

# How Sikhism can flourish in the West

**ANONYMOUS\***

*\* The writer is an African-American Sikh lady who prefers to remain anonymous.*

FIRST, I WANT TO STATE CLEARLY, MY family and I are very thankful to be baptised followers of the Sikh religion. We have no problems with Sikhism at all, except for the exclusionary behavior of the majority of congregations all over the world. So, as you read what I write, please don't think: well, they dislike the religion — Because that is far from the truth. And, I want you to know that:

Retxab is right about this, because I was a Bahai (who grew up as a Christian and became a Bahai later). My husband was a Bahai when we met too. There is a lot of racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity in the Bahai Faith, which was founded by Persians and began in Iran. When I first started studying Sikhism, I searched high and low to find out if “Bab” had met the Sikh Gurus or followers of the Gurus along the way, but too many centuries were between them for that to have happened. You see, Sikhism and Bahaism have some similarities that caused me to think this had occurred.

Being introduced to a non-Persian and Persian Bahai is a lot easier than being introduced to a Sikh. I just find it odd that Sikhism was out there all along; and, if someone had just walked up, or left information lying around, while I was searching for a religion that incorporated what I was looking for during those decades, I would have been a Sikh in the 1980s. I went to the Hindu temples, Buddhist temples, Sathya Sai Baba services, Suma Ching Hai services, God Realization Center and, in between all these, the non-denominational Christian and Unity churches. (I did these over two decades — All along searching and not finding)

I remember my weekly visits to the New Age Bookstore and other Alternative Bookstores to look at their boards with listings of all the religious places of worship in the hope of finding what I was looking for in the 1980s. Many of the places I went to for worship, I was approached by an individual, saw it on the board, saw a booklet or pamphlet lying around, and/or just saw information about it on bookshelves (in bookstores).

No one ever tried to convert me though, but they were kind enough to make me feel welcomed. The Sathya Sai Baba female inmates at the services I attended weekly came once a week with Indian saris and dresses; and, took me to a room to show me how to wear them. I never ever requested these items, they just gave them to me. And, I definitely was not dressing in an indecent manner, I was respectfully dressed. Plus, they offered a notebook, with English translations and transliterations, so that visitors could do the prayers and sing the songs. As a repeated visitor, I was allowed to keep the notebook (which were just copies of the aforementioned items).

But, even up to May of 2002, not one Sikh had approached me and I had not met any Sikhs — I now know they were in the city I lived in too. And I never saw books about Sikhism in bookstores or university campuses, or posted information about the local Gurdwaras or pamphlets/booklets on Sikhism. A Nigerian friend of mine recently found out about the Sikh religion from me; and, when I described how Sikhs dress, she remembered a classmate of hers in Chiropractic College who dressed that way. I asked her if he let others know what his religion was during those years;

and, she told me she spoke to him regularly, because their class was small and he never told anyone in the class about the Sikh religion.

**Even now, if I am out and I see Sikhs, I have to approach them — They never approach my family or me. Now really, I am dressed with all 5 Ks on, including my turban; and, both my husband and son are obviously Sikhs too. Yet, we always have to walk up and speak to other Sikhs first. It simply baffles me!**

Our other friends, and even strangers, from other faiths and religions tend to walk up and speak if we don't see them first. Even our Jehovah Witnesses friends, knowing good and well we have decided to be Sikhs instead of Jehovah Witnesses, still speak to us outside our home — They don't even give us goodies unless we request or set up time for study. They just see us as people who have accepted God in our lives and worship accordingly.

When strangers ask me about what I am wearing, I tell them about the Sikh religion; and, I even tell them where they can find out information on the web. For those very interested, I hand them a pamphlet. I don't want others ending up the way I did with years (decades) of searching for something that is unseen and unheard of on this planet, at least I thought so, because time was not taken by the followers of the Sikh religion to post pamphlets on boards in schools (colleges and universities) and alternative bookstores-etc., set up tables on the college campuses and universities as secular and religious groups (who are students) do, and place books in bookstores, such as Borders, etc.

When one finds out about the Bahai Faith and demonstrates curiosity, people answer their questions. They tell where their place of worship is being held so that if they decide to know more, they can go to the Bahai place of worship. They invite interested people to their socials and gatherings for activities and fun. No one ignores them when they visit the Bahai place of worship; and, willingly meet the guests at a location and take them to the place or pick them up.

When visitors/guests visit, the people are very welcoming and nice. They tend to speak the language of the country they visit, or live in, along with their Farsi language. People don't go to a service and hear only Farsi language spoken, prayed (chanted) and sung — They tend to do both, because there are still the elderly who cannot speak or understand English (or, whatever the other countries' languages are) very well.

No one, not even other religions, tell guests, seekers, and visitors: "No, we can't speak your language through translators or find the books. That's against our religion and shows disrespect to the Guru Granth Sahib and congregation. It is wrong to translate the *Bani* prayers and Guru Granth. Just try to learn Punjabi. It's easy." Other religions don't have visitor and guests sit through 1 to 2 hrs. of service not understanding what is being said, prayed, or sung.

Baha'u'llah and Abdul'Baha (the founders of the Bahai religion along with the Bab) wrote their own writings and plans for the religion used by the Bahai Faith today; and, they too were horribly persecuted by the Islamic leaders and, like Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, did not refuse to help others understand, learn, and practice. Many of their writings and prayers are translated and placed in an orderly manner (with table of contents at the beginning); and, it is not difficult to find the

writings or contact the Bahai headquarters in each country in order to obtain the books, magazines, pamphlets, videotapes, music, etc. One does not have to even buy them, because of the generosity of the Bahais to those seeking - and finally finding.

Though, I do remember a negative incident where I was a new Bahai in a new city; and, I went to my first service there. I was excited. **When I went there, no one spoke to me and the entire service was in *Farsi* — No effort was made to translate for the non-Farsi speakers. I knew nothing of what was going on or said during the service; and, I felt bad because I was stared at as well.** I called my former city and Bahai community and spoke to the Persians who sat on the committee. The first question they volleyed at me was, “The majority of the people were Persian, right?” I said, “Yes.” They heard my story patiently and asked numerous questions. **Unbeknownst to me they called the committee members of the city immediately, because that week, the secretary (in the new city) who was out of town during that incident, called and apologized and asked me to return, because henceforth it was not going to be the same. He told me he was furious when he heard what happened from my former community. He told me the committee would have a meeting and things would change.**

Sure enough, that month, there were translators (of the Bahai teenagers and youth) so that everyone could understand the service. And, when I walked in, I was welcomed and treated nicely along with the other non-Farsi speaking non-Persians in the congregation. After that, I noticed the same in the other surrounding communities, because doors opened where many people were inviting non-Persians more to their homes during the time I was there. Even one Persian family, who lived in a mansion, had Friday night discussions and music. Many people came from all over mostly new Bahais, non-Persians, and non-Bahais. There was food and fun. Professional musicians were invited to come and sing; as well as Bahai speakers and writers. And, each month, without anyone really talking to individuals, people walked up to the hosts of the weekly gatherings and privately said they wanted to become a Bahai and what needed to be done.

#### **Need of the hour:**

**There was no converting, harassing, intimidating, scaring, etc. This is called sharing with interested people and those still learning. And, this is an example of how followers of the Sikh religion can share with others about their religion.**

Just like other religions, there were study guidebooks or gatherings for just reading and studying the Holy Books. When I, as a seeking and learning Sikh, asked about the study groups and study guidebooks for reading and studying the Guru Granth Sahib, I was told there were none or the group was conducted only in Punjabi. Though I love reading the Guru Granth Sahib (translation and transliteration), it is a hard task to read when you are new and there is no table of contents or study guide for searching, researching, and learning. Plus, it is quite expensive to purchase and hard to find, as well as the *Banis* that offer translations and transliterations. None of the local bookstores ever heard of it and when they conducted a search, I was blown away by the price. The people at the bookstores said they were sorry, and as a substitute, they had the Bible, Koran, Torah, etc. “Will

these work?" They would ask. Thank God, I found sikhnet.com and a host of other websites offering Guru Granth Sahib online along with the *Banis*. What a boon the internet is!

**A Sikh seeker is really on his/her own, because no one helps even when one calls and asks. It is quite a difficult, sad, and lonely road to travel — The journey is not easy because nobody helps seekers and new Sikhs find the resources, etc. Other religions do not do this to the seekers of their religion. This is just not right and conducive for helping others understand, show interest in, and/or even become a Sikh.**

The Sikh religion is the religion Guru Nanak founded - and the other Gurus built upon to make it solid and firm — **It is a religion to help people to become closer to God and live as God wants. The founders of the religion just happened to be Indian and from Punjab. Being culturally Indian and/or Punjabi is not the same as being of the Sikh religion and being Sikh — The Religion is for God's purpose to draw others closer and give guidelines on following and being with and of God, not becoming an Indian and/or Punjabi.**

The religion was created for humanity through humans, on behalf of God, to benefit all of humanity all over the Green planet.

Those who follow the Sikh religion, just like the Bahai religion, Muslim religion, Buddhist religion, Christian religion, etc. are spread all over the planet for a reason and for a purpose. Followers of the Sikh religion definitely should not convert, much less harass people, but they definitely should not hide the teachings, writings, songs, study, and *amrit* baptism of Guru Nanak's and the other Gurus on behalf of God inside their own culture, , and ethnicity preventing others from seeing it (Sikh religion), hearing it (Sikh religion), speaking it (Sikh religion), learning it (Sikh religion), becoming it (Sikhs), and practicing it (Sikh religion).

This means the Indian and/or Punjabi Sikhs the world over can readily do the same — It doesn't take months or years to change the simple ways of doing things from cultural, ethnic, and castes (considering Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh have already set out the guidelines clearly) if the followers of the Sikh religion really want to change things for the benefit of God, the religion, visitors/guests, and new Sikhs, on behalf of God and out of respect for the founders. It maybe difficult, but it is not impossible.

If the Bahai Faith, which is the youngest newly founded religion; and, the other religions can open their doors to others from diverse backgrounds when they move to and live in other countries, then surely the Sikh religion can do the same.

For God's sake, even the American born African-American founder of the Nation of Islam that is currently overseen by Louis Farrakhan overcame exclusionary practices along with obstacles; and, now allow every racial, ethnic, and cultural group to join. He speaks many languages; and, doesn't let that keep others out either. This definitely opened the door for other diverse groups who were seeking too.

**Now, if Louis Farrakhan can change his ways and ideas; and, open the door to every group no matter what their race, ethnicity, and culture, then, surely,**

**the caretakers (congregation) of the Sikh religion, on behalf of God and the founders, can do the same in every country they live in.**

**[Courtesy: Dr. Harbans Lal]**

