

When Guru Nanak Confronted Terrorism

*Gurmukh Singh (UK)**

* of UK Civil Service (Retd.) Sikh Ed. Welfare & Advancement (SEWA). Email: sewauk@hotmail.com

Address: 298 Norwood Road, Norwood Green, Southall, Middlesex UB2 4JH. UK.

As the 21st Century world faces terrorism in its many horrendous forms, we look to Guru Nanak's teachings for guidance. Born in 1469, on the eve of the age of discovery, Guru Nanak came to this world with a divine mission. His unique definition of the Creator laid the foundation for a model human society.

Guru Nanak and his successor nine Gurus translated this basic description of God called the *Mool Mantar*, into a harmonious life model for humankind. Freedom from fear and freedom from hatred are the two preconditions of this religio-social model. It is built on the three pillars of honest and truthful living, sharing with others and constant awareness of the Timeless God Being.

It is important that the independent and peace-loving ideology of the Guru is clearly understood by those who continue to confuse Sikhism with other world religions.

"I am absorbed in the perfect Light of the formless Lord, Who is without fear and without enmity." (Guru Nanak, Guru Granth Sahib p. 596)

Freedom from fear is a central and constant theme of Guru Nanak's teachings.

His founding precepts of a modern religious ideology were introduced on the eve of the Age of Discovery (circa 1500 CE). They were practiced and elaborated on by successor Sikh Gurus and saintly scholars of different religious backgrounds, and embodied in Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scriptures – a truly unique collation of universal truths for the benefit of modern plural societies.

In his own life-time, Guru Nanak challenged terrorism. He challenged infliction of fear, cruelty or oppression in any form and in any religious, social or political sphere of life. The root of this uncompromising challenge lies in Guru Nanak's unique concept of "God" which is as follows :

One Creator, Truth is His "Name" "the Creator being (*Purakh*)". Without fear, without hatred, Everlasting Unborn, Self-existent, realised through the Guru (i.e. through God's Grace, for God Himself is the Guru, the Teacher.)

In Sikhism, God is above gender classification. However, in Sikh teachings the human soul is required to cultivate feminine qualities of love, gentleness and longing in order to realise the Lord God. So, when God is described in the masculine gender as "*Purakh*", it is to accord with that concept only. All creation and all human beings are therefore equal before the One Lord, united in their diversity through longing for His love and ultimate union with Him.

Having defined "God" in the above founding formula of Sikh teachings, called the *Mool Mantra*, Guru Nanak was not particular about which name he used for "God". He referred to God by different names, which were commonly used in his time. The traditional Sikh name for God is "*Waheguru*" – the Wonderful Giver of Light, the Fount of all knowledge, the Teacher.

In Guru Nanak's founding precept (*Mool Mantra*) the two linked Godly qualifications of being without fear (*nirbhao*) and without animosity (*nirvair*), provide the human interface with God. These are the two qualities human beings can cultivate in their daily lives. They can experience God by being without fear or hatred and achieve the ultimate goal of this life. This goal, in the Sikh teachings, is to merge the individual egocentric self in the Universal God Being. To be at one with the One:

"God's devotee should be like God." (*Har jan aisa chahiay jaisa Har hi hoay.*)

(Guru Granth Sahib p. 1372)

According to the Ninth Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur, freedom from fear in daily life is achieved through the maxim "Frighten no-one and do not accept fear (in any form from any quarter)" (Guru Granth Sahib p.1427.)

Freedom from fear is achieved by clearing the mind of hatred and animosity. For that reason, in Guru Nanak's teachings, the two "without fear and without enmity" linked qualifications of a saintly being are usually bracketed together. There is nothing to fear because all is within God's creation and in His Will (*Hukam* in *Sikhism* and *Raza* in Islam). Hatred or distrust is the cause of conflict; it invites violence and breeds fear, and must be shunned. Hatred is usually rooted in ignorance, as in the case of current hate crimes against certain minority groups in the West.

Fear is a natural instinct and is always lurking in the dark corners of the human mind. Unfortunately, it has been freely exploited; and so has its more intense and overpowering form, terror. It is inflicted, or sometimes self-inflicted through ignorance, in many forms and in many spheres of our daily lives. There is terror which is overt or direct. Be it in the form of an invasion, as that of Babar, the Mughal invader, during Guru Nanak's time. Guru Nanak condemned the terror spread by Babar's invading army in strong language (Guru Granth Sahib p. 722). Babar repented after meeting Guru Nanak. Far worse form of terror has been inflicted on civilian populations in recent times through atom bombs, carpet bombing and, most recently, on 11th September, 2001, when innocent civilians were killed in large numbers by a form of suicidal fanaticism.

Religion has been misused for spreading both direct and indirect forms of terror. Religious fervour, turned into fanaticism, has been used for spreading subtle but equally destructive forms of fear or terror. Reward and fearful punishment mechanisms have been used in religious ideologies as overt or covert forms of terror. Guru Nanak's teachings rise above such practices and make freedom from fear and hatred essential for spiritual and social progress. The only concern (which may be equated to fear) in the human mind should be that of separation from the God Being. Selfless service, truthful and honest living and constant remembrance of God (within and without creation) to ensure that this does not happen. Remembrance of God is the heaven of

Guru Nanak, and forgetfulness the hell. To abide by His Will (*Hukam*), while living a fully participative and active life is to be in heaven. There is no other fear - of hell or heaven hereafter - for a Sikh.

Guru Nanak challenged religious terrorism in both, direct and indirect forms in no uncertain terms. He condemned religious fanaticism by preaching the underlying truth of every religion, he condemned the priesthood exploiting ignorance and superstition, he condemned prejudicial and oppressive practices like the caste system (and as third Guru Nanak, Guru Amardas, horrifying rituals like the "*Suttee*"); and as the Ninth Nanak stood like a rock against forced conversions of Hindus to Islam (bearing in mind that he had renounced the Hindu religion by refusing to wear the sacred thread and by condemning the oppressive caste system and rituals).

Therefore, in Guru Nanak's teachings (*Gurbani*), none who spreads fear or insecurity is spared, the king and his henchmen using terror as an administrative tool; the high caste priest using rituals, superstition and social divisions as his devices for exploitation; the corrupt religious judge selling judgements; and the religious fanatic who sought converts to own faith through force. And so he instilled a fearless spirit in his students, his Sikhs, and said:

"If you wish to play the game of (Lord's) Love, place your head on the palm of your hand (i.e. be fearless) and come my way." (Guru Nanak, GGS p. 1412.

The foundation of Guru Nanak's challenge to terrorism was thus laid. Thousands followed his path and defied terror robustly in any form or shape. That challenge of Guru Nanak is highly relevant today.

There are terrorist regimes around the globe. Terror has been used for enforcing demands or for maintaining control or supremacy. The terrorist attack on the US on 11th September 2001, and what we have seen in its aftermath, illustrate how terrorism works. We saw a terrorist attack on the innocent civilians of a country; and that was followed by a "War on terrorism". **We talk of a terrorist attack. And we continue to witness many examples of such attacks. We talk of a "War on terrorism". It takes only a slightly different view point for "War on terrorism" itself becoming a form of terrorism.** "Caesar is dead. Long live Caesar!". Suddenly the minorities in the West feel insecure. They find themselves under threat and terrorized by the majority communities. Those who even remotely look like the terrorists shown on TV get attacked. Hundreds of Muslims and Sikhs have been assaulted in the USA and incidents have been reported in the UK. A Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was one of those killed in such hate attacks in the USA.

Guru Nanak's emancipatory ideology continues to be under threat from overzealous religious missionaries seeking converts. Irresponsible leaflets from fringe Islamic groups which do not represent the true spirit of Islam, and the covert activities of some Hindu organizations (of which the Birmingham "*Ramkatha*" episode is the most recent example) fail to understand that "good fences make good neighbours in a diverse society". As we have seen in the Punjab, such predatory activities in the name of religion can lead to horrendous atrocities and human rights abuses.

Education removes distrust and fear. The Sikh religion and Islam preach acquisition of knowledge as a religious duty. Fear may be a natural instinct but freedom from fear requires knowledge of the environment and of the diverse religions and cultures around us.

Guru Nanak saw freedom from fear and animosity towards none, as the essential pre-condition of a successful plural society, which remains united despite its rich diversity. God's Creation is diverse and in that diversity we see only one reflection of the One Creator.

The main objective of Guru Nanak's challenge to terrorism is to teach humankind how to live in the spirit of 'fearing none and frightening no-one.' This challenge is directed at all political, social and religious systems, which use fear or terror for achieving own ends, thereby denying fellow human beings the God-given right to live in peace and with dignity.

