**Sikhism and Suffering:**

**Understanding and Healing after the Milwaukee Tragedy**

**by**

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*It is an honor to be a part of Drake University’s Comparison Project. I am profoundly grateful to Professor Tim Knepper for his vision in including Sikhism, and for his invitation and gracious hospitality. The questions and comments from his students in class this afternoon were most meaningful, for they really made me think about my work on the Birth of the Khalsa in new and different ways. I also had the pleasure of meeting with the Des Moines Sikh community, and thank Mr. and Mrs. Jagtar Singh for their heart-warming welcome. And I thank you all for being here this evening.*

As Wade M. Page rampaged through the sacred space of the Sikhs in a Milwaukee suburb with his gun what did he see? His ears so attuned to musical rhythms, what did they hear? Sikh worship centers on reciting, singing, and hearing scriptural melodies praising the Divine, the common denominator across religions. As on a typical Sunday, men, women, and children dressed in their finery were gathering to share their joy or sorrow, find comfort, solicit answers, or just be together at the Gurdwara — literally a door (*dwara*) towards enlightenment (*guru*). With their heads covered in reverence, they would be seated on the floor – rich and poor, all equal in the presence of their Sovereign, their Sacred Book (called the Guru Granth). Draped in silks and brocades, this holy book is the core of their religious and moral values; the focus of all their ceremonies and celebrations. Its reading would conclude with the singing of the hymn of bliss (*anand*) and the partaking of the warm sweet sacrament (*karaprashad*). Soon the congregation would be eating *langar* – a meal cooked and shared with one another irrespective of caste, class, race, religion, or gender.

But in an instant all this came to an end. Shots were heard, which the unsuspecting devotees thought was a child’s prank. It was in fact a fellow human being, a neighbor, shooting bullets at the congregation. Blinded by racism against the “mud colored” and numbed by “hatecore” music, this avowed white supremacist could neither see the richness in diversity nor hear the universal melodies.

Throughout the five and a half centuries of their history, the Sikhs (about 25 million worldwide) have experienced grave tragedies. They have been victims of hate crimes and mistaken identity on US soil since way back in the late nineteenth century when they first arrived on the West Coast to work on the railroad, lumber industries, and farms. In 1907 there were racist riots against these early immigrants in Washington, California, and Alaska. Under anti-Asian laws, they could not own land or marry white people. Many of the Sikh bachelors married Mexican women because of their similar complexions and cultural habits, and thus created a bi-ethnic community erroneously termed "Mexican-Hindus" (also "Mexidus"), whose descendants today are some of the most successful producers of walnuts, peaches, and plums. Those who wore the turbans as a symbol of their religion were called “ragheads.” (Actually as recent as 2010, Senator Jake Knotts made a remark against Nikki Haley (now Governor of South Carolina) daughter of Sikh migrants: "We've already got a raghead in the White House, we don't need another raghead in the governor's mansion.")

When the immigration rules were relaxed under President Kennedy, a wave of Sikh physicians and engineers came to the USA. Soon there was the Iran hostage crisis and many turban-wearing Sikhs were mistaken as followers of Khomeini and came under racial attacks. Again, after 9/11 they were mistaken as followers of Osama bin Laden. In its immediate aftermath, a Sikh owner of a gas-station in Phoenix, Mr. Balbinder Singh Sodhi, was shot to death. Though very few Muslims in America don the turban, most Sikhs wear it as an essential item of their faith. There are at least half a million Sikhs in the US, they have hundreds of gurdwaras on the continent, and they are visible in all spheres of life, including the US army. Yet so little is known about them that they frequently end up as victims of “mistaken identity.”

The love inspired by their sacred lyrics helps Sikhs convert any loss into triumph. After the Milwaukee tragedy there is an awakening and a renewed commitment amongst the Sikhs. Men and women are initiating numerous projects in the areas of advocacy, education, and media relations. I have young Sikhs call me to get guidance in publishing articles on Sikhism. They are sacrificing lucrative jobs for raising awareness about their heritage. The process of healing for the Sikhs has been to empower themselves and their community. During adversities, Sikh homes, places of worship, and hearts resound with the verse, “*Tera bhana meetha lagai* – May your divine will taste sweet.” Rather than pick up a gun and ammunition, they sit peacefully in the presence of their holy book to absorb its language love; thus they regain strength and wisdom to experience the beauty and wonder in the Creator’s variegated multiverse.

The Sikh perspective on suffering is indeed complex. In order to grasp it, we could use the framework given by Buddha. The fundamental metaphysical Buddhist and Sikh premise is of course extremely different: for the founder of Buddhism everything is empty; for the founder of Sikhism (Guru Nanak, 1469-1539), everything is full with the singular Divine. In this talk, I am not doing a comparative analysis, but will only use Buddha’s Four Noble Truths as a structural framework to think through the Sikh approach.

1. **Basic truth of suffering**. Parallel to the first Noble Truth, Sikhism accepts suffering as a natural part of life. According to Sikh scripture, “ਨਾਨਕ ਦੁਖੀਆ ਸਭੁ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ — Nanak, our entire world is full of suffering” (GGS, p. 954). Suffering can be biological, psychological, or spiritual; yet, everybody suffers: “ਦੂਖੀ ਭਰਿ ਆਇਆ ਜਗਤੁ ਸਬਾਇਆ —The whole world is full of suffering” (GGS, p. 767). Guru Nanak even offers a paradoxical view: “ਦੁਖੁ ਦਾਰੂ ਸੁਖੁ ਰੋਗੁ ਭਇਆ ਜਾ ਸੁਖੁ ਤਾਮਿ ਨ ਹੋਈ — *dukh* (suffering) is medicine; comfort *(sukh*) is disease” (GGS, p.469). In other words, when everything is fine and comfortable, one lives superficially, oblivious to the ultimate reality. Suffering acts as a panacea for it jolts one to question and reflect on the meaning and source of life. Here Guru Nanak has much in common with Paul Tillich (*Shaking of the Foundations,* 1948) than the Buddha: both the Sikh guru and the Christian theologian view suffering positively because it awakens the individual to the presence of the Divine.

2. **Cause of suffering** In Buddha’s diagnosis, desire is the root cause of suffering; for Guru Nanak, it is *haumai*, literally, “I-myself." *Haumai* is the selfish investment of oneself with pride and arrogance. It is the inability to feel and know that the self belongs to a universal reality. By constantly centering on "I", "me", and "mine", the self is circumscribed as a narrow individual, wrenched from its common matrix. Guru Nanak compares it with a wall: just as a wall erects barriers and divisions, so does *haumai.*

3. **The End of Suffering** In Buddha’s prognosis, the end of suffering is Nirvana; in Guru Nanak, it is *sach khand*, the realm (*khand)* of Truth (*sach).* The opening hymn of the Guru Granth launches readers and reciters into a deeper and deeper intensity through the spheres of *Dharam, Gyan, Saram, Karam and Sach —* Earth, Knowledge, Aesthetics, Action, and Truth. The journey through these five stages is not an ascension into some higher regions beyond our lives and our world; rather, it is based on drawing the Divine whose name is Truth (*sat*) into the human situation. Guru Nanak named the Infinite so it could be actively engaged with in the lived context. By giving the name (*nam*) — *sat* — a participle of *as* (to be), he identifies the Divine as “existing,” “occurring,” “happening,” “being present.” Evidently, Truth is not an immutable essence but rather a becoming that in fact flows into the human world of motions and emotions. This finite temporal world is a part of the Infinite, and partakes of its characteristics of Truth, of Reality itself. It is in our everyday existence that moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual capacities are developed and the True One is experienced. Thus we live in the truest sense, living freely and expansively as life would be in *Sach Khand,* the Realm of Truth. In this mode of being we are seen by the Divine and exist free of suffering, disease, and pain. In an alliteration of “ds” tSikh scripture proclaims, “ਤੂ ਦਇਆਲੁ ਦਇਆ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖਹਿ ਦੁਖੁ ਦਰਦੁ ਸਰੀਰਹੁ ਜਾਈ ਹੇ — when you O’Compassionate (*daialu*) see us (*dekhai*) with compassion (*daia*), suffering (*dukhu*) and pain (*dard*) go from the body” (GGS, p. 1022).

4. **Path to end suffering**. While Buddha prescribes the 8-fold path, Guru Nanak prescribes the cognition of the Divine as the only way to end suffering. A beautiful analogy from Sikh scripture illuminates this process: “ਦੀਵਾ ਮੇਰਾ ਏਕੁ ਨਾਮੁ ਦੁਖੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਪਾਇਆ ਤੇਲੁ — My lamp is the one Name, suffering is the oil in it” (GGS, p. 358). Like the oil in a lamp, life is suffering, but the cotton wick is the shining Name that absorbs and burns off all the pain and suffering! The cotton wick can take the form of singing, hearing, reciting remembering, contemplating, or reflecting on scriptural hymns in the company of fellow beings:

ਹਰਿ ਜਪਿ ਜਪਿ ਅਉਖਧ ਖਾਧਿਆ ਸਭਿ ਰੋਗ ਗਵਾਤੇ (GGS, p. 651)

By swallowing the medicine of Divine Name,

All my diseases are eradicated…

ਸਿਮਰਿ ਸਿਮਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਭਏ ਅਨੰਦਾ ਦੁਖ ਕਲੇਸ ਸਭਿ ਨਾਠੇ (GGS, p. 625)

By contemplating on the Divine, we attain bliss;

All suffering and emotional conflicts vanish…

ਮਨਿ ਤਨਿ ਰਵਿ ਰਹਿਆ ਹਰਿ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਮੁ ਦੂਖ ਦਰਦ ਸਗਲਾ ਮਿਟਿ ਗਇਆ (GGS, p. 829)

In my mind and body pervades the Divine Beloved;

Thus all my pain and suffering are erased….

ਹਰਿ ਨਾਲਿ ਰਹੁ ਤੂ ਮੰਨ ਮੇਰੇ ਦੂਖ ਸਭਿ ਵਿਸਾਰਣਾ (GGS, p. 917)

Stay with the Divine my mind;

So all your suffering will go…

ਦੂਖ ਰੋਗ ਸੰਤਾਪ ਉਤਰੇ ਸੁਣੀ ਸਚੀ ਬਾਣੀ (GGS, p. 922)

Suffering, disease, remorse annul

By hearing the True verse. …

ਜਨਮ ਮਰਣ ਮੋਹੁ ਦੁਖੁ ਸਾਧੂ ਸੰਗਿ ਨਸੈ (GGS, p. 761)

Attachment and suffering from life and death,

— They go in the company of good people…

Bringing the infinite transcendent Truth into human consciousness is the only mechanism that ends suffering. Sikh worship therefore centers on the reading, reciting, hearing, and singing of scriptural verses. On that tragic Sunday morning, the congregation was doing just that.

However, we must keep in mind that the Milwaukee tragedy is not just a Sikh tragedy; it is an American tragedy. People across America felt the pain. There was profound mourning across the country. The media gave a lot of attention and has shown great sensitivity. Rather than the excitement of Olympics or that of Rover landing on Mars, CNN continuously covered the tragic happenings in Oak Creek. Newspapers, radio, and TV across the nation tried to circulate information about the Sikh faith. Sikhs and non-Sikhs have together offered their deepest condolences to the families of the victims, and prayed for the speedy recovery of the wounded — Officer Brian Murphy, Bhai Santokh Singh, and Bhai Punjab Singh. They joined together in candle-lit vigils all around the county. Personally, I am touched by the empathy extended by my students, friends, and colleagues — white and black, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim. It was heartening to get a call from a group of aspiring high-school journalists at the Princeton Summer Journalism Program with questions on Sikhism for a story they were writing. These are our future bridge-builders. I got sympathy cards and messages, including one from Professor Tim Knepper — whom I had never met. I got an email from Dr. Ashley Leavell, a former student living in Alabama: “I felt like I had been punched in the gut when I heard.”

This non-Sikh “white” woman felt the punch in her gut. We are in pain and bewilderment. What do we do? Where do we go? How do we fully heal ourselves? And who are “we”? The “we” constitutes all of us who have been born in America and/or have chosen to make it our home. It includes every Brown, Black, Yellow, and White. Had there been a rampage in a mosque, or a synagogue, or an African American church, it would have been equally devastating.

The challenge ahead is to familiarize ourselves with difference and diversity. Over the last fifty years, cities and suburbs like Oak Creek are becoming increasingly multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious. We are part of a rich American mosaic, but sadly, we hardly know anything about our neighbors. Ironically, with our world getting much smaller today, we are becoming more and more afraid of losing our self, of losing our "identity." Our addiction to technology (emails, skype, facebook, shopping via internet — even for guns!) makes us more insular, and deflects us from establishing links even with our families and friends. No wonder a community event, especially of “foreigners,” can be threatening for a loner. Some of our political leaders are making matters worse by intensifying the looming atmosphere of anger, hatred, and fear. They take pride in the rhetoric of hate and anger against other religions, against immigrants, against other cultures – all of which degrades the general public and provides a rationale for the recent senseless massacres, whether they take place in a parking lot, a movie theatre, or a gurdwara.

In this dangerously divided and polarized society, it is essential that we actually get to know our neighbors with different colored eyes or complexions or accents or texture of hair or those simply dressed differently. This has to begin at an early stage, and all of us have to take the responsibility that our education and popular culture reflect our multicultural reality. From nursery school to university, our education can no longer remain Euro/Anglo centered. Primary schools need to introduce people who look and speak different, so they feel comfortable from day one and grow up secure rather than afraid of “strangers.” We need new bedtime stories for our children that will show kids in different complexions and different hairstyles — including boys with long hair, so that a little Sikh boy with his braided hair will not be teased in his school. Middle school and High school curriculums should incorporate the history, religion, and cultures of the various civilizations. Since I am located in the field of Sikh Studies, I find that at the University level Sikhism is woefully neglected. The community is working hard to rectify the situation by endowing Sikh Chairs. However, there has to be an initiative from the institutions themselves so that Sikhism (and other forgotten traditions) can become a part of mainstream curriculum.

Likewise we have to ensure that the diverse designs and protagonists of our “patchwork heritage” are visible in museums, bookstores, industry (be it toys or fashion), and on the screen. Globalism appears to be going in one direction, with Anglo culture dominating the globe. Hollywood could easily move beyond its fetishism with “whiteness.” To this day I so wish the turban-wearing Sikh hero had not been marginalized in Anthony Minghella’s film adaptation of the *English Patient*. That was also a great opportunity for the brilliant Minghella to acquaint audiences with the Sikh popular shrine, the Golden Temple in India (described by the author Michael Ondaatje in great detail and insight). Even a quick flash of the structure — with its four doors symbolizing a welcome to the traditional four societal classes — would have relayed the fundamental inclusivity of the Sikh tradition to the general public.

In the 21st century, religion is so alive. Gone are the notions of religion as something otherworldly and spiritual; its powerful impulse is witnessed in contemporary culture, politics, and business. Understanding of the modern world mandates an understanding of the traditional world religions. Clearly, the domain of a few academic specialists is becoming an existential reality. So I suggest that we read scriptures from across religions, for at some level, it seems all of us are afraid to access one another’s holy books. Scriptures are the quintessence of every religion. They express the deepest moral and philosophical values of their respective community. Reading itself is complex, comprising the visual, perceptual, syntactic, and semantic processes. Therefore reading “Scripture” — especially another’s — becomes a daunting affair. Often those within the tradition hold such reverence for their holy book that they get anxious about any intimacy with it. Priests, along with scholars and exegetes, officiate as readers and thus intermediate between the subjects and their text. The result clearly leaves everybody alienated and impoverished. As Somerset Maugham said of books in general, the highest homage we can pay any holy book is by reading it. Some of us may unnecessarily fear that by doing so we may lose faith in our own.

When we read scriptures from other religions, not only do we experience what is important to them, but we also end up getting a better sense of *ourselves*, of our neighbors, and of the globe we inhabit. In their own and different ways, the Vedas, the Hebrew Bible, the Tao Te Ching, the New Testament, the Dhammapada, the Quran, the Shobogenzo, and the Guru Granth provide us with kaleidoscopic glimpses into the beyond, and simultaneously make us feel much more at home on our planet earth. Publishers and bookstores should ensure that all of the original major scriptures are readily available to the public. With the exception of the Tao Te Ching and the Bible, there is a glaring absence.

In the wake of the Milwaukee massacre, a reading of the Guru Granth Sahib would be particularly relevant for non-Sikhs. The entire text is scripted in the “language of infinite love” (*bhakhia bhau apar*), so it serves as an antidote to “hatecore” music of Wade’s white racist band, the Blue Eyed Devils. Actually, simply reaching out for the text releases some of the discomfort and anxiety that keeps one locked in, and thus sets the healing process in motion.

Healing entails getting in touch with something deeper and vaster, and Sikh sacred poetry does just that. The founder Guru Nanak celebrated the Divine as a singular infinite reality — *Ikk Oan Kar*, literally “1 Being Is.” The 1430 pages of the holy volume are but a poetic hermeneutics of his passion for this all-inclusive Divine. Represented by the universal numeral One (1), anybody can tap into it. Sikhism is for sure monotheistic, but it does not reproduce the conventional monotheistic model; rather, a distinct theological Singularity that transcends all exclusions and negations. Hindu, Buddhist, Tantric, and Islamic views that were current in medieval India come together in its wide-ranging literary spectrum. Binary oppositions between the Indic and Abrahamic worldviews are transcended: "Some call it Rama, some call it Khuda; some worship it as Vishnu, some as Allah” (GGS, p. 885). The Buddhist Nirvana is not omitted either: “Itself Nirvana, It itself relishes pleasures” (GGS, p. 97). “God” or “gods” or “no god” alike are recognized as part of the infinite One! Here we have a pluralistic model actually seeking to know and understand people of different religious perspectives, with the goal that its readers overcome any sense of alienation or hostility towards the *other.*

Its inbuilt poetic exercise shifts attention from the individual self to something far larger. Japji, the opening hymn in Sikh scripture, heightens our awareness of the beauty and vastness of the multiverse we live in. Recited in the morning, it reminds us of our human responsibilities in conjunction with the lunar and solar cycles. Our daily calendars with their limited standards of measurement acquire a much larger vista as we become temporally conscious of the billions and billions of years behind us and the billions and billions yet to come. Simultaneously, readers are inspired to imagine a spatial horizon that can never ever be quantified: “*tithai khand mandal varbhand je ko kathai ta ant na ant —* Here are continents, constellations, and universes, their counting never ending, never .... (Japji, stanza 37).

Like the “Japji,” the evening hymn “Arati,” celebrates the cosmic choreography of the planets, and as it emotionally expands the inner circuits, it connects readers with one another across cultures and religions. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish or Christian, everybody is invited to worship that transcendent One:

The sky is our platter; the sun and moon, lamps,

it is studded with pearls, the starry galaxies,

The wafting scent of sandalwood is the incense,

the gentle breeze, our fly whisk,

All vegetation, the bouquet of flowers we offer to you.

What a worship!

This truly is your worship, you who sunder life from death.

The unstruck sound in us is the drum to which we chant.

(GGS, p. 663)

The magic of infinity has tremendous physiological impact: it releases anger, jealousy, hatred, and other such poisonous stuff. The mystery and thrill of reading scriptural verses make us oblivious to the “isms” around us — be it racism, classism, sexism, or religious fundamentalism.

Overall, then, reading the Guru Granth is a healing mechanism. Its lyrics, though universal, provide us with an outlook on particular social, economic, political, and religious problems that may arise at any historical moment. They reach us with an aesthetic energy crucial in shaping our worldviews, attitudes, and behavior. The verses reach into the visceral hub where dictatorial rules and regulations never quite make it. Unlike the hatred and divisions promoted by Mr. Wade’s band, they produce positive energy within the individual, which ultimately makes its way to an acceptance and love for all others around. In contrast to his racist ideology that divides humans into separate and exclusive biological entities, Sikh scriptural lyrics promote the feel for the singular Infinite Creator, resulting in acts of love and compassion towards all siblings in the world. Plato, the harsh critic of poetry, quite well knew its force. He banned the poets from his Republic because “poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up” (*Republic*, Book 10, 606). Today we desperately need lyrics of love to water our parched empathy and to flush out the toxic sounds of hatred.

We all need to stand together and speak the language of love against bigotry and racial attacks. Human language does not simply mirror reality; it has the power to transform reality. In the language of love we can create arabesques of understanding that will usher us into a dynamic new future. As the tenth Sikh Guru said, “*jin prem kio tin hi prabh paio —* those who love find the Divine.”