Religion in the Subjunctive:
Vaiṣṇava Narrative, Sufi Counter-Narrative in Early Modern Bengal
by Tony K Stewart

In sixteenth century Bengal, the Vaiṣṇava community began to promote their belief that the charismatic god-man Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486-1533) was an *avatāra* or ‘descent’ of the god Kṛṣṇa. Theologians articulated different versions of these descents, but most popular was the purānic conception of the *yugāvatāra* or ‘descent for the Kali Age,’ the age of degradation, the function of which was to set right the moral order of the world. In an age increasingly dominated by foreigners—mainly Muslims—a novel approach was required, yet Caitanya seemed not to want much truck with the corrective activity, and soon his followers found that policing function too limiting. He was the godhead compleat, *svayam bhagavān*, and soon more than that: the divine androgyne, Kṛṣṇa and his lover Rādhā fused into a single body. His rôle as *yugāvatāra* languished, leaving the field open for others. Fittingly, Muslims moved center stage. We will examine three alternative takes on the notion of *avatāra*, where authors attempt to reconcile the Islamic presence in the purānic conception of divine intervention in a degraded age. One text is Hindu, one Muslim, and the other a combining form, each fitting Muhammad, the Prophets, and Sufi *pirs* and *bībīs* into the dominant incarnational model of *yugāvatāra*. The results document an exercise of the *imaginaire*, test-driving alternate theologies in what we might style the theological subjunctive.

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