

A Sikh in America

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In Oct. 2008, Sikhs worldwide celebrated the 300th anniversary of the installation of Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhism's living Guru and central holy text.

When I came to this country in 1960, a mere half a dozen Sikhs lived in New York City. There were none in Oregon where I spent several years as a student. Now no major metropolitan area in North America is without a significant presence of the Sikh community.

Most Americans back then had never seen a Sikh, not many know about us even now. I conclude this from the post-9/11 reality when the bearded, turbaned visage of the Sikh is often mistaken on the street for a follower of Osama bin Laden, despite the fact Sikhs have nothing to do with Islam or with bin Laden. It gets us the most unwelcome attention.

When I came here I was a Sikh but with little feeling for Sikhism. My interest in it was driven largely by the fact that I lived in North America in an entirely non-Sikh milieu, and by the innumerable invitations to churches, synagogues and Bible study groups that came my way. And when non-Sikhs asked me questions, I had little to say that made sense to me, much less to others.

To me, Sikhism speaks of a reality that the senses cannot perceive and the intellect cannot fathom, but with which our inner self can commune. This reality transcends anything that science and technology can measure or formulate.

As in many other spiritual traditions, the "Word" is God. Our scripture - Guru Granth — opens with an alphanumeric devised by the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak. "Ik Oankar" combines the first primal number "one" with "Oankar," a word that stands for Creator or Doer. Thus it postulates one God, — not a partisan Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh God, but one that embraces all creation.

If I can see the oneness in the creator and creation, there is then absolutely no room for distinctions in race, caste, creed, gender, color or national origin. Differences between "them" and "us" vanish. Equality, liberty, fraternity and justice are inherent in that oneness. And, then, as the Guru Granth says, "I see no stranger or enemy."

Guru Granth is both timeless and universal, so it speaks to me today as it did to countless Sikhs centuries ago. It deliberately shies away from historical events, and absolutely refrains from dispensing specific edicts on particular moral choices, such as abortion, reproductive rights or other bioethical issues.

The idea is not a God who micromanages our existence. In life, many dilemmas test us and new issues of life and death will demand our attention. Our response will evolve with time and technology in a changing world.

Guru Granth does not provide me a 'sin quotient' for every infraction committed or contemplated. It gives me not cut-and-dried solutions as in a catechism or an easily-swallowed pill, but an ethical framework rooted in spiritual values within which to

navigate my way. **This places all responsibility and accountability squarely on the follower.**

To me, Guru Granth has moral clarity and the vocabulary to express it without maudlin oversimplification or self-righteous hubris. It gives life an inner centering, reverence, reason, hope, and calmness in action.

Even though the best prayer is honest self-effort, the results are pure grace (nadar), like manna from heaven.

Faith, to some, is panacea; to others it is placebo. To me, it is embracing the uncertainty that is life, while knowing in the gut a visceral universal presence and oneness. This, then, becomes walking in the shadow of God, or a life in "hukam".

Sikhism asks of us a productive family life of honest effort and sharing its rewards with others, while holding on always to an awareness of the Infinite within us.

Much of the Guru Granth is in verse that is sung to the strains of classical Indian musicology. The poetry remains some of the most romantic, and speaks of a reality that transcends our puny existence.

My faith and engagement with the Guru in the Granth remains everlasting. Sikhism is now inseparably integrated into everything I think, do or feel — at work or at play.

After almost half a century of living in America, I see that just as it is possible to be a good Jew, or a good Christian and a good American at the same time, it is similarly possible to be a good Sikh and a good American. Despite some disquieting post 9/11 experiences, the two ideas are not mutually exclusive.

