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## Hermeneutics, St. Augustine of Hippo & Tantra (On Tantra continued and to be continued)

BY [SUBHASIS CHATTOPADHYAY](#) on 21 OCT 2018

“I [Caputo] would argue that the unknowing in this prayer to the unknown God is a structural element of prayer itself, of any prayer, the most classical prayers of the faithful included; it is not restricted to certain poets or philosophers who may as a contingent fact rightly or wrongly pass for atheists. For inasmuch as prayer is inscribed within the movement of faith—Lord, I believe, help my unbelief—there is a moment in every prayer where it finds itself thrown back on itself, finds itself praying for the prayer itself, praying that there is some point to prayer, praying that there is someone to hear our prayers, praying that our prayers find someone who hears them. There is, furthermore, always and essentially something unknown about the one to whom we pray, an uncertainty about their response, an irreducible uncertainty about the future, which is why we are praying rather than confidently forecasting a successful outcome. That ring of unknowing is a condition of prayer that is not only found in those who rightly pass for atheists but is also a mark of prayer itself, even and especially the most saintly prayer, the passionate prayer that issues from that passion of non-knowing

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called the dark night of the soul. At that point in mystical prayer, the soul comes to question whether she believes in God, or believes in prayer, having reached a point where she has to pray to be able to pray, pray to be able to believe in prayer, pray to be able to believe at all.” (103)

John D. Caputo in *Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Confession of Prayer in Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfessions* edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon. Indian University Press. 2005. Print.



St. Augustine of Hippo

Here Caputo comments as an heir to St. Augustine and as the most nuanced reader of Derrida. To understand Derrida, it is essential to have crossed the hurdles of

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Søren Kierkegaard. Therefore when Caputo writes, it is not he who writes but the ghosts of his predecessors in philosophy and literature. To see philosophy and literature as separate is to err on the side of naïveté. To have read Kierkegaard and Augustine means to have read the Bible. To have read the Bible means to have read (sic) Hellenism. Now then the 'I' in the quote above is no longer Caputo, the writers of such books as *Truth: Philosophy in Transit* and *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* but Caputo who *is* (sic) the wisdom of the centuries before him. But this essay is not on Caputo but on Tantra, and therefore we must now carry on from where we had left off in [the first instalment on Tantra](#). We must for the sake of focussing on Tantra now concentrate on St. Augustine for the moment.



## Arendt who considered St. Augustine her “friend”.

Michael J. Scanlon in his essay, *Arendt's Augustine* (159-72) in *Shedding Tears Beyond Being*, shows St. Augustine as:

the “first modern man,” Augustine is certainly holding his own with the postmoderns. He features in the work of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Derrida, and quite amply in the writings of Hannah Arendt. In 1996 Arendt's 1929 dissertation was published in English translation as *Love and Saint Augustine*. (Scanlon 159)

# Abhinavagupta's Hermeneutics of the Absolute

## Anuttaraprakriyā

An Interpretation of his Parātrīśikā Vivaraṇa

Bettina Bäumer



It is in the line of St. Augustine's overarching love for a God who eludes the seeker that we should turn to the first modern man in Hinduism if such a categorisation is possible or even desirable. The impossibility of being the first modern man within Hinduism is not absurd because unlike the claims of Abrahamic theologians Hinduism is equally personal and embodied. Being embodied, the *dasein* is within the woof of history and in no way ahistorical. **Tantra, unlike, all other forms of Hinduism is historical and embodied as has been pointed out by Bettina Bäumer in her *Abhinavagupta's Hermeneutics of the Absolute Anuttaraprakriyā: An Interpretation of His Paratrisika Vivarana*. In page 13, footnote 25,**



in her *Introduction's* (1-41), Bäumer mentions Kṣemarāja's understanding of Tantra as being superior to all other systems of Indian philosophy including the *nastika* systems and even *sāṃkhya* and *yoga*. As an aside, one must praise Bäumer's comment on the same page about the need for hermeneutics aka historicity within Tantric studies: "We have to look at the context to understand the implications." *Within Tantric economies of comprehension or as Bäumer points out in her book, Tantric prakriyas (knowledge), sāṃkhya and yoga lead but to Tantra.* Tantra in no way looks down upon *sāṃkhya* and *yoga*, but these latter can be thought of as a 'Scala Claustralium' (though the Carthusian Guigo II used this terminology in a *very different context* which I have appropriated for the cause of Tantra) to Tantra.



Guigo II

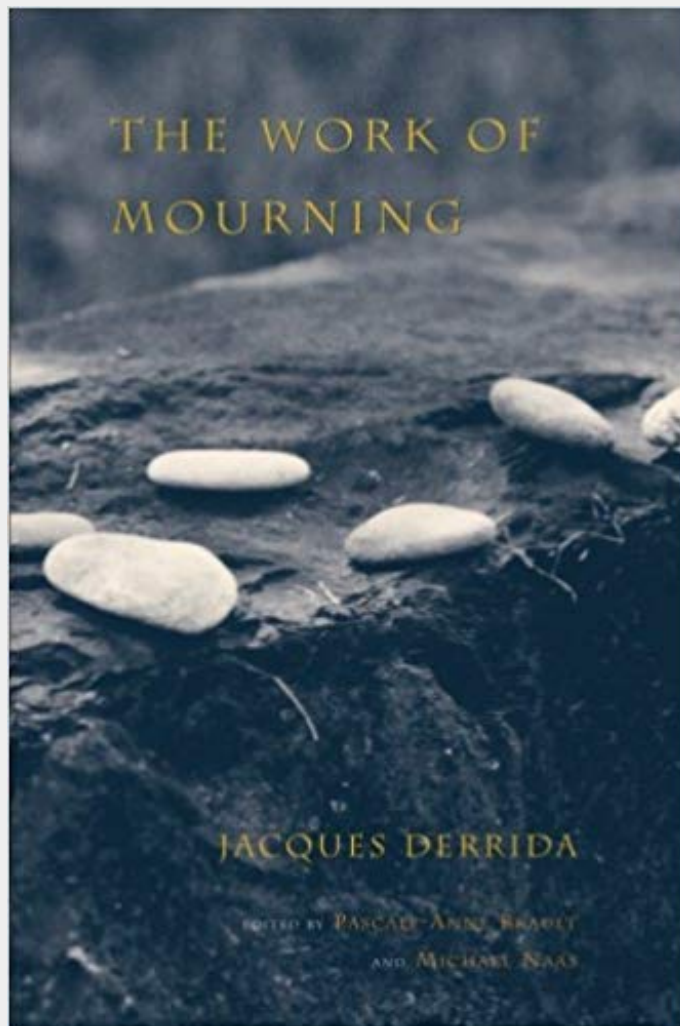
Now, for the use of the word 'embodied': it is not used here in the sense of a soul being 'within' the prison of the *sarx*, nor is it used in a materialist sense, but embodied means here that we exist because our bodies exist. **We do not have any known existence in the here and the now except through our bodies.** In this sense, my use of the word embodied is Judaeo-Christian and is not open to readings which pervert Tantra into an orgiastic and transgressive outlying religion. So, to return to St. Augustine, what constitutes in the minds of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Derrida and Arendt the *being* of a modern man? Put simply, Augustine was modern in that he could grow out of the *nonage* of the ancient philosophers and Patristics practised until he began thinking of the hard questions of life. For without Augustine there would be no Agamben or even, the rambling Zizek. It is for another day that we can assess the effects of Augustine on that dour man who was fixated against God, the indomitable Sigmund Freud without whom there would neither be Heidegger, nor Wittgenstein, nor Lyotard, nor Derrida and no Hannah Arendt. It is for another day that we reserve returning to Lacan and Agamben and Zizek and their (ir)relevance to Tantra. Not to mention the readings of Tantra made possible by both H  l  ne Cixous and Julia Kristeva who would both angrily decry their hallowed reputations being dragged to this apparently New Age fad. To return to a beginning which seems slippery already, our thinkers above must have seen in Augustine a certain trace to rebellion, to be anachronistically Vitruvian and to be able to turn inward to the extent that he, that is, St. Augustine, began the phenomenological turn in Western history. Now, what has he or anything Western to do with Tantra? For the lines, they are clearly drawn, and both sides agree; those who work within the tradition and those who are outside the tradition. (Which 'tradition', one would defer asking?) John Caputo in his *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* writes:

In radical hermeneutics [*prakriya* within Tantric poetics], we take the point of view of the outliers, the outsiders, the ones whose views have been neglected or excluded. Postmodern — radical — hermeneutics takes the view from the margins. Deconstructors are disposed to dissent, to point out alternative explanations, to bring up anomalies, to question received interpretations, to suspect unquestioned assumptions. They are not against

conversation, but they worry about those who cannot get into the conversation, either because they are excluded...Postmodern hermeneutics, in which we reserve the right to ask any question, is constitutionally anti-authoritarian and democratic...(Caputo 10-11)

In the case of Tantra so that it can be meaningful in a postmodern world where Nietzsche has convincingly displaced all morals qua categorical imperatives we need to open up the Tantric discourses so that they can be empirically/structurally scrutinised. It is within this postmodern history of ideas that we see the first modern, and indeed, the first postmodern thinker who goes by the (probably) assumed name of Sri Avinavagupta (Though Sri Utpaladeva comes close but not too close). There are great differences between Sri Avinavagupta and St. Augustine, but both of them loved God as men before them could not. At least, not in the sense that writers in *Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Confession of Prayer* speaks of. In as much as the thinking mind is one, in as much as the impulse to love is one, in such much as the idea of the holy is one, in as much as both Augustine and Abhinavagupta were interior men, they mirror each other and Indologists need to study the latter as Hinduism's first aesthete who practised Tantra as St. Augustine practised Christianity as the ultimate 'mysterium tremendum'. Both men were not mere scholars but men aflame with the love of the living God: YHWH or the 'Paratrisika'. For understanding the concept of Paratrisika see Bäumer page 3.





See Derrida's eulogy on [Sarah Kofman](#) in this book to understand the Derrida's unconscious wordplay between corpus and the Tantric corpse.

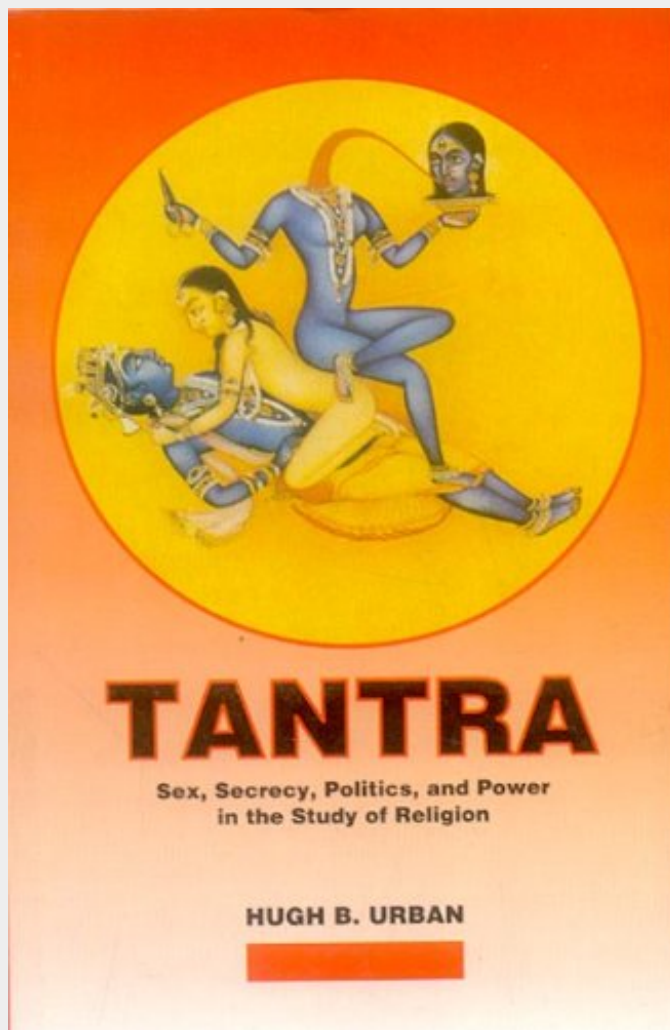
Sri Avinavagupta in his [corpus](#) (which is a dead thing in an ironic Tantric sense, brought to my attention by Derrida in his eulogy to Sarah Kofman in Pascal Anne Brault and Michael Naas edited *The Work of Mourning* by Jacques Derrida, p 169) repeatedly turns inwards and affirms the power of time, as Augustine did, and the power of the Self, as did Augustine, and

reaffirms in his *Tantraloka* and his exegesis on the expanded *Bhagavad Gita* of the need for a contemporary hermeneutics which can begin to interpret and historicise what has been written off by mainstream Hindus as too esoteric, making way for wolves in sheep's clothing.



**Sri Abhinavagupta**

Hugh B. Urban's works on Tantra are till date the most incisive studies which show the process of marginalising Tantra as if Tantra was not the main mode of Hinduism. Urban's works may not be palatable, but he speaks the truth when he points out the forces within Hinduism which try to make it non-Tantric. **This decentering is contrary to the 'Scala Claustalium' model of Hinduism proposed above, and therefore this decentering is erroneous.**



Urban's book is the most incisive study of the decentering of Tantra for a sanitised and Christianised version of Hinduism.

Tantra predates Avinavagupta but it is not outdated, and there is much at stake here. Tantra has been reduced to the unidimensionality of black magic associated with jouissance or, to put it bluntly, with forms of group-sex and useless simoniacal abracadabra. To conclude this post, it is proposed to study Avinavagupta *et al.* in the light of what we 'know' at the end of



2018, and since Tantra/Hinduism is a matriarchal religion (normatively so), we also need to study feminist thinkers of our times. The limitations of Harari is not the beginning of Tantra, the limitations of Donna Haraway are not the beginnings of Tantra. Tantra, if it has to be a way of life, has to engage with Harari and Haraway and be a praxis which can negotiate the singularity proposed by Ray Kurzweil.



**John D. Caputo**(to whom this post is dedicated)

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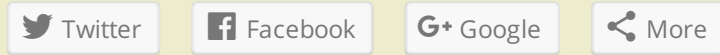
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For the need to appropriate Christian theology for Hinduism see [here](#).



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