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**Religious Responses to Suffering in Sikhism, Lakota Traditions, and Islam**

Sikhism, Lakota traditions, and Islam are all religions that offer explanations and responses to suffering. While they are each entirely separate traditions, their explanations of and responses to suffering are simultaneously similar and yet distinct. Comparing and contrasting these religions sheds light on each religion individually and on the function of religion overall. Notably, within Sikhism, Lakota traditions, and Islam suffering and responses to it can serve to bring practitioners closer to that which is considered most ultimate. Rather than deeming all suffering as negative or unwanted, these religious traditions understand certain instances of suffering as providing opportunities to strengthen spirituality and consequently respond accordingly.

Before analyzing responses to suffering, each religion’s explanations for the purposes of suffering must be accounted for. In Sikhism, suffering is understood as having multiple sources. Whereas Islam understands all suffering to come from Allah as the singular omnipotent god, Sikhism claims that suffering comes both from the deity, *Akal Purakh*, and from the cosmic order that is *karam*. Entirely different from Islam and Sikhism, Lakota traditions views suffering to originate merely from either infliction from others or from the self. Similar to Sikhism, however, the Lakota understand suffering to come as a result of an imbalance in a cosmic order. Suffering in Sikhism is explained as due to human self-centeredness, or *dukkh*. *Karma samsara* is the retributive cycle through which Sikhs suffer. In this way, both Sikhs and practitioners of Lakota traditions attempt to be relieved of suffering by seeking balance. On the other hand, Muslims explain suffering as an instrument of Allah’s will that occurs either as punishment or a test. Therefore, when suffering happens as a punishment, it is similar in both Islam and in Sikhism. When it occurs as a test, however, it is unique to Islam and Muslims’ understanding of human submission to Allah. While Islam, Sikhism and Lakota traditions all attribute suffering to have different causes and explanations, there are similar themes that can be drawn between their conclusions about it.

Practitioners of Islam, Sikhism, and Lakota traditions have all responded to suffering in manners that align with the specific principles and justifications of their religions. The Ghost Dance, the feminist re-interpretation of the Khalsa, and the Algerian jihad against the French are all religious responses to suffering that sought to eliminate oppression that was both physical and spiritual. In relation to the religious oppression experienced, the goal of the responses of these religious traditions was to obtain greater spiritual awareness. The Native American Ghost Dance was a spiritual response to the prolonged and systematic oppression and violence committed against the Lakota by white Americans. The Lakota’s connection to the land was a sacred connection that was unlike the Western concept of land as property. One Native American expressed the Lakota understanding of the land saying: “Fathers, both you and the English are white; the land belongs to neither the one nor the other of you, but the Great Being above allotted it to be a dwelling place for us; so, fathers, I desire you to withdraw” (Mooney, 662). The Lakota’s spiritual connection with the land was profoundly disrupted by the presence of the whites The oppression Nikky Singh experienced as a woman originated within Sikhism in its increasingly patriarchal nature over time, which “[did] not match the gurus’ teachings (Singh, 57). The masculine interpretations of the 5K’s along with the male dominant perspective of the Khalsa, Nikky believed, were damaging to both sexes (Singh, 103). Abd el-Kader and his Mulsim followers entered into jihad against France because of its oppressive Christian rule over Algeria that stood in opposition to the commands of the Koran for Muslim political rule. Beyond politics, Abd el-Kader responded in hopes of finding greater religious freedom and said: “We have, therefore, assumed this heavy responsibility, hoping it may be the means for united the Muslim community and of preventing dissensions among them and of affording general security to all the inhabitants of the land, of putting an end to lawlessness, and of driving back the enemy who has invaded our country in order to subjugate us” (Kiser, 51). The cases of suffering experienced by Lakota, Sikhs, and Muslims were unique and required unique responses. Yet, in the distinctiveness of responses, the theme of spiritual strengthening emerged as a similarity.

The oppression faced by both the Lakota people and Muslims was brought on by external sources, whereas Nikky Singh’s religious suffering came from within Sikhism itself. All three of the responses to the examples of suffering listed sought to bring practitioners back to traditional ways of spirituality. The Lakota Ghost Dance was an act of defiance against forced assimilation to Christianity and European culture. Those participating in the Ghost Dance sang and danced for hours and even days on end in hopes of connecting with the spiritual world. The Lakota did so because they believed their heightened spirituality would bring an end to white rule and restore balance to their world. Interpretations of the Khalsa within Sikhism have been overwhelmingly patriarchal, so much so that female Sikhs have become increasingly devalued over time. Nikky Singh’s re-memorization of the underlying feminist aspects of the Khalsa was a personal attempt to connect spiritually with her guru in a meaningful way as a woman. Abd el-Kader and his followers underwent oppression through the invasion of the Christian French in Muslim Algeria and, in response, decided to enter into jihad with the French in an attempt to eradicate the imposing Christian domination. The purpose of doing so was ultimately to reestablish Muslim rule in Algeria, which would allow Muslims freedom to fully follow Allah and his will. Each of these responses, while clearly were reactions to overwhelming physical conditions, were also spiritual in nature. In addition to experiencing tangible oppression, female Sikhs, Native Americans, and Muslims were inhibited from fully expressing and practicing their religions and reacted with attempts to increase spiritual growth. While gaining freedom from tangible types of oppression was part of the responses of Sikhs, the Lakota, and Muslims in these instances, ultimately it was the pursuit of strengthened spirituality that characterized their responses.

The goals of the religious responses to suffering for the Lakota people, Muslims, and Sikhs were multiplicative, yet all were attempts to achieve some form of greater spirituality. Different understandings of the divine, as well as causes of and explanations for suffering influenced the ways in which these religious practitioners reacted to suffering in their lives. The Lakota response was exceedingly physical in nature, yet signified profound spiritual ambition. The Islamic response to suffering in Algeria was also physical, but was militarized against the threat of French political and religious rule. The bodily aspect of the Muslim response, unlike the Lakota response, was less about personal religious connection and more about obedience to Allah’s will and commands. Conversely, Nikky Singh’s re-memorization of the Sikh Khalsa was not physical in any sense, but was rather a symbolic reworking of the role of women in Sikhism in general and of femininity within the establishment of the Khalsa specifically. These examples demonstrate that responses to suffering can and will look different across religious traditions, but can still share similar objectives in attempts to the intensification of religion experiences. The Ghost Dance, the reinterpretation of the Khalsa, and the jihad against France in Algeria all exemplify the ability of religion to bring about empowerment that is not only physical, but also spiritual on personal and collective levels. Making efforts to eliminate suffering in these instances did just that and also allowed practitioners come to a better understanding of that which is most ultimate.

Responses to suffering that strengthen practitioners’ spirituality and bring them closer to the divine do not serve as blanket responses to all types of suffering. However, using suffering as an opportunity to grow one’s faith or achieve greater wholeness is still meaningful because it re-interprets suffering as ultimately positive and demonstrates the power of religion to explain unwanted or unfortunate circumstances in human lives. This is a process called legitimation “that serves to explain and justify the social order” (Berger, 29). A variety of institutions in society function as instruments for legitimation; with religion being one of the most powerful tools for doing so because of the way it transcends legitimations as sacred (Berger, 32). Because of religion’s ability to explain and give meaning to suffering, people who are religious may embrace suffering rather than running from it, because it presents them with an opportunity to enhance their spirituality. In this way, religion can be described as masochistic because explanations of suffering “provides the means by which the individual’s suffering and even death can be radically transcended, to the point where the individual not only finds these experiences bearable but even welcomes them” (Berger, 56). Suffering is universal to the human experience, and thus one of religion’s chief functions can be found in how it legitimates suffering. Marginal situations threaten the social order, and religion addresses this threat by offering up reasons for suffering. Ultimately, religious responses to suffering can explain a lot about individual religions, people, circumstances, and the nature of religion as it assigns meaning to the otherwise inexplicable reality of suffering as a human condition.