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**Class Reflections on Responses to Suffering in Sikhism**

In the comparative religions class during the fall of 2012, students analyzed the creation of the Khalsa as a religious response to suffering, as well as the feminist re-memorization of Sikhism carried out by Nikki Guninder-Singh in *The Birth of The Khalsa*. Though the class spent time discussing whether or not each of these events was specifically a “*religious”* response to suffering, and no definitive conclusion was necessarily reached, suffering was certainly the catalyst for action in each instance. The class struggled to conclude how, precisely, it defined *religion,* and therefore it struggled with elements of categorization. However, the class was able to determine that Sikh suffering has been extensive, and responses have taken various forms, and whether or not the response was inherently “religious,” it almost exclusively involved at least some element of religious persuasion. The answer in regards to the Khalsa was more obviously religious, while Nikki Singh’s response, among other contemporary ones, was a bit more ambiguous.

The class spent time discussing the creation of the Khalsa as a response to the oppression of Sikhs by their Mughal leaders, who did not recognize Sikhism as a valid religious practice, and reacted violently by killing the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. The 5 Ks of the Khalsa, the drinking of Amrit, and the newly required surname of Singh or Kaur for men and women, respectively, were seen by many as a way to re-establish Sikhism in a way that it could more appropriately resist its oppressors. Again the nature of this Sikh response to suffering was complex in the class’s deliberations, though there was more of a consensus than previously that the creation of the Khalsa was “religious,” because it was more of a dogmatic shift in the faith as a whole.

In Nikki Singh’s re-memorization, she is responding to the suffering experienced by Sikh women, including herself, by not being fully recognized as equal by male members of Sikh society. She specifically addresses the creation of the Khalsa, and retells the story using a large-scale metaphor of femininity to demonstrate the ways in which the Khalsa represents feminine traits and ideals. She uses a comparison of the first and tenth gurus, feminization of the 5 Ks, and feminization of the Khalsa Vaisaki ceremony to achieve this. She also rejects the notion that the Sikh Khalsa is inherently militaristic and violent, and holds that its intention was merely to “re-birth” Sikhism with a new invigoration and femininity. The class’s inability to come to a uniform conclusion on whether or not this response was particularly “religious” originates from the reality that defining “religion” is a completely personalized and wide-ranging task, and the designation of Nikki Singh’s response as “religious” or “non-religious” could perhaps be limiting.

Responses to suffering have played a large role in the history and creation of Sikhism as a reactionary entity. These responses have taken numerous forms, often militaristic and other times theological. What is consistent is that Sikhs prioritize their faith very highly, and when responding to suffering, a Sikh almost exclusively turns to his or her religion to answer questions of why or how, even if the response may not appear to be imperatively “religious.”

Links:

Amrit -- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/ritesrituals/amrit.shtml>

The 5 Ks -- <http://www.amritsar.com/The%20Five%20K.shtml>