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In Search of God's Path

ANN BRAKE

CST 232: Nonwestern Religions, Spring 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Sharon Showman

Ann Brake is a writer, dancer, and student. She discovered a passion for education at an early age and hopes to be a lifelong seeker. She is currently a sophomore at Wright State University.

Ann notes:

Writing "In Search of God's Path" was a journey for me. Learning about Eastern religions challenged my faith, my intellect, and my western mindset. Writing about this experience, particularly my exploration of Sikhism, helped me understand not only my thoughts and feelings on Sikhism but also my wonder. I am filled with awe at the peace, joy, and unique personal benefits each religion offers to its followers, and I hope readers will share my wonder as they share this small part of my journey.

Dr. Showman notes:

Ann's paper is an assigned reflection on Sikhism. A reflection paper seeks to combine academic content with a student's personal response to what is being studied. It is to be a well-constructed academic paper, but it permits personal insights, questions, responses, observations, and experiences on the part of the student to be included in the paper. Ann's paper is exemplary in that it is able to convey important information about Sikhism from not only an academic perspective, but from a personal one as well. The energy and flow of the paper builds throughout the paper until reaching the conclusion that this religion may not be like all others in ways that are important for the student. Her ability to creatively describe what she is feeling as she encounters the major tenets of Sikhism makes the paper not only enjoyable to read, but important in that it offers to the reader an opportunity to understand a student's journey in dealing with something completely foreign to her previous thinking.

In Search of God's Path

Eastern religions will always find a way to surprise those fortunate enough to study them. In my studies of Eastern religions, I had grown accustomed to a range of religions that were typically polytheistic, encouraged meditation or yoga, and taught followers to seek unique paths to enlightenment. Just when I thought I had Eastern religions defined in those few words, Sikhism arrived to correct me. As a unique reaction to both Islam and Hinduism, Sikhism reminded me how dynamic and very beautiful Eastern religions are, and how predictably silly it was of me to try to predict an Eastern religion.

As the youngest religion in India, it should have been obvious that Sikhism would be different; the youngest sibling in any family tends to be the most colorful (Morgan 305). Sikhism emerged from the ideas of a man named Nanak whose life was marked with miracles and strange ideas from the very start; such is the way of men who start religions. Nanak lived in proximity with both Muslims and Hindus, and he believed the right path was God's path, rather than the paths set out by either religion (Morgan 306). Nanak taught his followers that God's path was one of selfless service to others and recognition of God's presence within oneself and others (Morgan 312). This cornerstone of Sikhism was quite agreeable to me; as a survivor of multiple Christian church splits, I have often pondered why seemingly religious people dedicate themselves to personal pursuits rather than God's work. In my experience, religious people selfishly pursued control of church events and worship services simply for the sake of being in control. Reading of, and learning about, a religion that is focused on God's path--rather than what God can offer one--gave me hope that some people still seek God before personal gains even if some of those people have religious beliefs that differ greatly from those with which I have been raised.

Though Sikhism is an Eastern religion, and thus has few similarities with the Christianity I was raised under, Sikhism felt strangely familiar to me. Sikhism felt like a family friend I had known as a child and not seen for many years: familiar yet alien. I credit this to the influence of Muslim religious beliefs in Sikhism. Sikhs are strictly monotheistic, and daily devotion to God is important (Morgan 312). Community involvement, whether it be community service or frequenting local Sikh temples, is also a highly valued aspect of Sikhism (Morgan 313). Though Sikhism differs from other Eastern religions because of its monotheism, I

found familiarity in Sikhism through its ties to Islam. These ties to Islam did not diminish Sikhism's existence as an Eastern religion, however. Sikhism also has ties to Hinduism, a religion which, in the simplest of terms, challenged my direct, Western way of thinking until I felt nothing but wonder. Sikhism shares the Hindu worldview, belief in reincarnation, and an awareness of God's consciousness in each person; this awareness dances a fine line between recognizing Godliness and acknowledging the divinity in all (Morgan 312).

Finding similarities between Sikhism and the religions I was more familiar with did not save me from my initial surprise, however. Sikhism's monotheism among Eastern religions that are commonly polytheistic continues to puzzle me even as I write this. I am amazed by how a monotheistic religion sprang from the tangled roots of Hinduism. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was born into a Hindu caste, but his Hindu upbringing was juxtaposed with the instruction of a Muslim tutor and the proximity of both Hindu and Muslim peers (Morgan 306). After a divine encounter, Nanak told his people, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim" (Morgan 306). Surely he must have been accused of madness. I find myself wondering if Nanak faced ridicule from family, friends, and community members. Nanak may have overcome any ridicule with the support of the female converts to Sikhism. Women specifically may have been drawn to Sikhism for a feature of its teaching rarely supported in other religions.

Sikhism teaches gender equality.

When I read that Sikh teaching heavily emphasizes gender equality, my feminist heart gave a squeeze of disbelief and delight. I had previously viewed contemporary religions as twisted and reinterpreted by mankind until women no longer had a place in them, and I felt a creeping sense of alienation in the face of religion. Sikhism restored my faith in women's place in religion with the seemingly simple belief in gender equality: "Amar Das [a Sikh guru] strongly believed in the equality of women, and of his 146 major disciples, fifty-two were female" (Morgan 308). Here, at last, I learned of a religion that is not used to oppress, manipulate, control, or shame women on either a personal, religious, or societal level. I could barely believe it. According to Diane Morgan, Sikhs "... denounce the caste system, sexism, racism... and religion-based vegetarianism" (313). This belief can easily be found in the Sikh *kehalsa*, which is the Sikh brother- and sisterhood. Both men and women are expected to join the *kehalsa* when they are ready (Morgan 314). Gender

equality can also be seen in the way Sikhs dress. All Sikhs are expected to dress modestly, and, though men who have been initiated into the *khalsa* must wear a turban, there are no gender-punitive restrictions on clothing for men or women (Morgan 313). Learning this in the aftermath of spending two weeks in a women's studies class studying how religions are used to oppress women was a delightful surprise.

The interesting surprises did not stop with the Sikh belief in gender equality. Sikhs strive to be released from the cycle of reincarnation and to be united with God (Morgan 313). Though the belief in reincarnation is far from unusual in an Eastern religion, the Sikh approach to being free from reincarnation is unique; Sikhs believe they will be freed from reincarnation with faith, prayer, and righteous living (Morgan, 313). Asceticism and meditation are not a means to reach freedom from reincarnation; Sikhs do not practice traditional forms of asceticism. Instead of going hungry or living without clothing and shelter, Sikhs strive to live purely while surrounded by an impure world (Morgan 307). This version of asceticism seems far less intimidating than some forms of Buddhist or Hindu asceticism; as a food lover, I never could bear the idea of living on breadcrumbs and water. My stomach always twists in sadness and hunger at the thought.

Another aspect of Sikhism that was a source of fascination to me was Sikhism's complete lack of idols. Because of Sikhs' strong monotheism, they have no minor gods, idols, statues, or saintly figures in their temples, homes, or religious ceremonies. Sikh temples occasionally have paintings of the ten Sikh gurus, but these paintings and the religious figures depicted are never a source of worship (Morgan 312). The images of the gurus serve only as sources of inspiration to live pure and righteous lives.

Sikhism's monotheistic center feeds into a belief in exclusive truth I find singular among the Eastern religions I have learned of thus far. Hinduism has many deities, and worship of those deities is highly individualistic. Buddhists may worship any deities they choose, or none at all, as long as they continue on the Eightfold Path. Tantra has little to do with deities. Taoism is all about following the flow of life, even if one's personal flow may involve unique approaches to truth. All of these Eastern religions allow some wiggle room for believers to pursue a unique path and system of worship. Sikhs, however, must not believe in any other religions and the associated doctrines (Morgan 312). Fortunately, this belief has never lead to any Sikh Inquisitions or Sikh Crusades against nations of other religions. Though Sikhs believe their religion is the true

path to God, Sikhs respect and value the beliefs of all, and they do not actively try to convert people to Sikhism (Morgan 316).

Awe has followed me every step of my journey to understand Sikhism. As a reaction to both Islam and Hinduism, Sikhism taught me that Eastern and Western religious ideas, no matter how contradictory at first glance, can be beautifully woven together. Rather than intimidate me with a violent past and a strict set of beliefs, Sikhism has inspired me with a nonaggressive past and a liberating set of beliefs. I have found not only surprises and joy in the teachings of Sikhism, but also enrichment of my personal faith. Sikhism has taught me to find the truth of a religion, not what I am told by men to believe of a religion. As I move on to studies of other religions, I leave with a fulfilling purpose Sikhism revealed to me: finding God's path in my life.

References

Morgan, D. (2001). *The best guide to eastern philosophy and religion*. New York, New York: Renaissance Books.