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Religion 121

12/12/12

Suffering in Sikhism, Lakota and Islam

According to John Bowker, “suffering is a part of what it means to be alive” and despite the differences between Sikhism, Lakota and Islam, the people of these religions have all faced adversity (101). Because religion is an integral part of their lives, suffering that threatens their religion or way of life is extremely alarming and must be addressed. Instead of weakening their faith, the people of Sikhism, Lakota and Islam were able to reaffirm and reconnect to their religion, which helped them to gain a renewed sense of strength and purpose and the ability to take action against their oppressors. While people may not be able to stop the existence of suffering, their faith helps them to deal with whatever comes their way.

Sikhism has several different explanations for the existence of suffering. The term “dukkh” is used to “convey a sense of spiritual, mental and physical suffering” in Sikhism and is encompasses “pain, grief, sorrow, [and] suffering” (Singh 112). One explanation for the existence of suffering in a Sikh’s life is related to the idea of haumai, “the sense of self-centeredness” (Singh 114). This self-centeredness leads to indulgences in worldly pleasures and a separation from the divine, leaving them to continue in the cycle of rebirth (sansar) where they continue to encounter suffering (Singh 114). Another viewpoint on the existence of suffering is the idea of karam-sansar. In Sikhism, “karam is subject to the higher principle of the ‘divine order’ (Hukam)…[so] even the suffering comes from the divine source” (Singh 116).

During the mid to late seventeenth century during the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur, tensions between the tyrannical and oppressive Mughals and the Sikhs of India became increasingly hostile (McLeod 25). Feeling a direct threat on their freedom to practice Sikhism, Guru Tegh Bahadur confronted Mughal power on behalf of the Sikhs, and when “threatened with forcible conversion to Islam...he allowed himself to be arrested and executed in order that Mughal tyranny might stand revealed and that brave men might rise against it” (McLeod 26). Following the brave actions of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh knew that radical changes had to be made within Sikhism. The execution of the ninth guru demonstrated that “the Mughal rule spelt oppression and injustice”, there was “the need to protect time-honoured conventions”, and there existed an “ultimate need for force as a means of combating extreme injustice” (McLeod 26).

As a response to Mughal oppression and suffering of the Sikhs in India, the Khalsa was established by Guru Gobind Singh. The establishment of the Khalsa was a necessary means to restore faith and strength the Sikh people. Guru Gobind Singh hoped to accomplish this by addressing the problems that faced Sikhs. First, after learning of the cowardice of Sikhs following the execution of the ninth guru, Guru Gobind Singh wanted to make sure that Sikhs would no longer be able to hide their faith; as a result, he established the five Ks making Sikhs “instantly recognizable” (McLeod 27). Another way that the Khalsa helped Sikhs to take control of their suffering was by increasing their ability to fight back. “Guru Gobind Singh had realized that his Sikhs were mere sparrows, weak and timorous creates who could never be trusted to face armed injustice without taking instant flight” (McLeod 27). In order to brig power to the Sikhs they needed to put “steel in their hands and steel in the soul of Panth”; “all weakness would be beaten out of them and each, having taken the baptism of the sword, would thereafter be firmly attached to the sword” (McLeod 27). Guru Gobind Singh sought to further establish the Sikhs as a large community of followers, placing “themselves under his own direct supervision” as members of his Khalsa (McLeod 27).

In addition to these changes, on Baisakhi Day 1699 Guru Gobind Singh gave a sermon describing the Rahit, which is defined as the “Khalsa way of life…the system of belief and distinctive behavior which all who accept Khalsa initiation are expected to observe” (McLeod 30). The Rahit re-emphasized the importance and practices of Sikh faith. The establishment of the Khalsa and the Rahit as a response to the suffering of the Sikhs under the Muslim Mughals helped to bring about a renewed sense of community and commitment to faith amongst the Sikh people.

In the Lakota tradition, suffering most often occurs due to a disconnect between its people and their land. Lakota people see the land they live on as “a gift from the sacred powers”, and “understand themselves to be a part of the landscape with obligations to the land” (Pesantubbee 86). As Pesantubbee states, “If the Lakota alienate themselves from the land and scared powers, they lose an integral part of what makes them distinctly Lakota” (86). This strong relationship between the Lakota people and the land and nature which surrounds them is crucial in understanding the suffering that they went through in the nineteenth century and why they desperately sought ways to heal their pain.

Much like the Sikhs, in the nineteenth century the Lakota were faced with major threats to their religion and way of life that led to an overall loss of hope and resilience amongst the people. There were several natural causes for their distress including crop failure, loss of buffalo, and disease, but the actions of the government and the white settlers brought on even more suffering to the Lakota (Mooney 829-831). Broken treaties and promises, the reduction of rations, rapid advances in “civilization” and seizure of land made the Lakota experience an overwhelming threat to their land and way of life, which brought them to their breaking point (Mooney 829-831).

Instead of giving in to their hardships, as Guru Gobind Singh inspired the Sikhs to do, the Lakota fought back with a renewed commitment to their faith. Amongst their suffering, a man named Wovoka had an encounter with God, who offered a solution for Native Americans suffering (Mooney 771). Wovoka was told how the Lakota people should behave and was given a dance to bring back to his people, with instructions on how and when to perform it (Mooney 772). God told Wovoka that if the people followed his instructions and performed this “Ghost Dance” in the intervals that he described, that they would be rewarded: “a major catastrophe would annihilate all whites in the spring of 1891…[and] at the same time, the spirits of deceased Lakota relatives and herds of buffalo and horses would return to populate the earth” allowing the Lakota “to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease and misery” (Pesantubbee 77; Mooney 777). People who visited Wovoka brought this message and the Ghost Dance back to the Lakota, and upon hearing the solution for all of their suffering, the Lakota committed themselves to Wovoka’s words, and performance of the Ghost Dance became widespread.

The dance brought a sense of community solidarity to the Lakota people as hundreds danced together in large circle, “[joining] hands and [performing] a series of side steps of shuffling movements while changing five songs that were given to Wovoka in a visionary state”; they performed the dance for five days, every three months (Carroll and Stoffle 338). The dance seemed to be the solution to all of their problems. Not only would the natural causes of their suffering be resolved, but the whites, who further exacerbated their troubles, would be gone for good leaving the Lakota to return to their land and their true way of life. The Lakota believed that the Ghost Dance was the solution that they were looking for to fix all of their problems, and they were willing to trust Wovoka’s vision and partake in the Ghost Dance to bring a back a sense of community, happiness and their way of life.

Islamic explanations of suffering are all centered on the idea of Allah’s omnipotence (Bowker 101). Allah’s omnipotence is emphasized in many passages throughout the Koran, where statements such as “truly, God has power over every single thing” are made frequently to emphasize that Allah has control over all aspects of life (Bowker 102). Bowker stresses the important Islamic idea that “suffering occurs only within creation, which is *God’s* creation” and is under his complete control (Bowker 103). Because of Allah’s omnipotence, it follows that all suffering comes from him and for this reason “suffering must in some sense be purposeful” (Bowker 103, 105). Muslims understand suffering as instrumental and believe that it occurs for two different reasons (Bowker 106). The first explanation for suffering is that it is “a punishment for sin” and passages in the Koran are used to support this explanation like “If some good befalls them, they say, ‘This is from God’, but if evil strikes them, they say, ‘This is from you.’ Say: Everything is from God” (Bowker 106). The other reason that Muslims believe that suffering exists is that it acts as a “trial or test” (Bowker 109). Because of the existence of innocent suffering, it is concluded that many Muslims go through suffering as a test from God. This trial has two purposes both to “create a faithful disposition and it also helps to discriminate the sincere from the insincere” (Bowker 111).

Like the people of Sikhism and Lakota traditions, Muslims also encountered threats to their faith that prompted them to take action. Following tensions between the Ottoman Turks and the French, the French decided that as a means of punishment, they would invade Algeria and gain power over the posts on its coast (Kiser 35). Despite the fact that the French promised to respect the existing religions in Algeria, as often happens with expansionism, the French began to ignore the rights of the citizens and instead focused on Algeria as an opportunity to “establish an effective mule and chance her influence in the Mediterranean and Europe” (Kiser 58).

After realizing the threat that the French posed to both Algeria and its many Muslim citizens, Abd el-Kader and others refused to be taken under French control and have Christianity imposed on their land and culture. This unwelcome source of suffering prompted action: as described in the Koran, “war against evil is necessary but war in general should be defensive only” (Bowker 117). Abd el-Kader’s knowledge of his faith allowed him to understand that despite this struggle as a creation of God, the French were making it necessary for the Muslims to defend themselves; this was a time for action, not acceptance and passivity. As Kiser describes in the glossary, jihad is defined as “struggle or striving in the cause of God; any moral or spiritual effort either against one’s lower instincts or in the case of justice (xi). As Abd el-Kader saw it, jihad was the response that needed to be taken against the French in order to restore Muslim society. In order to emphasize the religious nature of their cause and unite them under a single goal, Abd el-Kader understood the importance of getting his troops to “think of themselves as part of a greater Muslim community, as a nation of Muslims” (Kiser 54). As Kiser describes, for Abd el-Kader, “the Koran was his constitution. The deeds and saying of the Prophet were his case law. Religion was the common denominator of unity. The sword was his enforcer” (Kiser 54). Abd el-Kader’s role as the leader of the jihad was completely rooted in his faith, as were the Sikh and Lakota responses to suffering. His reasoning and actions in war were all connected back to his Islamic beliefs and he was taking to the sword to defend the lives and faith of all Muslims.

The Sikh struggle against the Mughals, the Lakota against white expansionists and the Islamic resistance to Christian occupation are all specific instances of times when religious groups felt the need to take control of their suffering. Despite differences in their explanations for suffering, when facing threats to their religious freedom and way of life, all three religions understood the necessity of taking action to relieve their suffering. In taking action in response to their suffering, each religion was able to restore a sense of community, perseverance and an increased commitment to their religion. Even if they were not able to completely resolve their suffering through their actions, their ability to stand up for their faith brought them each a renewed pride and strengthened relationship with their religion.

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