Repairing the Canopy: A Progressive Response to Suffering

Over the course of the past semester, our Comparative Religion class discussed three religions (Sikhism, Lakota Tradition, and Islam), all in relationship to the semester’s overarching theme of religious responses to suffering. The aforementioned religions / traditions discussed in the course varied greatly in terms of their practice, history, and perceptions of punishment, suffering, retribution, and reconciliation. However, all three traditions have, at some point in their development or history, engaged in acts of contestation, thereafter identified, by both practitioners and non-practitioners, as potentially violent responses to suffering. While all three traditions reflect their own explanations of suffering, many of which are due to divine omnipotence or cosmic/natural order and therefore, do not necessitate a violent or even external response, historically, some instances of communal suffering have instigated more seemingly violent responses than others. Upon closer analysis, these instances of communal suffering, which have resulted in violent response, while diverse in their situational details, share a commonality— the initial desecration of the sacred. Looking particularly at the birth of the Sikh Khalsa, the Ghost Dance of the Lakota, and the evolution of lesser jihad within the Islamic tradition, evidence of desecration and subsequent violence emerges. And, while such events reflect an attempt to correct a wrong through contestation, they also reveal the existence of a transformative process – a progression from an act of desecration, to a response of contestation, to the eventual attempted reclamation of the sacred, either through re-memorization of contestation and/or the adaptation of practice.

 In order to discuss the degree to which all three religions / traditions reflect a progression from acts of desecration to acts of reclamation, it first seems necessary to distinguish between those instances of suffering that illicit violence / contestation from those that do not. Within Sikh traditions, the assassination of the 9th guru led the 10th guru to establish the Khalsa. The Khalsa (“pure”) order, which supersedes the caste system, involves the adoption of the five K’s (*Kesh* or uncut hair, covered with a turban; *Kanga* or wooden comb; *Kara* or steel bracelet; *Kachhera* or cotton underwear; *Kirpan* or a small sword) and an initiation ceremony in which inductees drink the *Amrit* (sugar and water stirred with a double-edged sword). Following the guru’s assassination, the establishment of the Khalsa, as W.H. McLeod notes, served to transform Sikhs who were “mere sparrows, weak and timorous creatures who could never be trusted,” (27) into “splendid warriors.” The Khalsa emerged as a way to combat the violence imposed by the Mughals against the Sikhs, “all weakness would be beaten out of [the Sikhs] and each, having taken the baptism of the sword, would thereafter be firmly attached to the sword,” (27). A similar impetus for active response[[1]](#footnote-1) can be seen within the practice and development of the 19th century Lakota Ghost Dance, a ritual dance meant to reconnect Lakota people to ancestral spirits and bring about a time when “the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness,” (Mooney 777). While, at the most basic level, the Ghost Dance sought to reunite the Lakota people with the land and the traditional lifestyle (both of which had been lost with the invasion of white settlers and the confiscation of Native American lands by the U.S. government), the intended outcome suggests an undertone of retribution and perhaps even, indirect violence— the white population would be obliterated, either “left behind with the other things of earth that have served their temporary purpose, or else will cease entirely to exist,” (777). And, within Islamic traditions, the emergence of lesser jihad, an outward manifestation of what was originally an internal struggle to purify the soul, occurred in direct response to Byzantine aggression during the reign of the Umayyad dynasty. Gradually, the concept of jihad was extended to include both the internal and external struggle to purify the soul as well as the surrounding world, “out of the practical interest of the Islamic state … Jihad, then, became a convenient tool for dividing the world neatly into two camps: those under the control of the Islamic state and those not,” (Heck 106). Such examples suggest that acts of oppression and persecution are inherently conducive to contestation and active response.

However, what seems most interesting regarding the three different responses to suffering, in terms of comparison, is the degree to which all three responses seem direct results of actions which threatened to (or succeeded in) desecrating the sacred— for the Sikhs, this act of desecration was the assassination of the 9th guru; for the Lakota people, the loss of the sacred lands and inability to practice sacred rituals; for the Muslim people, the oppression at the hands of Byzantine aggressors and, in the case of 19th century jihad, the Christian French. Peter Berger describes the sacred as that which “sticks out” from everyday life “as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous … an immensely powerful reality,” which both “transcends and includes man” (26). By contrast, the profane emerges in contrast to the sacred as the “absence of sacred status,” (26). For Berger, the separation of elements into the sacred and the profane exists as a fundamental characteristic of any religious enterprise. Within the aforementioned traditions, the presence of the sacred is evident— for Sikhism, the guru exists as a “spiritual ‘preceptor,’ either a person or the divine inner voice,” (P. Singh 136); for the Lakota people, the Black Hills, the land from which they were driven out by the U.S. government, are considered sacred; and for practitioners of Islam, the inability to practice their religion when under the rule of Christian French also resulted in the removal of the sacred. All the aforementioned sacred elements of the respective religions / traditions were, in some manner, removed from a place of sanctity by outside, non-practitioners. The sacred was brought to the level of the profane, an act which seems to demand a response of contestation.

 For religious practitioners, the greatest threat to lifestyle is the loss of the sacred elements which give plausibility / legitimacy to their religious societies or institutions. If left uncontested, the acceptance of the aforementioned desecrations would destroy / remove fundamental structures which serve to support the sacred nature of the respective religious societies, for “existing in a particular religious world implies existing in the particular social context within which that world can retain its plausibility. Where nomos of individual life is more or less co-extensive with that religious world, separation from the latter implies the threat of anomy,” (Berger 49). And while the violation of the sacred results in the profane, the worse fate is the acceptance and lack of contestation in response to this violation. If no act of contestation occurs, the act of desecration is left unaddressed and the existence of both the sacred and profane as plausible distinctions is brought to question. In short, the lack of response becomes a form of acceptance.

Within all of the traditions previously mentioned, some form of violence was enacted on their conception of the sacred and the act was met with contestation but, in the years following such responses, practitioners of the respective religions have sought to restore the sacred lifestyle / tradition in light of the act of contestation. These instances of reclamation of the sacred all have aspects of reconciliation and, in some cases, redemption. Moreover, their existence seems to suggest that the progression from desecration to contestation does not end with the oppressed enacting violence; rather, the final and inevitable stage requires an inward transformation. For Sikh traditions, N. Singh’s re-memorization of the birth of the Khalsa signifies a very personal reconciliation with the more violent perceptions of her religious tradition. N. Singh writes,

“what an aberration of and deviation from Guru Gobind Singh’s egalitarian vision of society embodied in the Khalsa … the message of the Sikh gurus was precisely to strengthen us, men and women, Brahmin and Shudra, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim … Sikhs will recover their true pride and authenticity not in tough and macho acts and words, but in the rejected and repressed female side of the body and words of the guru,” (xxii).

N. Singh’s attempt to re-memorize the birth of the Khalsa and reclaim both the original “egalitarian vision” and the “true pride and authenticity” of Sikh practitioners proceeds from what she has perceived as the prevailing “tough and macho” understanding of the function of the Khalsa. This religious group, which emerged as a direct response to the assassination of the 9th guru, must, in more modern times, be re-imagined as a way of reclaiming the sacred message of unification and empowerment. Similarly, in Lakota traditions, the annual Big Foot Memorial Ride, a ritual which reenacts the passage of Chief Big Foot's band of Minneconjou Lakota from Standing Rock Reservation to Wounded Knee, serves as both a way of remembering and responding to the massacre at Wounded Knee. Duane Kuntz, a regular participant of the ride, states that the journey is, “about never forgetting what happened, and it’s also about healing … It was a terrible thing and [Lakota people] were hunted down, but the Lakota are still here,” (Bunk). While, this form of reenactment involves self-imposed suffering, as the participants journey for many days through the cold, often with little food, the ride also serves redemptive purposes, allowing for a healing process for the Lakota people— through the reenactment, the massacre at Wounded Knee is transformed into a sacred act of remembrance and healing as well as a celebration that “the Lakota are still here.” The reclamation of the sacred takes a different form within Islamic tradition, where the separation of greater and lesser jihad has resulted in a negative perception of jihad in the western world. Looking to the life of Abd el-Kader, there appears to be an attempt to negotiate the two different notions of jihad and, from these negotiations, form an alternative response to oppression and persecution. The Amir began his involvement with lesser jihad as a way of liberating the Muslim people from the control of the Christian French, “I will recognize no other law than the Koran. There is no liberty except through defending the faith. Paradise is found in the shadow of the sword,” (Kiser 50). However, his views were gradually transformed to reflect more humanitarian concerns resulting from a negotiation of the greater and lesser jihad. In the final years of his life, he harbored persecuted Christians and publicly chastised the actions of those who persecuted Christians, stating, “What makes you think you have the right to go around killing innocent people … If acting against God’s law doesn’t frighten you, then think about the punishment you will receive from men,” (Kiser 298-299). His actions reflect a desire to reclaim the sanctity of jihad, particularly in light of the violent actions associated with jihad in the 19th century. Through this process of negotiation (merging the inward struggle for purity with the outward struggle to prevent the deaths of the harbored Christians), he sought to restore the world view of jihad and reclaim the sacred.

 While each of the aforementioned religions / traditions reacted to oppression and persecution with acts of violence and/or contestation, they also sought to restore that which had been damaged, either through the actions of practitioners or the actions of oppressors. The presence of this reoccurring progression offers evidence of the process through which religions and traditions attempt to adapt or restore themselves in response to suffering.

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1. Rather than contestation, here, the term “active response” seems more appropriate. For, above all, the Ghost Dance doctrine promoted “peace with whites and obedience to authority until the day of deliverance shall come. Above all, [the doctrine forbids] war,” (Mooney 783). This said, the Ghost Dance still seems pertinent to the present discussion as the act represented a physical / outer, non-negotiative response which attempted to both terminate and repair the influence of white populations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)