

From Tragedy to Triumph

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On the morning of September 11, 2001, terrorists toppled the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Over a year later we are still sifting through the debris, unsure of how many were killed; it was surely in the thousands. In the face of such unprecedented destruction probably committed in the name of God and a religion (Islam) that truly eschews such violence, the first questions that any man of religion might ask, would be: Why would a compassionate merciful God permit such injustice against innocent people and how should a man of God act? In our response to such a tragedy what is vengeance or revenge and what is justice?

Investigators and the media quickly laid the responsibility at the door of Arab terrorists, primarily the followers of Osama bin Laden. In their anger many Americans, forgetting their own tradition of tolerance and the humanity common to us all, targeted Arabs and Muslims, Sikhs, and in general, anyone who was brown-skinned or wore a turban. Last year Sikhs saw their businesses and their places of worship (*gurdwaras*) vandalized and ordinary Sikhs harassed on the streets. One Sikh was shot dead at his business; his assailant, at his arrest, shouted, "I am a patriot, a damn American all the way".

Sikhism is a young religion that started in India only 500 years ago. From 1469 with the birth of the founder Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, ten Gurus guided its development. An independent revealed religion, its core beliefs are: one God common to all creation, to be discovered by service to humanity, and a belief system free of ethnic, caste, racial and gender discrimination. As the fifth largest religion it now has a vibrant worldwide presence of 22 million; close to half a million Sikhs live in North America.

Sikhs have no connection to the belief or practice of Osama bin Laden. More importantly, to target any ethnic group or religion (Muslim or Sikh, Indian or Middle Eastern) for revenge is morally indefensible and reduces us to the level of the terrorist. Our common enemy is not Islam, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism or any one of a number of ways of faith, but intolerance, hatred and fanaticism.

I leave the question of why such terrorism occurs to the theologians. My belief would be that God loves us so that he grants us the free will to make choices between good and evil, including behaviour that is entirely, reprehensibly sinful.

But in the aftermath of that day there are lessons for living that are surely in God's will and should guide us. In the Sikh scripture, Guru Nanak counsels us to look at adversity and suffering as a cure and a panacea, and at a life of luxury - as an affliction. I think it was because he saw that comfort often inures us to the pain of others and to the lessons of life, while suffering may bind us to the humanity that is our common reality.

The idea is not much different from Shakespeare's thought when he declaimed that "Sweet are the uses of adversity, which like a toad, ugly and venomous, yet bears a precious jewel in its head". Out of untold suffering can emerge a bond with humanity and a feeling for others, a capacity to look beyond the self.

The crime of the terrorists against humanity was horrendous and people are anxious for justice or revenge. What does Sikhism recommend?

All religions teach peace and forgiveness and so does Sikhism. I say this though I fully recognize that revenge is a form of wild justice. Also it is easy to preach forgiveness from the comfort of safety; the only person who has the right to do so is the one in the trenches, one who has suffered injustice. Until one has walked in those shoes, one has little right to pass judgment.

Yet the question has broader implications. What says Sikh history and religion to the concept of revenge? Should one turn the other cheek? If so, when and for how long? The question is not just theoretical. One needs to ponder over the subtle difference between justice and revenge and wrestle over the need for justice to be tempered with compassion and mercy.

Revenge wants an eye for an eye, even though such a policy would surely leave the protagonists blinded. Revenge says, "You killed my son, so your son must die." Justice says, "You killed my son, so you must pay for your crime". Justice and avenging wrongs have a place in Sikh philosophy, pure revenge does not. Often the distinction gets lost in the heat of anger but it remains crucial. The Sikh Gurus, particularly the sixth Guru Hargobind and the tenth Guru Gobind Singh demonstrated how these difficult choices are made.

To avenge an injustice is not the same thing as to take revenge. These are similar words with a world of difference. Some readers will miss the forest for the trees. Revenge, even though it is wild justice, shoots wildly; justice aims exactly - and exactingly. In seeking justice it is important that retribution and terrorism do not set up a vicious cycle where they feed upon each other. Sikh ethics hold for strict accountability.

From the beginning, justice has been a cornerstone of Sikh teaching. Justice cannot be compromised. Guru Nanak's God is a just God but also a merciful one, not an angry or vengeful God. Therefore, throughout its history Sikhism has differentiated between justice and revenge and tempered justice with mercy.

The tenth Sikh Master, Guru Gobind Singh clearly delineated revenge from justice in *Zafarnamah* – an oft-quoted and much admired philosophic epistle that he wrote to the despotic emperor of India in the early eighteenth century. In it he clearly discussed alternatives available to people seeking redress.

His conclusion was that when all other means have failed it is just and rightful to take to the sword. He was not a pacifist and no Sikh can ever be, but his life and writings lay down strict conditions for war. Non-violent methods of conflict resolution must be first exhausted. Do not go looking for war; it must be thrust upon you. Weapons are not to be picked up lightly; they must be used only under strict discipline and after grave and serious consideration. Non-violent

alternatives must always continue to be explored even during war. And arms must be laid down as soon as feasible alternatives appear.

Even so, justice and forgiveness remain at the core of all actions. For Sikhs these are not mere teachings, they are requirements of the faith to be seen every moment of every day. As Albert Camus reminds us, "There is no need to hang about waiting for the Last Judgment – it takes place every day."

It is well to remember that though the mills of God grind slowly, they grind exceedingly fine. The thought expressed in the Bible that "Whatever a man soweth so shall he reap is repeatedly and powerfully expressed in the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth.

In a paean to a God common to all humanity, Guru Gobind Singh said:

"As out of a single fire,
Millions of sparks arise;
So from God's form emerge all creation,
Animate and inanimate."

He further declared:

"He is in the temple as in the mosque In the Hindu worship as in the Muslim prayer, Men are one, though they appear different; The *Abhekh* of the Hindus and the *Allah* of Muslims are one. The one Lord made them all."

The Sikh congregational prayer recited everyday by every Sikh, and in every Sikh place of worship, asks a merciful God for the boon of discerning and critical thinking and for the betterment of all humanity, irrespective of religion, race, gender, color or ethnicity.

Perhaps in such universality of thought and prayer lies the way to transcend fanaticism, hatred and intolerance.

