

Oak Creek Killings: the Denial of a Culture of Oppression

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Force without justice is tyrannical. Justice without force is gainsaid, because there are always offenders; force without justice is condemned. It is necessary then to combine justice and force; and for this end make what is just strong, or what is strong just. And thus being unable to make what is just strong, we have made what is strong just.
(Blaise Pascal, *Pensées et opuscules*, 1670, frag. 298)

It is unfortunate that attacks of such horror and devastation are reported on without any critique of how the wider culture in which they occur is itself culpable. The media, itself conditioned by and conditioning of that wider culture, time and time again lay the blame at the feet of the figure of the lone criminal, by means of which the culture and society at large is relieved of any need for cross-examination, let alone personal introspection.

The recent shootings at the Oak Creek Gurdwara in Wisconsin, however, sadly cannot be reduced to individual pathology. In its targeting of a community at their place of worship, this tragic event points to an unacknowledged culture of modern (religio-secular) conditioning that implicates state power, media power and intellectual power. The State would like us to believe such incidents are a 'tragic shooting' (BO) and an act of 'senseless violence' (MR), as though this event is merely a blip in an otherwise trouble-free space and history of secular liberal democracy. But what we know as secular modernity is in crisis, and the cracks in the wall make more and more apparent the weak foundations upon which it is based: the domination of others through the violence of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism. It is this very foundation that becomes visible in the actions of individuals and groups who feel emboldened to kill as a righteous activity. Indeed of recent mass shootings, the Oak Creek tragedy instigated by Wade Page bears poignant parallels to the rampage of the Norwegian white-supremacist Anders Breivik whose motive was "self-defense" because he felt under siege by multiculturalism and Muslims. The 33-year-old Breivik had the audacity to plead "not guilty", and after a ten-week trial, he recently received a 21-year sentence for killing 77 people. But what in our Western, liberal, modern culture allows Breivik to adopt such an unrepentant tone? The comparison of these two events, however, should not stop short with the biographies of disaffected individuals, but rather tackle the larger and more fundamental crisis that afflicts us all - the crisis of modern religio-secularity that has been historically formed by a systemic privileging of whiteness.

Nor can the Oak Creek event be reduced to the next chapter in 9/11 fall out. After the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Phoenix on September 15, 2001, whom his attackers presumed was an al-Qaeda sympathizer on account of his beard and turban, many in the Sikh community sought to educate the American public that “Sikhs are not Muslims”. This distancing of oneself from the other (“we are not like them”) was both callous in its further stigmatization of Islam as blameworthy and contrary to Sikh ethics and traditions that rest on principles of equality and inclusivity as exemplified by the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. (Even the briefest of examinations of the *Guru Granth Sahib* points to the Gurus’ ethical stance in relation to the other and the marginal as seen in their inclusion of non-Sikh saints of higher and lower castes, their denial of elite languages in favor of the vernacular, and their defense of the right to practice different religious traditions and of women’s equality). Hence, whilst understandable as a strategy of self-defense, the blaming of American ignorance of religious diversity (such that Balbir Singh Sodhi’s murder was reduced to a case of mistaken identity) was an all too convenient scapegoat for it failed to examine the current history of minorities being attacked for simply being different. Sikhs are attacked for being Sikh, for being a minority just like Muslims are and a whole host of others (Blacks, Latinos, South and East Asians, Indigenous Indians, Aboriginal peoples, Women, the LGBTQ communities, Occupy protestors et al). September 11th, 2001 is irrelevant to these attacks, for such targeting of minority communities has occurred well before and after that date and continues to occur. The particular history of anti-Sikh violence in the US can be traced back to the riots in Bellingham, Washington (1907) and Live Oak, California (1908) where Sikhs taunted as “rag heads” were hounded and driven out from the city borders by an angry white “mob of 500 men and boys” proud to have “cleansed the city of the Sikhs” (*Bellingham Morning Reveille*).

As such, the killings of Sikhs at Oak Creek are better understood as the most recent in a long history of Western subjugation of non-white (non-heterosexual male) communities, bringing to the fore the continued injustices of a neo-colonial globalized economy dominated by the Euro-American West. The issue here is that difference is primarily defined in terms of not being part of a white mainstream culture whose Christian roots have more recently become masked by the rhetoric of a liberal secularism. The answer is not to “keep the religion, drop the turban and beard”, because it is precisely this “secular-liberal” demand that sanctions the persistence of intolerance and hate. The demand eschews a legacy of racist attacks that has long been seen as legitimate social behavior from a white world-view.

Nor should this event be reduced to yet more fodder for the gratuitous, interminable and polarized debates (whether regards religion vs. secularity, tradition vs. modernity, or guns vs. no-guns). This is not only a call for decency and respect for the victims and their families; but more urgently it is a call that public debate not side step the roots of the problem. Violence and hate are not dependent upon guns, and hate crimes will continue even if all the guns in the world were banned. To respond to the recent murders only in terms of the desirability or otherwise of gun ownership is not only far too simplistic but part of the problem, for it perpetuates the notion that a solution is easy and therefore obviates the difficulty of societal self-reflection. The Huffington Post reports that just minutes after the news of this horrific tragedy, a tweet from the Westboro Baptist Church read, “God sent another shooter?” (Margie]Phelps) and then “Beautiful work of an angry God who told Wisconsin to keep their filthy hands off his people (WBC)! (Fred Phelps Jr). If our goal in discussing such events is to understand why they happen, we cannot afford to simply slate

both the shooter and his ideological supporters as suffering from “fringe madness”, or being mere “ignorant idiots”. What if “fringe” racism is actually an integral part of the mainstream?

The structures that mask and reinterpret systemic whiteness create a culture of invisibility that works to cast the gaze of suspicion on all those who are visibly different. How many in our society see blacks in the way Zimmerman viewed Trayvon Martin? How many frame Asians (like Page and Breivik), and Latinos (like those vigilantes who patrol the southern US border)? How many view the other as an *outsider* with an *unthought* suspicion that already legitimizes a level of violence and righteousness in equal measure? If these views are recognized as societally embedded, then we must ask what the trajectory is from which this asymmetrical *colonial/historical* difference has emerged – one that ensures the place of Euro-Americans as top-dog?

If one recalls that by the 1930s Europe had colonized 84.6% of the land surface of the entire globe (Loomba 1988), one cannot but begin to question the extent of the hegemony and homogeneity of this “modern/colonial world system” of the Western “first world” (Mignolo 2000; 2006). As others from the Global South (Latin America, Asia and Africa) have argued we need to reflect on what the *colonial* or *historical difference* is (Dussel 1996; Chakrabarty 2000; Mandair 2009) if we are serious in our analysis of the present that is more than ever bi-furcated by the *oppression of the privileged* and the *exploitation of the marginalized*. It is crucial to discover how secularity itself is inseparable from the religious culture out of which it emerged, just as modernity is constitutionally imbricated in colonialism.

Sikhs are not strangers to state-sponsored and orchestrated violence. Indeed, the fact that this shooting happened in a Gurdwara cannot but bring to mind the brutal desecration of the Akal Takht and the Harimandir Sahib by the Indian army in 1984 where thousands of innocent civilians were massacred. Given that the recent events at Oak Creek Gurdwara echo this collective trauma of 1984, there is then a peculiar sensitivity required in reflecting upon this horrible event, *and a renewed and desperate need to ask difficult and searching questions*. The Sikh community needs to resist the rush to placate social anxieties, as this is exactly how the secular state seeks to domesticate their political voice by co-opting it to a passive religio-secular liberalism. The persistent denial of the colonial foundations of modernity reinscribes a tragically uneducated view that the difference between developed and underdeveloped, first world and third world, north and the global south, the west and the rest, the superpowers and the powerless is somehow *natural, cultural* or *civilizational* – rather than the direct result of the violent epistemic and economic colonial and imperial projects of the Euro-American West. Though the language of civilized vs. barbaric may no longer be in vogue given the influence of cultural relativism, the colonial mindset resurfaces in the distinction drawn between secular rational moderns and irrational religious primitives.

This latter secular/religious distinction gained currency in the 19th century as European colonial powers classified their colonized subjects according to a newly constructed notion of religion as a general and universally applicable concept. Populations were organized and disciplined under the new nomenclature of “Hinduism”, “Buddhism”, “Jainism”, “Sikhism” et al from the vantage of a colonial epistemic gaze that simultaneously and exclusively reserved for European Christians a critical secular consciousness. Where colonizers were political rational agents, the colonized were perceived through the lens of irrational religious emotion, unable to think “critically” or “historically” given their attachment to

“myth”, “ritual”, “fantastic speculation” and “superstition”. An active recognition of this colonial legacy necessitates alternative modes of political engagement that relinquish the dominant knowledge/power of the secular west. It is through the institutionalization (via discourses of “religions” and “religious plurality”, “multiculturalism” and “cultural diversity”, “historical periods” and “rational civilizations”) that the denial of the West’s modern secular *colonial* culture of oppression and hate becomes normalized.

The Global South of Latin America, Africa and Asia have only been allowed to “enter” the West via a horizontal rhetoric of inclusivity, plurality and diversity. They have not been able to “engage as equals,” from the standpoint of their own epistemic and economic centers, for Western Euro-American culture has violently claimed for itself the voice of universal enunciation and value. The consequence is that white supremacy from above (institutional power) maintains the vertical hierarchy of the historical/colonial difference as foundational, which bursts with alarming and horrifying frequency in white supremacy from below (populist movements of hate). If it is the case (according to, Sahil Bhatia’s “Peter King Must Go” article in *Foreign Policy* August 10, 2012) that domestic terrorist attacks are more likely to be perpetrated by “white supremacist lone wolves” than Islamic extremists, then only the colonial/historical difference begins to explain why only the latter is pursued *as an organization and movement* and the former *as acts of “senseless individuals” gone AWOL*.

The hierarchical forms of power that are constituted by the colonial/historical difference need to be explored if we are not to elide this insidious racist disease of always translating the other from the perspective of the modern Western neo-liberal “first-world”. We need to discover a way of translating the others’ difference that allows the possibility of seeing in their very difference a revelatory voice. We need to seek a new frame of cultural comparativity where one’s difference is not perceived to be a threat or a virus but precisely that which enhances the whole that remains invisible otherwise. The haunting irony in this Oak Creek tragedy is that this is exactly what the Sikh Gurus achieved; their writings reflect a truth that is communicated through multiple voices, languages, castes, and diverse religious traditions. To be a Sikh one *needs* the other to be different. A Sikh’s own self-definition includes the other, because only together as a heterogeneous group do we get to glimpse the diversity of existence as a gift.

Justice without force is gainsaid, because there are always offenders. Collectively, then, we should embark on the project *to make what is just strong, and combine justice with force.* Or is this a project that we are simply *unable* to do? The history of the Sikh Gurus begs to differ. As the Sikh Gurus’ advised we should fear none and inspire none to fear, love the other and serve the other, learn from all and protect the other – even die for the other. But they also taught Sikhs to discipline or uproot those that persistently hate, pollute and tear apart life’s fabric. This ethical call is not only to be answered by a state scrutiny of white supremacist groups, but also of the structures, programs, laws, parties and state, academic and media institutions that profess tolerance but consciously or subconsciously provide cover and/or support for such groups. Particular crimes, and the wider discourses of hate that legitimize them, need challenging and dismantling – otherwise we are all complicit in aiding the unjust to gain strength and maintain power over the just.