

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 3

Article 8

2011

Unity on the Surface

Laura Spinelli
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spinelli, Laura (2011) "Unity on the Surface," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol3/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Writing Center at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Unity on the Surface

By Laura Spinelli

In religions around the world, followers seek to unite with a higher power. Bill Friskics-Warren, a popular music critic and author of the book *I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence*, explains that this desire for unity is a universal human feeling that stems from “an increasing desperation in our culture for spiritual meaning and direction” (9). In hopes of quenching this spiritual thirst present in all humanity, followers of Sufi Islam and Chabad-Lubavitcher Judaism have turned to music as a means of closing the gap between themselves and God. However, in the midst of the religions’ musical quest for communion with the divine, worshipers often hold a higher regard for the mind than they do the body. This division is manifested through the follower’s reverence for past traditions and the hierarchy of men over women in their fundamental religious practices. Thus, the actions and mindset of worshipers in the Sufi and the Chabad-Lubavitcher religions display a dualism between their minds and bodies. Such a divide is paradoxical considering that the purpose of these religions’ musical worship is to achieve *full* unity with the Divine.

An understanding of the Sufi’s fundamental doctrines shed light on this inconsistency between the religion’s goals and practices. Sufism is a branch of Islam that refers to the holy texts of the Qur'an and looks to the Prophet Muhammad as a role model for the faith (Racy 215). Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, an internationally recognized Islamic Studies professor who has published nearly one hundred scholarly articles on the subject, explains in his book, *Journey to God*, that the Sufi sect has mystical roots. In particular, Sufis wish for their actions to reflect the idea that "God manifests Himself in the most infinitesimal parts of His creation." The Sufis’ ultimate goal is to establish a deep connection with this presence that has such a great influence on their lives

(Frembgen 5). They believe that love for the Lord is the foundation upon which this harmony can be established, for the Lord dwells within the heart when unity is the strongest (Frembgen 6). This view of the Lord manifests the Sufi's ideal that God is present in both mind and body, for the heart is physically associated with the organ in the body, and metaphorically associated with one's faith.

Sufis turn to music to help them establish this heartfelt connection with God. Ali Jihad Racy, a published Arab music expert, explains in his article, "Path to the Divine: Music and the Sufi Experience", that "music is worldly [...] and at the same time otherworldly" (216). Because music possesses these two qualities, it can impact humans on the earthly level *and* have heavenly elements (Racy 216). Thus, Sufis seek to use music to close the gap between Paradise and Earth while on their quest to unity with God. However, the opposite occurs, for Sufis reject earthly associations in their attempts to reach heaven while transcending, which ultimately broadens the distance between the spiritual and physical realms. The disparity between the Sufi's goals and practices is evident in their use of music to reconnect with past generations. Such musical retrospection is said to produce feelings which lead Sufis into a new, separate, atmosphere, "withering [them] away from ordinary consciousness" (Racy 215). This transcendence occurs within a ritual environment, which means that the Sufi minds go to a place separate from their bodies. Thus, transcending and becoming emotionally close to God comes at the expense of physical connection to the Lord. While the Sufis do emphasize that God dwells in the heart, one of their firm beliefs is that God permeates *every* aspect of their existence and the world (Frembgen 5). Therefore, there is a body-mind dualism present that seemingly goes against the Sufi's chief goal of *fully* uniting with the Divine.

This high regard for the mind is also evident in the Sufi's musical ritual called the Zikr. In this ceremony, participants rhythmically chant "Allah" to create an

environment that enables participants to distance their minds from earthly troubles, and focus on the Lord. Although this ritual is conducted with the purpose of attaining unity with the divine, females are not allowed to be present during Zikrs (*I Am Sufi*). While there is no explicit explanation for this division, Reverend Dr. James Nelson, a Christian theologian who studies sexuality in Christianity and discusses such matters in his book *Embodiment*, claims that these divisive roots can be traced back to ancient thought. Dr. Nelson explains that women are associated with the body, for they are viewed as lustful and enticing, where as men are often associated with wisdom and higher function of the mind (Nelson 45-47). Thus, women's exclusion from the Zikr demonstrates that the men's highly revered minds do not want to be distracted by the women's impure physical presences. This separation between men and women again defies the religion's core belief that God must be embraced in all aspects of life because his divinity is omnipresent. Therefore, the men's attempt to achieve unity is paradoxical, because they are not only leaving part of themselves behind, but they also leave behind part of God's loving human creation when they transcend.

The Sufis are not the only sect that faces this problem of trying to achieve unity by paradoxical means. The Lubavitcher sect of Hasidic Judaism also faces such issues, even though the sect arose in response to worshipers' discontent with Judaism's current singular focus on adherence to rules. In order to create a more multi-dimensional outlook on faith, the Lubavitchers decided to incorporate both the intellectual aspects of religion, which are achieved through study, and the mystical aspects of the religion, which are associated with feeling (Rubinstein and Lior 554). Ellen Koskoff, an ASCAP award winning professor of ethnomusicology, explains in her article, "Contemporary Nigun Composition in an American Hasidic Community", that much like the Sufis, the goal of Lubavitchers is to establish an

ultimate unity with their Lord, which they call “devekuth” (153). Furthermore, an entry on the Chabad religion, from Encyclopedia Judaica, describes how worshipers believe in God’s omnipotence, saying that “a divine essence is at the root of every physical and spiritual phenomenon” (Rubinstein and Lior 554). Followers also believe that their God switches between the two forms “*Yesh* (‘being’)” and “*Ayin* (‘nothingness’)” (Berenbaum and Skolnik 554). The Lord’s Earthly existence is *Yesh*, and his heavenly existence is *Ayin*, which gives a surface appearance that the Lubavitchers reconcile the body-mind dualisms that the Sufis struggle with.

However dualisms persist, for the Lubavitcher’s high esteem for the mind is evident in their reliance on the past to create new *nigunim*, or melodies used to emotionally prepare participants for devekuth. Lubavitchers reflect upon the past because they believe that each generation is progressively less holy due to the increasing temptations of consumerism (Koskoff 156). Consequently, melodic composers seek to replicate the unity of the past and draw from previously recorded songs, in hopes of reawakening a deeper spirituality. This act of using music to transport to the past demonstrates that Lubavitchers use music on what Robin Sylvan, a religion professor at the College of Wooster, and founder of a large center devoted to fostering community through religion, refers to as the “virtual level” (33). Thus, the Lubavitchers’ reconstructed melodies “[create] a virtual reality by setting up [music’s] own version of space and time” (33). In transcending to this virtual reality, the Lubavitchers leave their physical presence on Earth, and establish a mental connection to the past. This desire to escape the present reflects the follower’s belief that the current world is undesirable for exercising religious practices. Thus, rather than trying to reconcile the present world with past traditions, the Lubavitchers altogether disconnect their minds from their body’s realm. While they firmly believe that God is omnipresent, their withdrawal from the current moment causes

them to leave behind a part of themselves that is connected with God.

Despite this contradiction between the Lubavitcher's belief in God and their methods of transcendence, the nigunim still plays an important role in the religion's rituals, and there is much esteem associated with being a nigunim composer. However, this admired title is reserved solely for men, which is where the pinnacle of the Hasidic mind-body dualism occurs. The practitioners' reasoning behind this disparity is that they "feel that a melody written by a woman cannot convey the same spiritual feelings as one written by a man" (Koskoff 155). Because nigunim are so closely linked to devekuth, this implies that males are more worthy of achieving the core unity with God than females are. Recalling Dr. Nelson's description of the ancient beliefs concerning males and females, this lack of faith in women's abilities demonstrates a lack of respect for the body. The Lubavitchers have a firm belief in God's presence in everything. Yet in viewing women as inferior, they are not fully embracing all of God's creation, and thus not fully embracing God.

This body-mind dualism, which is especially present in the Lubavitcher's religion as well as the Sufi's religion, demonstrates that there is a universal need for unity with a higher power, as Friskics-Warren discusses. While it is true that a religion's music is a plausible avenue for transcendence, the ultimate human desire for unity will never be fulfilled while followers continue their dualistic ways of viewing women as subservient to men and connecting their minds to the past. Thus, complete human contentment, through unity with the divine, will be absent until these divisive differences are reconciled.

Works Cited

- Frembgen, Jürgen W. *Journey to God*. Trans. Jane Ripken. Oxford University Press. 4-8.
- Friskics-Warren, Bill. *I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence*. New York: Continuum, 2005. 9-20.
- I Am Sufi, I Am a Muslim*. Dir. Dick Dumon. Films for the Humanities and Sciences. FFH, 1996. VHS
- Koskoff, Ellen. "Contemporary Nigun Composition in an American Hasidic Community." *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 3:1 (1978): 153-173.
- Nelson, James B. *Embodiment: an Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1978.
- Racy, Ali J. "Path to the Divine: Music and the Sufi Experience." *Religion as Art*. Ed. Stephen Lozen. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2009. 214-18.
- Rubinstein, Avraham, and Rachel Lior. "Chabad." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Brenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007. Print.
- Sylvan, Robin. *Traces of the Spirit: the Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.