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Faith-based Service in Los Angeles: An Ethnographic Approach to the Comparative Theology of Sikhism and Catholicism

Khalsa Brah

In the early 16th century, a Catholic saint and Sikh guru were teaching on the interconnectedness of life with the divine. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, was teaching people the *Spiritual Exercises*, in order that people would have a greater capacity to know, love, and serve God by finding God in all things. In India, the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, was proclaiming that the creator and all of creation are One, “Ik OngKar.” Both traditions, through their interconnected perspectives, work to break down social barriers and encourage camaraderie with all people, regardless of their religious affiliations by serving others and striving for social justice.

Scarce research exists comparing how Sikhs and Catholics in the present time interpret and perform their faith-based service. Sikh service is called *seva* or selfless service, and for Catholics it is known as community service. The present study analyzes how the service-oriented teachings of these faiths permeates the lives of professionals fighting for social justice, both within the Loyola Marymount community and the surrounding Los Angeles area. This paper is a compilation of interviews with Sikh and Catholic lawyers, scholars, and educators who are working on social justice issues such as immigration reform, hate-crimes, and religious freedom. Religious leaders such as Sikh priests (Granthis) and Catholic priests who serve to educate their communities were also interviewed. This study explores how each professional in their own service and social justice work are faith-based, being informed by the deep conceptual roots found in the teachings of their historical leaders and religious texts. In some cases, it was discovered that this faith-derived service was very explicit; in others, it worked in a more subtle way.

In a world with five-hundred million people who are starving, a billion who live in absolute poverty, and 1.5 billion who do not have access to medical care,¹ a particular Christian approach to theology, known as liberation theology can provide a particularly helpful lens in which to view suffering. Liberation theologians critically approach their worlds to solve dynamic problems and work towards solutions of “the real problems of life.”² Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, explains it as such: “The theology of liberation seeks to provide a language for talking about God. It is an attempt to make the word of life present in a world of

1 James P. Spradley, “Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016: Taking on Inequality,” *World Bank Group* (2016): 1-33. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/25078/9781464809583.pdf>

2 Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 88.

oppression, injustice, and death.”³ In line with the idea of finding God in all things and serving one’s neighbor, now more than ever, Catholics are acknowledging the common man or woman on the fringes of society, regardless of gender, sex, religion, country of origin, or status. Catholics in contemporary society are actively trying to understand and ease the injustices of our society. By knowing, loving, and serving their neighbors, they are knowing, loving and serving God.

Now moving into the Sikh tradition and ways of service, commonalities can be found. Sikhs comprise the fifth largest World Religion and are known as warrior-saints due to their willingness to selflessly serve their fellow humans. The seed of selfless services comes by taking a stand against social and religious injustice and inequality for the freedom and equality of all. Similarly to the idea of helping the poor and marginalized in Catholicism, Sikhism seeks to find ways to end social inequities. Sikhism is centered around the teachings of the Sikh Gurus enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib* which states, “You shall find peace, doing seva.” (Shri Guru Granth Sahib 25). *Seva* traditionally carries two meanings in the Punjabi spoken language. One means to serve, the other to worship. In Sikhism, the word *seva* carries both of these meanings at once. Faith-based selfless service for social justice is a large part of the Sikh tradition, started by the first Sikh guru, Guru Nanak. In the late 15th century, Guru Nanak fought for gender and social equality. *Seva* has always “characterized the Sikh who has become *gurmukh*,”⁴ the one who sees God in all things and in doing so, selflessly serves all as part of that One.

In viewing these two faiths, Sikhism and Catholicism, as having similarities, while also respecting their differences, our hope is to investigate and better understand Sikh *seva* (selfless service) and Catholic faith-based service in light of the other. In *Faiths Among Faiths*, Dr. James L. Fredericks argued that, “By exploring the truths of Christianity in dialogue with the teachings of traditions of other religious believers, Christians will come to embrace their own cherished beliefs in new ways.”⁵ Even more than this, those who better understand and have grappled with other religions in light of their own can begin to approach their neighbors and fellow humans in more profound ways through a comparative theological approach. Dr. Fredericks elucidates, “Comparative theology is a spiritual transformation...[it] should contribute to the common good of our society in general.”⁶ The natural extension of a comparative theological approach into one’s life is enacted by leading a life of service for our common humanity, and interconnectedness in the natural world. Comparative theology is as much a mindset of approaching life as it is a tool to “bring the human family that is divided in many ways, more and

3 Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: an Introduction to Liberation Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 81.

4 W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *Sikhism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 80.

5 James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), 162.

6 Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, 171.

more together.”⁷ In a world that is multi-religious, multiethnic, and multicultural, comparative theology is the foundation on which a dialogue of love, based on celebrating and critically examining the diversity of faith in our world, can lead to more authentic relationships and a deeper understanding of one’s own tradition. In fact, comparative theology is an avenue through which Sikhs, Christians, and those of other faiths, or no particular faith, can gain more clarity about their place in the world and their role in the salvation or liberation of all its living creatures.

The need for a comparative theological approach is important now more than ever, especially due to our globalized, interconnected world. Unfortunately, globalization has caused economic, social, and political ramifications, where fear and hatred are prevalent, and misinformation is widespread. Because of this, we see Catholic and Sikh lawyers fighting for immigration reform, gender equality, and other social justice issues. Religious leaders are spreading God’s word via community service and education. Teachers, parents, and others within each respective tradition, are staying true to the idea that through faith-based service, our community, our world, and our spirits will be enriched and deepened. To better understand the point of views of local Sikhs and Catholics in the Los Angeles area, whose work aims to serve the interconnectedness of our common humanity, the choice of doing ethnographic research was a natural one. In line with the idea of “the best way to learn to do ethnography is by doing it,”⁸ our group followed steps laid out by anthropologist James Spradley. First, with the help of Dr. Nirinjan Khalsa, we 1) located good informants and scheduled interviews, all of which were 2) recorded by video or transcription. During these interviews, 3) descriptive questions were asked in order to 4) develop a rapport and elicit useful information. 5) All of these records were subsequently analyzed.⁹

From the performed ethnographic and literature research and analysis, it is evident that the relationship between faith and service is one without a linear causality - a person’s faith does not necessarily lead one to do service in their community. Likewise, experiences and understandings gained through service do not cause faith. Rather, the relationship between service and faith is a feedback loop. Through a deeper understanding of the Christian Gospels or Sikh *Granth*, a person begins to find a fuller relationship to service. For example, Father Bryan Pham of Loyola Law School uses the analogy of Los Angeles’s 405 Freeway: “The work is the faith, and the faith is the work...It is like the freeway of LA, everything converges. There is craziness, but everyone gets home somehow.”¹⁰ For Father Pham, Catholics are “part of a larger

7 Deck, Interview.

8 Spradley, “Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016: Taking on Inequality,” 42.

9 Spradley, “Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016: Taking on Inequality,” 42.

10 Pham, Interview.

plan” of which they can get glimpses of through the gospel.¹¹ On the relationship between his vocation and faith, Father Pham noted an iterative cycle that informs what he does, how he does it, each and every day:

My work and faith inform each other, but allow me to go deeper with Christ. Ultimately, it’s my relationship with God that then informs me of what my faith is, which pushes me out of my room to go into the world, which then gives me the courage and energy to come back into my room for prayer, which then deepens my relationship with Christ. And it happens all over again.¹²

By constantly looking for “where Jesus is,” as Father Bryan Pham noted during the interview, people can begin to go through the iterative cycles to live a more authentic Christian life.¹³ In his life, Father Bryan Pham serves as an educator, scholar, and attorney. Specifically, Father Pham works as a staff attorney at the Loyola Immigrant Justice Clinic (LIJC), which fights for a more just reality for the immigrant population of Los Angeles. The clinic is entirely pro-bono and provides clients with access to representation that they would otherwise not have, due to both legal or financial issues. The LIJC does intakes at Dolores Mission and HomeBoy Industries, two organizations that have a longstanding history of serving the East Los Angeles community. In providing a much-needed service to the community, especially to those members who are affected by DACA or have gone through human trafficking, the clinic, in Father Pham’s eyes, is following Loyola Marymount’s Catholic mission. The LIJC is a unique ministry, which in his eyes, “Is about being wherever Jesus is.”¹⁴

For Sikh UCLA graduate student Harleen Kaur, the relationship between faith and *seva* are equally strong. Kaur’s actions are “all in terms of her faith.” For Kaur, actions are about a deep understanding of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh Scripture as Living Guru) and the actions of the Gurus during their lives to inform what she does in her professional and personal life.¹⁵ Following the Sikh idea of working towards a better community, Kaur hopes to gain better living conditions for her entire community, which in her eyes transcends ideas of faith, or lack thereof. To do so, Kaur seeks to use a combination of advocacy and policy to “reinforce a set of ideas” about the larger Sikh diaspora.¹⁶ Specifically, Kaur has remained active in the Sikh community and has interned with the Sikh Coalition, a civil rights and Sikh advocacy

11 Pham, Interview.

12 Pham, Interview.

13 Pham, Interview.

14 Pham, Interview.

15 Kaur, Interview.

16 Kaur, Interview.

organization of lawyers who work to track and combat hate crimes, as well as provide better living standards for the Sikh community. But even more than this, Kaur has a vision for a world that is derived from the Sikh idea of “recognizing the Divine in all people” and hopes to work towards a world in which “all people can pursue [this] Divine themselves.”¹⁷

Furthermore, faith-based service for both traditions is altruistic and transcends the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, and background. According to Sikh Granthi (priest) Dr. Kuldeep Singh, from the *Gurbani* (Gurus-revelations) comes the idea that with *seva* “there is no agenda, no ulterior motive.”¹⁸ The goal of *seva* is not to convert people to Sikhism or have a favor returned to you or so that they may return the favor to you - rather, the goal of *seva* is acting on your love for God. For example, he discussed an eighteenth-century battle between Hindus and Muslims against Sikhs. In that battle, Bhai Kanhaiya was tasked with aiding and nourishing the Sikhs who were injured in battle. After seeing and realizing that God was physically present in all people, on both sides of the battle, Bhai Kanhaiya served all men across battle lines and remains a symbol of the Sikh perspective on *seva*, to selflessly serve all.

The altruism found in Sikhism is echoed by those in the Jesuit community. As a young man, Father Allan Deck, rector of LMU’s Jesuit community, was particularly intrigued by the one of the Jesuit missions, “scope is the whole world.”¹⁹ This inspired him to be both an educator and a priest. Father Deck argues that in life one’s primary focus should be the “other, which is God, and also literally the other, which is our neighbors.”²⁰ He said that while there is a tendency for an isolationist mindset, where by one’s primary focus is on themselves, their own purpose and motives, social justice is about, “concerns for who is on the bottom, who is left out, the voiceless.”²¹ This is also seen in the pursuits of various Los Angeles Jesuit undertakings, such as the Dolores Mission and Homeboy Industries. Dolores Mission works in Boyle Heights, an underserved community, to provide residents with education and support. Likewise, Homeboy Industries was founded by Father Gregory Boyle to help former gang members reintegrate into society by training them in a multitude of skills. These organizations, per Deck, encourage “people to get in touch with that God spirit in them and [help] them develop it. It is developed in a lot of ways - education, secure relationships, friendships, family, human relationships. It is about promoting a world of stronger inter-human relations.”²² Father Thomas Rausch, Emeritus Professor of Theological Studies at LMU, has also been working on stronger inter-human

17 Kaur, Interview.

18 Singh, Interview.

19 Deck, Interview.

20 Deck, Interview.

21 Deck, Interview.

22 Deck, Interview.

relations by bridging the gaps within the Christian community through his scholarly work in ecumenism. With his work, he hopes to “fight historical barriers” and hopefully “move towards some sort of unity” within Christianity. In communicating his interpretations of the Gospel values to others, Father Rausch hopes to see full communion within churches, so that this unity strengthens their ability to serve one another and in turn effectively serve all others.²³

While service is at the heart of both religious traditions, Sikhism and Catholicism also view education and knowledge as a path to understanding (or *gyan*) and community empowerment. Sikhs are encouraged to be actively learning about the world in order to realize one’s own potential, along with bringing about positive change in the world. This mindset is precisely what motivated Sikh scholar and lawyer Jasleen Kohli, director of the Critical Race Studies Program at UCLA Law School, to study the intersection of race and law, and how the law, “creates and perpetuates racial hierarchies.”²⁴ Specifically, Kohli has focused on how the law affects those on the margins of societies, including communities of color, low socioeconomic status, and the LGBTQ communities. Students who have gone through the Critical Race Studies Program have gone on to work in civil rights, immigration, labor, and public policy. Moreover, Kohli is actively involved with Black Lives Matter and organized lawyers to do a “die-in” at Los Angeles’ Stanley Mosk Courthouse after the brutal deaths of Michael Brown and Tamir Rice. For her, it has been the “underlying tenets of Sikhism, as far as issues of equality among genders and people of all religions” that have motivated her to become an activist in the community.²⁵ Her goal for the future is to “train the next group of racial and social justice warriors. I want to give the tools to the next generation and resources to be racial advocates.”²⁶

Stemming from the love of one’s neighbor and altruism, Sikhs and Catholic educators, scholars, and lawyers are also fighting for immigrants and others who are often on the fringes of society. Often times, immigrants do not have the resources to be able to provide for their families, or to go through a traditional legal system. Immigrants are the backbone of American society and in helping them, Catholics and Sikhs alike are informed by their theological traditions to serve these communities. Per Dr. Singh, “listening to people’s pains and doing something about it” is *dhan*, which is a form of *seva*.²⁷ In line with this approach, Sikh law firm owner and partner Natasha Sawhney feels that everyone has “almost an obligation to take care of

23 Rausch, Interview.

24 Kohli, Interview.

25 Kohli, Interview.

26 Kohli, Interview.

27 Singh, Interview.

one another.”²⁸ As such, Sawhney has actively worked in the field of public education in her law firm, Garcia Hernandez & Sawhney, representing various school districts and community colleges. One of her most memorable cases, was fighting a decision made by a group of athletic directors’ to redraw their athletic leagues so as to group inner cities schools, such as Inglewood and Centinela, separately from schools in more affluent areas such as Santa Monica, Palos Verdes, and Malibu. As a lawyer, she saw the potential injustice and was able to end the project. As a partner, Sawhney makes it a point to “focus on hiring, and recruiting and retaining and celebrating lawyers who have individual passions around their communities.”²⁹

Caring for those who are unable to adequately care for themselves, which transcends lines of gender, race, and religion, informs the work of LMU Theology Professor Cecilia González-Andrieu, who serves as an activist in the LMU community, especially in collaboration with the ‘DREAMers’ on campus. Together with associate Dean Dr. Herbert Medina, more than a decade ago, she began working with undocumented students to help understand their journeys and help them in their challenges. To support them and fight “what is against the Gospel,” Dr. Gonzalez-Andrieu works to provide undocumented students with scholarships, a network of support, and mentoring.³⁰ She has students who have “passed the bar as lawyers, in medical schools, and who are leading international relation programs, engineers, and teachers,” and who acknowledge that each of these humans is contributing to this “common good that God envisions for all.”³¹ She credits her work to her faith community, advocating for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and other marginalized communities. She points to Matthew 22:37 and 22:39 about the importance of faith being the center on which to build a world “predicated on love of neighbor, on fairness, and taking care of the sick, the poor and the hungry.”³²

LMU’s new Vice President of Mission and Ministry, John Sebastian, has also been working within the University to make LMU’s mission of, “service of faith and promotion of justice tangible and accessible to people on campus.”³³ As a practicing Catholic, Dr. Sebastian encourages people to explore the ancient Catholic ideas of looking out for the “widow, the orphan, and the stranger,” and “people who are on the margins of society and who do not have patriarchal networks to protect them and integrate them into society.”³⁴ By educating those on

28 Sawhney, Interview.

29 Sawhney, Interview.

30 Gonzalez-Andrieu, Interview.

31 Gonzalez-Andrieu, Interview.

32 Gonzalez-Andrieu, Interview.

33 Sebastian, Interview.

34 Sebastian, Interview.

the fringes of society, Dr. Sebastian hopes to start, “dismantling systems that are inherently unjust in some way and then teach those tools to others.”³⁵ Thus, we see education as a crucial form of service toward social justice.

Nevertheless, selfless service and social justice do not stop with the people. For Catholics, the idea that God is everywhere and in everything permeates the Bible: “He is the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of all creation, for in him were created all things in Heaven and earth: everything visible and everything invisible” (Col. 1-15-17). In an interview with Father Deck, he discussed the importance of how we have a duty to do what is best for our environment; to fight for a cleaner, less polluted environment is just as important as other ministries taken up by Catholics. Father Deck stressed that, “you do not exclude anybody or anything from this love.”³⁶ This non-exclusionary mode of loving everything means that fighting against global warming and human-caused climate change are natural extensions. The climate of our Earth and the health of the forests, clean air, and animals are all our responsibility, as humankind, to take care of. The Earth, as Father Deck mentioned, is a gift from God to humanity and it is important for us to conserve this gift because “everything is connected.”³⁷ This view of seeing God ecologically has reached new levels with Pope Francis, who is an advocate for a cleaner and environmentally sound world. Pope Francis stated in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*:

A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. ... A number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity (Bergoglio 19).

In other words, Pope Francis acknowledges that the environmental crisis we are facing is manmade, encourages us as humans to understand our reciprocal relationship with our natural world, and to fight for the dignity and grace of all life.

Sikhism also provides a perspective of all life as interconnected, based on the proclamation of Oneness “Ik Ongkar” by the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak, in the seminal *Japji* hymn. He saw the Creator as One with the Creation. Through this worldview, a similar passion for the world’s health emerges where *seva*, as Granthi Dr. Kuldeep Singh views it, is the service of “all man, all creatures, the environment, and people.”³⁸ The last *salok* (verse) of the *Japji* Sahib then goes on to proclaim “*Pavan guru paani pita, maata dhart mahat.*” This roughly

³⁵ Sebastian, Interview.

³⁶ Deck, Interview.

³⁷ Deck, Interview.

³⁸ Singh, Interview.

translates to, “the air is our Guru, water is our father, and the Earth is our mother.” While this becomes clear that the relationship Sikhs have with the environment is more of a familial one, and less of one that views the world as God’s property - the resulting outcome is the same: a passion for protecting our earth. Dr. Kuldeep Singh stated that when a person has a divine relationship with the earth, water and nature, as every Sikh does, “it is your responsibility to clean the earth and water, and to respect it the way you would your mother and father.”³⁹ Dr. Singh views this relationship with our environment as an extension of the relationship with the Divine and stated, “Serving animals, creatures, and the environment is all a form of *seva*.”⁴⁰ As such, *seva* should be regarded not just as service, but selfless service to everyone and everything, stemming directly for one’s love of Ik Ongkar.

In our interconnected world it becomes important to engage in comparative theology in order to better understand how we can live together harmoniously. The way in which people of different faiths, and those without a particular faith, interact in the world is as much a theological issue as it is a political, social, and economic one. Through analyzing the literature and ethnographic research, there were some stark similarities in how Sikhs and Catholics manifest their faith in their personal and professional lives. First, the relationship between service and faith is one without linear causality; rather, it is better viewed as an iterative cycle where faith informs one’s service in the world and one’s service in the world informs their faith. Second, faith-based service is truly altruistic and does not concern itself with lines of religion, gender, sexuality, race, or country of origin. From this, the immense care that Sikhs and Catholics show for those on the fringes of society, such as immigrants, the poor, and other marginalized communities, is a natural extension of their faith. Finally, selfless service for Sikhs and Catholics is not limited to the human realm of social justice but extends to a care for all life as part of an interconnected ecosystem. Thus, while there were differences in the reasons why Sikhs and Catholics would perform service and justice-oriented work, this comparative theological research is a reminder that there is more that unites humans than separates us.

39 Singh, Interview.

40 Singh, Interview.

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