that. They are not *karmis*, they are people. It is so disrespectful, our *ācāryas* [masters] would never sanction such calling!” (Karnamrita Dasi, interview by author 2021).

This shift in mindset is portrayed in the documentary *Mantra: Sounds into Silence* (Wyss 2018), where prominent kirtan leaders from ISKCON’s second-generation sing and play side by side with kirtan artists from other groups. On the 3HO side, Snatam Kaur’s parents were followers of Yogi Bajan. She grew up in ashrams and remains a committed *gora* (white) Sikh, but her audience extends much beyond the 3HO or even Sikhs. Thus, being integrated to society, second-generation devotees now have a more fruitful interaction with a diversified audience.

²¹ In ISKCON jargon, the term *karmi* indicates those who perform *karma*, in the sense of material activities, rather than *bhakti*, or devotional service. It is an othering terminology applied in a manner analogous to how ‘pagan’ has been used to designate people outside the Abrahamic religions or the term ‘gentile’ to indicate not Jewish.

The Neem Karoli Baba Connection

One of the first Americans to promote kirtan in the West was Bhagavan Das (b. Kermit Michael Riggs 1945). In 1963, at eighteen years old, he had hitchhiked on what has been called the ‘Hippie Trail’, an overland journey across Europe and the Middle East going all the way to India. There he lived as a hermit and had the opportunity to learn from several spiritual preceptors until he met his guru, the mystic Neem Karoli Baba – affectionately called Maharaj-ji by his followers. Then, in 1967, while visiting Kathmandu Bhagavan Das met a former Harvard professor called Richard Alpert (1931-2019) who was on an existential quest. They travelled together in India for about three months until Bhagavan Das introduced his new friend to Neem Karoli Baba. The encounter was life transforming: “He returned to the States in 1968, bearded, beaded, berobed, and redubbed Baba Ram Dass.” (Goldberg 2010, 226).

After that, Ram Dass wrote a seminal book titled *Be Here Now* (Dass 1971) which sold over two and a half million copies. His popularity skyrocketed over the years, making Ram Dass one of the most influential spiritual teachers for the baby boomer generation. The book also turned Bhagavan Das into a living legend – portraying him somewhat idealistically as an enlightened young American yogi. Despite the ups and downs in their individual trajectories since then, there is no doubt about their important contributions to the propagation of kirtan.

Because of them, many young Americans would find their way into Neem Karoli Baba’s ashram in India and report having their lives profoundly transformed by that experience. One notable case is Harvard-trained psychologist Daniel Goleman, who openly expresses his indebtedness to Maharaj-ji in his books (e.g., *The Meditative Mind*, 1977; *Altered Traits* 2017). Also, physician Larry Brilliant was listed on *Times* magazine among the one hundred most

influential people in 2008 for successfully conducting a work to eradicate smallpox in India. He credits this feat to Maharaj-ji, who had requested him to do so (Goldberg 2010, 230).

On the musical side, we have Krishna Das and Jai Uttal. They are highly popular, Grammy nominated artists whose contributions ushered kirtan into the mainstream. Each of them spent time with Neem Karoli Baba in the 1970s and took to heart his instruction to sing the names of God. Jai Uttal is an accomplished singer and multi-instrumentalist trained by the famous Ali Akbar Khan. His music integrates influences from Jimi Hendrix to the Bauls of Bengal, from classical Hindustani to Reggae to Bossa Nova and so much more. Krishna Das is probably the most well-known kirtan voice today due to his impressive baritone. Together, Krishna Das and Jai Uttal have been dubbed the “Pavarotti and Domingo” of kirtan in the *Yoga Journal* (Catalfo 2007).

Above and beyond those who met Maharaj-ji in person, my research shows that his influence continues to affect new generations of kirtan practitioners. Through my fieldwork, in some interviews and participant observations, I have heard younger devotee singers like David Newman, Brenda McMorrow, and others who never met Neem Karoli Baba physically, sharing experiences of having dreams and perceiving his presence vividly on some occasions, thus effectively feeling connected to him. In this way, Neem Karoli Baba’s influence remains strong among kirtan enthusiasts to this day.

The Kirtan Network

For sure, there are many other groups practicing and promoting kirtan. For instance, followers of Swami Kripalvananda founded the Kripalu yoga center in Massachusetts, whereas followers of Swami Satchidananda started the Yogaville center in Virginia – and these are but two samples of important kirtan venues in the USA. Indeed, kirtan sites in America are far too numerous even to mention, as the following description by Phillip Goldberg illustrates:

In five to thirty minutes from my home in Los Angeles, I can be at any of the following: the Self-Realization Fellowship's Lake Shrine; the Sivananda Yoga-Vedanta Center; the Hare Krishna temple; Ananda L.A.; the Siddha yoga Meditation Center; the Sri Aurobindo Center; the Universal Shaiva Fellowship (the Kashmir Shaivism of Lakshman Joo); the Transcendental Meditation center; Radha Govinda Dham; classes at Loyola Marymount's yoga Philosophy Program; regular satsangs or study groups with devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, Mata Amritanandamayi, Ramana Maharishi, Neem Karoli Baba, Swami Rudrananda (Rudi), Adi Da Samraj, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, Eckhart Tolle, or Krishnamurti; *at least five weekly kirtan evenings*; and more yoga studios than there are Starbucks. (Goldberg 2010, 327, emphasis mine)

The above shows the formation of a complex networks of people, institutions, and locations where kirtan takes place. There are also more recently formed groups that deserve mention. For instance, the Bhakti Marga is a new movement inaugurated in 2005 by a charismatic guru called Swami Vishwananda. With centres opening in various parts of the world, they have been very effective in spreading kirtan not only in their ashrams, but also online on YouTube (Aaradhakananda, interview by author 2021).

Each of these influential individuals and groups can be counted as nodes in the complex kirtan network, where they do not operate in isolation. Rather, kirtan singers from various groups often play together and their audiences also attend events in various locations, as observed by Jubilee Cooke in *Kirtan in Seattle*:

Kirtan participants did not form a spiritual community in the traditional sense. They were not devoted to the same guru, did not follow the same ethical guidelines, nor did they share the same scriptures or doctrinal view. They formed a temporary community when they gathered at a kirtan. At the end of the kirtan, a sense of community might remain, but everyone left free to believe as they chose. (Cooke 2009, 33)

My fieldwork clearly confirms this observation. For instance, during a kirtan festival organized by ISKCON devotees in a rural community near Montreal in August 2021 there were concerts by fourteen artists coming from various groups and the audience was equally diverse. Among the singers were Betty and Bill, a couple of engineers from southern Ontario who form the Shantimaya ensemble. Even before this festival, I had the chance to ask about their affiliation in an interview:

Author: Do you perceive yourselves as part of a kirtan community, or communities, in the plural?

Bill: I would say it's one community. Not everyone knows everybody else, but when we introduce somebody from our Canadian community to somebody from the American community they are instantly friends as if they knew each other for a long time [...] We've been to the Radha-Krishna Mandir and we led kirtan there, our best friend from many years ago is a Sikh, and we've been very exposed to that aspect of it. Our CD has a Sikh chant on it as well. So, there is a complete non-exclusivity, I guess, about the whole practice, so that people don't feel intimidated if they are coming from another faith.

Betty: I'd like to add, when we go to festivals and the various groups come in, they are not actually coming in as [representatives of] their groups and therefore they are not trying to convert anybody. People are there to experience each other's sacredness and they don't mention, you know, 'I'm from this group or that group'.

Thus, kirtan creates a space where people of different affiliations – as well as those who prefer to remain unaffiliated – feel comfortable to sit together and participate in this common practice. Clearly, we are dealing here with a very diverse network of practitioners. Many of these devotee-singers come from a Jewish background: Shyamdas, Krishna Das, Jai Uttal, David Newman, and Snatam Kaur, to mention a few. As expected, others like Bhagavan Das, Patrick Bernard, Dave Stringer, and Seán Johnson have come from a Christian background.

There is also quite some variety in their composition in terms of gender, color, and affiliation: Nina Rao is an Indian woman who settled in New York and learned kirtan from Krishna Das. Jazz musician Alice Coltrane and singer C. C. White are examples of Black American women who found in kirtan a powerful expression of their spirituality.

To further illustrate how people with diverse religious affiliations have taken to kirtan: Rabbi Andrew Hahn, a.k.a. ‘The Kirtan Rabbi,’ has been using kirtan for over a decade to inspire his Jewish audience with Indian music combined with Hebrew chants (Boorstein 2013). On the Islamic side, Canadian born Geoffrey Lyons studied qawwali from renown masters in India and Pakistan, including Rahat Fateh Ali Khan. After converting to Islam at 17 and taking the name Tahir Qawwal, today he is a major figure in the kirtan world (Malik 2015).

Despite his Sufi commitments, Tahir Qawwal often performs in kirtan festivals and sings together with Krishna devotees. In some of his YouTube videos, he even sings verses from traditional Vaiṣṇava sources, like the text *Brahma-Samhitā*, as well as poems composed by bhakti saints including Kabir and the female saint Mirabai.



Figure 2: Canadian born Sufi singer Tahir Qawwal with Krishna devotees - Radhe Shyam

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKnC63WwWyl>

In Brazil too I have met and interviewed kirtan practitioners affiliated with Umbanda and the Ayahuasca religion Santo Daime. For instance, Carlos Eduardo and Alexandre are the founders of an Umbanda *terreiro* near Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. Narada is the founder of the yoga and Ayahuasca community *Flor das Águas* near São Paulo. In both cases, they not only do kirtan themselves, but teach and encourage members of their communities in this practice (Interviews with author, 2021). Thus, there are plenty of examples showing how kirtan has been adopted by people from all walks of life.



Figure 3: A deity of Goddess Lakṣmī at the Umbanda center near Porto Alegre, Brazil. Photo by author.

Celebrities Promoting Kirtan

Many of the singers mentioned above became famous by performing kirtan, but there were also those musicians who were already greatly renowned before getting involved with Eastern spirituality. Together with other celebrities such as poets and writers, they had a massive impact in the worldwide popularization of kirtan. Here we illustrate this by first examining the Beatles, especially George Harrison, and then mentioning a few other cases relevant in the Americas.

In 1965, still in their early 20s, the Fab Four had achieved unprecedented success with their ground-breaking music. By the end of that year, lead guitarist George Harrison once improvised on a sitar as an attempt to enhance *Norwegian Wood*, a new song they were working on. Excited with that experimentation, Harrison developed a desire to learn sitar from a real master. Not long after that, in June 1966 Harrison met and started taking sitar lessons from the legendary Ravi Shankar, for whom music had a higher purpose. At the end of their first lesson, Shankar said: “My goal has always been to take the audience along with me deep inside, as in meditation, to feel the sweet pain of trying to reach out for the Supreme, to bring tears to the eyes, and to feel totally peaceful and cleansed.” (Greene 2006, 63). His words had a profound and lasting impact on Harrison, as if creating a bridge between his musical and mystical aspirations.

In 1967 the Beatles joined Maharishi Mahesh Yogi for a ten-day retreat in North Wales where they learned about mantras and meditation. Then, in the beginning of 1968 they embarked for a longer three-month training in Transcendental Meditation at the Yogi’s ashram in Rishikesh, India. Each of the Beatles had a different perception of that trip: Paul McCartney stayed for a month and thought he had enough; John Lennon stayed longer but left outraged after hearing rumors that the guru had acted inappropriately toward some of his female disciples. George Harrison was unsure about the truth of the accusations and still appreciated the teachings he had

received on meditation. In any case, the mere fact that the Fab Four had taken that trip impacted the whole world. In the words of biographer Joshua Greene:

Their pilgrimage to Rishikesh was reported by press in every country and added impetus to a spiritual culture that had been gathering momentum for several years. By the end of 1968, courses on yoga and vegetarian cooking were flourishing, meditation centers had opened across the United States and Europe, and Ravi Shankar was a celebrity in his own right. (Greene 2006, 98)

Then, in 1969 there was another important connection. Harrison met the Krishna devotees in London and developed a lifelong friendship with some of them. He also met their guru, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, who encouraged the Beatles to use their talents to do good for humankind and reinforced what George had heard from Ravi Shankar years before: “Through musical vibration we can approach the Supreme” (Greene 2006, 150).

Following the Swami’s advice, Harrison arranged for the Krishna devotees to record the single *Hare Krishna Mantra* through Apple Records. It was a bold move to release a Sanskrit mantra for the first time in the music industry, but it had a fantastic outcome: the record sold over seventy thousand copies on the first day of its release, rose to number one in U.K. radio’s top ten, and was broadcast twice on England’s most popular television show *Top of the Pops* featuring the Hare Krishnas chanting in their exotic robes. This was the first of a series of recordings produced in this cooperation between the Beatles and the devotees of the Radha Krishna Temple, in London.

Furthermore, Harrison “had his staff book the Radha Krishna Temple at outdoor rock concerts, television shows, and nightclubs across Europe” (Greene 2006, 147). And as Harrison’s quest for ultimate meaning intensified, there came an outpouring of his own compositions reflecting on spiritual themes. Some of these songs, like *My Sweet Lord*, openly expressed religious sentiments. In most cases, however, their deeper meaning could easily elude the casual listener.

But the Beatles were not the only ones captivated by exotic Hindustani vibes. This was a broader trend, as musician Peter Lavezzoli discusses in *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*: “While a handful of classical players discovered a kinship with the emphasis in Indian music on virtuosity and discipline, and rock musicians empathized with its improvisational freedom and alternative spirituality, the jazz tradition identified with Indian music across the board” (Lavezzoli 2006, 267). In fact, this affinity with the latter has caused a mutually beneficial exchange in which “jazz players have drawn upon the rhythmic and melodic language of Indian music, while Indian musicians working in jazz have liberated themselves from a fixed repertoire of *rāgas* and *tālas*” (ibid.).

In this connection, John Coltrane has been credited with having built a bridge between jazz and Indian music. Through his interactions with Ravi Shankar, he absorbed much more than just some insights on North Indian musical theory. Like Shankar, he shared a passion for the divine and a desire to express his spirituality through sound, and for that he wanted to understand more deeply the effects of *rāgas* on human consciousness. Coltrane had struggled with drug and alcohol addiction for years and a religious epiphany had helped his recovery. Since then, he had been composing and playing his music as an offering to God, as indicated in the titles of his albums: *A Love Supreme*, *Om*, *Ascension*, and *Meditations*. More than that, he had been studying various religious texts including the *Qur'an*, the *Bible*, the *Kabbalah*, as well as the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the *Gospels of Sri Ramakrishna*, and Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Lavezzoli 2006, 286-7).

After his early demise at the age of forty, his wife jazz musician Alice Coltrane continued following with great zeal the spiritual journey she had started in the company of her husband. She sought spiritual guidance from Swami Satchidananda and changed her name to Turiya Sangitananda. Eventually becoming a spiritual teacher (*Swamini*) herself, she founded an ashram

in California where kirtan was performed regularly. Alice Coltrane contributed many original recordings of mantras and devotional songs with marked jazz, blues, and gospel influences. Her music expressed an “uncompromising spirituality without losing its power and groove” (Lavezzoli 2006, 290). In other words, in performing kirtan Alice Coltrane was embracing the Hindu tradition without forsaking her roots. She was also using all her resources – her voice, musical training, creativity, and influence – to engage others and promote this practice.

Brazilian Celebrities

Looking beyond the English-speaking world, we find some unique contributions to the popularization of Indian ideas through music in initiatives led by Brazilian artists Raul Seixas, Rogerio Duarte, and Nando Reis. In these three cases, more than concerns about *rāga*, *tāla*, or the subtle power of sound, the emphasis is clearly in making the message accessible by singing in Portuguese. And yet, one can argue that these songs, composed in various musical genres, still perform the function of kirtan according to the core meaning of the term which is derived from the Sanskrit root *kīrt* – to make mention of, to narrate, to celebrate, to make famous.

Chronologically, and also in terms of enduring impact on Brazilian society, the song *Gita* comes first. It was composed in 1974 by musician Raul Seixas together with writer Paulo Coelho, who had read the classic Hindu text the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Their song is a free rendition paraphrasing passages from the text that describe Krishna’s all-pervading powers: “I am the light of the stars and the moon, I am the strength of the strong” say the lyrics expanding on the central idea that divine energies are everywhere, and yet remain inaccessible to ordinary experience. Seixas received the Golden Disc award for *Gita*, which in 2009 ranked 72 among the 100 greatest Brazilian songs according to the *Rolling Stones Brasil* magazine (Luiz 2009).

Another remarkable musical accomplishment connected to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was led by Rogerio Duarte, one of the intellectual mentors of the *Tropicalia*, an influential cultural movement in Brazil during the 1960s. Duarte translated the Sanskrit *anuṣṭubh* and *triṣṭubh* verses from the *Gītā* into Portuguese verses using meters called *redondilha maior* and *decassilabo*, respectively.²² His reasoning for translating the work in this manner was to “facilitate mnemonic retention in order to incorporate [the *Gītā*] more deeply in [Brazilian] language and culture” (Duarte 1998, 20). These meters also facilitated setting the verses to music, since *redondilha maior* aptly fits various genres of Brazilian music (Weininger 1999).

The book was released in 1998 by *Companhia das Letras*, a prestigious publisher in Brazil, and included a musical CD recorded by a total of 29 artists who composed 32 tracks based on key passages from Duarte’s versified translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Among these singers are internationally acclaimed artists like Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, Chico Cesar, and other stars of MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) who looked up at Duarte as their intellectual mentor since the times of the *Tropicalia* movement. Despite all this, the work did not penetrate popular culture as deeply as one could expect. Some of the songs did play in the radio, and some were more recently recorded again by individual artists. I had the chance to visit Duarte at his house in Salvador a few years before his departure in 2016. On that occasion, and also from recent conversations with a mutual friend who was close to Duarte, I know he had prepared a revised edition of his book and there are plans underway to revive this important work.

²² The *anuṣṭubh* meter consists of 4 lines with 8 syllables each, 32 syllables in total. The *redondilha maior* meter consists of 6 lines with 7 syllables each, making a total of 42. The extra syllables in this Portuguese meter gave Duarte space to paraphrase and compose richer translations. Regarding the less common *triṣṭubh* verses (4x11), however, Duarte chose to accommodate them into *decassilabos* (10 syllables per line).



Figure 4: Bhagavad-Gītā: Canções do Divino Mestre, translated by Duarte and recorded by Brazilian artists

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8UI_FVOFvK7ViLIDxfURDW9pwULXSTSy

Then, in 2004 Brazilian musicians Nando Reis and Arnaldo Antunes composed the song *Mantra*, which was first performed live on a TV show together with a band of a dozen Krishna devotees singing the Hare Krishna mantra while dancing and playing their instruments. In a YouTube video²³ where he retells the history of that composition, Nando Reis openly attributes his initial inspiration to George Harrison and his classic *My Sweet Lord*. Despite the initial success of the song, it was soon censored by radio channels owned by evangelical Christians who felt disturbed by the public singing of a Hindu mantra by a popular musician (Reis 2019).

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avD053jjAto>

Having met some of the key protagonists, now we turn to the processes and channels through which kirtan has been propagated in the Americas.

Channels and Patterns of propagation

As rainwater flows through gorges and valleys forming rivers and lakes that accommodate to the contours of the landscape, so does kirtan stream down the channels of the yoga movement and, mimicking adaptive processes of the mindfulness phenomenon, transmutes to fit each specific cultural and religious landscape. This becomes visible in the documentary *Mantra: Sounds into Silence* (Wyss 2018) where singer Dave Stringer explains how the kirtan movement has been spreading in the wake of yoga. In the same documentary one can observe how kirtan has been undergoing a series of adaptations to facilitate its portability and acceptance by various publics in different environments and public institutions. Moreover, the online space has become extremely important for the propagation of kirtan, especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This includes a proliferation of online kirtan performances as well as a variety of kirtan courses and retreats that were previously conducted in person only.

In the Wake of the yoga Movement

Although public kirtan has been going on in the Americas for at least half a century, at first it was performed within institutional boundaries – either inside ashrams or in parks and streets but involving a particular religious community. Gradually, however, yoga teachers started inviting artists like Krishna Das, Jai Uttal, and Dave Stringer to sing in their yoga studios. At first, people would listen to kirtan as a background music to their yoga practice, but eventually it grew to become an end in itself. Nowadays, as my research and participant observation reveal, people have gotten used to congregate in yoga spaces and festivals exclusively to attend kirtan sessions. In this way, kirtan went beyond sectarian boundaries and became accessible to a broader audience.

And since yoga proved to be an open channel for kirtan, even singers linked to a particular lineage or ashram naturally started tracking the expansion of the yoga community (Cooke 2009, 19; Wyss 2018). It is pertinent, therefore, to examine the developments of the yoga movement in the West.

In *A History of Modern yoga*, Elizabeth De Michelis (2004) argues that ‘Modern yoga’ evolved over the past 150 years through a close interaction between European and Indian individuals and can therefore be described as “the graft of a Western Branch onto the Indian tree of yoga” (De Michelis 2004, 2). To this, Mark Singleton adds that there was a further “grafting of modern *āsana* practice onto the perceived Patañjali tradition” (Singleton 2010, 185). In other words, yoga underwent two successive major transformations: in a first moment, ‘Modern yoga’ was fashioned by British-educated Indian reformers in conversation with European scholars. Swami Vivekananda was a key figure in this process, with the publication of his seminal book *Rāja Yoga* in 1896. Vivekananda and his contemporaries, however, shunned *āsana* and other *haṭha-yoga* procedures as inappropriate. How, then, did *āsana* emerge as a core yoga practice?

Singleton explains that the gradual popularization of *āsana* took place during the initial decades of the twentieth century under the influence of modern body culture techniques developed in the West that made an impact on Indian youth and became linked to nationalist projects.

Colonial educators tended to present Hindu Indians as a weakling race who deserved to be dominated. The British physical culture regimes, however, were adopted by Indians and used as components of nationalist programs of regeneration and resistance to colonial rule. It is in this context that *āsana* began to be combined with modern physical culture and reworked as an “indigenous” technique of man-building (Singleton 2010, 22)

Thus, just as Vivekananda’s *Rāja Yoga* arises in a dialogical encounter with orientalism, posture-based yoga develops as a “powerful synthesis of Western and Indian modes of physical culture, contextualized within ‘traditional’ *haṭha yoga*” (ibid. 23). This process continues today as yoga concepts combine with the values and aspirations of American societies.

A crucial question then is how far this semiotic stretch can go before the word ‘yoga’ loses all meaningful relation with prior Indian traditions. Are we dealing with distinct phenomena going under the same name? For Singleton, this relationship is better explained as one of “dialogical homology” rather than through a “claim of direct, wholesale genealogical affiliation to a tradition with the same or similar sounding name” (Singleton 2010, 16). Be that as it may, the point here is that kirtan may be undergoing transformations of a comparable magnitude in its adaptations to suit the tastes and aspirations of modern audiences.

We shall return to this in Chapter Four, when we elaborate on the transculturation of kirtan. For now, there are three main points to be highlighted: 1) as a movement, yoga has opened a pathway that facilitates the dissemination of kirtan. 2) In the context of the yoga movement, kirtan transcends denominational boundaries. 3) As a set of Eastern practices associated to a particular worldview which is currently being adopted and adapted on a global scale, yoga provides a case study to help us understand how kirtan may evolve in similar ways. Another interesting case study is mindfulness, to which we turn next.

Mindful Adaptations

In *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, Jeff Wilson (2014) provides valuable insights on how various non-Western religious practices can be rendered fit for mainstream appropriation. He discusses the creative adaptations of Buddhism throughout history and highlights the flexible nature of mindfulness that facilitates its adoption in very different contexts. Most importantly, Wilson describes some key processes that have permitted mindfulness to pervade “nearly every institution of American society”, including schools, hospitals, prisons, courts, military, and pop culture (Wilson 2014, 5).

These adaptative processes may involve, among other things a) concealing to some degree the original religious context of the practice; b) medicalizing and psychologizing it; c) adapting it to local needs; and d) marketing it in creative ways. Such adaptations turn mindfulness into ‘all things to all people’ in the sense that practitioners are allowed to participate in it “along a very wide spectrum of degrees of engagement” (Wilson 2014, 194). It is not hard to imagine how these same processes apply to kirtan and other Indian practices.

For instance, as an attempt to present kirtan in a relevant manner in front of a Western audience, sometimes its religious context may be deemphasised. To illustrate this point, during his online *Kirtan College*, the facilitator David Newman explained that mantras could be understood in various levels. He then explained that devoted Hindus may relate each mantra to a particular deity, but that those coming from a different religious background could think in terms of archetypes represented in the mantras, such as wisdom, compassion, or strength. As a third option, one could simply become absorbed in the sound vibration of the mantra, allowing its energy to pervade and transform one’s consciousness (Newman, participant observation, 2020).

A therapeutic approach is also common, presenting the physical and psychological benefits in the process of chanting. Although academic studies in this field are still incipient, the idea has been publicized in various medias. As examples, the documentary *Mantra* features an explanation by Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg asserting that there are discernible changes in the physiology of the brain after just 12 weeks of kirtan practice (Wyss 2018). Also, *Psychology Today* recently featured an article titled *Kirtan: The Easy Meditation that can Improve your Brain*. In that short article, the author lists some of the many benefits attributed to the practice of kirtan, including improvements in cognitive functions, sleep, mood, memory, as well as a reduction in the symptoms of depression and chronic pain (Vilhauer 2018). A similar article in the *Scientific American*

(Hartzell 2018) discussing the neurological effects of chanting Sanskrit mantras provides yet another example of how these ideas have been popularized.

Regarding the other processes mentioned in relation to mindfulness – adaptation to local needs and creative marketing – this is surely happening with kirtan too, as we shall discuss later. It should be made clear, however, that these movements of yoga, mindfulness, and kirtan are not monoliths. They surely can and have been practiced in both secular and religious contexts. In fact, one can notice quite diverse understandings across different groups. When members of the 3HO perform kirtan, meditation, or kundalini yoga, they do so with a typical religious mindset. The same applies to Krishna devotees and to many others who perceive these practices as expression of their religious commitments. On the other hand, people may also engage in any of these practices with a secular outlook, searching for an improvement in health and wellbeing. This will become evident as we look into the performance of kirtan during the COVID-19 pandemic in the next section, as well as when we analyse the transculturation of kirtan in Chapter Four.

Online Kirtan During the COVID-19 Pandemic

There is a saying that when one door closes, another one opens. Since the early months of 2020, people around the world have been facing travelling restrictions and series of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following lockdown policies, kirtan singers who used to be always on the move performing at various locations were suddenly unable to travel. As a way out, many of them resorted to online platforms instead. In doing so, artists were attending to their own financial needs and at the same time providing valuable opportunities for a public troubled by the restrictions and uncertainties in that critical moment. This encouraged the use of social media and emerging communication technologies, leading to a proliferation of online kirtan concerts and courses.

On the one hand, singing or teaching remotely has serious disadvantages because it hinders participation and the feeling of community which are so fundamental to the kirtan experience. On the other hand, there is the advantage of making kirtan accessible to people anywhere in the world, even if they live in remote areas. In this way, kirtan kept growing and adapting during the COVID-19 crisis. Instead of reaching a smaller number of people in a yoga studio, some of these artists were suddenly performing or teaching about kirtan to many hundreds at a time. This process was facilitated by the fast popularization of video conferencing platforms like Zoom during the pandemic, creating a paradigm shift in distance learning.

At this time, I was about to start my field research in 2020 and had no choice but to adapt to the new situation. Instead of traveling throughout the United States, Canada, and Brazil as I had anticipated, I enrolled in nine online courses and attended lots of online concerts. In many ways, this has provided me a richness of materials that would not have been possible to collect in person. I heard each of these kirtan artists not only singing but sharing their understandings and life experiences in a very deep and structured manner.

The first was a course by Krishna Das titled *Deepen the Loving Presence Within and Develop Inner Strength Through Devotional Chanting*. It consisted of eight weekly sessions of two hours each. In these sessions Krishna Das would intercalate singing for some time, then sharing his experiences in India with his guru Neem Karoli Baba, or discussing techniques of chanting, giving useful tips for those aspiring to engage in kirtan, and then singing some more at the end. He would also encourage students to read the Ramayana, to recite and even learn by heart the prayer *Hanuman Chalisa*, and he answered many questions regarding the process of bhakti in general. The structure of the course was simple, but Krishna Das spoke with depth from personal

experience. He quoted often his guru saying that God is in his names and that through the repetition of these names everything can be accomplished.

The course by Jai Uttal was called *The Art and Practice of Kirtan* and it consisted of a combination of pre-recorded lessons, live sessions in the weekends, and small study group meetings for practice. Jai Uttal spoke at length about topics like bhakti-yoga, the healing power of sound and mantras, and how to deepen one's practice. But he also had a musical component to the course, encouraging students to practice *sargam* (the Indian equivalent to *solfeggio*) and providing tutorials for people to learn how to play some of his tunes on guitar or harmonium. Jai Uttal also encouraged students to practice the recitation (*japa*) of the divine names using chanting beads made of *tulasi* wood, and he recommended creating a home altar. He took us on a virtual tour around his home altars and told everyone to follow their instincts in creating their sacred space. Interestingly, in one of his altars Jai Uttal pointed to a picture of Jimi Hendrix next to his Indian Guru, Neem Karoli Baba! Both of them were transparent mediums through which sacred sound could manifest in this world, he explained.

Then I had the chance to attend two weekend retreats, one by David Newman and the other by Seán Johnson. Both were highly engaging and effective in promoting a bhakti experience. David Newman encouraged everyone to bring their instruments and play along, even if we had to keep our microphones muted to avoid echo. There was plenty of space for questions and other group interactions, despite being an online event. Similarly, Seán Johnson managed to keep everyone engaged through a combination of theory, singing, storytelling, and creative expression dynamics. There was an implicit message that bhakti is not a mechanical ritual but something that must come from the heart as a unique offering of love to the divine.

Another course I attended was by Canadian singer Brenda McMorrow. In this case, since we live nearby, I could attend her online *Kirtan Academy* during a period of lockdown and later participate in an in-person workshop in London (Ontario). On both occasions, these were very well conducted sessions alternating theoretical presentations on sacred sound with the experience of singing mantras. And because she knew of my studies in India, I was invited to conduct sessions on Sanskrit pronunciation both during the online course and for the in-person event in London. Besides interacting with Brenda during these online and in-person courses, I also had the opportunity to interview her on Zoom and get to know more about her journey.

From the 3HO/Kundalini yoga side, I attended a course called *Soul Radiance* by Snatam Kaur with the participation of her husband Sopurkh Singh and her mother, Prabhu Nam Kaur. The program introduced *shabad* kirtan and the Sikh tradition – including definitions of common terminology, the lives of Sikh gurus, the importance of covering one’s head, and so on. There was also the musical training with vocal practices of *sargam* and notions of scales. But the main focus was on learning a particular *Śabad* called *Dhan Dhan Raam Daas Gur*.

We learned about the history and reflected on the meaning of this *Śabad*, then we practiced the pronunciation of each word and finally we took turns singing each separate line while receiving detailed feedback from the teachers. In this way, Snatam Kaur not only spoke about the importance of pronunciation, but made sure that each of us would get the chance to study this one *Śabad* meticulously, experiencing the beauty of every syllable. In the course manual she highlights the value of rhythm and pronunciation describing it as the “yoga of the tongue”. I found that she was very consistent and effective in teaching us how to sing that *Śabad*.

Going somewhat beyond kirtan practice, I took three courses on sacred sound in the Hindu traditions by Guy Beck, Finnian Gerety, and Shamini Jain. The course by Guy Beck, titled

Hinduism and Sacred Sound, was offered online by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and, together with his books and articles, provided me with important references for the topics discussed in Chapter 2. Finnian Gerety taught *The Story of OM: Sacred Sound and the Vedic Roots of Yoga* based on his doctoral dissertation (Gerety 2015). Shamini Jain has an Indian Jain background and is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at University of California San Diego, as well as a member of UC San Diego's Center for Integrative Medicine. Her course titled *Voicing the Goddess* was intended for a general public and made connections between traditional practices and modern science for physical and emotional healing.

I am aware that the descriptions above are too brief to make justice to the rich contents presented in each of these courses. The intention here, however, was simply to illustrate how online courses became not only an innovative solution for times of pandemic but opened new possibilities for the propagation of kirtan. Before COVID-19 these artists were too busy traveling and would not consider the idea of online kirtan. Of course, everyone knows that the online platform is a poor substitute for the 'real' experience and in-person kirtan will be back as soon as the conditions allow. And yet, I trust that the broadcasting of kirtan will continue in parallel reaching so many who would not be able to attend in-person events.

Indeed, this is also the understanding reached by the coordinators of an extended online kirtan event organized during the pandemic by Krishna devotees based in Alachua, Florida. What was intended as a provisional solution during times of social distancing paved the way for a series of similar events in a trend that is likely continue. The original event was called *Festival of the Holy Name: Global Pandemic Kirtan* and it was initially planned as a 24-hour online kirtan gathering. However, due to the enthusiastic response of the participants they decided to extend the event for another 108 hours, and then again until reaching 360 hours of continuous kirtan in 15

days. In total, starting April 18th to May 3rd 2020 over 400 singers along with participants in over 150 countries came together online for the kirtan festival (Smullen 2020).

Following this successful initiative, many other events were organized by Krishna devotees from Canada, India, Mauritius, Brazil, and many other countries. I had the chance to participate twice in these events, being invited to lead kirtan with my family. This created a soothing feeling of community during times of isolation and uncertainty. We felt connected to a global community, virtually meeting friends whom we had not seen for years and who now live in different parts of the world. Suddenly we were all there connected, taking turns in the online chanting. These online events also reached people who, for a variety of reasons, could not physically attend kirtans before the pandemic. That is why organizers of the *Festival of the Holy Name* foresee a continuation to their project. They envision in-person kirtan gatherings being broadcast and perhaps having separate online kirtans happening at different times of the year. “Then we could connect in kirtan with those devotees who are more isolated, and don’t necessarily leave their remote corners of the world. So, we definitely see it as something we would want to continue even beyond the immediate crisis of the pandemic.”, says team member Nila Khurana (Smullen 2020).



Figure 5: the author singing with his family for an online kirtan event during the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2020

Confluence: Agents and Institutions Promoting Kirtan

If we apply Thomas Tweed's (2006, 54) definition of religions as "confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries", kirtan – as well as yoga and mindfulness – can be understood to form a movement taking place at the confluence of immigration, counterculture, and new religious movements, all connected through networks of practitioners and social media. Beginning in the 1960's, kirtan has been adopted and adapted by people of all religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds who were looking for alternative ways to cultivate spirituality and achieve well-being. They have found inspiration in a pantheon of divine beings, as well as in Indian and American mentors, each presenting variations of what can be described as a theology of sacred sound. With various levels of commitment, people have been practicing kirtan as a process for achieving comfort, happiness, and for cultivating a relationship with the divine.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges but also brought new possibilities for the dissemination of kirtan, which came as an answer to people's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs. The crisis triggered a rapid development and popularization of technologies needed for making online teachings not only feasible, but also more widely available. This resulted in an abundance of kirtan performances online. More significant still, in my opinion, is that for the first-time people from all over the world were able to attend kirtan courses and retreats conducted by the most renowned artists in the field. Simply for making the study and experience of kirtan so much more accessible, it is likely that the online trend will continue even after the public health conditions allow for in-person events. This may create an impact on the global propagation of kirtan by increasing capillary diffusion even in remote areas. In other words, all this comes together to enhance the transculturation of kirtan.

Chapter 4: The Transculturation of Kirtan

It was one of my first times leading a Kirtan in Toronto and an Indian couple in their 70's came and sat in the front row. They were listening very quietly and in the end they came to talk to me. I said "Thank you, it must have sounded very different to you! Did it?" Then the man said to me "It was very different... and exactly the same!"

(Interview with Canadian kirtan artist Brenda McMorrow, 2021)

Transculturation is a term coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to express the highly complex nature of cultural encounters. For Ortiz, "the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them" (1947, 103). Moreover, according to Mary Louise Pratt transculturation happens at the "contact zone" – or the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt 2008, 7). And yet, no matter how uneven the relation may be, the agency of those in a subaltern position is never completely effaced. Rather, they invariably find ways to creatively engage the very means of subjugation in order to resist domination and respond to the challenges imposed upon them (Borup 2017; Clarke 1997; Pratt, 2008).

Thus, a transcultural stance never assumes one-way impositions, but expects complex interactions resulting in mutual influences and crosspollination. Moreover, transculturation goes beyond the complex blending of cultures; it also implies a "set of conditions under which such acts occur: globalization, neocolonialism, and the increasing dominance of transnational capitalism vis-à-vis nation states" (Rogers 2006, 491).

From what has been discussed so far, it is clear that kirtan in the Americas is a transcultural product. As Paul Bramadat puts it, “religion is never relocated (like baggage), but rather recreated. Of course, this recreation happens neither *in toto* nor *ex-nihilo*” (Bramadat and Seljak 2009, 13). In the previous chapter, we have looked at the transculturation of South Asian practices like yoga and mindfulness looking for insights into the patterns of adaptation that kirtan undergoes to become portable and transposable in America and, from there, to circulate around the world. Now we begin this chapter by examining the appeal kirtan exerts on practitioners in the Americas, followed by a discussion about kirtan’s adaptations in the United States, Canada, and Brazil.

Appeal of Kirtan as a “Technology of the Self”

Kirtan has distinctive features such as a) its utterly experiential nature; b) its presumed therapeutic effects; c) its visceral expressive power; and d) its capacity to promote social bonding. Such features make kirtan appealing as a practice that supports healing, connection, and personal growth. This resonates with Foucault’s idea of “technologies of the self”, defined as techniques that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988 [1982]).

In this regard, Foucault claims that the two guiding principles in Greco-Roman philosophy in late antiquity were “take care of yourself” and, for doing that, “know thyself”. In other words, the injunction to know oneself was subservient to the requirement of cultivating oneself. However, he argues that in modernity this first principle has been eclipsed due to the influence of Christian notions of morality and developments in European philosophy emphasising knowledge about the thinking subject over self-cultivation (Ibid.).

There has been an inversion between the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity, “Take care of yourself” and “Know thyself”. In Greco-Roman culture knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of taking care of yourself. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle”. (Foucault 1988 [1982])

Thus, it can be argued that contemporary trends emphasising self-care arise as an attempt to balance a previous cultural insistence on self-renunciation. If so, what distinctive features make kirtan effective as a ‘technology of the self’ that can be used to perfect one’s life?

According to traditional views, sacred sound has an inherent power that can affect one’s consciousness by its mere vibration. Thus, there is no need for understanding the meaning of a mantra, and kirtan consists of simply hearing and repeating a certain sound formula, often in a call and response fashion. Krishna Das stresses this point in an interview:

I feel that Westerners don’t need any more concepts – we have enough concepts. I feel what we really need is experience, and we need true experience. [...] A true experience – a kirtan experience – can help you break free. Because God is already present. He is there in His name and He is there all around us. (Rosen 2008, 32).

This understanding that the divine can be experienced directly through the chanting of the holy names is a foundational principle of bhakti-yoga widely shared among kirtan practitioners. Here the practice and the experience it produces are valued above concepts or theoretical knowledge. Surely, the theological underpinnings of this practice are profound and make for a recurring theme in Hindu and Sikh teachings, as we have seen in Chapter Two.

Indeed, this emphasis on divine names is common across several other religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. But besides any doctrinal considerations, the application of this knowledge, is extremely simple. This combination of experientiality, simplicity, and universal applicability makes kirtan highly accessible and appealing to a contemporary audience around the world.

Another reason for kirtan's popularity lies in the view that this practice has therapeutic effects. As discussed in Chapter Three, this view has been publicized in popular science magazines like the *Scientific American* (Hartzell 2018) and *Psychology Today* (Vilhauer 2018), as well as through a feature-length documentary called *Mantras: Sounds Into Silence* (Wyss 2018). Moreover, a literature review article identifies nineteen therapeutic effects of kirtan according to previous studies. These include lowering anxiety and improving cognitive functions, memory, sleep, and psychological well-being. Studies also indicate that kirtan can help prevent or alleviate disorders connected with the nervous system such as Alzheimer's disease, Dementia, stress, depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and mild cognitive impairment (Kumari and Karunaratne 2021). As a scholar of religion, it is not my role to assess the merits and reliability of medical studies. From a religious studies perspective, what matters is the fact that these findings have been popularized through mass media and have become part of a common discourse among practitioners, with many of them reporting first hand experiences.

For instance, Krishna Das has on more than one occasion described his crisis after the departure of his guru Neem Karoli Baba. He had come back from India to New York and was struggling with severe depression. He remained addicted to cocaine for a couple of years and had lost the desire to live until he had an epiphany. One day, Krishna Das recounts, he felt the presence of his guru as strong as a thunderbolt – and together with that presence he felt unconditional love and acceptance. He also understood that he had to make a commitment to chant with people as the only way for him to overcome the shadows in his heart (Rosen 2008; Wyss 2018). Similarly, Jai Uttal tells how his life went through “many ups and downs – many dark places [...] Drugs and drinking, trying to get away from myself. And still through it all, I did kirtan. That's what saved me.” (Rosen 2008, 413).

To their testimonies I can add that over the years a number of my personal friends has told me how they managed to overcome drug addiction through kirtan and I closely observed the successful (though not easy) recovery process of a friend addicted to alcohol. Related to this, a psychology study conducted with the participation of singer David Newman corroborates the value of kirtan for people involved in the Alcoholic Anonymous 12-steps program (Vaughn 2009). In short, this combination of scientific studies, their popularization through media, and the personal accounts of countless individuals who experienced healing through kirtan strengthen the appeal of this practice based on its presumed therapeutic effects.

A third reason that attracts people to kirtan is its visceral expressive power. This addresses the natural human hankering for ecstasy and for the expression of one's repressed feelings. There is a well-known quote attributed to Victor Hugo that says: "music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent". The same idea can be applied to kirtan, with the difference that the latter is even more consciously directed to the divine than music *per se*. Furthermore, in kirtan one is invited and encouraged to seek communion with the deity which is present in the sound vibration of the mantra without the mediation of any priest or institution. It is the individual self who seeks direct connection with the Supreme through singing.

This idea often seems strange for many attending a kirtan 'concert' for the first time. People expect to sit and passively listen to the musician-priest as the only one 'authorized' to publicly project one's voice. Soon, however, the person realizes that everyone is summoned to sing, calling out the divine names. Surely, there are variations on kirtan styles ranging from more sober performances like in Gurbāṇī kīrtan up to more ecstatic expressions typified by Caitanya Vaiṣṇava and Sufi lineages. In all cases, kirtan allows for the expression of feelings suppressed by societal conventions as well as transcendental sentiments that are simply unfathomable.

In this regard, during an online retreat kirtan artist Seán Johnson spoke eloquently about bhakti as a revolution against elitism, a movement that allows all to participate in the divine, to connect through devotion, creativity, and singing.

Bhakti invites us to participate, to really be a part of this stream of life and creativity that lives inside of us [...] In American culture there is a sense of a self-consciousness and a lot of judgement and competition when it comes to our creativity, when it comes to our voice. There is a dysfunctional relationship to creativity. We believe that only some people are creative, we believe that only some people should sing out loud [...] I believe that a lot of us as adults are walking around carrying a lot of wounds that come from childhood and adult experiences of being judged for our creative expression, of having our voice shut down in some way. [...] And I believe that bhakti-yoga can be a kind of healing doorway for us to reconnect with the deep pulse and the source of our creativity which is our voice. [...] bhakti-yoga historically arises in India as a rebellion against elitism, as a rebellion against dogma, against a small group of people who have harnessed all of the political, religious, and social power and the bhaktas they did not stand for that, and they said: we don't need to pay someone to connect us to the divine. We don't need to participate in a system that just allows for a part of the population to have access to these resources, access to divinity. We know how to do it: we do it by singing and dancing and telling stories and writing poems and going out in the streets and praying in public – and everyone is welcome, no matter what caste you are, no matter what color you are, no matter how much money you have, no matter your education. Everyone is welcome because this is our birthright, you know, the divine lives inside of ourselves and it is not something that is restricted to a certain group of people. So, bhakti-yoga has always been in a sense this incredible movement that welcomes everybody". (Seán Johnson, participant observation, August 2020)

A similar point is made by kirtan singer Russill Paul, who is also the author of *The yoga of Sound*.

Through kirtan and other devotional practices, the bhakti teachers were echoing the fundamental premise of Patanjali's yoga Sutra, that spiritual realization does not require an external mediator. God is inside you. They used kirtan as a way to get in touch with God's presence and showed everyday people that they could have the same levels of Self-realization and the same depths of mystical experience as a Brahmin performing sacred ritual or a yogi in deep meditation. (Sexton and Dubrovsky 2011)

Thus, kirtan is presented as a way to break free from elitism and to creatively express oneself, making an offering of love that needs no intermediaries. Depending on the style of kirtan, it can promote deep introspection or untamed ecstasy. In any case, these results are understood to arise through experiences that transcend the human intellect. To wrap up this idea with a line from Tagore's poem, he writes: "I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence. I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach. Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord" (Tagore [1912] 2007, 9).

Finally, a fourth reason I would like to highlight is kirtan's capacity to promote social bonding. Research shows that group singing promotes social benefits alongside physical and emotional ones (Andrews and Densley 2021). As human beings, we all hanker for community and singing together is a powerful way to connect people. As kirtan artist Gaura Vani says in an interview: "You know the part of the rock concert where everyone knows the words? [Kirtan is] like that, but for the whole time". And he continues: "They say one of the sources of trauma is feeling no connection between you and other parts of humanity. When you do chant and mantras, it's impossible to avoid the group connection, the sense of communion" (Boorstein 2013).

So, under these four headings – experientiality, healing, expressiveness, and communion – we have identified a few prominent reasons for explaining the appeal of kirtan. Each of these can be expanded and more reasons can be identified as well. For example, to say that kirtan is meant to be experienced by each individual practitioner implies it must have a degree of simplicity that makes the practice accessible. The ubiquitous nature of music also makes the kirtan experience something universally applicable.

Moreover, healing does not need to be limited to our physical and psychological dimensions but can be extended to encompass healing in a holistic sense. In other words, people may be attracted to kirtan because they believe this process can support their human flourishing – in whatever way they may conceive it. I suggest, therefore, that kirtan is perceived by practitioners as a highly effective tool for personal growth, or a 'technology of the self'. Indeed, just as modern technologies are the outcome of accumulated scientific knowledge, mantras and kirtan are the application of Vedic knowledge and the theology of sacred sound further developed by Indian traditions over millennia.

Beyond the reasons outlined above, it is quite common for practitioners to offer religious explanations for the propagation of kirtan. For instance, Krishna Das attributed the popularity of kirtan to a higher power saying that “it’s not people doing kirtan; it’s kirtan doing the people” (Cooke 2009, 66). In this view, the inspiration for singing comes through divine grace. Moreover, sacred texts (see bhakti and Sikh kirtan in Chapter 2) and gurus have pointed out that the chanting of God’s names would spread throughout the world and become the main religious practice in Kali-Yuga. For instance, the hagiographic work *Caitanya Bhāgavata* (3.4.126) portrays Caitanya declaring that “in every town and village the chanting of My name will be heard” (Dāsa 2008).

Summarizing, in the highly individualized and digitalized world we inhabit today, people often lack deeper connections – both internally and externally – but kirtan simultaneously promotes introspection and community building. People also seek physical and mental healing, self-knowledge, self-improvement, and a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Traditional teachers and sacred texts who promoted kirtan in India frequently reassured that all this and much more could be achieved through kirtan, and the same discourses are reproduced by yoga teachers at present.

In this regard, Caitanya composed eight influential verses on the value and results of kirtan and his teachings are based primarily on the authority of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The translations for these eight verses, called *Śikṣāṣṭakam*, are presented in appendix 1. Out of them, the first verse is particularly relevant for describing the power of kirtan in promoting a complete purification of the self, including the cleansing of the mind, the relief from worldly suffering, the blossoming of the lotus-like heart, and the awakening of transcendental knowledge that allows one to experience an ever-expanding ocean of bliss. Thus, alongside sociological explanations, one can surely look into the encounter of Eastern and Western religious cultures to find reasons for the worldwide expansion of kirtan.

The Unfolding of American Metaphysical Religion

The quest for mystic experience and the development of a metaphysical religion in America is not a new trend. Rather, as demonstrated by historian of religion Catherine Albanese (2007), alongside evangelical and mainstream-denominational institutions, metaphysical religion has been one of the three major forces shaping the American religious culture since the early colonial days. And yet, to excavate the history of metaphysical religion is a daunting task due to the fluid nature of this community, which is formed by “networks that appear especially temporary, self-erasing, self-transforming” (Albanese 2007, 8). Albanese traces the evolution of this metaphysical trend through many expressions such as Freemasonry, early Mormonism, Universalism, and Transcendentalism. Then, it further evolves in Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, and Christian Science. Moreover, in the form of the New Age movement, this religious mode appropriates Eastern ideas and practices, Native American rituals, UFOs, channeling, environmental concerns, and so much more in the composition of a broader new spirituality.

This increasing interest in mysticism comes hand in hand with a contempt for the exclusivism typically seen in organized religion. Modern views have shaken the Judaic and Christian foundations of Western civilization – on the one hand allowing people to break free from the confinement of dogmatism; on the other hand, leaving a despairing existential vacuum. Much deconstruction has taken place with little edification. At this point, Heinrich Zimmer (1951) proposes that Western civilization has come to a crossroads analogous to the one Indian civilization encountered before – a moment ripe with concrete opportunities for metaphysical enquiry, characterized by a deeply felt thirst for addressing issues of consciousness, but also challenged by relativism, absence of ethical direction, and lack of ultimate aim.

And yet, he continues, “we cannot take over the Indian solutions” (Zimmer 1951, 1-2). Rather, using a metaphor similar to the one Ortiz deployed for explaining transculturation, Zimmer suggests that the West has been fecundated by the “divine Transcendent Principle” (ibid.) and will need time to conceive, gestate, and finally manifest its own new expression of spirituality. But it is not only the West that has been fecundated – India presently undergoes a similar process of assimilating Western influences into its own culture. It is thus a transcultural process of cross-pollination that will necessarily generate new cultural patterns for all parties involved.

Similarly, Russill Paul argues in *The yoga of Sound* that religion cannot be transplanted but needs to be organically recreated within a culture.

America is not without its own spiritual power, so I want to be respectful of this culture as I introduce my knowledge of Eastern spirituality here. The first wave of Indian teachers sought to transplant Hindu spirituality, unchanged, into Western soil. I believe that a new attitude is necessary today. The insights I will share with you through the *yoga of Sound* are offered in a spirit of dialogue and sensitive cross-cultural fertilization. I hope that this effort will, in some fashion, enrich the global spiritual renaissance that is taking root here in the West (Paul 2010, 23).

Jessica Frazier is another author who compares India’s past with this present “spiritual renaissance that is taking root in the West”. Relating the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer with that of medieval Indian theologian Rūpa Gosvāmī, she argues that both strove to rekindle the “passion for the real” within a philosophical landscape marked by radical doubt. Recognizing similarities in both scenarios, Frazier writes that the “interreligious dialogicians of sixteenth-century India, inhabiting a critically self-aware and multicultural society, also sought an ontological answer to the relativistic and nihilistic critiques of radical scepticism, hoping thereby to heighten their own experience of reality” (Frazier 2009, 3). Her point resonates with Zimmer’s and Paul’s ideas above: an understanding of the development of Indian religions may offer insights on how to deal with some of the issues troubling contemporary Western societies.

Nowadays, what used to be parallel processes (as evident in the works of Gadamer and Rūpa Gosvamī) became more like a whirlpool: Indian ideas and practices adopted and adapted in the West are eventually re-imported back to India in their “Western” forms (Borup 2017). In fact, countless Indians today learn about yoga and kirtan from Western teachers, as illustrated in the documentary *Mantra: Sounds into Silence* (Wyss 2018). Moreover, Western gurus from ISKCON have given spiritual initiation (*dīkṣā*) to thousands of Indian disciples, and popular Western kirtan singers like Jai Uttal, Gaura Vani, and Vishvambhar perform in gatherings like the Kumbha Mela and other festivals of gigantic proportions in India. To illustrate, Nina Rao – who is now a popular kirtan singer – narrates how she would never have imagined herself as such before moving to America. “I had to come from India to New York to learn the *Hanumān Cālīsā* and chant it from a Jewish guy [Krishna Das]” (Wyss 2018). Her testimony points to how cultural exchanges can often go full circle and produce a revival in the originating society.

But not all aspects of Eastern religiosity are equally adopted in the West. For instance, there is hardly any interest in certain features of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism like the worship of ancestors and the stress on social hierarchies including the subordination of women. What seems to have strong appeal on Western audiences are precisely the Eastern ‘technologies of the self’, or those very concrete “ideas and practices (and material culture related to these) that are closely associated with narratives of rationality and spirituality” (Borup, 30). This once again provides hints about the needs and hankerings of our contemporary world. There is a demand for experiential spirituality, for connection and for meaning in life. Thus, kirtan fits well in this new spirituality paradigm which, despite its elusiveness, has had a profound impact in American culture. In the following sections we shall discuss how the kirtan movement expands to other parts of the world, noticing general trends as well as peculiar adaptations according to local cultures.

Hybridism and the emergence of a new music genre?

Kirtan practitioners in America come from every sort of ethnic, religious, and social background. Most often, the singing format is kept simple to encourage participation, but the style can vary from more traditional to highly innovative expressions. On the innovative camp, which has been called ‘neo-kirtan’, there tends to be a high degree of experimentation resulting from a fusion of horizons combined with an eclectic assortment of musical styles, which is expected in the face of the complex and transcultural nature of contemporary music. With this, kirtan seems to be gaining prominence as a new music genre on the world’s soundscape.

Accessibility is generally a priority for kirtan in the West, no matter whether practitioners come from Hindu, Sikh, or any other background. After all, South Asians in diaspora need to recreate kirtan under the constraints of being a minority group and having a constant influence of the surrounding culture. Thus, it is understood that Hinduism in America is “relatively monochromic when compared with the rich colors of religion in India” (Narayanan 2000, 768) and temples often group together people of distinct religious identities and from different regional and linguistic backgrounds. Expectedly, there is a tendency to replace traditional compositions in vernacular Indian languages (*pada-kīrtan*) with simpler forms of *nāma-kīrtan* (Beck 2015).

Regarding Sikhs in North America, their youth has been called the “Kirtan generation” by Charles Townsend (2018). In his work, Townsend traces the developments of kirtan in the United States and highlights the effort put by American Sikhs to teach the younger generations how “to perform *Gurbani kirtan* at a rate that may be unprecedented since the time of the Gurus of the Sikh tradition” (Townsend 2015, 346). Even so, these young Sikhs have their limitations when it comes to engaging with Punjabi language and culture, and they also have a predisposition for adopting “new song-forms and modern musical arrangements” (Cassio 2019, 175).

If even Sikhs and Hindus in diaspora often feel the need to adapt kirtan, what to speak of those coming from other ethnic backgrounds? They may be Krishna devotees or members of the 3HO with certain commitments to what is perceived as authoritative kirtan in their traditions. Or they may come in the line of Neem Karoli Baba or lack any formal affiliation. As described by Guy Beck (2015), “American and European singers, such as Krishna Das, Jai Uttal, Dave Stringer, Deva Premal, and Rāgani, have made success in promoting a popular style of *kīrtan* in the West that employs New Age, Celtic, middle-eastern, blues, Jazz, and African features”. Certainly, we can extend this list to include Axé, Samba, Forró, Maracatu and other musical genres.

A common viewpoint of those I have encountered during interviews and participant observation is that any musical style can be used to glorify the divine and is therefore a suitable vessel for kirtan. To illustrate this with just a couple of counterintuitive examples, we find artists like MC Yogi (Nicholas Giacomini), an American rapper and yogi whose message is conveyed through Hip Hop. Another interesting name is Raghunath Das (Ray Cappo), a Krishna devotee coming from the Straightedge community. In the 1990s he started an influential band called *Shelter* whose music style became known as *Krishnacore*, a subgenre of hardcore punk rock.

I have a curious anecdote to tell in this regard. It was 1998 and I was a young Army officer in Brazil. I had spent a month in India during my vacations in the previous year and was interested in learning more about Indian spirituality. A popular Brazilian musician called Thomaz Lima would be singing mantras with classic guitar in a theatre in the city of Curitiba – and a Punk rock show was scheduled to happen at the same time just around the block. To my surprise, I saw a group of ISKCON devotees in saffron robes and shaved heads coming into the theatre, honoring the musician with a flower garland, but then proceeding to the Punk rock show where they mixed with the young Straightedge crowd and danced in ecstasy.

It should be noticed that each artist may combine various styles in their repertoire and even use a blend of styles within a song. Perhaps Jai Uttal illustrates this best: he is an eclectic singer and multi-instrumentalist who studied Indian music with the legendary Ali Akbar Khan and the *Baul* masters of Bengal (Rosen 2008). His music defies genre categorization, except for saying that his East-meets-West approach creates a colorful potpourri of world music. He seamlessly combines Indian musical elements with a wide variety of influences like Jazz, Rock, Blues, Reggae, and Samba. He often integrates mantras and divine names in Sanskrit with English lyrics and, sometimes, even weaves in Hebrew prayers and Jewish themes. Finally, Jai Uttal has an album dedicated to children called *Kirtan Kids* (Uttal 2011) which combines singing and story telling.

In the same way that Jai Uttal allows his Jewish roots to surface in his compositions, other artists have spoken about the importance of honoring one's roots. For instance, in a weekend retreat Seán Johnson sung an Irish song to the Goddess Brigid associated with wisdom, poetry, and healing explaining how he felt it was important to acknowledge his origins and try to find his own voice in kirtan. My personal experience concurs with that. After spending over 12 years in India doing kirtan regularly with 'traditional' instruments only, when I went back to Brazil and decided to record my first album *Mantra-Yoga* it came out with a distinct Brazilian flavour. This happened despite my best intentions to carefully attend to Sanskrit pronunciation and meter.

Kirtan artists today may also engage a range of musical instruments that were simply unknown in pre-colonial India. An interesting example of transculturation is the case of the harmonium – an instrument of European origins that went 'extinct' in the West during the 1930s after the invention of the electric organ. Harmoniums were like small-sized organs with foot-operated bellows sending air to vibrate a set of metal reeds. Compared to organs and pianos, they were cheaper, lighter, and more resistant to the warm and humid weather of tropical colonies.

The British imported the harmonium to India, where they were played in houses and churches. In a transcultural fashion, Indians eventually adapted the harmonium by removing its legs and placing the bellows in the back of the instrument. It is thus played sitting on the floor – not on a chair – and pumping air with one hand while playing with the other (Gaitonde 2016). The Indian harmonium is, therefore, the hybrid ‘child’ born from the encounter of European and Indian cultures, and it has become a key instrument currently used in kirtan, having gained the status of ‘traditional’. Below, images illustrating the transculturation of the harmonium:

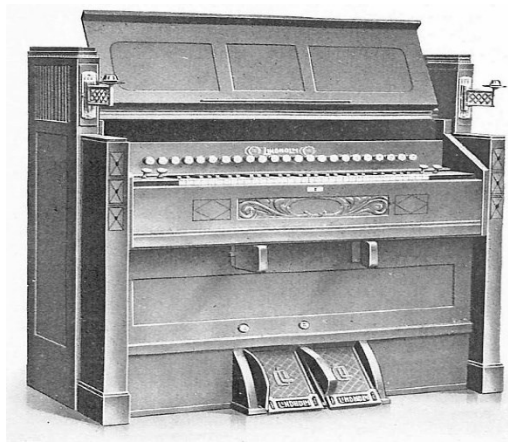


Figure 6: The European harmonium in its original form

<http://www.themantle.com/arts-and-culture/birth-death-and-reincarnation-harmonium>

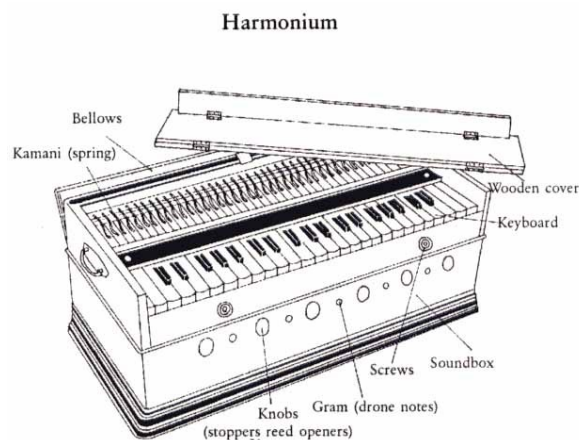


Figure 7: The Indian adaptation of

the harmonium

<https://www.india-instruments.com/encyclopedia-harmonium.html>

Another instrument considered ‘traditional’ in kirtan is the *tablā*, whose origins are contested. Scholars debate whether *tablās* are of Hindu or Islamic pedigree, and the dates for when the current ‘incarnation’ of the instrument became first available remain unclear (Kippen 2010). In fact, until the early 20th century a variety of drums, cymbals, and stringed instruments were used in kirtan – the combination of harmonium and *tablā* being “only a modern standardization” (Linden 2019, 239). Indeed, the cases of the harmonium and the *tablā* are often referred to by kirtan artists today to justify the adoption of musical instruments of any origins. For instance, both Gaura Vani and Vishvambhar have mentioned the harmonium when arguing that any instrument can be used in kirtan, and here I quote the former: “Kirtan has adopted the harmonium, which is not an Indian instrument at all, but they saw that ‘this will be great for kirtan, we should take it and use it’. You know, every instrument that has come along has found its way into kirtan” (Gaura Vani Das, interview by author 2021).

Finally, a significant indication that kirtan is growing to become a new genre in the world music scenario is its repeated appearances on Grammy nominations and its presence in streaming platforms. With many artists nominated for the Grammy awards over the years – Jai Uttal in 2003, Krishna Das in 2013, Dave Stringer and Madi Das in 2016, and Snatam Kaur in 2019 – the kirtan community had been asking how long it would take for the organizers of the event to acknowledge kirtan as a stand-alone category (Patoine 2013; Ghosh 2016). As a step in this direction, it has been announced that for the Grammy’s 65th edition in 2023 the “category formerly known as ‘Best New Age Album’ has been renamed ‘Best New Age, Ambient Or Chant Album’” (Aswad 2022). Moreover, there is no scarcity of kirtan playlists on platforms like Spotify, and kirtan related music also appears under labels such as ‘Krishnacore’ as mentioned above, as well as ‘world devotional’, ‘healing’, and ‘música de rezo’ in the Brazilian context, as we shall see shortly.

Kirtan in Brazil

Much of what has been discussed above also applies to Brazil, but some contextualization is needed to address local historical and cultural specificities. We have already discussed the connections of kirtan and the yoga movement. In Brazil, both have followed different trajectories from their North American counterparts. As I have argued elsewhere²⁴, the establishment of yoga in Latin America had no direct influence of Indian gurus during its early stages and the same is true for kirtan. This happened mostly due to pragmatic reasons, especially language barriers. And yet, according to Roberto Simões it did not prevent yoga from spreading. On the contrary, “it produced beliefs and enabled masters to arise and yogic schools to fuse with native and Catholic religious elements” (Simões 2018, 310). In fact, by tracing the historical development of yoga in Brazil, Simões reveals the roots of a movement characterized by unique values and symbolic exchanges. These include an emphasis on the therapeutic aspects of yoga coupled with approximations to Christianity and Amazonian shamanism (Simões 2018, 291).

Additionally, the practice of postural yoga in Brazil was never associated with the image of fakirs and similar ‘degradations’ as perceived by Max Müller and other Indologists (Singleton, 2010; Gnerre, 2017). In other words, the reception of yoga in Brazil was relatively free from certain prejudices and negative associations common in North America and Europe. Moreover, there is a long affinity between Brazil and India since colonial times through a bridge created by Portuguese missionaries and traders (Freyre 2000). This natural affinity facilitates a dialogical exchange with the inclusion of Indian elements in Brazilian music.

²⁴ This and the next few paragraphs have been adapted from my book chapter titled *Yoga’s Flexibility in Brazil during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Moura Forthcoming).

To this day, the number of Indian immigrants in Brazil is negligible. It is very rare to find Hindus and Sikhs even in major urban centres. Despite this (or perhaps because of this) the cultural affinity remains strong, even if in a romanticized manner. People tend to be intrigued when they meet someone from India and there is a general appreciation of Indian culture which reflects on Brazilian music, TV series, and of course, on the reception of any material or cultural product from India. The feeling of proximity may also reflect the fact that the relationship between Brazilians and Indians is *not* one of former colonizer and colonized – unlike the British people and, by extension, North Americans. Finally, the Portuguese version of Catholicism, in itself considered syncretic, was implemented in Brazil in a more tolerant and inclusive manner when compared to what was done by Spanish colonizers in Latin America (Macedo 2008). Catholics also tend to be less suspicious of Indian devotional elements than Protestant and Evangelical Christians. All this contributes to a marked culture of religious “syncretism, which according to historians and anthropologists (such as Gilberto Freyre and Darcy Ribeiro) is a traditional feature of Brazilian religiosity” and “can be considered a cultural element that contributes to the ongoing process of accepting spiritual elements of yoga within [Brazilian] society” (Gnerre 2017, 132).

Curiously, this eagerness in accepting the “spiritual elements of yoga” occurs side by side with a secularization discourse. In my interactions with yoga teachers in Brazil for over a decade, so often I have heard them describing yoga as a secular practice. Indeed, this is a position defended by some of the most influential teachers (Simões 2019, 67). But often, what Brazilians mean by ‘secular’ is that “yoga is not a religion. Yoga may be practiced by people of all religions” (Kupfer 2010). This quote comes in an interesting context: an influential yoga teacher justifying the propriety of an article about yoga and Ayahuasca that he posted on his website. Responding to

some adverse comments, he defends that the circulation of Ayahuasca ideas as propagated by the Santo Daime religious group is appropriate in yoga circles as much as any other religious ideas.

This episode illustrates how in Brazil people are not expected to leave their religious understandings behind when they come to a yoga studio. Indeed, by saying ‘secular’ they do not mean a neutral space free of religious symbols, practices, and discourses. Rather, they mean a space where people of all religions may feel welcome and comfortable sharing the elements of their faith. And as already mentioned, over and above these associations with Brazilian religious cultures, there is a clear appreciation for and engagement with Eastern religious elements to an extent that is unique to Brazil.

This is the context in which kirtan has been developing in Brazil, sometimes with more typical Indian features, but often with remarkable transcultural adaptations. In fact, the singing of mantras and divine names of Hindu deities is sometimes done by people unfamiliar with the term kirtan, which raises questions on the classification of this music genre. Some of the singers are committed devotees, others borrow and mix Indian elements with indigenous and African ones.

Among the more ‘traditional’ types of kirtan, we have members of ISKCON and the 3HO in Brazil who perform kirtan with Indian instruments such as the harmonium, the mṛdaṅga or khol, the tablā, etc. These devotees, although few in numbers, are very active in kirtan, both in person at their centers and also on social media. This same group can also be very innovative, engaging local musical styles and instruments. Thus, you can hear a Krishna devotee leading kirtan with Indian instruments on one occasion and then ‘translating’ kirtan into Brazilian forms in the very next song during a musical event or within the same album on Spotify. They also go in processions, doing street kirtan that becomes a cultural fusion of mantras and local rhythms.

To illustrate with a few examples: in 2018 the Recife-TV covered the participation of Krishna devotees in a pre-carnival procession in Recife, capital of the state of Pernambuco. The music band is called *MantraCatu* (a fusion of mantra and maracatu) and they have been participating in this festival every year since 2009. Similar events around the Carnival season have been taking place in other major cities, like the band *Cores de Krishna* (Krishna's Colors) in Natal, and the group *Pena de Pavão de Krishna* (Krishna's Peacock Feather) in Belo Horizonte. The same devotees who compose these bands also sing in more 'traditional' Indian formats when in their temples and communities. This shows how these adaptations are welcome as an outreach strategy, while more 'conventional' styles remain the norm in daily liturgical settings as well as during kirtan festivals or even online events directed to the internal ISKCON public.



Figure 8: Maracatu denotes any of several performance genres found in Pernambuco, Northeastern Brazil. The TV report covering this MantraCatu procession in 2018 can be watched on YouTube through the link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoQf6s9qBbY>

Besides these Carnival celebrations, *Réveillon* festivals and *Ratha-Yatra* processions are important dates for Krishna devotees to perform street kirtan in all major Brazilian cities. The *Ratha-Yatra* festivals have been conducted in Rio de Janeiro since 1991 with the participation of traditional *baterias de escola de samba* (samba drums). In Salvador, traditional bands like *Olodum* with typical samba-reggae percussions follow along with the *Ratha-Yatra* parade (Souza 2016).

Having described the kirtan festivals conducted by this ‘conservative’ group (i.e., the Krishna devotees), we now turn to those who more creatively combine Indian mantras with indigenous and African elements. Here are included people connected to Afro-Brazilian religions like Umbanda, Ayahuasca religions like Santo Daime, and groups linked to yoga lineages. In one sense, their work is one of rescuing spiritual themes already present in Brazilian music but doing so now in a dialogue with Indian traditions.

Umbanda is a syncretic Brazilian religion blending African traditions with Catholicism, Kardecist Spiritism, and Amazonian shamanism. It is a sound-oriented religion with an abundance of *pontos* (sacred chants) that are essential in their ceremonies. Interestingly, Sanskrit mantras and devotional Hindu chants are becoming a common feature within the subdivision of Umbanda called *Linha do Oriente* (Eastern Lineage). In 2015 I was invited to spend nine days teaching the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and mantra recitation at an Umbanda center in the South of Brazil. The leaders of the community explained to me how they saw much similarity between Hindu teachings and their religious tradition. Within their *terreiro* (Umbanda compound), they have constructed a small Hindu temple where mantras are recited every morning and where other Indian related practices like *pūja* and meditation take place as well. Indeed, the founders of the *terreiro* had been to India and completed courses in yoga, Ayurveda, and Vedic Astrology – all of which informed their practices and the teachings they offered to the local Umbanda community.

In fact, there is much overlapping in the Umbanda, Ayahuasca, and yoga communities in Brazil – indeed, there is overlap in all religious groups. I had noticed this while travelling in Brazil from 2014 to 2017 and later could confirm that perception in my fieldwork through interviews and participant observation. If we look at what is happening on the ground through a lived religion approach, it becomes clear that to have multiple belongings is something very common.

As an example, Narada, the founder of the *Flor das Águas* community in Cunha, state of São Paulo, comes from an Evangelical background but has embraced yoga, Ayahuasca, and even elements of Catholicism. Differently from the Umbanda *terreiro* described above, where they have separate areas dedicated to the Indian and African based practices, the temple in this ashram has all under a single roof: images of Jesus, Mary, saint Francis of Assisi, Shiva, Durga, Ganesha, and Mestre Irineu, the founder of the Ayahuaca religion Santo Daime. The *sādhana* (daily routine) at the temple emphasises chants – Sanskrit mantras and devotional songs in Portuguese – combined with yoga, meditation, and the ritual consecration of Ayahuasca. The musicians in the community receive training in Indian musical theory and instruments, which are combined with Brazilian ones. They typically begin their performances with an *alap*, a melodic improvisation characteristic of Indian music that introduces and develops a *rāga*. Thus, their musical style is very consciously formatted by combining Indian and Brazilian elements (Narada, interview by author 2021).

Another instance of multiple belongings is Father Sergio, an Anglican priest who for a couple of years has been visiting an ISKCON ashram called *Govardhana Ecovila*. He received *Vaiṣṇava dīkṣa* (spiritual initiation) from an ISKCON guru and has been actively involved in the Krishna community celebrating for them events like Christmas and wedding ceremonies. He keeps carrying on his duties as a priest with the knowledge of his Church authorities and peers, who never expressed any opposition. When I asked him in a personal conversation how he managed to

reconcile his roles as a priest and Krishna devotee, he explained that his Vedic studies had turned him into a better Christian. Curiously, we first met in a kirtan event at the *Ecovila* and he compared my singing with that of another Brazilian priest whose album of Christian songs is titled *Mantras*. For sure, he is not alone among Christian clergy engaged with Indian traditions in Brazil.

Although each of these life stories is unique, they are not isolated cases at all. These are but a few examples to illustrate features of the Brazilian religious landscape. One may wonder, however, about the logic behind these borrowings and adaptations. In a conversation with Narada, he told me that practices of prayer, meditation, mantra recitation and so on as taught in various religious traditions are essentially different kinds of “technologies” meant to connect us to the divine. He then offered an example to clarify: “If I try to contact you through email but you are not answering, I may send you a message on WhatsApp” (Narada, informal conversation 2021).

His point brings us back to Foucault’s (1982) concept of ‘technologies of the self’, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. These are techniques used by individuals to perfect their own lives. Indeed, Brazilian practitioners often use mantra, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, or meditation techniques just as they use laptops and smartphones – not really worrying about where they come from, but whether they work. This shows a very pragmatic approach that pervades the religious mentality in Brazil, where one does not feel compelled to stick to the resources of a single tradition.

Now, to focus on the religious soundscape we can look into an emerging music genre characterized by a fusion of Indian and Afro-Shamanic-Brazilian elements. Consider, for instance, the name of the band *Sarava-Shivaya*. The word *saravá* is a typical salutation used by members of Afro-Brazilian religions analogous to the Sanskrit *namaḥ*, whereas *Śivāya* is an inflected Sanskrit word meaning ‘to Shiva’. This is how the members of the band describe themselves:

Sarava-shivaya uses stringed, winds, and percussion instruments to produce sounds that carry influences of Brazilian popular culture, indigenous traditions, Hinduism, and African roots. The song lyrics lead to an interior trip promoting healing and self-love. This [musical] concept can be called medicine music, prayer music, devotional music, elevational music, among others. (Spotify, artist profile)

There are plenty of other bands and musicians whose songs integrate these diverse influences and whose message is directed towards healing and connection with the divine. This emerging musical genre revives spiritual themes that pervade Brazilian music, like the little acknowledged religious dimension of samba (Bakke 2007). Only recently, however, such metaphysical musical speculations started being done in a conversation with Indian practices.

This resonates with an idea cited in Chapter 3, the concept of “dialogical homology” used to describe the yoga movement in the West for its lack of “direct, wholesale genealogical affiliation” to the Indian tradition going by the same name (Singleton 2010, 16). These Brazilian musicians do not call their style kirtan, and for good reason. This is not about the migration of an Indian tradition, but a ‘home-grown’ movement produced in a transcultural dialogue and serving a function similar to kirtan in Indian traditions. The main exponents of this genre call it by various names, as seen in the group description above. Two of my Brazilian interviewees – Chandra Lacombe and Narada – prefer to call this genre “Música Devocional Brasileira” (Brazilian Devotional Music), although the most common name when searching on streaming platforms is “Música de Rezo” (Prayer Music). Thus, there is certainly homology and dialogue, but also unique features and symbolism. The iconic lotus flower representing purity becomes the white *lírio*, whereas the Indian *chakora* bird who lives in hope of tasting divine nectar finds a Brazilian counterpart in the hummingbird. Through music and poetry, people try to express the inexpressible. And yet, it is only expected that each cultural group will draw inspiration from the natural environment and socio-historical context surrounding them.

Chapter 5: Tradition, Adaptation, and Authenticity

A young ISKCON devotee once asked his master, “Prabhupāda, how can we tell the difference between making an adjustment and changing a principle?” The master closed his eyes for a moment and then, looking again at his disciple, said: “That takes a little intelligence.”

(Adapted from Bhurijana Das, 1996)

In common parlance, whenever people describe anything traditional – music, religion, education – they often imagine something that has never changed. People also tend to assume that to remain faithful to a tradition one must eschew any sort of adaptation. Such understanding, however, betrays an essential aspect of any living tradition: its flexibility. That is why scholars like Marilyn Waldman (1986, 326) have insisted that we should see “tradition as a process – as a modality of change, as *a way*, but not *the way*, in which any society can cope with universal problems of human existence, such as legitimacy, authority, and change itself.” In other words, tradition is a process that preserves identity even while allowing for significant transformations. Thus, instead of imagining tradition as a fossil, one can more profitably think of it as a living organism capable of adapting to new circumstances and of interacting with other traditions.

The Development of Tradition

To illustrate this point, let us consider Brian Smith’s definition of Hinduism as “the religion of those who create, perpetuate, and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda” (Smith 1989, 14). Here Hinduism is defined not as a singular entity, but as a cluster of traditions. Each of these, Smith argues, features an identifiable Vedic principle or “episteme”, which he calls “*sāmānya*”, or resemblance (ibid., 47). The identification of this key principle operating within Hinduism, he concludes, reveals a genuine correlation of post-Vedic doctrines, practices, and texts to the original four Vedas.

And yet, parallel to the internal developments of the Vedic tradition, we should consider the interactions and exchanges with neighbour cultures. In this regard, in *Greater Magadha* Johannes Bronkhorst (2007) proposes that while expanding their influence within the Indian subcontinent, Brahmins encountered others – like Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas – and appropriated some of their doctrines and practices by dovetailing them within their Vedic epistemological framework. Although aspects of *Greater Magadha* as an explanatory model have been contested, I find the idea of transculturation in ancient India to be most plausible.

Another way to explain the paragraphs above is as follows: Hinduism is a family of traditions sharing common Vedic ancestry. Each of these traditions carries fragments of a Vedic ‘DNA’, so to speak, as part of their ‘genetic code’ alongside non-Vedic ‘genetic’ information. As living organisms, traditions remain recognizable even while growing and changing – just as the key features and proportions of one’s body remain identifiable through childhood, adulthood, and old age. This internal consistency is possible because of one’s genetic code, although one’s phenotype is also affected by external conditions. Thus, groups following a given tradition under different circumstances may develop variant forms of that tradition just as twin brothers (with identical genome) may develop distinct traits when living in different environments.

Moreover, through a process of transculturation taking place at the intersection of civilizations, new cultures may arise. The emerging tradition, as per the metaphor deployed by Ortiz (1947), combines elements of the parent cultures. So, we may say that Hindu traditions arise from the interactions of the Vedic civilization with other groups. They all inherit aspects of the “Vedic DNA” combined with non-Vedic materials, each tradition in a specific mixture, just as siblings sharing genetic information from parents in different proportions. The Vedic civilization, in its turn, may then be the amalgamation of previous cultures as well, *ad infinitum*.

One famous passage from the Ṛg Veda [1.164.46] might indeed suggest a process of synthesis in the formation of Vedic religion: *ekam sad viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti agniṃ yamaṃ mātariśvānam āhuḥ*. This passage states that sages describe in various ways the one ultimate truth or reality (*sat*), which is called Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan, etc. This shows how problematic it may be to identify the pristine essence of any tradition – for even the ancient Vedic paradigm may result from a confluence of worldviews – and, of course, this also reveals a marked tendency toward pluralism in the religious landscape of India since the Vedic period.

Furthermore, alongside a plurality of worldviews ethnic diversity was likely an important factor in the Indian subcontinent since a very long time. Research led by geneticist David Reich from Harvard and co-authored by over a hundred scholars from all over the world suggests, based on genetic evidence, successive waves of migration into the Indian Subcontinent resulting in a composite nature of the population since around 6000 BCE (Reich 2019). Thus, it seems that the value of the Indian civilization lies not so much on its often-imagined purity, but in a synthesis that allowed for the creation e constant re-creation of such a great and long-lasting civilization out of so much diversity.

In the case of the Sikh panth, historical investigation reveals how much transformation has occurred over the past five centuries, especially due to the colonial encounter and subsequent processes of standardization and classicization within complex dynamics of reform, revival, identity formation, and globalization. In this case, the inevitable change can be inadvertently caused by the very agents who strive to promote a return to tradition.

It has been argued that attempts to define ‘pure’ Sikh identity – from reform movements such as the nineteenth century Singh Sabha all the way to contemporary revival initiatives like the Gurmat Sangeet, which aspires to establish Gurbāṇī kīrtan as an independent and homogeneous

Sikh musical genre – all this has contributed to erasing “those elements that were perceived as transgressing Sikh-Khalsa normativity” (Khalsa-Baker 2014, 135). This caused the exclusion of the Muslim *rababis* (*lit.* rabab players) who had been acting as memory bearers of Gurbānī kirtan since the times of Guru Nānak. More broadly, this resulted in a “narrowing down of the rich Punjabi cultural setting out of which kirtan emerged” (Linden 2013, 138).

Indeed, following the modern processes of institutionalization and canonization of Sikh sacred music, the main tension in the performance of kirtan has been between a desire for classicization and an urge toward popularization; in other words, between the invention of an “authentic” tradition and a being with the times. (Linden 2013, 139)

Ironically, here we see how those who are striving to preserve or restore tradition may in fact be erasing fundamental aspects of the Sikh heritage. Quoting an interview with kirtan revivalist Bhāi Baldeep Singh, Khalsa-Baker argues that “Gurbani Kirtan practice has historically been genderless, creedless, and casteless where women and Muslim rababis would sing compositions not limited by standardized definitions.” (Khalsa-Baker 2014, 130). One may wonder, therefore, what it means to honor a tradition. If change is unavoidable, how to create and maintain a sense of identity while preserving essential values and principles even in the face of constant transformations?

This acknowledgement of inevitable change, however, is not at all intended to minimize the importance of preserving traditional elements. Anything a community considers significant for pragmatic or symbolic reasons should be honored and maintained. The point I am trying to make is that preservation includes allowing the tradition to unfold and express its vitality as a living organism characterized not so much by fixed external features but by consistent internal patterns. Thus, a constructive way to express fidelity to tradition includes honoring the past while forging meaningful connections to the present and the future.

Keeping in mind this complex and dynamic conception of tradition, we shall address issues of innovation and legitimacy in a context of religious translation. Adopting a transcultural and transnational stance, we ask: What sort of adaptations can be made in kirtan and by whom? How are kirtan artists participating in the socio-economic dynamics of consumer societies while trying to share their work? To whom belongs traditional legacy? And what constitutes an authentic kirtan experience?

Preservation through Adaptation

There is an eternal dilemma that every traditional community must confront: on the one hand, there is a need to preserve core values in order to genuinely represent the teachings of their predecessors; on the other hand, there is also a need to continuously adapt to the reality of an ever-changing world if they wish their message to remain relevant. The resolution of this riddle primarily depends on the ability of community leaders to properly discern between unchanging principles and changeable details. However, even when a thoughtful and experienced leader has developed enough wisdom to make such a distinction and is thus capable of proposing constructive changes, there are overwhelming institutional dynamics that may block the way, causing stagnation. This is what Roger Finke (2004, 24) called “institutional roadblocks” to innovation. Equally disastrous consequences ensue from inappropriate changes, which may result in a degenerative cultural assimilation of the tradition. The future of a religious community thus depends on its ability to periodically produce visionary leaders capable of reinterpreting teachings and practices according to time, place, and receivers – and they must also be sufficiently influential to implement the necessary changes. Following Finke’s analysis, here I argue that the vitality of a religious group is preserved by appropriate innovations built upon the foundational teachings of the tradition.

Organizational vitality is defined by Finke (2004, 20) as the “ability to attract and retain members, and to generate commitment from these members”, thence the importance of interpreting ancient teachings and adapting old practices to keep them intelligible and relevant to new generations. Refusing to do so may prove seriously detrimental:

The downfall of many religious organizations is not that they fail to support core teachings, but rather that they treat all aspects of the organization as core ideology that cannot be changed. This is most evident in the sects that hit their high-water mark on the day they began. Founded on the principle of restoring or retaining past traditions, they tenaciously hold to all traditions and refuse to accommodate to the changing environment. (Finke 2004, 23)

According to this, the number-one enemy of tradition is not change, but the tenacious attachment to the past that prevents healthy adaptations. By ‘healthy’ I mean that these adaptations in form are not meant to detract, but may in fact invigorate, essential principles for the benefit of the congregation. Thus, Finke concludes that “religious groups sustain organizational vitality by preserving core religious teachings as they introduce innovations for serving members and adapting to their changing environment”. (Finke 2004, 20)

Most often, however, those members who oppose the organizational changes do so based on a strong sense of commitment to their ‘traditional ways.’ Due to a fragmented vision, they fail to perceive that the central purpose of tradition is not simply to perpetuate external formulas, but to preserve a worldview and support human flourishing.

Some people mistake that faithfulness to tradition means faithfulness to a frozen set of external formulas that are unchangeable for the rest of eternity. Such a conception of tradition is based on a grievously fragmented vision of the tradition – a vision blind to a vibrant part of the tradition, its flexibility. ***It is this flexibility that makes the unchanging core of the tradition sensible, viable and relishable for people in different social settings, generation after generation, millennia after millennia.*** (Charan 2014, emphasis mine)

The ideas above – which broadly apply to any tradition – have been contextualized to kirtan by singer Gaura Vani when I asked him about how to preserve tradition in the face of so many changes

that we see taking place today. Interestingly, he identified the main challenges as those coming from restrictive policies rather than from free adaptations of external forms of expression.

I don't think that there is any danger of the forms of kirtan breaking up the essence. ***I think there are dangers, but I don't think they come from the artistic expression of it.*** I think the danger comes from our ego, our desire to insert ourselves into the forefront. You know, 'worship me, not Krishna', 'I am the kirtan singer, worship me!', that's a great danger. Another danger is a certain kind of elitism, kirtan elitism, where me and my group are special and anyone else is second-class. Or, you know, we should do it in a Western style, or we should do it in an Indian style. Any sort of exclusivism or elitism I think is dangerous. So, I feel – and this is going to be a controversial statement but – ***I feel there is more danger in losing the essence of kirtan by trying to control how people do kirtan, than there is of them ruining the essence by going crazy with it.*** (Gaura Vani, interview by author 2021, emphasis mine)

After making these points, he balances his statements by saying:

But I still think teaching can be done. I mean, I think anyone who has something to give should teach others and in the process of teaching they will learn and will grow stronger. So, it's not that you can't teach it, but the idea of being restrictive with it I think can be possibly damaging to the essence of the tradition. (Ibid.)

This understanding that something can be taught (which implies compliance) but with the caveat that the teaching should not be too restrictive (which values creativity) shows a nuanced concern with issues of conformity and innovation that exist at the core of any educational process. We shall come back to this at this chapter's final section.

Finally, applying a holistic conception of tradition to the adaptations made in various expressions of kirtan in the Americas also invites considerations on the nature of transnational²⁵ music. In *Transnational Music*, Simone Bridge discusses how "musical interactions across nation-state boundaries are an everyday occurrence in today's interconnected world" (Bridge 2022, 324).

²⁵ "While transnationalism initially referred to migration as a one-way process, [scholars] gradually reconsidered its meaning to also include reverse, temporary, circular and other kinds of migration. The term also gradually expanded to include other groups of people, [...] religious communities, social movements, mobility, communication media and so forth. Thus, while transnationalism is a facet of international migration, it is no longer restricted to immigrant groups (Bridge 2022, 315).

She presents case studies of Salsa, Reggae, and Hip-Hop highlighting features of cross-cultural musical activities and revealing

the varied ways in which migrant and non-migrant people today make music useful and meaningful in their transnational lives, and how musicians collaborate, source new material, adopt musical instruments and market their music across geographical boundaries. By listening to music, appropriating music and creating hybrid glocalised fusions, people perform their ideal transnational social lives and relationships. (Bridge 2022, 324)

So again, adaptation is about making traditional elements useful and meaningful across geographical and cultural borders. It is about tailoring globally available ideas and practices to suit the needs of local people, making them ‘glocal’. After all,

Technology, corporate expansion, mediatization, and commodification on a global scale have led to the diffusion and globalization of music, with some styles and genres spreading far and wide from their places of origin and becoming part of the expanding repertoire of transnational popular music. (Bridge 2022, 320)

Through her studies of various musical genres Bridge demonstrates how “music in both the homeland and diaspora is never static, but a living product of synthesis and hybridity” (ibid., 321). In a similar manner, we can understand how these processes of mediatization and globalization have contributed to the diffusion of kirtan far and wide from its Indian origins, in fact creating an expanding repertoire of transnational music for a growing international audience.

All this to say that adaptations in the performance of kirtan are not only to be expected, but they can indeed be very beneficial if implemented by those who know the tradition deeply and who are sufficiently influential to implement changes despite any institutional roadblocks. The issue remains regarding who is to decide what can be changed and how. Since kirtan is an umbrella term used by various groups, the answer to this question has to arise from within each community based on their authoritative sources.

Adaptations in Hindu Kirtan

The simpler case seems to be what has been called neo-kirtan, or the very recent development by Westerners who have adopted kirtan in their own lives and now try to translate their experiences in a way that makes sense to their audiences. In this context, there is less emphasis on ancient norms or external sources of authority. These devotee-singers may have studied Indian music, they may find inspiration in sacred texts, they may even have accepted a guru and consider themselves part of a spiritual lineage, but they are not so much bound by issues of conformity to the ‘old ways’ because the kirtan they make is clearly a new transcultural product. Moreover, they are mostly free from hard institutional demarcations. And yet, in each decision – from adopting a certain musical style or instrumentation to educating their audience on how to understand and participate in kirtan – these leaders share a responsibility for what they create.

Among members of this group, there is a broad consensus that in principle any musical instrument can be used in kirtan, even because this is what most of these singers do anyway. According to them, the only essential ingredient is a devotional attitude and variations in style can be justified as long as one is genuinely trying to offer one’s heart to the divine and to serve fellow *kīrtanīyas* by connecting them through singing. Being able to guide and engage the audience through meaningful participation is perceived as more important than any technicalities.

Even trained musicians have emphasised the inclusive and participatory nature of kirtan. For instance, Vishvambhar Sheth is a multi-instrumentalist and expert player of the *mridanga* drum. He was born as a second generation ISKCON devotee in the United States but has undergone extensive musical training in India since an early age. During our interview, he recounted his dilemma as a teenager between the ‘classical’ training he had received in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava kirtan *paramparā* and his interest in Western music and instruments.

[Kirtan] is a living, breathing, evolving tradition that allows our individual expression. Like I said, my guitar playing was something separate from my kirtan. It wasn't until I came together with Jai Uttal and Gaura Vani, and others that I started to see that I love playing guitar, I love Bossa Nova, I love Reggae, I love these styles of music. Why does it have to be something separate? Kirtan is really inclusive. Let me just bring mantra [...] And suddenly, I am not just 'mantrifying' my own experience, but it is relatable to people. (Vishvambhar, interview by author, 2021)

Here we notice that although a member of ISKCON, Vishvambhar has close connections with *kīrtanīyas* from other lineages, like Jai Uttal. He is very knowledgeable of the tradition he represents and made sure to explain that he respects ISKCON standards when playing within institutional settings, but he also performs in yoga studios and large festivals around the world.

Adaptations in Gurbāṇī Kirtan

The situation becomes more complicated when dealing with Sikh kirtan. Among those attempting to revive the heritage Gurbāṇī repertoire, some stand on the side of the normative standards of Gurmat Sangeet, exclusively based on the authority of what is written in their authoritative texts. Others defend the historic operative practices received through guru-disciple transmission within the *paramparā* system. Much has been written on this (Linden 2013; Khalsa-Baker 2014; Singh 2019; Cassio 2019) but an in-depth discussion of these contentious matters would go beyond the scope of this work. What follows then is just a brief outline of this debate followed by a discussion on the translation of Sikh kirtan, which is our main focus.

There is a broadly shared understanding that the musical arrangement for singing Gurbāṇī must be emotionally appropriate for it to effectively promote inner transformation. The problem is to decide what counts as appropriate. For those taking the Gurmat Sangeet viewpoint, the singing of scriptural hymns must conform to *rāga* as prescribed in the *Guru Granth Sāhib* and the Rahit Maryādā (the Sikh code of conduct). While the authority of these texts is widely accepted by Sikhs, some find this attempt at standardization based solely on the written word to be too restrictive, for

it marginalizes the unwritten knowledge preserved in the *paramparā*. Moreover, two styles of kirtan have always coexisted among Sikhs: on the one hand there are ‘solo’ forms, on the other there are congregational forms which are not necessarily *rāga* based (Cassio, forthcoming). This latter type is the model for neo/transnational kirtan in its modern incarnations wherein practitioners tend to focus on the accessible nature of Sikh practice and sing Gurbāṇī using simple tunes to the accompaniment of the harmonium and *tablā*, or indeed any instruments.

While I can appreciate the Gurmat Sangeet efforts to promote a style of kirtan based on the most accessible and uncontested Sikh sources of authority, the idea of institutionalization and the narrowing down of the original diversity of Sikh kirtan is concerning. Moreover, I share the anxieties of those few extant memory-bearers who fear the loss of a rich legacy of heritage kirtan and I find some of their arguments highly persuasive. So let us consider a case of heritage kirtan and then extrapolate the discussion to what is taking place in America today.

In *The Sonic Pilgrimage*, Francesca Cassio (2019) provides a pristine example of *bāṇī* interlaced with the *rāga* approved by the renowned exponent of the *paramparā* system Bhāi Baldeep Singh, whom she quotes. “Look at the placement of the notes, you can see this is done by a *sādhu*; it’s not a musician’s composition, ... it’s not possible (to create a masterpiece like this). Somebody must have had such an understanding of the *bāṇī*, that not a single word is misplaced.” (Cassio 2019, 173). She then continues arguing against the notion that these most refined forms of Gurbāṇī kīrtan – misleadingly labeled as ‘classical’ – were a creation of professional court musicians. Rather, she presents the view that they were the expression of extraordinary individuals deeply committed to spiritual discipline. In other words, these were enlightened compositions coming from the heart of saint-musicians and capable of directing the consciousness of listeners on a deeply transformative internal pilgrimage (ibid., 174-175).

To me, there is no doubt about the value of heritage kirtan and the need to preserve it, but a crucial question arises. Should the scope of Gurbānī kirtan be confined to some sort of excavation of the past or can Sikhs today follow in the footsteps of the gurus and still hope to access their original source of inspiration? Put differently, would there be a way for the tradition – so flexible and inclusive up to the Partition – to affirm a plurality of approaches for those trying to conform to the guru’s examples and precepts today? If there are other emotionally appropriate and effective ways of singing, should they be labeled as ‘new’ compositions that are not ‘true’ Gurbānī kirtan? More pragmatically, could the contending views of revivalists and contemporary practitioners be harmonized within the Sikh community? Perhaps reflecting on recent developments of Gurbānī kīrtan in a context of religious translation might contribute to this discussion.

As part of my research, I took an online course taught by the famous second-generation 3HO musician Snatam Kaur with the participation of her mother and her husband. They led the group through a detailed study and practice of how to sing the hymn *Dhan Dhan Ram Das Gur* with careful attention to pronunciation, meaning, Sikh history and teachings, considerations on the attitude for singing Gurbānī, as well as some basic vocal exercises and musical training. Their commitment to the Sikh faith and lifestyle was evident. Most importantly for my point here, Snatam is someone who has put the singing of Sikh hymns on the world map, reaching out to an audience who would never have come in touch with the Sikh gurus’ message otherwise.

One interesting incident mentioned in the course was about an American war veteran who had fought in Iraq. Although deeply traumatized by the horrors of war, for several years he was unable to cry. It was only after listening to one of Snatam’s songs that this man finally began to cry and started a deep healing process. Snatam attributed this to the potency inherent in the sound of the guru’s words, even if her singing style is far from what is imagined as ‘the gurus’ way’.

Now, putting aside Snatam's case, if any sincere Sikhs today go out of their way to present the gurus' message in a manner that is intelligible to their audience, traveling around the world and using any means at their disposal to propagate Gurbāṇī, is that not following in the footsteps of the gurus? Did Guru Nānak not engage a variety of folk tunes to attract his listeners as he travelled through so many regions? And even if by any means someone could reproduce the singing exactly as done by Guru Nānak in terms of *rāga* and instrumentation, would such singing have a greater impact on a contemporary public than modern interpretations? In other words, what is more important, to sound like Guru Nānak or to act following his example?

But one thing does not need to preclude the other. In my interviews I had the chance to speak with Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker, a scholar of Gurbāṇī kīrtan who is also a second generation 3HO Sikh. Nirinjan is a skilled musician trained in kirtan by traditional teachers in India and the US, including Bhāi Baldeep Singh. She plays the *jori-pakhawaj* percussion. The ways in which tradition and modernity are combined in her life gives me confidence that they can also coexist within communities and institutional settings.

Asked about how her involvement with kirtan began, Nirinjan told me that even before she was born her mother used to sing kirtan for her in the womb. This is a common practice based on Sikh (and Hindu) understandings on the efficacy of sacred sound even in those early stages of human development. She grew up in 3HO ashrams in the United States and was exposed to various styles of kirtan throughout her life. Indeed, kirtan was the main type of music her family listened to at home, in the car, etc. Only after undergraduate studies, however, Nirinjan began to formally study and practice Gurbāṇī kīrtan in a structured manner. After many years of intensive musical training and academic research on kirtan, she has played in a variety of spaces from the more conservative environments of gurdwaras to yoga studios and festivals.

However, more than something that she studies and performs in various events, kirtan is part of Nirinjan's lifestyle. At night, before putting her children to bed, she sings with them in simple 'Westernized' tunes that are reminiscent from her childhood memories. At other times, she drums by herself as a form of personal meditation. And desiring to innovate and apply her musical training in different environments, Nirinjan sometimes participates in an ensemble that includes modern instruments like the electric guitar.

According to her experience, all varieties of kirtan have their place, but the secret for innovation lies in a solid traditional foundation. A clear understanding of the principles behind musical arrangements, of how the gurus deployed *rāga* and *tāla*, of how each instrument was used to express and support a transformative experience – all these refined techniques, she explains, not only provide insights into the past, but allow one to find effective ways to innovate.

Of course, it is much easier to reconcile tradition and innovation at home. In formal settings, however, we typically encounter what we have described above as institutional roadblocks to innovation. A clear example of this is the fact that women are not allowed to sing Gurbāṇī inside the Golden Temple, the preeminent religious site for Sikhs, despite the explicit instructions on equality professed by the Sikh gurus (Khalsa-Baker 2019). In this case, the call for change is genuinely based on foundational Sikh principles of equality and dignity to all, a concept that Sikhs will readily accept. But for this kind of social change to reflect in religious praxis it often takes much time. And yet, one could argue that whenever such 'innovation' might take place, it would not make Gurbāṇī kīrtan any less traditional. Rather, Gurbāṇī would be closer to the core traditional teachings once gender equality is accepted and applied in theory and practice.

As a way of closing this section on preservation through adaptation, I would like to reflect on a couple of quotes. The first is from *Music and Empire in Britain and India*, where the author deals with the quest for authenticity in Gurbāṇī kīrtan and asks to what extent “the music of an oral tradition, of which there are almost no written sources available, can be recreated over time” (Linden 2013, 145). He begins by quoting Shiv Kumar Sharma, a famous Hindustani musician: “Change is the only permanent reality in music. Even the music of the same *gharana* changes from generation to generation. No musician can ever be a perfect xerox of his guru” (Ibid.). Linden continues writing that

from the time of Guru Nānak onward, kirtan was sung and played in variable intonation, in different musical styles, and with various instruments. Hence, Sikh scholars and musicians in search of “authentic” kirtan can only imagine what the music of earlier generations was like [...] In fact, even if it were possible to recreate the past exactly, ***there are aesthetic and philosophical reasons why such a recreation would be undesirable. Present-day performances must appeal to present-day tastes, and ‘historically informed performances’ therefore are not really historical, but remakes of the past in the image of the present*** (Linden 2013, 145, emphasis mine)

The above summarizes much of what I have tried to express: change is natural and unavoidable, and there has never been a single exclusive way of singing. Of course, this does not diminish in any measure the value of preserving heritage kirtan. At times, however, those mentioned above by Linden as promoting “historically informed performances” claim exclusive access to the only ‘true’ way of singing Gurbāṇī – and this can be perceived as too restrictive by others who consider touching people’s hearts more important than reproducing a particular type of music.

The final quote, from an interview with a scholar and influential author in the yoga milieu called Christopher Wallis (aka Hareesh), resonates with the above statement by Shiv Kumar Sharma that “change is the only permanent reality in music”.

Over the centuries, kirtan developed into many different forms, just like *āsana*. Some branches of kirtan emphasized introspection; their slow, sweet melodies drew the singers into a state of meditative stillness [...] Other styles were celebratory, and participants would often hold hands and dance. So while purists may cringe to think about Westerners leaving their own bold imprint on

kirtan today, kirtan is a tradition that constantly reinvents itself [...] We are simply witnessing another stage in the evolution of a sacred practice (Sexton and Dubrovsky 2011).

The above reminds us of the variety of kirtan styles and forms already present in medieval India, each reflecting a particular mood, and how these expressions continually evolve through time. This brings us back to a broad view of kirtan as a sacred practice valued by people following various paths in the past and today. In this light, transformations occurring within various groups can be seen as healthy signs of traditions that remain alive and relevant. The key idea is that traditions are better preserved through meaningful changes directed by knowledgeable agents in the service of the community. Rather than undermining foundational values, such changes revitalize the tradition by repackaging it in ways suitable to time, place, and recipients.

Marketing Kirtan

Talking about time, place, and recipients, the influence of globalizing capitalism in today's kirtan scenario is evident, and of course, it is tempting to label the music produced by artists involved in such system as 'commercial'. As a matter of fact, "commerce has been a powerful agent in the production and distribution of everything from Bibles to balloons; likewise, inner quests, even for off-the-grid simplicity or spiritual enlightenment, never transcend the market" (Schmidt 2012). Considering this, it would be too simplistic to assume that anyone operating under such circumstances is corrupting the 'pristine' nature of kirtan – or the reverse idea that those in India, in the past and present, have been free from mundane concerns.

Clearly, no community can flourish without financial support. Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas played a key role in the propagation of kirtan, and their success was made possible by ample royal patronage from various monarchs, including Akbar. More specifically, we know that the founder of the *Garanhati* style of kirtan, Narottama Das, secured powerful patrons in the district of Rajshahi, in east Bengal (Sen 2019, 110-116).

Gurbāṇī kīrtan too flourished with support from the gurus' and royal courts at least until the colonial era (Khalsa-Baker 2014, 82). After that, there was a shift in musical patronage due to processes of reform, identity politics, and institutionalization to such an extent that under the current system the market has become the new patron for Sikh musicians (ibid., 264). The situation is not much different for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava *kīrtanīyas*. Lacking the royal patronage of the past, they too need to adjust their performances and promote their work to secure financial support. This has attracted criticism from scholars and journalists in Bengal who accuse these professional musicians of commodifying the genre of padāvalī-kīrtan (Graves 2017).

The consequences of this shift in patronage from princes to commoners is in itself a worthy debate, but my point here is that musicians need to be supported in one way or another. The fact that musicians today operate within a capitalist framework does not automatically imply that they are less committed to their values and traditions than their predecessors. In fact, in *The Marketplace of Devotional Songs: Cultural Economies of Exchange in Bengali Padāvalī-Kīrtan*, Eben Graves (2017, 81) challenges “a discourse of commodification that contrasts use- and exchange-value as mutually exclusive binaries” and suggests that often times these artists' so-called ‘marketing’ efforts may be attempts to resist the forces of capitalism and promote tradition by adopting the most effective means at their disposal.

In this regard, Graves' ethnographic study discusses the trajectories of professional musicians trained in padāvalī-kīrtan at the Rabindra Bharati University as well as under the mentorship of the renowned kirtan master Pandit Nimai Mitra. These kīrtanīyas have created their own music production company for distributing padāvalī-kīrtan Video Compact Discs (VCDs). The selling of the VCDs does not generate much profit, however. They serve as a kind of ‘business card’ for their kirtan ensemble to reach out to the public and arrange future live performances.

Moreover, being able to produce their own VCDs protects their ensemble and other emerging *kīrtanīyas* from the monopoly of large Kolkata-based music labels, which is a way to minimize the impositions of a capitalist market. The ensemble also performs shortened and adapted versions of padāvalī-kīrtan at a famous festival every year in order to secure opportunities for full-fledged traditional presentations at other venues. Thus, their so-called commercial enterprise can be seen to function as a strategy to support their driving aim: “to join Caitanya’s mission to spread his devotional religion” (Graves 2017, 67).

If Indian *kīrtanīyas* today need to creatively adapt to this situation in which the market is the new patron, what to speak of Westerners? Besides the fact that artists need support to make their projects viable, there are other reasons for one to participate in a ‘capitalist’ kirtan economy. Even when financial considerations are not a concern, what else could possibly be done to propagate kirtan more effectively than by making it available on YouTube, Spotify, and other social media platforms? And if one can afford to engage the latest communication technologies and digital marketing techniques to reach out and inspire thousands of people around the world to participate in kirtan, why not?

Of course, there is a real danger of being infatuated with fame and profit if one becomes a celebrity, and so there is a fine line between engaging these resources with a service attitude in a sincere endeavour to promote kirtan and using kirtan for one’s self-aggrandizement. This is a common theme surfacing on several interviews. For instance, second-generation ISKCON musician Karnamrita Dasi, who studied under Ali Akbar Khan and others, says:

If someone is using kirtan for self-promotion you can feel that and, personally, I am not inspired by such singing. But when you see someone singing with devotion there is such spiritual potency! The idea is that a person desiring to get closer to Krishna cannot be after anything else. Kirtan’s biggest lesson may be this: not to be carried away with cameras and social media; not to get

distracted but to sing for Krishna's pleasure. Took me much time to get used to doing kirtan on stage, outside devotional settings. (Karnamrita, interview by author 2021)

For Karnamrita, kirtan is not at all a significant source of income and she expresses a concern of how fame may negatively impact her devotion. Still, she has learned how to be on stage and her music is amply accessible on streaming platforms like Spotify for the sake of reaching out and sharing kirtan with a wider audience. Despite her attitude and best intentions, some people would argue that this kind of music constitutes a form of cultural appropriation, a provocative topic that we approach next.

Cultural Appropriation

Issues of cultural appropriation are commonly raised in critical scholarship. It has been defined as “the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (Rogers 2006, 474). In broad terms, appropriation is said to occur even if is “not intended to deconstruct or distort the other's meanings and experiences” (Shugart 1997, 211). And yet, recognizing that this sort of cultural interaction has been all too common and has involved people from all ethnicities throughout history, authors may choose to restrict the discussion of cultural appropriation to white individuals and their claims to represent “nonwhite cultural and religious forms” (Lucia 2020, 17).

This latter approach reveals the author's more specific concern with cultural exploitation in a context of white hegemony. In any case, a fundamental problem with critiques of cultural appropriation is that they rely on and reinforce an essentialized notion of culture conceived as a bounded, static entity. A transcultural stance, on the other hand, does not see appropriation as an anomaly. Rather, it challenges discourses on appropriation based on the understanding that what we call culture is “a relational phenomenon that itself is constituted by acts of appropriation, not an entity or essence that merely participates in appropriation” (Rogers 2006, 475).

In other words, if we understand cultures not as pure, stable entities, but as fluid systems that continuously evolve in contact with other cultures, then acts of appropriation are both natural and unavoidable. Of course, transculturation should not be used “as a neoliberal licencing of cultural imperialism” but should remain “sensitive to the complex dynamics of disproportionate power” (Rogers 2006, 495). It remains imperative, therefore, to tackle the sources of inequality that foment injustice and exploitation.

Before looking into specific examples related to kirtan, let us consider four ways of analysing cultural interactions as discussed by Richard Rogers (2006) in his *From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation*. The first, he explains, is when a powerful group imposes elements of its own culture onto another, including attempts to assimilate other people by replacing their language, educational, and religious institutions; this is called “cultural dominance.” The second is when elements of a subjugated culture are incorporated by the dominant group for its own purposes and subsumed within its own framework, and this is called “cultural exploitation”. The third is when there is a more balanced, symmetrical relation of power, promoting what has been called “cultural exchange”. Beyond these three modes, however, Rogers proposes transculturation as a better framework to understand the complex exchanges among cultural groups (Rogers 2006, 477).

Regarding the practice of kirtan by non-Indians, critiques of cultural appropriation most often imply the idea of cultural exploitation outlined above. These critiques express various concerns, such as the violation of intellectual property through commodification, the degradation of the originating cultures due to misrepresentation, and the erasure of native voices. In line with the explanation given in the previous paragraph, I suggest that these issues can be addressed more effectively through a transcultural approach.

To begin with, the idea that white people commodifying kirtan are violating the rights of the ‘legitimate’ heirs of the tradition is based on a Western notion of intellectual property coupled with a reification of culture. From a legal perspective “copyright laws favor individual ownership over collective ownership” in such a way that ‘traditional’ cultural forms are deemed public domain (Rogers 2006, 487). Besides, who are the so-called legitimate heirs of kirtan?

If one looks at the words of Guru Nānak, Kabir, or Caitanya, did any of them indicate that their compositions were meant exclusively for one community? Of course not. Following his epiphany, Guru Nānak is famous for declaring “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” (Prothero 2020, 134), proclaiming a message of universal brotherhood. Similarly, Kabir rejected any religious labels and was equally critical of Hindu and Muslim beliefs and practices. Regarding Caitanya, it is stated that upon entering the temple of Jagannātha in Puri, he prayed: “I am not a Brāhmaṇa, I am not a ruler, I am not a merchant or a worker. Nor am I a celibate student, a householder, a retired person, or a renounced mendicant. I am simply the servant of the servant of Krishna”.²⁶ Also, as previously mentioned, the *Caitanya Bhāgavata* portrays Caitanya declaring that Krishna’s names would be heard in every town and village of the world (Dāsa 2008). Furthermore, even during his lifetime, Caitanya appointed a Muslim-born devotee called Haridas as the highest exemplar of how one should constantly chant the divine names.

These are strong statements coming from some of the founding fathers of kirtan rejecting any discrimination due to religious affiliation or social status. Indeed, through example and precept they have made clear that kirtan is for everyone. Thus, there are no select communities that can be

²⁶ What I have provided is a simplified translation by me from the *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta*, 2.13.80 (Kaviraja 1974)
nāhaṁ vipro na ca nara-patir nāpi vaiśya na śūdro
nāhaṁ varṇī na ca gṛha-patir no vanastho yatir vā
kintu prodyan-nikhila-paramānanda-pūrnāmṛtābdher
gopī-bhartuḥ pada-kamalayor dāsa-dāsānudāsaḥ

pointed as the heirs to kirtan, nor there is any indication that the notion of intellectual property has ever crossed the minds of its founders. The example of Karnamrita Dasi, the second-generation ISKCON devotee mentioned above, illustrates well this point. Although a white woman of Irish descent, she grew up in an ashram not even knowing her legal name. When I asked her about issues of cultural appropriation, she answered as follows:

I was raised in a devotee community with no connections with my Irish background. I am at home with kirtan and Sanskrit mantras, but I would feel an imposter trying to sing Irish songs. We are not this body. I was raised without even knowing my legal name. I was called simply Karnamrita Dasi. If you approach the mantra with respect, then it does not matter the color of your clothes or the color of your skin. The mahā-mantra is non-different from Krishna and so it is about how you relate to Him. Kirtan can take you beyond bodily consciousness. (Interview by author, 2021)

Clearly, to her the idea that she would be engaging in the cultural appropriation of kirtan appeared absurd, not only because that is the culture in which she was born and raised, but also due to the universally inclusive nature of kirtan.

The question about cultural appropriation was also asked to Jai Uttal during his online course that I was attending. He explained that kirtan had been at the center of his life for half a century, that it is his daily prayer, his way of connecting to the divine. He was very humble and then invited students to share their perspectives on the issue. No one in the audience was complaining or accusing him, although they were certainly aware of the debate.

But even if we accept that everyone is entitled to engage in kirtan, the next issue is how misrepresentation may degrade the culture. In this case, again we have an assumption regarding the pristine essence of kirtan as something that was done ‘traditionally’ in one particular manner but suddenly is suffering all kinds of transformations. We have already addressed this point when discussing adaptations above. To recap with a quote from the end of that section, “while purists may cringe to think about Westerners leaving their own bold imprint on kirtan today, kirtan is a tradition that constantly reinvents itself [...] We are simply witnessing another stage in the

evolution of a sacred practice (Sexton and Dubrovsky 2011). So, the main question that really needs to be addressed is the third one: why are we missing a wider palette of voices in the global discourses on kirtan? Why do we have so many Westerners speaking as the representatives of these traditions, both among musicians and scholars?

In *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals*, Amanda Lucia (2020, 84) argues that in the cases of yoga and kirtan “when people of color are erased from representing their own cultural forms and their traditions are defined for them by whites, it is a neocolonial act of aggression”. While I would not call any white *kīrtanīya* an aggressor against non-whites, the question remains: why do their voices seem to be so prominent?

According to Lucia’s analysis, a key factor is the way in which North American society is organized. There are cultural values and social dynamics that put white people in a position of privilege. Thus, even if as individuals they may not discriminate against others, these agents have privileged access to resources that give their voices prominence, which ends up “denying the authority of nonwhite voices to represent the traditions of their heritage” (Lucia 2020, 223).

As a caveat, however, I would highlight that often these white agents are people deeply interested and committed to kirtan. Many scholars and musicians with whom I have interacted during my research (some of them are both scholars and musicians) are white people for whom kirtan is their practice, their prayer, their research topic, their life – so it would be unfair to attribute their prominence to ‘white privilege’ alone. Furthermore, as kirtan has been established as an inclusive practice since its early origins, the issue is not so much that white people – as well as Blacks, Asians, and Latinos – are representing kirtan. We are troubled by the relative scarcity of Indian voices promoting kirtan in the American context.

We should also keep in mind that Amanda Lucia’s research was conducted in the context of transformational festivals in North America that are organized by whites and thus naturally attract a majority of white participants. If one goes to festivals organized by ISKCON or by members of the Sikh diaspora in North America, the majority of *kīrtanīyas* and attendees will be Indians simply because of their circles of influence within a multicultural society.

Another advantage of looking at these issues from a transcultural viewpoint is that it reveals multisided interactions where the agency of non-whites is acknowledged. By this I mean that kirtan in North America is not only about white people appropriating an Indian practice, but also about Indian agents recognizing transcultural dynamics and using that to promote their cause. In this connection, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda used the novelty that were his Western disciples to revive kirtan in India as he traveled with them through his homeland.

Shaven-headed Westerners, wearing *śikhās*, Vaiṣṇava *tilaka*, and saffron robes, playing *karatālas* and *mṛdaṅgas*, chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa with heart and soul, quoting Sanskrit verses from *Bhagavad-gītā*, affirming Lord Kṛṣṇa to be the Supreme Personality of Godhead – for the Bengalis this was sensational, and hundreds would gather to watch. Prabhupāda knew the great appeal his disciples would have; everyone would want to see them. He therefore affectionately called them his “dancing white elephants.” (Goswami 2002, 996)

The idea was that Indians would have their interest in kirtan revived when they saw young Western people – the “dancing white elephants” – adopting it so enthusiastically. The biographer Satsvarūpa Dāsa Goswami narrates how Prabhupāda would speak to his disciples about the prominence of a spiritual culture in ancient India and how this was effaced due to

a thousand years of foreign subjugation, first under the Moguls and then under the British. As a result, the intelligentsia and, to a lesser degree, the masses of India had lost respect for their own culture. They were now pursuing the materialistic goals of the West, and they saw this as more productive and more practical than religion, which was only sentimental. (Goswami 2002, 996)

This last point made by Prabhupāda about how Hindus in general seem to have “lost respect for their own culture” and perceive religious matters as not worth pursuing intrigues me. As

someone who lived in India for over a decade, who is married to an Indian, and who has many Indian friends, I have noticed how often Indian parents want their children to become engineers or follow some other ‘respectable’ career. To be a *kīrtanīya* or even a scholar of religion is not an option to be considered in most Hindu families – and this could be part of the answer for why we lack Indian voices representing kirtan and even South Asian studies in general.

One last point showing a positive outcome of this appropriation (or rather transculturation) of kirtan. In *Buying Spirituality: Commodity and Meaning in American Kirtan Music*, Matthew DelCiampo (2012, 36) claims that:

Kirtan is not only effective and appropriate for American yoga enthusiasts and spiritual seekers, but it helps to expand awareness about Indian sensibilities and promote Hindu spirituality. Far from being a detractive, destructive endeavor, the application and appropriation of kirtan in the United States adds to the vibrancy and influence of kirtan practiced elsewhere in the world.

In investigating the commodification of kirtan in the United States, DelCiampo comes to the overall conclusion that this practice is effective and beneficial for Americans and others around the world. Again, this promotes the revival of tradition in its place of origin and resonates with the central theme that pervades the volume *Eastspirit: Transnational Spiritualities and Religious Circulations in East and West*, by Borup and Fibiger (2017). It is expected, therefore, that this influence will eventually inspire people of all ethnicities to contribute and will also help transform American culture to become more receptive to other voices. This would certainly enrich everyone’s experiences and participation in many vibrant types of kirtan.

To close with a metaphor, Agehanada Bharati coined the expression “pizza effect” to describe the transnational circulation of Indian ideas and practices that ultimately went back to revitalize traditions in their homeland. They are compared to the pizza, a staple Italian food that after its popularization and ‘embellishment’ in America eventually became a source of national pride in Italy (Bharati 1970). This is just one vivid reminder of how cultural appropriation is natural

and inescapable, especially in our globalized context. Even if some Italians might dislike the styles of pizza made abroad (and I know people like that), I suggest that instead of trying to convince the non-Italians to refrain from pizza, a more satisfying alternative is to let Italians be proud of their invention while allowing everyone else the joy of making and eating pizzas their style.

Summing up: What Makes an Authentic Kirtan?

The issue of authenticity is closely related to claims of authority and begs a deeper question: authentic for whom, and based on what criteria? It is easy to take an exclusivist standpoint and dismiss any expression of kirtan that does not conform to one's idealized standards, but what is gained by such attitude? I am in no position to evaluate whose style of kirtan is the most 'genuine' and I doubt anyone could ever be. In any case, my main interest is to investigate how people from all walks of life practice kirtan in ways that are genuinely beneficial for them. Keeping in mind a Sanskrit proverb that says *phalena paricīyate* (the value of something is to be judged by its fruits), this section reflects on the promises and pitfalls of various approaches to kirtan.

Coming back to the idea of kirtan as a technology of the self, one common reason for people to engage in kirtan is the conviction that it is a most effective practice for perfecting one's life. But what is perfection? Is it conformity to an ideal model, something fixed and given externally, or is it a continuous process of human flourishing, of bringing forth one's inherent potentiality? This issue stands at the core of seemingly unsolvable controversies such as disputes on educational models. In regard to kirtan, it manifests as a debate between those who wish to preserve traditional ways against those inclined to allow truth and beauty to find ever new expressions through inspiration and creativity. Is it possible to reconcile these views?

In discussing educational systems, Maurice Craft (1984) noted that there are two distinct Latin roots for the word ‘education.’ They are *educare*, which means to train or to mold, and *educere*, meaning to lead out. Thus, education can be defined as the transmission of knowledge and values inherited from previous generations. It can also be understood as a process meant for bringing out the potential in each individual. Although distinct, these two meanings of the word are not incompatible, but complementary aspects in the educational process.

Interestingly, in the interviews when asked about “what makes a good kirtan”, most respondents came up with answers that harmonize preservation and innovation. They valued good pronunciation, musical training, respect for values, doctrines, and practices, all of which are received through the tradition. At the same time, they emphasised the need of translating kirtan according to time, place, and recipients, as well as the freedom for finding one’s own voice. These two processes are seen as intertwined, as expressed by Nirinjan Khalsa-Baker quoted above. To put it succinctly, the best innovators are those who know the tradition thoroughly, who are deeply invested in its values and culture, who received extensive training in musical techniques, and who can thus expertly apply the principles of kirtan in ever new situations.

There is also a related issue of *personal authenticity*. In the previous chapter, we discussed how kirtan artists in the Americas often feel a need to honor one’s cultural roots instead of simply trying to sound Indian. But it goes beyond matters of cultural identity, as kirtan can also become a way to uncover one’s unique relationship with the divine. As Gaura Vani explains:

Ultimately, in the eternal divine realm, when we are interacting directly with the source of our own consciousness [...] there is a mood or flavor that is alive in that realm and that is unique to each of us. It’s not that everyone has the same flavour of love for God. It is required that over time we learn to listen to the flavour of our own heart. [...] There are as many flavours as there are individual souls in the universe in relation to God. I don’t want to mimic someone’s flavour. I want to learn how to master my own flavor and offer it. (Gaura Vani Das, interview by author 2021).

In other words, authenticity in this sense means being able to express one’s love for the divine in one’s own unique manner. This search for personal authenticity goes hand in hand with years of traditional training in Indian music, showing that one thing does not preclude the other.

Above all, kirtan is meant to be an inclusive practice accessible to anyone regardless of class, gender, or any other external parameters. Indeed, inclusivity is one of the key values in kirtan, from Jayadeva to Guru Nānak, to Caitanya and to today’s *kīrtanīyas*. And despite the various forms of expertise that can contribute to a good kirtan, the only indispensable qualification is to sincerely call out to the divine. This devotional attitude is described by Caitanya as follows: “Thinking oneself as lower than grass, trying to be more tolerant than a tree, not expecting personal honor yet showing genuine respect to others – in this mood one should always chant (*kīrtanīyah*) the holy names of the Lord” (*cf.* Appendix 1).

In this way the ‘tradition versus innovation’ dichotomy can be harmonized by attending to legitimate claims of both parties: acknowledging the importance of preserving the historical legacy while allowing space for innovation, spontaneity, and original insight. In this synthesis, the examples and directions left by the Sikh gurus and bhakti saints support and lead the devotee to the same type of connection with the divine that they had displayed. The guru-disciple relationship within the *paramparā* system is designed to allow for a dynamic transmission of knowledge generation after generation. At least in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava lineage, where I have received my training, it is understood that following the *paramparā* is not an attempt to imitate the inimitable (*anukarāṇa*), but rather a process of *following in the footsteps* (*anūsarāṇa*) of previous masters. Thus, the flexibility of the tradition is ensured beyond the black-and-white norms of sacred books by those who are themselves considered the ‘living books’ and exemplars of what they teach.

Chapter 6: The Soft Institutionalization of Kirtan

The ripeness of Religion is doubtless to be looked for in this field of individuality, and is a result that no organization or church can ever achieve. [...] I should say, indeed, that only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion positively come forth at all.

(Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, 1871)

What is often labeled as ‘new spirituality’ is in fact quite old, as attested in the passage above. This notion of spirituality as something distinct from religion – or more precisely, as the transcendent foundation of all religions – has been evolving over the course of more than two hundred years of meaningful interactions with Indian ideas and practices. Its articulation started in the early nineteenth century when English translations of India’s sacred texts reached the hands of highly influential figures like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The history of how these ideas evolved and eventually became mainstream concepts, effectively transforming the American religious landscape, has been documented in great detail by Catherine Albanese (2007), Phillip Goldberg (2010), and Leigh Schmidt (2012). What these authors describe can be summarized as the emerging of a tradition “in which the primacy of individual experience is joined to a whole web of spiritual practices and social commitments” (Schmidt 2012, 286). Kirtan is part of this “web of spiritual practices”, and it fosters a set of “social commitments” functioning as a didactic tool for institutionalizing the value orientations of this emerging tradition.

By now it should be clear that we are mostly focusing on the transculturation of kirtan, not so much on contemporary efforts to preserve heritage forms. It is especially in this context of religious translation that the practice of kirtan needs to be translated (or adapted) into musical forms attuned to the sensibilities of its new audiences; then, in turn, it helps to translate (or contextualize) Eastern concepts into a coherent message that is intelligible to people today.

Kirtan and Institutionalization

As a devotional practice, kirtan simultaneously promotes deep internal experiences and extensive community bonding. Indeed, kirtan is often considered the most effective means for awakening bhakti, which “is not an isolating, individualistic mode of religious faith. It is intensely personal, but in a thoroughly interpersonal, mutually supportive, collective way” (O'Connell 2019, 25). As a collective undertaking, the need for some sort of organization is implied. A productive tension arises, then, between an individualistic mode of religious faith and the need to find means of institutionalization compatible with the ethos of bhakti.

From our discussion on the ‘vectors of transmission’ in Chapter 3, it is clear that kirtan was introduced in the Americas by multiple agents, including Indian gurus who established their own religious institutions. Today, kirtan continues to take place in various settings: among members of the Indian diaspora in their temples and gurdwaras, in ISKCON and 3HO centers, in yoga studios, in transformational festivals, and even in the houses of devotees. However, as a starting point for understanding the relationship between kirtan and religious institutions I suggest we consider the following case study from a medieval bhakti tradition.

In his study on the development of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition in India since the sixteenth century, Joseph O’Connell (2019) distinguishes between three modes of organization. First, there are “hard institutions”, which are characterized by “centralized executive authority with coercive sanctions, and mechanisms for amassing mundane resources or for mobilizing adherents against external threats”. Second, there are “soft institutions”, which constitute “symbolic means” of articulating, propagating, and perpetuating the group’s value orientations. Third, there are “intermediate institutions” comprising “networks of gurus and disciples” which collectively constitute the tradition, or *sampradāya*. (O'Connell 2019, 27-28)

In this context, O'Connell (2019, 27) defines 'institution' as "a culturally defined set or pattern of interactions expected to occur in certain situations" whereas he uses the concept of 'value orientations' as referring to "the basic cognitive and evaluative standards shared by a group of people: their fundamental ideas and feelings about what is most real, right and valuable".

In the case of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, O'Connell concludes that historically they seldom relied on the centralizing and coercive authority of hard institutions perceived as unnecessary and unsuited for the transmission of spontaneous loving devotion (*prema-bhakti*). Rather, they engaged most effectively a set of soft institutions such as literature, songs, devotional practices (*sādhana*), festivals, and pilgrimage as the symbolic means for preserving their value orientations. These various means of soft institutionalization, O'Connell argues, produce a kind of "genetic code" which becomes embodied in the *sampradāya*, or the intermediate organizational networks of gurus and disciples (O'Connell 2019, 45-49).

In recent times, however, we see that Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas have adopted hard institutions as a strategy to propagate their message throughout the world. The obvious example is ISKCON, with its centralized organizational structure and its tendency to deemphasise certain aspects of spontaneous bhakti expression in favor of more regulated practices that better align with its mode of rational-legal authority (Rochford 2007, 14; O'Connell 2019, 44-45). Likewise, the 3HO/Sikh Dharma switched from charismatic authority to a more institutional framework after the demise of their founder (Jakobsh 2008, 401). Moreover, Sikhs in diaspora do institutionalize the performance of kirtan more strictly than practitioners with no ethnic roots in India, and the Sikh panth in India has been evolving historically in its own unique way from a more heterogeneous community led by the charismatic authority of the Sikh gurus into the gradual adoption of centralizing hard institutions, as argued by Harjot Oberoi (1994, 421).

Thus, while kirtan has existed under all varieties of institutional models, kirtan itself constitutes a soft means of institutionalization. Making a parallel with this case study on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava lineage, in what follows we shall examine how transcultural kirtan serves a growing community of seekers and helps consolidating the so-called American metaphysical religion or, put simply, how kirtan articulates the value orientations of non-religious spirituality.

Kirtan as text, practice, celebration, and pilgrimage

There are interesting parallels between transcultural kirtan and the soft institutional methods forming the “genetic code” of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition as outlined above, namely the use of 1) literary works/songs; 2) devotional practices; 3) festivals; and 4) pilgrimage.

The first instrument for articulating the value orientations of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism was the production of systematic literature in Sanskrit and vernacular languages. This canonic literature was then embedded in a popular form of Bengali devotional song which is *padāvalī-kīrtan*, extending the reach of their message beyond the community of devotees to influence Bengali culture at large (O'Connell 2019, 41). In a similar manner, contemporary kirtan reflects and reifies the concepts of non-religious spirituality which evolved through a dialogue between Indian gurus, Theosophists, Europeans and American philosophers, and many other interlocutors. Sometimes, kirtan simply consists of the singing of mantras; other times, devotional songs in vernacular Indian languages; and then, going one step further in the process of vernacularization which is typical of the bhakti movements, kirtan may be translated to English, Portuguese, or any other language. In any case, kirtan reinforces fundamental ideas and values, extending them to a larger audience, and also popularizing the Indian notions of sacred sound discussed in Chapter Two.²⁷

²⁷ Cf. Appendix 2 for examples of mantras and devotional songs used in transnational kirtan

The second means of soft institutionalization is *sādhana*, or disciplined practice. In fact, kirtan is a core *sādhana* for Sikhs and Hindus in various denominations. Just as the identity of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas is forged through daily *sādhana*, people around the world who regularly engage in kirtan develop a new sense of identity as *bhaktas*, or devotees, as I have so often heard my informants from various groups describing themselves during interviews, online courses, retreats, and festivals.

One example of a kirtan practice emphasised in the online courses I attended is the singing of the *Hanuman Chalisa*. Krishna Das, David Newman, and Brenda McMorrow – each of them in their respective events – dedicated an entire session to explaining, singing, and encouraging students to practice the *Hanuman Chalisa*, learning it by heart if possible.

Tonight, we're going to talk about the *Hanuman Chalisa*. I'm sharing this with you because it's probably the most important single practice that I received in this life in terms of the effect it has on me and the place that it holds in my life. [...] Now, one of the fruits of devotional practice is to develop faith and develop understanding, a deep understanding of the relationship we have with the Divine. (Krishna Das, participant observation 2020)

Other teachers emphasised practice too: Snatam Kaur taught the hymn *Dhan Dhan Ram Das Gur* with great attention to meaning and pronunciation. She also urged students to keep practicing until they knew it by heart. For ISKCON devotees, the Hare Krishna mahā-mantra is the main focus, but they too learn other hymns like the *Brahma-Saṁhitā*, the *Dāmodarāṣṭakam*, and plenty of devotional songs in Bengali. The result of such regular practice is that it helps one to internalize fundamental concepts and values presented in discourses and literary works, as well as to find internal connection with the divine and external bonding with the community.

The third way of soft institutionalization consists in promoting festivals. In the case of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, up to this date they do not have “ecumenical councils or synods as such, nor a Caliphate, nor even an organized *saṅgha* of monks or *pañcāyata* of elders such as might attempt to resolve important matters. What they have had since the sixteenth century are celebratory

gatherings of devotees, leaders and laypersons alike, called *mahotsavas*, great festivals” (O'Connell 2019, 41-42). These *mahotsavas* bring together devotees from various regions and serve as forums for discussing important issues, as well as for setting standards and guidelines for the community. As we shall see in the next section of this chapter, something similar occurs in the present American context, with multiple festivals taking place every year in the United States, Canada, and Brazil where bhaktas from different parts of the world congregate.

Indeed, Amanda Lucia’s (2020) ethnographic study of transformational festivals reveals a remarkable coherence in ethos among those attending these events. In her conclusion, Lucia asks: “What are the foundational logics and the institutional structures that create their presumed coherence? In other words, what makes these amalgamated groupings of disparate, ideologically and geographically distinct religious formations make sense together?” (Lucia 2020, 223).

While her answer to these questions suggests a coherence centered on a widespread thirst for religious exoticism, an inclination white individuals have to appropriate non-white cultures in a quest for “alternatives to Western modernity” (Lucia 2020, 223), I propose that this soft institutional framework provides a more promising heuristic approach for investigating the articulation of value orientations in these communities.

Finally, the fourth expedient for soft institutionalization is pilgrimage, which can be external and internal. In fact, following Victor and Edith Turner ([1978] 2011, 33-34), Francesca Cassio (2019, 169) elaborates on the idea that “pilgrimage may be thought as *extroverted mysticism*, just as mysticism is an *introverted pilgrimage*”. In this regard, Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas often engage in physical pilgrimage to visit the various epicentres of their tradition. They may also transport themselves internally to sites of transcendent geography (*dhāman*) through *līlā-kīrtana* or similar practices leading to “profound meditational experiences wherein one visualizes and

spiritually participates in the open-ended repertoire of divine dramatic sports called *līlā*” (O’Connell 2019, 47). The same concept applies to Sikhs, for whom kirtan may be a sonic form of “introverted pilgrimage: a journey that does not require physical travel, but rather an inner movement of the consciousness to unite with the Akal Purakh” (Cassio 2019, 176).

Contemporary *kīrtanīyas* also engage in external and internal pilgrimage, often leading groups of *bhaktas* to explore the sacred geography of India and allowing kirtan to transport them through an internal journey. Regarding external pilgrimage, the striking contrast between Western and Indian lifestyle creates a cultural shock that naturally instills a sense of wonder and promotes a re-evaluation of one’s views and priorities in life. This theme will also be developed shortly in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Summing up, kirtan constitutes a soft means of institutionalization by functioning as sung text that also helps to propagate and internalize the concepts of written texts; as a form of *sādhana*, or spiritual discipline that builds a sense of belonging and devotional identity; as the central activity in festivals where a broadly dispersed community can converge from time to time; and as a catalyst for internal and external pilgrimage. But kirtan is not the only means by which communities of seekers articulate their value orientations. A similar case can be made for the practice of hatha-yoga, which encourages many practitioners to study texts like the *Yoga-Sūtras*, to adopt *āsana* as a form of *sādhana*, to congregate in festivals, and to visit India. To a greater or lesser extent, we could include many other kinds of technologies of the self such as mindfulness, Vedanta, and Ayurveda. They are all means of soft institutionalization contributing to the consolidation of a worldview that arises from an ongoing conversation in which ancient Indian ideas and practices are adopted and adapted by people coming from all sorts of backgrounds. Kirtan adds a musical and lyrical component in this transnational and transcultural whirlpool.

Festivals in North America and Brazil

As discussed above, kirtan festivals create opportunities for community building, where members of the group come together from time to time even if they live far apart. During these events, people engage in extended kirtan sessions and associate closely with other *bhaktas*, thus imbibing group values and worldviews. Moreover, the intensity experienced in these gatherings justifies their classification as “transformational festivals” that aim to transform not only individuals, but society at large by presenting social critiques and proposing changes (Lucia 2020, 108).

Interestingly, both the analysis of the medieval Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition discussed in the previous section and a study on contemporary festivals in North America come to very similar conclusions about the role of kirtan in consolidating a group’s ethos. Just as O’Connell (2019) defines kirtan as a type of “soft institution” shaping Caitanya’s lineage, Amanda Lucia (2020, 11) too envisions “transformational festivals as one form of institution wherein SBNR communities congeal and reproduce their common ideologies”. Of course, there are various types of transformational festivals, so here we shall focus on those where kirtan figures prominently.

Before COVID-19, the largest kirtan festivals in the US used to be the Bhakti Fest and its ‘cousin’, the Shakti Fest. These were yoga and sacred music events that started being held annually in Joshua Tree, California, since 2009. Then, beginning in 2012, the festival expanded as bhakti Fest Midwest to include another location: Madison, Wisconsin. It has been dubbed “the Woodstock of this generation, except this time it’s without the drugs”, and it is estimated that each edition has brought together between three to five thousand people (Sexton and Dubrovsky 2011). To this, Lucia (2020, 114) adds that of all types of transformational festivals that she has attended for her ethnographic study, the “Bhakti Fest and Shakti Fest were the most traditional in their ascetic inclinations, evidenced by their strict prohibitions against meat, alcohol, and tobacco”.

These two were the most prominent festivals attracting *bhaktas* from various ‘tribes’, but there used to be also events conducted by a specific community. In this connection, Sara Brown (2012) in her doctoral dissertation devotes a full chapter to each of these four major ISKCON festivals in the United States, namely: The Ratha-Yatra parade in New York; The Ratha-Yatra in Los Angeles; the Festival of the Holy Name in Alachua, Florida; and the Festival of Colors in Spanish Fork, Utah. Here I will simply describe in broad strokes the nature of each of these festivals.

Ratha-Yatra is an ancient festival held every year in the city of Puri, India, when the deities of Jagannātha, Baladeva, and Subhadrā are placed in three huge chariots which are pulled by the devotees through the city’s main avenue.



Figure 9: Festival of Chariots – Jagannātha Ratha Yatra in Puri, India. Photo by author

The *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta* (Madhya,13) vividly describes the kirtan led by Caitanya and his followers during these parades. Seven kirtan parties surrounded the chariots with two drums in each and many devotees singing and dancing. Caitanya wandered through all seven groups dancing, reciting prayers, and loudly singing Krishna’s names in ecstasy (Kaviraja 1974).

The first Western Ratha Yatra parade was held in San Francisco in 1967 and soon became a regular festival celebrated by ISKCON devotees in major cities throughout America and beyond. In Canada, as I revise this dissertation, devotees are preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Toronto Ratha Yatra, which started in 1972. The parade starts with a forty-foot chariot cruising down from St. George and Bloor Street down University Avenue to Nathan Phillips Square. The next day, the celebration continues in Toronto's Central Island with more kirtan, lectures, drama performances, and a variety of cultural activities in what is called the Festival of India.

As already mentioned in the final section of Chapter Five, Ratha Yatra festivals are celebrated in several Brazilian cities and they have their own flavour, with the inclusion of samba drums in Rio de Janeiro and 'Olodum' style samba-reggae percussions in Salvador. It is not uncommon for devotees to travel from all parts of Brazil and neighboring countries to participate in these events, which serve to create bonds with members of the community who may live far apart. This happened in Caitanya's time, when devotees from Bengal and Vrindavan would travel by foot for many weeks to join the Ratha Yatra in Puri, thus creating a sense of unity in a decentralized religious community.

The other two major ISKCON events in the United States are the Festival of the Holy Name in Alachua, Florida, and the Festival of Colors in Spanish Fork, Utah. The first consists of two days of kirtan for twelve hours each day, and this congregational singing is the heart of the event. The second is a celebration of Holi, an Indian festivity when people throw colorful powders and paint at each other. But even such playful activity of coloring others happens in the context of 'stage' kirtan, as various bands sing devotional songs during outdoors concerts. Interestingly, since the festival takes place in Utah, it attracts large number of Mormons. In total, the 2012 edition of this festival drew 65,000 participants over the course of two days (Brown 2012, 210).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to participate in these events (except in their online adaptations), which did not occur in the past couple of years. And yet, the vivid descriptions by Brown (2012) combined with my own experiences attending similar events in India, Europe, Canada, and Brazil allow me to form a clear mental picture of how impactful these festivals are. There are many other important festivals throughout the year, including the celebration of Krishna's birth which takes place in all ISKCON centers. To attend these events is considered a powerful way to unite the community and nourish one's devotional enthusiasm, as noted by Brown (2012, 274, 279).

As general remarks about the nature of group singing, Brown draws from the work of Thomas Turino to describe this model of participatory music as one in which "we are fully focused on an activity that emphasizes our sameness" (Turino 2008, 18; as cited in Brown 2012, 17). She also quotes from the work of Edward O. Henry on Bhojpuri devotional music explaining how

group singing and dancing are unique in the repertoire of human behavior in the way they join individuals in social relation through individual, psycho-physiological gratification. [...] the phenomena of rhythm and the mutual coordination of voices are keys to the process of the individual-group relationship. (Henry 1998:116-17, as cited in Brown 2012, 17)

Furthermore, drawing from the work of Victor Turner (1982), Brown proposes that "kirtan, like other celebratory activities, stimulates *communitas*" defined as "an unstructured social state in which consciousness of hierarchy, status, and difference are temporarily suspended" (Brown 2012, 18). Finally, invoking Durkheim's concept of "collective effervescence" Brown quotes from Barbara Ehrenreich who describes how "techniques of ecstasy" can induce the expression of a type of "love that serves to knit people together in groups" (Ehrenreich 2007, 14-16, as cited in Brown 2012, 18). These remarks reinforce the idea that kirtan festivals are indeed this kind of soft, but powerful institution, building communities and shaping worldviews.

Much could be written about Sikh festivals in North America, and to some extent this has been done in the works of Nirinjan Khalsa-Baker (2014), who discusses the Sat Nam Fest promoted by the 3HO/Kundalini Yoga group, and Charles Townsend (2015), who deals with the main festivities celebrated by ethnic Sikhs in the United States. There are also Hindu groups whose festivals involve kirtan, but to elaborate on them would go beyond the scope of this dissertation. And yet, the examples presented above should suffice to illustrate the function of kirtan as a soft institution which plays a key role in community-building as well as in the consolidation and propagation of their value orientations.

Pilgrimage to India

Many Western kirtan singers visit India on a regular basis for studying music under the guidance of local teachers as well as for participating in major kirtan festivals and for going on pilgrimage. Some of them guide groups of Westerners into what can be counted as a very exotic spiritual adventure. In their first visit, most of these people fall in love with India; others are so frightened that they change their flights and return to their countries the same day. Indeed, as I guided groups in India over the years, twice I had to help male Brazilian *bhaktas* get back to the airport just a few hours after they had landed. A third time, I managed to convince a middle-aged woman to just try to take some rest, promising I would take her to the airport the next morning. She ended up staying for a whole month and loved India, having returned more times since that first trip. Western pilgrims often swing through a wide range of feelings such as alienation and encounter, enchantment and frustration, delight and discomfort, but the fact is that no one remains indifferent. It is an utterly embodied experience that at the same time is capable of transporting one beyond the body. As I was taught, the key for a fruitful pilgrimage lies in a devotional attitude nurtured by *śravaṇa* and kirtan, or hearing transcendental topics and constantly singing the divine names.

Indeed, whenever I organize a trip to India, my main recommendation to the group is that they familiarize themselves with the narrations of Krishna's playful activities (*līlā*) and engage in kirtan as much as possible. Of course, they need to get their airplane tickets and an Indian Visa on their Passports, but I insist that kirtan is their true 'Visa' if they wish to access the sacred realm hidden under thick layers of mundane, often disturbing sights. It is tempting for me to attest to the transformational power of pilgrimage based on my own experiences visiting India in 1997 and then living there as a *sādhu* from 2000 to 2013, but that risks becoming too autobiographical. I could also refer to my ethnographic work, since most of my interviewees have been to India in pilgrimage and some of them conduct groups regularly. But I think the most effective way to convey the value of pilgrimage as an aspect of soft institutionalization and a technology of the self in line with what has been discussed so far is to draw from David Haberman's (1994) brilliant account in *Journey Through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*.

Krishna, one of the most popular deities in India today, is typically encountered through story. His stories are seldom encountered in the passive reading of a book, but are more often heard, sung, danced, or enacted. They are also celebrated through pilgrimage activity in a land called Braj, a distinctive cultural region in north-central India. My travels in this region have taught me that the physical geography of Braj is itself a kind of text, and that the preeminent way of 'reading' this text is by means of pilgrimage. (Haberman 1994, vii)

Thus, Hindu pilgrimage consists in 'reading' the sacred landscape by seeing the deities, temples, and natural features of the terrain, climbing hills and walking barefoot for many hours a day, bathing in rivers and lakes, smelling the incense burning in shrines, tasting the local food, and especially hearing about the *līlās* related to the places visited and singing kirtan all along the way. In other words, it is a complete bodily experience involving all the senses and the mind of the pilgrim. There is also a good deal of asceticism involved as pilgrims usually commit themselves to a set of rules, such as sitting and sleeping on the ground only (no chairs or beds), not wearing shoes, not shaving, not using soaps but taking bath in the rivers and lakes, etc. (Ibid. 156).

Haberman spent twenty-one days in this pilgrimage around Braj accompanied by more than five hundred Indian pilgrims, and then continued living in the region for a year. I had the chance of doing that same circuit multiple times during the six years I roamed around in the Braj area, sometimes in a group and other times by myself, so each of the places and practices described in his book are deeply familiar to me. One passage, however, called my attention for it captures the essence of what pilgrimage is and what it is not.

On the way to Kamaban we visited a hill called Charan Pahari, the “Mountain of the Foot.” Atop this small mountain rests a white boulder with an indentation in the shape of a foot. The boulder is bathed with water and smeared with red powder. Attendants kept the crowd moving; one of them informed us that this footprint was left by Krishna after the rock had softened, while listening to the sound of his flute. Such claims are naturally met with some doubt on the part of the outsider, especially considering the economic benefits gained by the attendants busily collecting money from the pilgrims. (Haberman 1994, 168)

His skepticism is certainly understandable, but Haberman does not let this negative impression halt his observation of the religious experience of other pilgrims around him. He continues:

But upon observing several women bow down and touch their heads to this stone, come up with tears streaming down their faces, and hug each other crying, ‘O Sister! O Sister!’ I began to think that questions such as ‘Is it really Krishna’s footprint?’ were inappropriate. I realized that these women and I simply experienced the rock before us very differently. (Ibid., 168-169)

Haberman then acknowledges multiple realities and ways of being in the world. Furthermore, he realizes that issues of historical authenticity are not what pilgrimage is about. Rather, the real issue for devotees is to develop the right *bhāva*, or an emotional state that facilitates remembrance of Krishna. At this point, the inner and outer forms of pilgrimage discussed earlier converge, for the aim is not to achieve any geographical destination. Rather, it is a circumambulation of a sacred landscape in which every location is associated with Krishna’s *līlās*. In this way, pilgrimage is a technology of the self that helps *bhaktas* to absorb their minds constantly and intensely in Krishna’s intimate loving play and institutionalizes bhakti through utterly embodied practices.

Embodiment and Engagement

Bhakti is not simply devotion, but devotional participation. Put another way, it is not just a sentiment, but a service attitude. In *American Veda*, Phillip Goldberg (2010) points out an interesting move from ethereal to embodied religiosity that is becoming increasingly visible nowadays. That is, an emphasis on the figure of a male God and the related perceived superiority of men over women, spirit over matter, intellect over emotion, and so on, starts to be replaced with an awareness of the sacred inherent in all things. This reflects in a more positive evaluation of women, nature, relationships, feelings, and all that is associated with the feminine. Two obvious developments from this paradigm shift are embodiment and engagement, as expressed below:

Today's scene—symbolized perhaps by the shift in advertising images from the seated meditator with eyes closed to the lithe yogini stretched in dynamic repose—is marked by spiritualized bodies, spiritualized relationships, and spiritualized service. Younger practitioners are, by and large, more socially engaged and vigorously embodied than the boomers were when they first turned eastward. By embodied I mean more physically grounded, more real, more here-and-now; less cerebral, less ethereal, less repressed, and less obsessed with the long-term goal of spiritual liberation. This is perhaps why the religious scholar Jeffrey Kripal and others contend that the dominant strain of contemporary spirituality is Tantric. (Goldberg 2010, 335-336)

Trying to spiritualize one's body, relationships, and activities rather than renouncing them, as well as being "less cerebral" and "more socially engaged" are all symptomatic of a move away from male-centered representations of the divine such as the God figure in the Abrahamic religions and the concepts of Puruṣa in Indian traditions. But in India these notions of gender hierarchy have since long been challenged by competing views in the Śākta traditions.

The Śākta traditions constitute an ancient and widespread branch of Hinduism centered on the worship of the Goddess – Śākti or Devī – who is accepted as the ultimate Divinity. Indeed, for the Śākta, all other male and female deities are perceived as her diverse manifestations. In the *Devī-Bhāgavatam*, 7.33.13-15, the Goddess declares:

"I am Manifest Divinity, Unmanifest Divinity, and Transcendent Divinity. I am Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva, as well as Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Pārvatī. I am the Sun and I am the Stars, and I am also the Moon. I am all animals and birds, and I am the outcaste as well, and the thief. I am the low person of dreadful deeds, and the great person of excellent deeds. I am Female, I am Male in the form of Śiva". (Cited in Brown 1991, 186)

Moreover, the Goddess is identified with the Supreme Brahman, as expressed by historian V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar (1999, 78). "The excellence of Śaktism lies in its affirmation of Śakti as consciousness and of the identity of Śakti and Brahman. In short, Brahman is static Śakti and Śakti is dynamic Brahman".

The above statement has deep implications: against the prominence of ascetic traditions, Śaktas intends to overturn the usual representation of the male principle as active and potent in contrast to the female principle, taken as passive and receptive. This typifies a completely female-oriented religious system and is graphically represented as Devī standing on her husband's body, indicating that without Śakti, Śiva is only a corpse. Of course, these opposing worldviews outlined here constitute two sides of the same coin, neither complete nor fully satisfying.

A more balanced representation of the male and female principles is found in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava depiction Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, who are seen as the supreme manifestations of the divine in female and male forms. The *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Ādi 4.95 states: "Lord Kṛṣṇa enchants the world, but Śrī Rādhā enchants even Him. Therefore, she is the supreme goddess of all" (Kaviraja, 1974). This appraisal of the feminine reveals a Tantric dimension that pervades Caitanya Vaiṣṇava doctrine and provides a theological basis for gender equality as well as for a more nuanced rapport between transcendence and immanence. As June McDaniel (2019) puts it:

A Śākta is one who worships a goddess, or Śakti. As Rādhā is Krishna's *hlādinī-śakti* [pleasure potency], we can say that her worship is worship of Śakti. If we wish to define a Śākta as one whose primary focus is a goddess, this is still possible. Rādhā is the Mediatrix, the channel of divine grace, more reliable than Krishna, and more accessible. Indeed, in some works Krishna himself worships Rādhā, as he is fascinated by her beauty and love. (McDaniel 2019, 105)

Caitanya himself is depicted in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* as someone equally capable of displaying sharp intellect and passionate emotions, to be absorbed in transcendence and remain deeply invested in loving relationships with his associates, and most importantly, as being the combined manifestation of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the same body. This is not to say that the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, or Sikh cultures are all supportive of equal rights for women, but their worldviews challenge deep-rooted prejudices and seek to provide equal opportunities to all.

As discussed in Chapter Two, tantra is a pervasive worldview with profound impact on South Asian traditions since at least the sixth century. As the term suggests, tantra operates not so much by inventing something entirely new, but by weaving together and expanding all kinds of religious doctrines and techniques.²⁸ It promotes a shift from a model of dry asceticism, in which a man would see nature, women, and his own body as the “other” that must be conquered. Rather, by perceiving the divinity in all aspects of creation one is expected to surmount the egoistic impulse to exploit them, the tendency to perceive them as objects for one’s domination.

Just as we suggested earlier that the bhakti mode of soft institutionalization informs the ‘new’ spirituality networks, here we point to the Tantric influence shaping the contemporary American religious landscape. Postural yoga and kirtan clearly illustrate the prominence of embodied practices today. For an increasing number of practitioners, it is not sufficient to contemplate abstract concepts; they want to enact spirituality with their own bodies – which are no longer perceived as symbols of sin and impurity, but rather as valuable divine instruments. That the theory and practice of Hatha-yoga and kirtan have been forged with significant input from Tantric sources has been documented by Wallis (2013) and Beck (2004) respectively.

²⁸ Both the ideas of “weaving together” and “expanding” can be etymologically derived from the word “tantra”. See the section about tantra on Chapter 2 for contextualization.

Regarding engagement, today's *kīrtanīyas* certainly show concern with social issues. To give a few examples, the documentary *Mantras; Sounds into Silence* shows Jai Uttal and other *kīrtanīyas* leading kirtan inside a prison with the lively participation of the inmates. Also, the Call and Response Foundation was a non-profit organization promoting kirtan in the US and Canada, including activities inside correctional and healthcare institutions. At one point they were actively visiting at least five prisons in the United States, exchanging letters with the inmates, and visiting them to sing kirtan. Moreover, they had a fundraising project for donating musical instruments so that the inmates could also learn and play kirtan themselves. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted many of these activities and the Foundation itself was dissolved by mid 2020. And still, Jai Uttal recorded a song and promoted a campaign to raise awareness of the dangers the inmates were facing during the pandemic and provide them support through another organization.

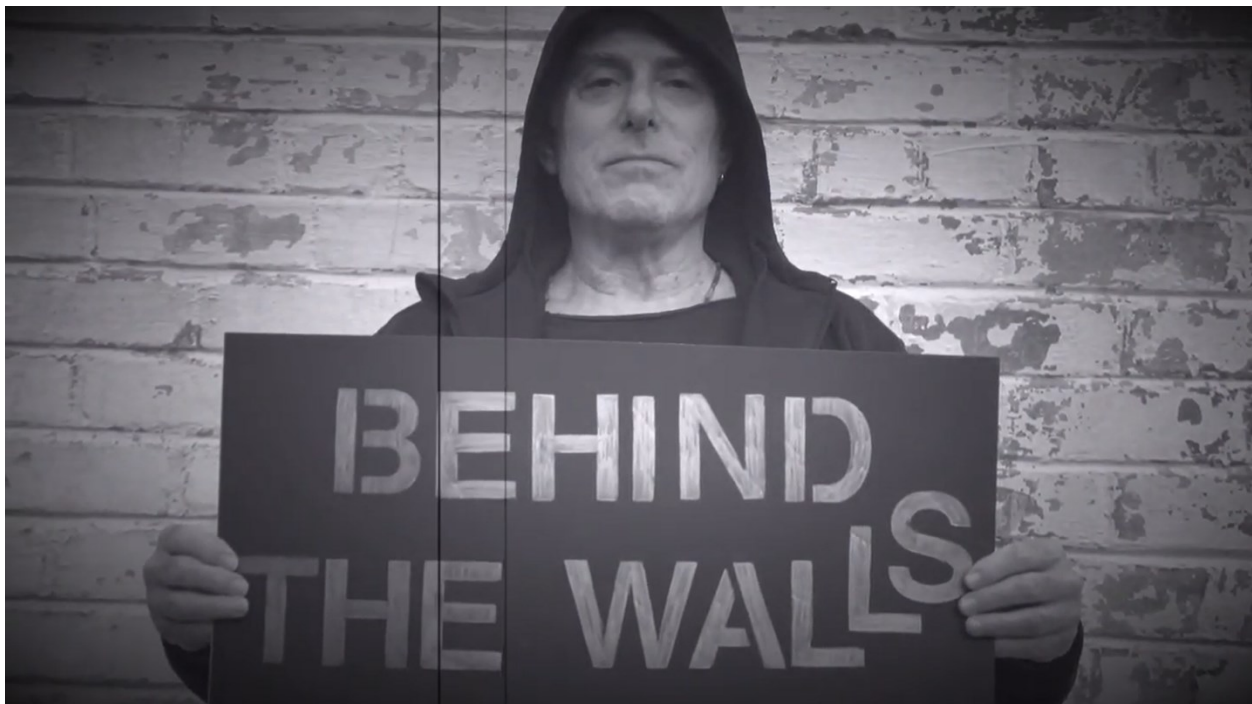


Figure 10: Jai Uttal's 'BEHIND THE WALLS' – DEDICATED TO THE INMATES OF SAN QUENTIN PRISON

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mNxTkcbTss>

Another noteworthy initiative called Chant4Change was organized by ISKCON kirtan artist Gaura Vani, who summoned *kīrtanīyas* and devotees from different communities to chant together and make a statement “that there’s only one way to heal the racism, sexism and terrorism that is currently plaguing the globe – and that is chanting God’s names” (Smullen 2016). It was a large event for social healing that took place “on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., where Martin Luther King Jr. spoke his famous ‘I have a dream’ speech” (Ibid).



Figure 11: CHANT 4 CHANGE 2016: Lincoln Memorial:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKH6xBdZ47o&t=5s>

There are many similar events where kirtan is performed in such a way as to promote social change, feed the hungry, and show empathy to those who suffer, but due to my personal trajectory the majority of examples I was able to witness are from India and Europe.

In Brazil too, once I had the chance to participate in a kirtan performed at a shelter for homeless people. So, while these initiatives may still be limited in scope, they show the attuning of today's *kīrtanīyas* with social issues. The underlying principle behind this shift from a world-denying attitude to a more engaged spirituality was eloquently expressed by former Siddha yoga manager Robert Rabbin as follows: "The seminal spiritual question of 'Who am I?' is incomplete without 'How shall I live?'" (Cited in Goldberg 2010, 338).

Finally, it seems that the embodied and engaged nature of this 'new' spirituality encourages the participation of women, who form a vast majority of attendants in any yoga or kirtan related events. As noted by Phillip Goldberg,

Longtime observers of Vedanta-yoga have been intrigued by what one called the feminization of the subculture. Evidence includes the rise of female gurus, the predominance of women in the empire of yoga, the ascendancy of devotional practices like kirtan (and, within that phenomenon, the rise of the divine feminine as an object of devotion), the growth of service work as a spiritual practice, and the democratization of teaching organizations. Even the male gurus seem softer, less authoritarian, less didactic, than their predecessors. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's public appearances, for instance, almost always feature chanting, a marked contrast with the straight-up lecture style of his mentor, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. By way of explanation, a cosmic hypothesis has made the rounds: dynamic, masculine energy was needed to till the soil and plant the seeds of Vedanta-yoga in the West; it is now being balanced by the nurturing energy of the feminine. Who knows? Whatever the reasons, the new equation—more singing, more sweetness; fewer lectures, less control—seems to appeal to today's seekers". (Golberg 2010, 332)

Thus, the kirtan culture developing in the West opens a significant venue for women not only to participate, but to lead kirtan. Many of the most influential kirtan singers today are female: Snatam Kaur, Jahnavi Harrison, Deva Premal, Brenda McMorrow, just to name a few. The practice itself is deeply embodied, healing, and stimulates emotional expression. To borrow a metaphor from the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (2.19.152), kirtan is an effective way to water the seeds of bhakti and nurture devotional sentiments. Despite its simplicity and emotional nature, kirtan is firmly rooted on a refined theology of sacred sound as discussed in Chapter Two. It is the manifestation of the divine feminine known as *Vāc*, *Sarasvatī*, *Śakti*, *Rādhā*, and countless other names.

Again, all these ideas and values that are becoming ever more influential in the American religious landscape are not being imposed by a centralized institutional endeavor. Rather, they are assimilated by people through singing, dancing, listening to stories, participating in festivals, going on pilgrimage, or engaging in other practices through which this worldview is imbibed. On the other hand, as Sonia Sikka (2021) argues, many thoughtful seekers today are distancing themselves from ‘religion’ understood as a certain notion of ‘faith’ that precludes independent reflection. These people reject the demand for exclusive affiliation to a certain ‘church’ that would forbid them from gleaning wisdom from other sources. Neither are they interested in a bundle of doctrines that must be taken or left *in toto*. The context of Sikka’s study is the influence of Asian traditions on the SBNR community and her overall conclusion is that many of these people are “on a path of thoughtful seeking [...] negotiating religious/spiritual/philosophical views” (Sikka 2021, 225).

The Rising of a Secular Church?

Parallels to bhakti soft means of institutionalization and tantric views of embodiment are not the only approximations to the South Asian scenario. A third aspect of the current American religious landscape that resonates with the Indian model is its plural character which is reflected in many of the kirtan festivals taking place in the US, Canada, and Brazil. While exclusivists may resent the increasing choices available in what sometimes is called the ‘marketplace of religions’, this is a natural consequence of religious freedom. As Leigh Smidt (2012, 6) writes, “seeker spirituality” is a product of “the rise and flourishing in the nineteenth century of religious liberalism in all its variety”. After all, diversity is natural when people are free to choose; conformity needs to be imposed.

For the sake of contextualization, it is helpful to contrast the historical legacy of Europe with the plural South Asian scenario as depicted by Elaine Fisher (2017) in *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South India*. The author develops the thesis that a distinctively non-Western form of religious pluralism existed in precolonial India.

A multicentric cultural landscape, at least within the Indian context, has premodern precedents; the urban pluralism of contemporary India owes as much to its early modern antecedents as to the hegemony of economic globalization. [...] Pluralism, however, can be most accurately described not as the absence of conflict but as its effective resolution—a process that in Hindu early modernity was facilitated not by the removal of religion in public but by its active publicization, by the shared performance of plural religiosities. (Fisher 2017, 26-27)

This persistence of religious discourse in the public sphere reveals, with striking contrast, how religion developed differently in India and Europe. Rather than asking what has prevented secularization in India, this invites an inquiry on the factors giving rise to multiple modernities. How did Hindus and Sikhs cope with diversity? Is there any particular feature of the Indian approach that can explain their historical trajectory? And what social conditions caused the backlash against organized religions in the European context?

It can be argued that the exclusivism typical of Abrahamic traditions unavoidably leads to violent conflicts. Not only did Europeans have to endure the crusades during the Middle Ages, but they suffered through the Wars of Religion from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. These conflicts left deep scars that continue to affect their collective consciousness even today.

It is no surprise that, after Europe witnessed the ravaging destruction of the Wars of Religion, educated minds across the continent would seek to limit the influence of religion in the domains of politics and civil society. In India, on the contrary, history unfolded differently, and the relationship between religion, society, and violence took on another form altogether. [...] Where religious violence did erupt in premodern India, it did not take the shape of large-scale militarized clashes on the scale of the European Wars of Religion, which might have imprinted a memory of cultural trauma on the popular imagination. (Fisher 2017, 19)

This “cultural trauma” needs to be taken into account as we try to understand the deep-rooted secularizing impulse within societies of European provenance. At the same time, it is naive to expect that other cultures, with their unique historical trajectories, should follow the European metanarrative of secularization.

Considering the mindset of a predominantly white public attending a transformational festival where kirtan is a major attraction, Amanda Lucia (2020) notices a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand, many of these people are disenchanted by religion; on the other, they hanker for the community and the sense of purpose in life traditionally provided by religion.

Many millennials were not raised within religious communities as children; they are the most common age group to choose “none” on surveys that question their religious affiliation. These populations comprise the increasing numbers of religiously disengaged people who are nevertheless looking for opportunities to feel supported within a like-minded community, to explore and develop the spiritual self, and to connect with a sense of something larger than themselves. (Lucia 2020, 200-201)

In this regard, Lucia explains based on her fieldwork how yoga is fulfilling this deeply felt need and becoming some sort of “secular church” (Ibid.).

Similarly, in *A History of Modern yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*, Elizabeth De Michelis (2004, 260) concludes that “historical, textual, and field findings all concur in showing that MPY [Modern Postural Yoga] has been adopted and acculturated in developed societies as a healing ritual of secular religion”. In other words, according to her analysis even the most physical forms of yoga conducted in so-called secular spaces bear the symbolic, soteriological, and ritual features of religion. So, the only real motive for calling it ‘secular’ is the understandable reluctance people in these “developed societies” (read European) have to use the word ‘religion’. Well, many today simply use the word ‘yoga’, which implies connection, integration, and is not so distant from the idea of religion as a process of re-connecting with the divine.

In this way, communities are built around the practices of yoga, mindfulness, and kirtan fulfilling the religious needs of those trying to run away from religion, which for them carries the negative connotations of competing exclusivist claims. These technologies of the self are dovetailed with the discourses of seeker spirituality resulting from over two centuries of conversations between India and the West.

In the end, I propose that the most significant contribution of kirtan to American societies is its participation in the process of forging a new religious paradigm that mirrors Indian ways of 1) articulating value orientations through soft, non-coercive institutions as in bhakti traditions; 2) overcoming gendered hierarchies through a tantra inspired worldview; 3) coping with diversity in a multicentric cultural landscape. Kirtan is but one component in this evolving model of free religious choice in which “pragmatic mystics [...] draw from spiritual teachings that make sense to them, regardless of their source” (Goldberg 2010, 339). Moreover, in this encounter between “the American spirit of autonomy and religious freedom and the Vedantic spirit of personalized *sadhana*, religion is becoming both increasingly nonsectarian and increasingly individuated” (Ibid.). It remains to be seen if the expression ‘secular church’ will remain the preferred choice to describe this mode of religion.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the course of this investigation, textual, historical, and fieldwork materials were weaved together in an attempt to understand how and why kirtan is becoming popular among people of various religious and ethnic backgrounds. The central geographical focus of this research has been the United States, but fieldwork in Canada and Brazil brought important insights into variations in the adaptation of kirtan to various contexts. A ‘lived religion’ approach allowed me to pay close attention to how people negotiate their religious lives without assuming that they would believe and act according to a particular set of orthodox standards. In fact, we met people committed to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Umbanda, Ayahuasca, as well as Hinduism and the Sikh panth of course, and many more who fit the category of SBNR, all adopting and adapting kirtan in their own ways. Moreover, a transcultural stance permitted a better perception of the dynamic and multisided nature of cultural encounters, acknowledging issues of domination and exploitation in asymmetrical relations but never denying agency to all sides involved. Now, by way of conclusion we shall revisit some of the leading questions in this research and see how much of this puzzle we were able to put together and what pieces are still missing to forming a clearer picture of the development of kirtan in the Americas.

The first guiding question was about the philosophical/theological underpinnings of kirtan. Chapter Two provided an outline of the key developments of what Guy Beck (1993) has called ‘sonic theology’ by looking at how ideas on sacred sound were articulated by Indian traditions. In a simplified version, these ideas were presented by Indian gurus to their Western followers and now form a remarkably consistent discourse among *kīrtanīyas* of all groups. My fieldwork and secondary literature review concur that for practitioners there is little doubt about the efficacy of sound in the purification of consciousness and connection to the divine.

Of course, people may have different understandings about the nature of the divine, at times describing kirtan as a way of invoking the presence of a personal deity from which the holy name is non-different. At other times, a *nirguṇa* [without attributes] conception prevails but still kirtan serves to connect the devotee with the unmanifest divinity. Or the efficacy of kirtan may be explained along the lines of *nāda-yoga*, or connection through sound vibration.

Interestingly, as described previously, David Newman validated all three options in his online retreat. He explained that some devotees like to think of the deities they celebrate in kirtan in a very personal manner. Others, he continued, hold a more abstract view of the divine and conceive each particular deity as an archetypical manifestation of the One. Finally, he concluded, there are those who choose to simply focus on the sound vibration of the mantras trusting that they are beneficial. It would not take a huge step to relate these three options to the conceptions of the divine in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* where Krishna declares to be simultaneously the syllable *om* in the Vedas and indeed all sound [7.8], to pervade creation having all demigods as parts of his universal form [11.6], and to ultimately be the Supreme Person beyond all fallible and infallible beings [15.18]. This pluralistic outlook allows people to approach the divine in various ways.

But not all *kīrtanīyas* feel the need to concern themselves too much with these issues. For example, in his online course Krishna Das openly stated that he is not a philosopher and that he has heard conflicting explanations about the divine as being ultimately personal or impersonal. In a very unpretentious way, he admitted that he does not have the answer to that disputed issue, but that he keeps singing because this was his guru's instruction to him. Indeed, several times in the course he quoted Neem Karoli Baba saying that simply by chanting the names of God anything can be accomplished. Moreover, Krishna Das recounted how difficult challenges in his personal journey attest to the positive effects of kirtan in his life.

In any case, whether *kīrtanīyas* subscribe to a specific theological view as usually done by Sikhs and Vaiṣṇavas, whether they consider all approaches valid and beneficial, or whether they choose to leave these issues for philosophers to debate, I find that the general principle of the efficacy of sound is agreed upon by practitioners in all groups. Moreover, as presented in chapters three and four, the narrative of the therapeutic value of sound is reinforced by the available evidence in neuroscience and psychology which has been publicized in popular science magazines. I feel that as research on the effects of sound in the human brain and psychological apparatus develops, it may provide valuable pieces to compose our puzzle.

Equally desirable is a deeper engagement with Indian philosophical ideas on sacred sound in a decolonized fashion. Such decolonization can be undertaken through scholarship committed to the principle of ‘theory parity’ and invested with a good dose of ontological and epistemological humility. It is not much progress if Christian confessional views are replaced by secular ones that are equally Eurocentric. For the study of non-European religions and cultures, the implications of different historical trajectories need to be acknowledged to avoid misleading assumptions about the role of religion in a given society. As such, a strict separation between “faith” and “reason” while investigating Indian traditions can distort the very nature of these traditions. These issues have been discussed in the Introduction and Chapter Two, where I set my intention in following the examples of scholars of “the third way”, as proposed by Robert Orsi (2005).

The second question I wish to revisit is regarding the ways through which kirtan has arrived in the Americas. As discussed in the third chapter, the United States have been the major destination attracting Indian immigrants and gurus, so kirtan mostly spreads from there to the rest of the world. And yet, the presence of large Sikh and Hindu diasporas in Canada is certainly consequential and the geographic and linguistic isolation of Brazil make it a case apart.

But immigration has not been my primary concern due to the focus of this research on the transculturation of kirtan. As such, my main preoccupation has been with ‘vectors of transmission’ consisting of complex networks of practitioners and organizations through which kirtan is promoted. In this connection, we have examined how kirtan mirrors patterns of transformation used to make mindfulness portable and transposable in new environments. Kirtan also tracks the expansion of the international yoga movement as a channel for its own propagation. Indeed, streams of kirtan flowing from the Hare Krishna movement, 3HO/Kundalini yoga, followers of Neem Karoli Baba, Satya Sai Baba, Osho, and many other gurus, Shamanic groups and Ayahuasca religions – all of them converge when kirtan is performed in yoga spaces.

Another major channel for kirtan is the internet. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, most people could not afford to participate in kirtan very often at a gurdwara, temple, or yoga space. Thus, online kirtan is increasingly becoming a reality in the daily lives of most practitioners as confirmed in previous research (Khalsa-Baker 2014, 256; Townsend 2015, 108). Needless to say that online kirtan events became the norm during the pandemic and they tend to continue from now on in parallel with in-person events. The health crisis forced the kirtan community to find alternative ways to participate in and teach kirtan, resulting in a number of online courses that most probably would not have happened without the pandemic.

An unintended but significant consequence of making kirtan available through online channels and using recent innovations in communication technologies is the increase in the transnational accessibility. Nowadays people may choose not only to listen, but also to study kirtan with teachers living in any part of the world. The new range of possibilities created by this may impact the global propagation of kirtan by increasing its capillary diffusion even in remote areas. In other words, such innovations contribute to the transculturation of kirtan.

Having discussed these vectors of transmission, the enquiry is then directed towards the reasons why people develop an interest in kirtan as well as to the processes of transculturation. I have suggested that a primary reason for kirtan's appeal today is the fact that it constitutes a form of "technology of the self", a term coined by Michel Foucault (1988 [1982]) to describe techniques that allow individuals to transform their own lives in the quest for happiness, wisdom, and other types of perfection. This concept is all the more relevant for the context in which it was developed. Foucault was arguing that of the two key principles of Greco-Roman culture, namely the injunction to "take care of yourself" and the concomitant need to "know thyself", modern European culture has emphasised the latter in detriment of the former. Thus, people's eagerness in adopting various types of technologies of the self today may be read as an attempt to balance a previous bias towards knowledge as an end in itself, with the consequent neglect of self-cultivation.

More specific reasons for the appeal of kirtan are also discussed in terms of its utterly experiential nature, its presumed therapeutic effects, its visceral expressive power, and its capacity to promote social bonding. These features can easily be dovetailed with the ethos of what has been called the "American Metaphysical Religion" (Albanese 2007), a religious mode characterized by a thirst for unmediated experience of the divine. As I argue in Chapter Four, this metaphysical religion developing in America since the early nineteenth century is a typical example of transculturation resulting from the encounter of East and West. In the case of kirtan, an expected outcome of transculturation is the emergence of new hybrid musical forms. To further illustrate transculturation, the fourth chapter's final section describes kirtan expressions in Brazil, some of them so distinctly Brazilian I prefer to classify as cases of "dialogical homology", a terminology used by Mark Singleton (2010, 16) to describe the yoga movement in the West for its lack of "direct, wholesale genealogical affiliation" to the Indian tradition going by the same name.

This leads to important questions regarding the nature of tradition and the need for making adaptations as a strategy for preserving core traditional elements. In this context, it was asked: What sort of adaptations can be made in kirtan and by whom? How are kirtan artists participating in the socio-economic dynamics of consumer societies while trying to share their work? To whom belongs traditional legacy? And what constitutes an authentic kirtan experience?

Examining these issues from a transcultural viewpoint, I insist on a conception of traditions defined as dynamic processes. As such, expressions of fidelity to a tradition must include respect for its flexibility. In practice, it means honoring the past while forging meaningful connections to the present and future. As explained by Roger Finke (2004), failing to do so curtails religious vitality by making frozen aspects of the tradition irrelevant in ever-changing new cultural settings. A living tradition, on the other hand, keeps changing constantly without losing its core principles, which I have compared to the tradition's DNA.

But if changes must be made, the next question is 'by whom'? My understanding is that in order to flourish, every community depends on the guidance of visionary leaders who can distinguish between the non-essential details and the core principles of their tradition, making the necessary changes according to time, place, and recipients. They must also be influential enough to overcome the typical institutional roadblocks that prevent change. In the context of musical adaptations, I have suggested based on conversations and interviews with other *kīrtanīyas* that the more one knows the traditional ways, understanding the principles behind choices of ragas and instrumentation, developing sensibility to the dynamics of participation and expertise in connecting the audience to the divine, the better one is positioned to make effective adaptations in the details of kirtan practice. Of course, there are changes disputed within institutional boundaries and changes carried out by professional *kīrtanīyas* who today have the market as their patron.

In this context of globalized consumerism, concerns with the commodification of kirtan are clearly justified. It is not difficult to see how the pressure applied by the market can quickly distort the nature and goal of traditional practices. And yet, the fact that kirtan musicians today operate within a capitalist framework does not automatically imply that they are less committed to their values and traditions than their predecessors. Rather, examples of artists in India and America illustrate how sometimes these market dynamics are used by those who are trying to resist the forces of capitalism while promoting kirtan in the most effective way.

The fact that non-Indian musicians ‘sell’ kirtan raises the question of cultural appropriation, which is defined as “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (Rogers 2006, 474). White people, in particular, are targeted here, although there are plenty of non-white, non-Indian *kīrtanīyas*. In one sense, this may be justified by the perceived need to promote more equitable conditions within a society where whiteness is privileged. However, such selectivity also invites questions about cultural ownership. As Amanda Lucia (2020, 82) interrogates: are “Indian knowledge and cultural forms for Indians only?” And she answers affirming that, “When the logic of cultural appropriation critiques is taken to its fullest extent, the ethnic isolationism at its heart becomes readily apparent” (Ibid.).

A related problem with critiques of cultural appropriation is that they assume and reinforce an essentialized notion of culture conceived as a bounded, static entity. A transcultural stance, on the other hand, challenges discourses on appropriation based on the understanding that what we call culture is “a relational phenomenon that itself is constituted by acts of appropriation, not an entity or essence that merely participates in appropriation” (Rogers 2006, 475). From this perspective, acts of appropriation are both natural and unavoidable.

And yet, Rogers continues, transculturation should not be used “as a neoliberal licencing of cultural imperialism” but should remain “sensitive to the complex dynamics of disproportionate power” (Rogers 2006, 495). An effective response to this problem requires that we tackle the sources of inequality that foment injustice and exploitation. In this, I share Amanda Lucia’s concern regarding the scarcity of Indian voices representing neo-kirtan in North America and further investigation is needed to understand what combination of factors leads to this result.

A related matter concerns issues of authenticity. This is a sensitive topic that I address in the end of Chapter Five. In essence, disputes about authenticity are closely related to authority claims and are commonly articulated around the tension between ‘tradition versus innovation’. In general, one side claims to hold the key to the traditional ways which others are guilty of having distorted. My attempt has been to present an approach through which disputes regarding the authenticity of kirtan may be harmonized by attending to legitimate claims of both parties.

On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge the value of preserving the traditional legacy of heritage kirtan as an invaluable treasure that deserves to be protected by all means. On the other hand, the vitality of the tradition also requires allowing space for innovation, spontaneity, and original insight. The challenge for a ‘traditionalist’ is to resist the temptation of claiming exclusive access to the only ‘authentic’ way. The danger for the innovator is to lose connection with the rich legacy of the past and be condemned to start all over again in every generation. But the paradox between conformity and innovation can be resolved by *internal*, not external conformity. In brief, I suggest that authenticity is about *following in the footsteps* of the most revered kirtan masters, trying to develop a similar internal disposition to what they had, but not attempting to imitate them. Of course, there are organizational and individual criteria for what counts as authentic kirtan, which leads to the final question about kirtan’s institutionalization.

The tension between the individual quest for freedom, spontaneity, and direct experience of the divine against the pragmatic need for preservation and propagation of the value orientations of a tradition creates yet another paradox that puzzled me until the final stages of writing this dissertation. I wondered about how it could be possible to institutionalize a practice that by its very nature depends on spontaneous expression. The answer came to me while reading Joseph O'Connell's (2019) account on the development of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition in medieval India. He argues that the various Caitanya Vaiṣṇava clusters dispersed in north and northeast areas of India seldom relied on the centralizing and coercive authority of hard institutions, which were perceived as unnecessary and unsuited for the transmission of spontaneous bhakti expressions. Rather, they engaged most effectively a set of soft institutions such as literature, songs, devotional practices, festivals, and pilgrimage as the symbolic means for preserving their value orientations. This notion of soft institution became the key not only to understanding the propagation of kirtan in the Americas, but also for uncovering subtle but widely pervasive dynamics that resonates with Indian modes of religious transmission.

For the lack of a better terminology, authors such as Elizabeth De Michelis (2004) and Amanda Lucia (2020) have called this phenomenon the rising of a 'secular church', while Sonia Sikka (2021, 224) has come to the conclusion that we do not have in modern Western culture any adequate word to express the idea of religion without invoking the limitations it implies. So, for now we may call it the unfolding of the American metaphysical religion, the 'new' spirituality, or the 'New Age', the rising of a secular church, or use expressions like 'spiritual but not religious.' In any case, as part of this phenomenon kirtan is transforming the American religious soundscape as an effective means of soft institutionalization which is adopted by many as a form of technology of the self.

On the broader implications of this research, I propose that this ‘new’ mode of being religious will continue to hold strong appeal to an increasing number of people and, if religious freedom continues to be the norm, it will allow for a continual expansion of choices.

Everything points to a further expansion of spiritual choice [...] This does not portend a do-your-own-thing spiritual anarchy, as traditionalists fear. Nor will organized religion disappear. It simply means that individuals are taking responsibility for their own relationship with the divine. The trend parallels the evolution of health care away from the physician-as-God model to one that sees patients as educated consumers who make autonomous decisions in consultation with experts. (Goldberg 2010, 339)

In other words, just as no one questions the pertinence of validating or interrogating medical choices, or moral and political ones, in the mind of those who are willing to take responsibility for their spiritual/philosophical/religious choices, this same process seems natural and necessary. That is why, rather than dismissing the SBNR community in its entirety as shallow, uncritical, and self-absorbed, Sikka suggests that there are indeed some very thoughtful people among these seekers.

They test the claims of a variety of traditions against evidence and experience. They evaluate views one by one rather than wanting to slot themselves into a school or become followers of a creed. They look for community and solidarity but not group-think or blind obedience, leaving groups if their leaders turn out to be abusive or corrupt. They are willing to revise when a practice does not work or a prescription turns out to have negative implications and consequences. Why, I ask, is this not also a reasonable and appropriate way of being “religious” in this new age? (Sikka 2021, 226)

That her analysis is done in the context of a volume titled *Asian Philosophies and the Idea of Religion: Beyond Faith and Reason* reveals the close connection with our topic. People in the West are negotiating new ways of living religion and alternative ways of coping with diversity. An open dialogue engaging Indian history and thought may offer valuable insights to further contemporary discussions on the developments of religion and culture in the American continent, considering its present-day multicultural societies and tracing historical parallels with similarly plural societies that existed in pre-colonial India.

Appendix 1: The Śikṣāṣṭakam: Eight verses on kīrtan attributed to Caitanya

1

ceto-darpaṇa-mārjanam bhava-mahā-dāvāgni-nirvāpaṇam
śreyaḥ-kairava-candrikā-vitaraṇam vidyā-vadhū-jīvanam
ānandāmbudhi-varধানam prati-padam pūrṇāmṛtāsvādanam
sarvātma-snapanam param vijayate śrī-kṛṣṇa-saṅkīrtanam

“Let there be all victory for the chanting of the holy name of Lord Kṛṣṇa, which can cleanse the mirror of the heart and stop the miseries of the blazing fire of material existence. That chanting is the waxing moon that spreads the white lotus of good fortune for all living entities. It is the life and soul of all education. The chanting of the holy name of Kṛṣṇa expands the blissful ocean of transcendental life. It gives a cooling effect to everyone and enables one to taste full nectar at every step.

2

nāmnām akāri bahudhā nija-sarva-śaktis
tatrārpitā niyamitaḥ smaraṇe na kālaḥ
etādṛśī tava kṛpā bhagavan mamāpi
durdaivam īdṛśam ihājani nānurāgaḥ

My Lord, O Supreme Personality of Godhead, in Your holy name there is all good fortune for the living entity, and therefore You have many names, such as “Kṛṣṇa” and “Govinda,” by which You expand Yourself. You have invested all Your potencies in those names, and there are no hard and fast rules for remembering them. My dear Lord, although You bestow such mercy upon the fallen, conditioned souls by liberally teaching Your holy names, I am so unfortunate that I commit offenses while chanting the holy name, and therefore I do not achieve attachment for chanting.

3

ṭṭṇād api su-nīcena taror api sahiṣṇunā
amāninā māna-dena kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ

One who thinks himself lower than the grass, who is more tolerant than a tree, and who does not expect personal honor but is always prepared to give all respect to others can very easily always chant the holy name of the Lord.

4

na dhanam na janam na sundarim kavitam va jagad-isa kamaye
mama janmani janmanisvare bhavatad bhaktir ahaituki tvayi

O Lord of the universe, I do not desire material wealth, materialistic followers, a beautiful wife or fruitive activities described in flowery language. All I want, life after life, is unmotivated devotional service to You.

5

ayi nanda-tanuja kinikaram patitam mam visame bhavambudhau
krpayā tava pāda-pānkaja- sthita-dhūli-sadṛśam vicintaya

O My Lord, O Kṛṣṇa, son of Mahārāja Nanda, I am Your eternal servant, but because of My own fruitive acts I have fallen into this horrible ocean of nescience. Now please be causelessly merciful to Me. Consider Me a particle of dust at Your lotus feet.

6

nayanam galad-asru-dharaya vadanam gadgada-ruddhayā girā
pulkair nicitam vapuḥ kadā tava nāma-grahaṇe bhaviṣyati

My dear Lord, when will My eyes be beautified by filling with tears that constantly glide down as I chant Your holy name? When will My voice falter and all the hairs on My body stand erect in transcendental happiness as I chant Your holy name?

7

yugāyitaṁ nimeṣeṇa
cakṣuṣā prāvṛṣāyitam
śūnyāyitaṁ jagat sarvaṁ
govinda-virahaṇa me

My Lord Govinda, because of separation from You, I consider even a moment a great millennium. Tears flow from My eyes like torrents of rain, and I see the entire world as void.

8

āśliṣya vā pāda-ratāṁ pinaṣtu mām
adarśanān marma-hatāṁ karotu vā
yathā tathā vā vidadhātu lampāṭo
mat-prāṇa-nāthas tu sa eva nāparaḥ

Let Kṛṣṇa tightly embrace this maidservant who has fallen at His lotus feet, or let Him trample Me or break My heart by never being visible to Me. He is a debauchee, after all, and can do whatever He likes, but still He alone, and no one else, is the worshipable Lord of My heart.

These eight verses with the original Sanskrit and word-for-word translation are found in the *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta, Antya 20*, from verse 12 onwards (Kaviraja 1974). The translation here is by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda.

Appendix 2: Mantras and Devotional Songs used in Transnational Kirtan

These are but samples to illustrate how kirtan uses Sanskrit, Vernacular Indian languages, and even local vernacular languages (English, Portuguese, etc.) to articulate ideas and values.

Example 1: Sanskrit only

Lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu

Even if sung without translation, most people who have been practicing yoga and/or kirtan for some time will know the meaning of this Sanskrit line, often translated as “May all beings be peaceful and happy”.

Example 2: Sanskrit mantra with Translation

Om asato mā sadgamaya

Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya

Mṛtyor māmṛtam gamaya

(from the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (1.3.28))

Translated as follows in the interpretation of Kevin James:²⁹

Lord, lead me from the unreal to the real

Lead me from darkness to the light

From the Earth to the open skies (this line is mostly there to fill in the meter)

Lead me from death to eternal life

²⁹ Available on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/track/1iQ7Dj54W9SatRZ2M2bW3d?si=9879a8d3926a4cd6>

Example 3: Sikh hymn in Gurmukhi

This *Śabad-kīrtan* was taught by Snatam Kaur during her online course with careful attention to the pronunciation of each syllable, as well as its meaning and historical context.³⁰

ਧੰਨੁ ਧੰਨੁ ਰਾਮਦਾਸ ਗੁਰੁ ਜਿਨਿ ਸਿਰਿਆ ਤਿਨੈ ਸਵਾਰਿਆ ॥

Blessed, blessed is Guru Raam Daas; He who created You, has also exalted You.

ਪੂਰੀ ਹੋਈ ਕਰਾਮਾਤਿ ਆਪਿ ਸਿਰਜਣਹਾਰੈ ਧਾਰਿਆ ॥

Perfect is Your miracle; the Creator Lord Himself has installed You on the throne.

ਸਿਖੀ ਅਤੇ ਸੰਗਤੀ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮੁ ਕਰਿ ਨਮਸਕਾਰਿਆ ॥

The Sikhs and all the Congregation recognize You as the Supreme Lord God, and bow down to You.

ਅਟਲੁ ਅਥਾਹੁ ਅਤੇਲੁ ਤੂ ਤੇਰਾ ਅੰਤੁ ਨ ਪਾਰਾਵਾਰਿਆ ॥

You are unchanging, unfathomable and immeasurable; You have no end or limitation.

ਜਿਨ੍ਹੀ ਤੂੰ ਸੇਵਿਆ ਭਾਉ ਕਰਿ ਸੇ ਤੁਧੁ ਪਾਰਿ ਉਤਾਰਿਆ ॥

Those who serve You with love - You carry them across.

ਲਬੁ ਲੋਭੁ ਕਾਮੁ ਕ੍ਰੋਧੁ ਮੋਹੁ ਮਾਰਿ ਕਢੇ ਤੁਧੁ ਸਪਰਵਾਰਿਆ ॥

Greed, envy, sexual desire, anger and emotional attachment - You have beaten them and driven them out.

ਧੰਨੁ ਸੁ ਤੇਰਾ ਥਾਨੁ ਹੈ ਸਚੁ ਤੇਰਾ ਪੈਸਕਾਰਿਆ ॥

Blessed is Your place, and True is Your magnificent glory.

ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤੂ ਲਹਣਾ ਤੂਹੈ ਗੁਰੁ ਅਮਰੁ ਤੂ ਵੀਚਾਰਿਆ ॥

You are Nānak, You are Angad, and You are Amar Daas; so do I recognize You.

ਗੁਰੁ ਡਿਠਾ ਤਾਂ ਮਨੁ ਸਾਧਾਰਿਆ ॥੭॥

When I saw the Guru, then my mind was comforted and consoled. ||7||

³⁰ The text is available at <https://www.sikhnet.com/news/dhan-dhan-ram-das-gur>

The song by Snatam Kaur can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW7xOdyWavE>

Example 4: Only English devotional song expressing a bhakti worldview

May I Remember (a song by Radha Bornstein, sung by David Lurey)³¹

*When I think I know something, it's when the veil drops
When I think I know something, it's when the beauty stops
When I think I know something, it's when I'm far away from you.*

*When I know I know nothing, it's when the beauty starts to unfold
When I know I know nothing, it's when I'm neither young nor old
When I know I know nothing, it's when I start to see your face
When I know I know nothing, it's when I'm wrapped inside of your grace
When I'm wrapped inside of your grace.*

May I remember, May I remember this...

*When I think I'm this body, the light inside begins to dim
When I think I'm this body, in an ocean of delusion I swim
When I think I'm this body, the light of life begins to fade
When I think I'm this body, I struggle from the womb to the grave
I struggle from the womb to the grave*

*When I know I am the soul, I can't believe the joy in my life
When I know I am the soul, there's a flame of truth burning deep inside
When I know I am the soul, it doesn't matter where I am
I'm surrounded by angels, all the years the ground on which I stand
all the years the ground on which I stand*

May I remember, May I remember this...

*When I think I am separate, from the magic inherent in each breath
When I think I am separate, I'm failing one of life's greatest tests
When I think I am separate, I'm out to sea in a boat with no sail
When I think I am separate, you're right beside me but I think no one is there
Oh, no one is there*

³¹ Available on Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/track/3WIw6YxP5XVGzCjDqXLWPI?si=a54f2fe5b05f4f6d>

*When I know I'm connected, to the power that makes the river flow
When I know I'm connected, to the magic that makes my garden grow
When I know I'm connected, to each and every living thing
Then the Earth is respected, in the wind you can hear her sing
In the wind you can hear her sing*

Example 5: Sanskrit mantras combined with Portuguese Lyrics

This is a song titled *Ciranda Encantada* composed by Chandramukha Swami, a Brazilian ISKCON guru, and interpreted by me, the author. The song starts with a Krishna mantra, then narrates the journey of a soul thirsty for connection through kirtan, and then ends with Krishna mantras again. It is available on YouTube with English subtitles.³²



Figure 12: The author singing *Ciranda Encantada* – a devotional song combining mantras, divine names, and Portuguese lyrics

³² *Ciranda Encantada* on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8QVvsoRuhQ>

Appendix 3: Spotify Data for Kirtan Artists Cited

Name	Number of Monthly Followers
Snatam Kaur	538,298
Krishna Das	327,941
Jahnvi Harrison	168,285
Brenda McMorrow	104,037
Jai Uttal	82,082
Seán Johnson	80,854
Chandra Lacombe	80,497
Bhagavan Das	77,948
Gaura Vani	43,051
Karnamrita Dasi	33,872
Dave Stringer	14,961
Mayapuris (Vishvambhar)	14,767
Russill Paul	13,338
David Newman	12,489
Nina Rao	11,421
Madi Das	10,245
Flor das Águas (Narada)	8,875

Appendix 4: Guiding Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

1. How did your involvement with kirtan begin?
2. What do you like the most about kirtan?
3. Do you see yourself as part of a kirtan community or communities?
4. How often do you engage in kirtan?
5. In your opinion, what makes a good kirtan?
6. How important is pronunciation in the practice of kirtan?
7. What about understanding the meaning of the words, does it matter at all for you or do you feel it is enough to focus on the sound vibration?
8. What kind of instrument and musical style you think go well with kirtan? Do you think it is important to stick with traditional Indian instruments and rāgas?
9. How do you think kirtan is best defined?
10. How do you envision the future of kirtan in America/Canada/Brazil?

Appendix 5: Wilfrid Laurier University Informed Consent Statement

The yoga of Kirtan: Music and Spirituality in a Transcultural Whirlpool

Principal Investigator: Gustavo Moura, PhD candidate, Department of Religion & Culture –
Wilfrid Laurier

Supervisor: Dr. Jason Neelis, Chair of the Department of Religion & Culture at Wilfrid Laurier
University

Information

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to promote an understanding of how the practice of kirtan has been adopted and adapted in the Americas. The researcher is a Laurier graduate student in the department of Religion and Culture working under the supervision of Dr. Jason Neelis.

Participants will be asked to give an interview about their involvement in kirtan. The interview will take between an hour to two hours to complete. As a part of this study you will be video-recorded or audio-recorded for research purposes. You have the right to refuse being taped. Only Gustavo Moura and Dr. Jason Neelis will have access to these recordings and information will be kept confidential. You will be able to preview these recordings. The tapes/films will be transcribed by January 2022. The recordings will not be used for any additional purposes without your additional permission.

Risks

As a result of your participation in this study you may feel uncomfortable with some of the questions being asked. If this happens, you may choose not to respond to any of these questions.

Benefits

Participants may benefit from the participation in this research project by promoting an understanding of the practice of kirtan in the West. The research will contribute to the body of literature on religious diversity in the Americas and, more specifically, on the significance of kirtan as a spiritual practice.

Confidentiality

The anonymity of your data will be ensured by withholding your name if you so desire. The data will be stored on a password protected computer located at the researcher's house, although for interviews done on the internet, the confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed. The de-identified data will be stored indefinitely and may be reanalyzed in the future as part of a separate project. If you consent, quotations will be used in the dissertation. You will be able to vet your quotations before the publication of the dissertation by May 2022.

Would you like to remain anonymous? yes no.

Would you like to be able to vet your quotations before publication? yes no.

Compensation

There will be no financial compensation for participating in this study.

Contact

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact the researcher, Gustavo Moura, at mour7460@mylaurier.ca or +1 (519) 580 6389.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB# *10010804*), which receives funding from the [Research Support Fund](#). If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca.

Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or participate in any activity you choose.

If you withdraw from the study, you can request to have your data removed/destroyed *by contacting the principal investigator until May 2022.*

Feedback and Publication

The results of this research may be published/presented in a dissertation, course project report, book, journal article, conference presentation, class presentation. If you wish, at the end of the study an executive summary and other materials on the findings will be sent to your email address.

Would you like to receive these updates on the research findings? __ Yes __ No.

Consent

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

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