

When “Sacred” Scriptures Promote Unholy Agendas

I think we have to reconsider our attitude toward the various treatises that have been given the status of “scripture” among aspirants for awakened consciousness.

Regardless of whether those treatises were written 500, 900, or 2500 years ago, they were written by humans (often highly exceptional humans, but humans nonetheless) who reflected the attitudes and beliefs of their cultures and also who would have been carrying out their own agendas, which in many cases involved maintaining near total power over their disciples. There are MANY revered “scriptures” that promote guru worship and place students in lifelong subservient positions in relation to their “enlightened” gurus.

I was researching some information about Satya Sai Baba (about whom there is substantial, credible evidence he was a serial pedophile) and found an Indian newspaper article that referred to him as “the billionaire godman Sai Baba.” A lightbulb went off in my brain and I thought, “Oh. My. God. This is a BUSINESS MODEL!”

It's a business model built on a tradition of guru worship facilitated by the canonization of writings from gurus, aspiring gurus and guru worshippers going back centuries and millennia.

Teaching a doctrine that claims “enlightenment” confers infallibility/spontaneous right action/total alignment with natural law, etc. creates a smoke screen behind which gurus and others claiming enlightenment often carry on in ways that may be unethical, abusive, predatory, etc. It's a long, unfortunate history that is increasingly coming to light now.

Here's an example of a mythology promulgated through a revered scripture. This is a mythology I find extremely problematic:

Seduction of the fisher girl Satyavati by the great rishi Parashara and birth of the great rishi Vyasa

The Devi Bhagavata Purana [a major, highly revered scripture] narrates that when Satyavati was ferrying the rishi Parashara across the river Yamuna, the sage wanted Satyavati to satisfy his lust and held her right hand. She tried to dissuade Parashara but finally gave in, realizing the desperation and persistence of the sage. Satyavati agreed and told Parashara to be patient until the boat reached the bank. On reaching the other side the sage grabbed her again, but she declared that her body stank and coitus should be pleasurable to them both. At these words, Matsyagandha [another name of Satyavati] was transformed by the powers of the sage into Yojanagandha (“she whose fragrance can be smelled from across a yojana [ancient measure of distance]”). She now smelled of musk, and so was called Kasturi-Gandha (“musk-fragrant”) and Parashara transformed into a fisherman and had intercourse with Satyavati only to return her chastity again. She asked Parashara to promise her that the coitus would be a secret and her virginity intact; the son born from their union would be as famous as the great sage, and her fragrance and youth would be eternal. Parashara granted her these wishes and was satiated by the beautiful Satyavati. After the act, the sage bathed in the river and left, never to meet her again. The Mahabharata [another major scripture] abridges the story, noting only two wishes for Satyavati: her virgo intacta and everlasting sweet fragrance.

~ Wikipedia

What kernel of truth underlies the story of Vyasa's conception, we can only speculate. Myths are circulated for various reasons, one of which is to advance the interests of those circulating the myths.

We have to ask three questions about this story and others like it:

1. What messaging does the mythology convey?

The story shows by example that gurus are entitled to demand sex on the basis of their special status as gurus. Women are presumably supposed to submit to gurus on the grounds that union with an “enlightened” guru will bring blessings (as the story demonstrates) and might result in the birth of a great sage, following the template of Parashara's imposing his will on the fisher girl, blessing her with boons, and her conceiving the great rishi Vyasa.

2. What will have been the effect of its promulgation?

We have seen sexual exploitation of disciples on a massive scale by guru after guru going back as far as anyone is able to investigate.

3. Who has been promoting it for centuries and millennia?

It is the gurus themselves, along with others in their priestly class, who are the keepers and tellers of these stories.

Is there any logical reason why it would be necessary to tell the story of Vyasa's conception through Parashara's forcing his will on an innocent girl? One glaring inconsistency in the story is that a sage with the powers Parashara was reputed to have could be so overcome by lust. (Yogis are supposed to be the masters of their senses.) Such a telling, including the seemingly glib characterization of Parashara's inability to manage his libido, would appear to condone predatory sexual behavior, setting a very low standard for yogis and gurus through the centuries during which the myth has been circulating.

In situations like this, there's a middle way, and that is what I am advocating. It is dangerous, in my opinion, to take such treatises to be infallible sacred truth, but they do contain a tremendous amount of insight and wisdom (which is why they are so revered in the first place). I would suggest we look at them critically but with respect (and even with reverence, but not unquestioningly) as rich sources of potentially profoundly helpful material to be explored and put to use in service to our ever-ongoing awakening but not to be taken wholesale, unexamined and at face value.

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My friend Ron Silverman asked AI software to create a short short story in the voice of Ian McKewan based on this essay. Here's what our AI helper came up with:

The Veil of Musk and Saffron

Maya had always been drawn to the mystique of sacred texts. The weight of them—thick with age and authority—felt satisfying in her hands. She imagined herself part of a lineage of seekers stretching back to the dawn of human history, each striving for the same ineffable truth. Her mornings were rituals of quiet devotion: the lighting of incense, the measured recitation of verses, her voice faltering on the unfamiliar syllables.

One evening, scrolling through her phone in the soporific haze of twilight, she stumbled upon an article that jarred her into wakefulness. It was about a guru, a man who styled himself as a living god, presiding over millions of devotees. The details were grotesque in their excess: the private jets, the gilded ashrams, the whispered allegations of abuse. But what struck her was the writer's assertion: This is a business model.

The words unfurled in her mind like smoke, clinging to everything she thought she knew. The article laid it out with clinical precision: the machinery of faith, the manufacture of mythology, the systematic commodification of human longing. Maya's initial reaction was defensive, even indignant. Surely, the purity of ancient wisdom wasn't implicated in this cynical framework. Surely, there was something

untouched, untainted.

Still, she couldn't stop reading.

The stories she had held so dear—the miraculous births, the divine seductions, the sagas of gurus transcending the petty concerns of mortals—took on a new, disquieting hue. The account of Satyavati and the sage Parashara stood out. She had read it before, had even admired its poetic strangeness. But now, she saw it for what it was: a tale of power cloaked in sanctity, a myth not for enlightenment but for control. The sage's lust, the girl's submission, the veneer of divine blessings—it all felt so contrived, so painfully obvious once the illusion cracked.

That night, Maya barely slept. The shadow of her bookshelves loomed across the room, their spines glinting faintly in the half-light. She had loved those books, trusted them, treated them as sacred artifacts. Now, they felt like relics of her naivety.

By dawn, her decision was made. She packed the books into a crate, her movements brisk and resolute, and drove them to the donation center. As she hefted the box into the bin, she caught herself holding her breath, as if anticipating some terrible consequence. But nothing happened. No lightning struck. No divine hand stayed her arm.

Driving home, she felt hollowed out but oddly free. The sky hung low and gray, a flat expanse of indifference. For years, she had thought of enlightenment as a kind of arrival, a final crossing into certainty. Now, she understood it as something more troubling, and perhaps more honest: an unending process of questioning, a perpetual confrontation with ambiguity.

And this, she thought, was something no guru could sell her, and no scripture could give. It had to be wrested from the world with her own hands, her own mind. Anything less was just another story.

NOTE: I added the essay's last paragraph after it had already been made into a story. We asked the AI software again and it created a new protagonist named "Henry." Here's the revised ending ...

He reached for the tea. It had gone cold, of course, but he drank it anyway, his mind circling back to the paradox of it all. For within those same texts—the myths, the manipulations—lay genuine wisdom, moments of startling clarity about the human condition. Samsara and nirvana, karma and dharma—concepts that resonated deeply, that hinted at something real and profound.

Henry sighed. Perhaps the solution wasn't rejection but reclamation. To sift through the sands of tradition, to find the gold without bowing to the gilded throne. To read critically, to question, to reimagine.

He closed his laptop and stared out the rain-speckled window. The world outside looked the same, yet something about it seemed different somehow, as if a veil had lifted ever so slightly. For better or worse, he thought, he'd seen behind it now. The question was, what would he do with the sight?

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