

Understanding Sikh Ethos: A View from the West

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@We are delighted to note that the writer is a young man with his cultural roots firmly embedded in the Sikh faith. - Ed. SR

There are few religions that can claim to truly be accepting of other religions. The linear religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their pure forms reject any and all other religions as means to salvation. Buddhism while not claiming to be the only path, does not claim other wise. Finally we come to the Bah'ai faith, which claims that all the world in one and all its people are one. In fact Baha'u'llah a prophet of the Bah'ai Faith said

"Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind". (his kind being the Humankind)

In fact, the Baha'is believe that God has sent different prophets throughout the ages as messengers. While this does indeed seem to be the ultimate statement of acceptance of all religions, even this acceptance has been defined. The accepted Prophets have been listed. They are : Adam (? BCE), Abraham (? BCE), Moses (1456 BCE), Krishna (1249 BCE), Zoroaster (1000 BCE), Buddha (757 BCE), Jesus Christ (34 CE), Mohammad (613 CE), The Bab (1844 CE) and Baha'u'llah (1863 CE)

So we see that it is indeed hard to find a religion that is all 'inclusive'. Yet when we look at Sikhism we see that it does not define its acceptance by specifically telling us who is right and wrong, or which religions are true and which false...which prophets are God's and which not. The Guru is very simple, he says, "ਜਿਨੀ ਨਾਮੁ ਧਿਆਇਆ ਗਏ ਮਸਕਤਿ ਘਾਲਿ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਤੇ ਮੁਖ ਉਜਲੇ ਕੇਤੀ ਛੁਟੀ ਨਾਲਿ ॥"

Those who have meditated on the Naam, the Name of the Lord, and departed after having worked by the sweat of their brows— O Nanak, their faces are radiant in the Court of the Lord, and many are saved along with them! ||1||

It doesn't matter. Be a Jew, be a Christian, be a Muslim, be a Buddhist, be a Zoroastrian, be *whatever* you want to be. But remember God, and be honest and hard working.

As if this wasn't enough, the Guru went beyond the call of duty, and included the writings of other religious leaders within the Guru Granth Sahib, and declared those writings to be sacred.

So with such an amazing Universal and uniting message – why is it that Sikhs are still looked upon as followers of extreme Islamic sects? Why is it that no one really knows what exactly we believe in?

Recently, there was a road rage incident involving racist remarks towards a Sikh man, in Brampton. The very place that is known as a smaller Punjab. If we couldn't spread the word in such a densely Sikh area such as that, what exactly are we doing wrong? Nothing-that's what. We are doing nothing, and that is exactly what is causing the problems.

We are not spreading the "word"-so to speak. We are not integrating and helping other understand our religion. If we really were doing job worthy of any sort of praise, why would a reporter from CNN film Dixie Rd. Gurdwara, and call it a mosque on national television?

I cannot deny the fact that there are some absolutely amazing groups doing amazing work. The Sikh Coalition and others have been working literally day and night to give the Sikh community a voice. But how much can they do alone? We need to levee en masse! EVERY Sikh should have simple flyers explaining their religion in their cars at ALL times.

Give it to police officers, to customs officers, bus drivers, anyone at all.

Further, we as Sikhs need to learn that Gurdwaras are not just for controversial elections, fights, court cases, the daily dose of kirtan or paath, or even Punjabi classes. While some of those are very important there is also another calling for our houses of worship. While serving our community spiritually we must learn to use Gurdwaras as Houses of enlightenment for *non* Sikhs. Let every Gurdwara have special literature. Let every Gurdwara participate and even HOST mulifaith Dialogues.

In fact, it should be incumbent upon our Gurdwaras, to have flyers, leaflets, and pamphlets ready at all times, for anyone to take and keep at hand, to take to work, school, or anywhere else. Our Gurdwaras should be our community centres, where we congregate not only to listen or eat more free food, but to also forge bonds between ourselves and our community and *educate* ourselves and *others* of our religion.

It is unfortunate that we rarely use our Gurdwaras for these practical purposes. Once while attempting to host an interfaith program at a Gurdwara, and giving a tour, there were a few of elderly men and women who were unaccustomed to sitting on the ground. When a few sevadaars brought seats for them to sit on at the back, they were immediately verbally attacked. Seats in the diwan hall? Not a chance! Seats in the langar hall? Absolutely not! We as Sikhs show that everyone is EQUAL, so every one MUST sit on the ground.

Wait a second – let's look at this historically. The people who were trying to understand our religion, taking time out of their busy schedules to create a bridge between communities were quite elderly and mostly from European decent. While us Sikhs enjoy claiming our religion is the most equal of all, and the earliest of religions to command such a thing, these very same people had been *practicing* equality of people *much* longer than we had. The simple difference is this: In Europe, the climate did not allow for comfortable sitting on the ground, but rather, everyone sat on chairs at tables. In India, the heat made it much *more* comfortable to sit on the cool ground. Sikhism is a religion of values and beliefs, not customs and culture, and it is important that we understand that letting a few elderly people sit on chairs is not in any way degrading to our religion. Rather, if anything we are doing it a service by making others who wish to learn of our religion feel comfortable doing so. We as Sikhs can claim a lot but all in theory, while our fellow Canadians had already been practicing it. We speak of equality as if we embody it in everything we do, while one has but to ask an Amritdhari Sikh's name, and we are kept waiting to hear the Guru's gift of Singh, or Kaur. Instead we hear Bains, Randhawa, Gill, Mann, Bajwa, Chawala, Grewal, Sidhu, Parmar, Sodhi, etc. While we are still slaves to our castes and are proud of our *status*, these were the same people who put equality in the charter and actually made the effort to practice it. And even when there was a social difference, it wasn't nearly as horrendous and sickening as the divide that still exists today by the name of the Caste System in our community.

And yet we as Sikhs are just too stuck on our morals to allow an elderly person to sit on a chair because all are equal? Is the irony blinding anyone else?

After this very same event, a gentleman who has a Punjabi radio and television show, made the comment that – all we were doing was following around white people and trying to make sure they were comfortable, as if they were superior to us in some way. He felt that by going out of our way and doing this, we were somehow lowering our status.

That is exactly the type of ignorant thinking that we as a community must learn to overcome. When my family went to a synagogue for an interfaith exchange, we had people with top professions staying after the service, and explaining the very details of their devotional practices. They gave us a tour and invited us to dine with them afterwards.

Needless to say, providing such a service was not considered degradation in any way, shape or form. If anything, it was a form of progress.

Another factor that we need to consider important, is the idea of having a status in our national community other than just rich professionals, or cab drivers, or extremist terrorists. Every year we remember the tragic events of 1984. We honour those who died so unnecessarily. We lament the "Sikh Genocide". But is that the only reason we are sad? Because it is a *Sikh* genocide? Or is it the Genocide that we are so horrified by? I should hope that it is the fact that a Genocide occurred, and not just because it was Sikh.

I should sincerely hope that we are saddened and horrified by the very fact that human rights just ceased to exist for anyone, not just because it happened to Sikhs.

So if that is the case are we as a community living under a rock? Over 800,000 people died in Rwanda. How many will have to die and suffer in Sudan before we notice? We need to fight for all of the worlds other genocides and massacres. Only when we start to fight for the rights of others (as true Sikhs always should), will we be recognized on that world scale. We must give to receive. If we see human rights violations in Chechnya, Israel, Africa, or any where else in the world, we must rally together as Sikhs and show the world that we will not stand for it. We must show the world that we as Sikhs know what its like to be targeted, for genocide, to be to be treated like second class citizens, in our own country, to be plotted against by our very own government. We Sikhs know how that feels, and we should not let it happen to others! Once we show the world that we really do care, only then can we show them why we care. We can show them how our young Sikhs are being arrested and tortured arbitrarily by a corrupt police, how we STILL have not received justice for government organized riots, and literally thousands of murders.

It is important to take part in holocaust memorial days, join human rights groups such as Amnesty International, and fight for the rights of others. We must, I repeat MUST, defend our dignity, faith and honour, but we must ALSO fight for those who cannot defend themselves.

We can find no greater example in the world, than that of our ninth Guru, who showed true selfless service and sacrifice to Humanity, regardless of religion.

Guru Teg Bahadur showed us that we must always rally together to help anyone in need, even if we have nothing to do with it. If it isn't our problem we should make it our problem. Let it be so that when a Sikh walks anywhere in the world, people say, "Look! There is a defender of human rights – There is a defender of *My Rights*". Through helping others achieve justice, we will receive it ourselves. A Buddhist proverb summarizes this idea very thoroughly, "When you light a lamp for someone else, it will also brighten your path".

What path? Along side helping those in need, we are also helping ourselves by making ourselves known as a community that is ever vigilant in the fight against the oppression of human rights. This is one of the strongest ways to build bridges.

We must learn as a society that we have to make compromises. We have to make sacrifices of a different sort in order to spread the word. *We* need to build the bridges. Or at least start. We need to put in more of an effort than most because *WE* are the ones who are the easy targets. Not the Muslims. Us. We wear turbans, we keep the beards. Spread the word to the rest of society. Tell them we do not belong to the Taliban. We are not Al Qaeda. We are not even from the Middle East. We are Sikhs!

On the sixth anniversary of 9/11 in 2007 let's remind ourselves of this need to help understand and participate. Let us, as a community, take a vow not only to remember *shaheeds*, and to celebrate *gurpurabs*, and to have *kirtan darbars* and conferences. Let us take the vow that we *will spread the Guru's message*.

