

THE NURBAKHSI RELIGION IN BALTISTAN

Within Islam, the major religion in Pakistan, there are different factions: Shia, Sunni, Ismaili. Baltistan practices predominantly Nurbakhshi Shiism and Sufism, the latter being the majority among the Balti people of the eastern region, where the Hushe Valley is located.

This faith goes back to the Sufi order named after Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh (1392-1464), Iran (Tajikistan today) proclaimed him the mystic messiah in 1423. Until his death, Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh spread the faith by pilgrimage, but it was half a century later, under the leadership of Shams al-Din Iraqi, when Nurbakhshis achieved cultural dominance in Kashmir. Their joy was short lived, because in the middle of the sixteenth century, they were defeated by the Turcomongoles. Many of them sought refuge in mountainous Baltistan, where the inhabitants (mainly Buddhist Tibetans) managed continue their practices. As a result, the Nurbakhshi faith remains prevalent in this region.

Sufism, rather than a 'religion' as understood in the West, is a mystical practice. Try to understand the existential questions (What am I doing here? Why is there something and why is there nothing? What is the underlying logic of the world and myself? etc.) through personal internalisation. This means going beyond, or rather the 'here' of the ordinary mental processes, ie what we normally think about ourselves and reality. Practitioners say that those who practice the path will find the true reality at the end, which is called 'consciousness' or 'God' or any other terms (such as 'hypostasis' or 'original reality' would be out of any term or concept that I tried to grasp).

Sufism is characterized as the 'Way of the Heart': All efforts are focused on lead practitioner within the 'explosion of love', according to interpret and experience, is but the most intimate of God. This distinguishes it from other approaches working mystical emotional observation techniques (Buddhist vipassana meditation), mental observation (Zen Buddhism), or suspension of perceptions (Hindu and Tibetan mantras and prayers Christians).

At present, some Nurbakhshis present their version of Islam as an antidote to the violent Sunni-Shia confrontation (the main factions of Islam) which has intensified since the mid 80's. However, its practice is under attack as much as any of the branches of Islam. To understand this we must remember that Sufi mysticism came into being prior to the seventh century, the starting point of Islam. Practitioners are moulded to the new religious landscape, but not always able to maintain their practice in peace.

The truth is that both Sunni and Shia Sufis have been persecuted throughout history. It is because the mystic seeks direct realisation of the 'existential mystery' or 'God' and structured religions seek a realisation mediated by social forms and ceremonies that precisely target the leaders of religion, in other words the 'intermediaries of God'. Thus, their roads tend to be different. In this way, over the twentieth century, the Nurbakhshis have been submitted to 'Islamic normalization' that continues today, with the permissiveness of violence and even the participation of the state of Pakistan.

Nevertheless, the Balti maintain their cultural and religious idiosyncrasy (in addition to Islamic ways, Balti religion incorporates influences of Buddhism and Bon, a pre-Buddhist shamanistic religion.) It would be regrettable that the current 'Talibanization' of Pakistan and governmental responses to it,



which have already arrived in the region, ended up undermining the religion of the Balti, which is an admirable example of syncretic religious dialogue between cultures.

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