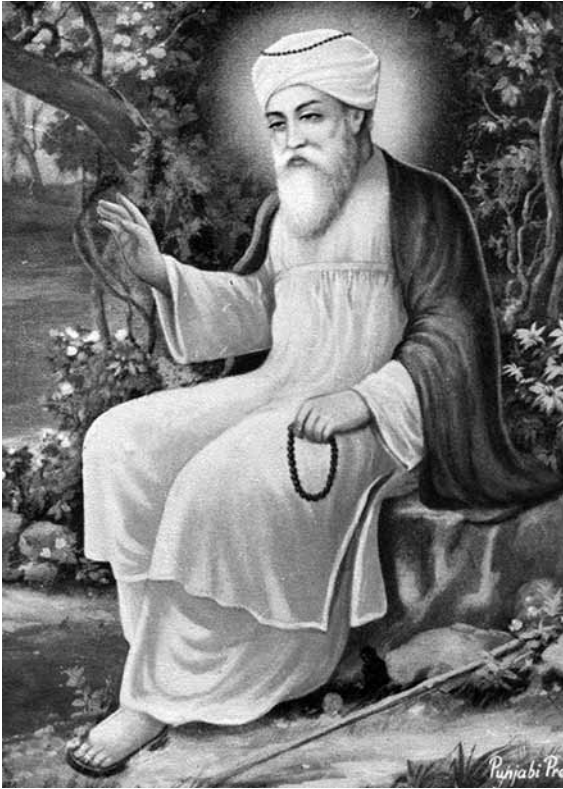


“There is No Enemy; None is the Other”

promoting Sikh-Christian mutuality

CHRISTIAN VAN GORDER



Guru Nanak; photo courtesy, Punjabi Press

The quotation: “There is no enemy, none is the other, and a sense of universal brotherhood has come to me” was a revelation from Guru Nanak (1469-1539) that has powerful implications for Sikhs and Christians today.¹ It speaks of a powerful re-framing of traditional categories that, in our modern context, often promote enmity and hatred between people. Guru Nanak calls all of us to re-envision the “other” and to see each other as co-sharers of the exact same source of the grace of a loving God. When “one is filled with God’s eternal love there is no room for the limiting chains of seeing your fellow children of God as the “other”.

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Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world today and its 24 million adherents stretch around the globe, although the vast majority of Sikhs,

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14 million, live in either the Punjab of modern India or the Commonwealth nations of the former British Empire. The Sikh Diaspora is so widespread that many Sikhs joke that shortly after Neil Armstrong began to walk on the surface of the moon in 1969, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around to see a man with a turban and huge beard ask, “Taxi, Sahib?” Over one million Sikhs live in North America. Except for the Punjab, to be a Sikh means that one is, in the words of the American Dr. I. J. Singh, “ordained to remain in a minority.”² Guru Nanak, the founder, of the Sikh religion began to teach his message in the late 1490s in a decidedly multireligious milieu. Two hundred years later, the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh founded the “order of the pure” on Baisakhi Day in April, 1699. Sikh scriptures are unique in that they include contributions from Muslims and Hindus as well as Sikhs. For David Cheetam: “This sends a powerful message about the acceptance of the spirituality that is present in other faiths.”³

The new community of learners at the feet of the Guru lived in the cultural crossroads of the Punjab and more than

half of all Sikh history since that time has been framed in what George Lipsitz calls the “productive, destabilizing and frequently dangerous sites of cross-cultural collision, contest, and change”

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within the web of a British Empire rooted in the historic Christian tradition.⁴ Interpreters of the Sikh tradition to the larger world were also entombed within the consequential presuppositions of both British colonial policies and Christian missionary perspectives. The term *Sikh* is best translated to be those who are “learners”. There is a pressing need in religious studies today to move beyond pasquinades about the Sikh faith, often rooted in nothing more than uncontextualized textual studies to look at this faith with fresh perspectives.⁵ There is also little benefit in those studies which assert how our various faiths are distinct; a fact which should be obvious to all. This paper has far more modest goals than declarations about similarities or differences: I will explore how the study of contemporary Sikh-Christian relations can foster a spirit of learning on the part of Christians as they confront their own assumptions about the “otherness” of those who call themselves Sikhs and to encourage Christians to learn from Sikh teachers something of their intense devotion to God, the Greatest Guru.

One of the issues that Christians sometimes raise when discussing their

encounters with Sikhs is the style of Sikh dress, Sikh beards and flowing hair, and a composite sense of Sikh “otherness”. Stereotypical responses see the Sikhs as a combination of “saint and soldier”.⁶ A confident and mature character is

not threatened by concerns about being seen by others to be different. Sikhism teaches that one can practice the “fundamentals” of the faith without resorting to fundamentalist intolerance. Guru Nanak taught that people should not relate to others with a sense of superiority when he confronted the underlying logic of an inequitable Hindu caste system: “How are you

a Brahman and I low caste? Is it that I have blood in my veins and you have milk?”⁷ Teachers can confront thoughts that students have about Sikh “otherness” by helping non-Sikhs to appreciate the ways that they themselves are different. It was certainly the case that

the first Europeans that the Sikhs met in India were seen to be “implausible”: the British were “so incredibly red-faced and dressed in such quaint clothes displaying their bottoms so indecently...their women went about barefaced in equal-

ly incredible clothes and spoke to strangers with the confidence of men.”⁸

A sense of “otherness” between Sikhs and their neighbors has often resulted in periods of tremendous suffering throughout Sikh history and an obvious strength and resilience in the midst of sometimes unimaginable suffering. Christians who worship Christ, who died a martyr’s

death on the cross as an act of love, can easily understand this theme of redemptive suffering. The poet Narain Singh explained of lives that “If you want to play the game of love, approach me with your head on the palm of your hand.”⁹ Life is compared to the fragrant



Violence; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

branches of a sandalwood tree marred by the presence of snakes which must be confronted.¹⁰ All of us must wear the clothes of both pleasure and pain. One beautiful line of Sheikh Farid explains: “I thought I alone suffered, but oh! The whole world is overtaken by grief. From the house-top, each abode is equally set on fire.”¹¹

One must not only know about God with cognitive insight but “enjoy God” and experience a state of bliss (anand).

In their history, first Muslims, then British Christians, and more recently, Indian Hindus have unleashed violence on Sikh communities (*quam* – literally, “those who stand together) seeking to “destroy the future.”¹² Countless Sikhs were asked to choose between a forced conversion to Islam or death. Those men who refused the force of such hateful religious bigotry had their beards shaved and hair shorn before they were killed. Sikh women were sometimes forced by Muslim militants to wear necklaces in public made from the chopped up limbs of their small children.¹³ Horrific events such as the hellish entombment of two Sikh children, ages 9 and 7 into a wall after being beheaded by Wazir Khan on the 13th of Poh, Sambat 1762, can never be forgotten.¹⁴ Sikhs are called to a life of peace with all but are obligated to “raise the sword only in the defense of truth” and only as a last resort in the protection of their communities.¹⁵ Mahmood writes that the “landscape

of the Punjab, saturated with so much blood, is also in Sikh minds fragrant with the scent of jasmine.”¹⁶

Sikh martyrs (*shahid*) have suffered so much at the hands of Muslim attackers that their lives offer a particular lesson to contemporary Christians living within Muslim majority contexts who have often faced persecution. These two communities have often found themselves, to use a Sikh proverb, “sailing in two boats”. Beginning with a perspective of appreciation and met by oppression, the “Sikhs had no intention of becoming serfs under Muslim masters” and chose to defend themselves.¹⁷ Sikh responses accentuate both the potential beauty of devotion expressed by sincere Muslims and recognition of the potential brutality that can be unleashed by Muslims who are arrogant and intolerant. Sikhs and Christians are also united in their shared experience of living as minorities within Pakistan.¹⁸ The unique prism for interfaith understanding that Sikhism holds about Islam and Muslims offers Christians a creative and balanced perspective in our present context where Christian-Muslim interactions are either of empty theatrics filled with glowing platitudes or dire warnings preached by some about the inherent malevolent nature of all Muslims.

Christians who harbor a sense of “otherness” toward Sikhs have lost sight of a deeper way of seeing rooted in Biblical revelation. Both Sikhism and Christianity have long traditions in mystical reflection. Sikhism mysticism is not other-worldly but teaches that the presence of God, the “Timeless Being”

(*Akal Purakh*), is to be “dis-covered” within each human spirit. All forms (*saguna*) are informed by the formless (*nirguna*). One should foster an “exuberant love for the Lord.”¹⁹ Just as the one true God expresses Himself in perfection for Christians in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Sikhs embrace that God (*Waheguru*, “The Greatest Guru”) that revealed Himself perfectly in the lives of ten historical gurus. One must not only know about God with cognitive insight but “enjoy God” and experience a state of bliss (*anand*). Christians and Sikhs both recognize that life is intended to be

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more than simply a delusional (*maya*) materialistic drive to wallow in temporary allurements. A call to a deeper sense of spiritual knowing has enabled both Christians and Sikhs who have faced miseries to remain unruffled in the face of torture. Both religions embrace mystery and Sikh devotion can remind Christians to be learners at the feet of the Guru Granth Sahib who warns that all worship that is devoid of a genuine intention is empty: “You may pray five times a day, but only if truth is your first prayer; honesty is your second prayer; generosity is your third prayer; purity of mind is your fourth prayer; and praise to God is your fifth prayer; only then can you call yourself a Muslim.”²⁰ Even though people may put on religious airs and seek to gain attention their efforts

are as foolish as the parading of “drunken elephants arrayed in gold; first among the giants in blazing colors” and yet last “as they depart barefoot from the world.”²¹

Non-Sikhs can lose any sense of seeing Sikhs as “others” when they come to appreciate the Sikh vision to root daily life in a commitment to purity rooted in a holy fear of the Great Creator God. The Sikh scriptures teach that we should “accept all humans as equals and let humanity be your only sect.”

that fears only God and none other. Life is the “dance of dances” and the truth of God must be lived out in daily decisions. Guru Nanak teaches that “truth is higher than all but higher still is true living.”²² For Christians, the love of God is not a theoretical idea and Christ did not love abstractly and in a vacuum. Both Christians and Sikhs speak of those who love God as something akin to “intoxicated love-filled madmen” with God as a “spouse” to be loved as an intimate “soul bride.”²³ This will mean that loving God is more important than even life itself. Shaheed Bhindranwale, freedom fighter for the cause of Khalistan, proclaimed, “Physical death I do not fear; death of conscience is the real death.”²⁴ Death is no better than life; both are wonderful gifts to be filled with spiritual meaning. Guru Nanak taught that “Death is not called bad if one knows how to die. Serve the Lord and your path will be an easy one.”²⁵

The Sikh vision for the appreciation of a shared humanity is rooted in the



Family Life; photo, Cetta Kenney

home. For a Sikh the “home is a sacred place where the troubles and anxieties of the world cannot enter.”²⁶ In spite of our labels, many of us return to our homes and become fathers and mothers,

All of us are God’s children: this is the heart of the declaration of Guru Nanak that “there is no Hindu here, nor a Muslim”

brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. For Sikhs, as for Christians, a life of faith is to be lived out in the context of family commitments. Countless passages in the *Adi Granth Sahib* speak of the impor-

tance of home and stress that “liberation is not achieved in isolation, but within the context of family and domestic responsibility.”²⁷ An individual is cultivated in the family and the ethics of the family are central to the creation of a just and equitable society.

Sikhism is a faith that promotes interfaith harmony so that social justice can be advanced. A Sikh theology of liberation teaches that God is the *Asur Sanghar*, “the destroyer of demons.” Emancipation must be collective. All humans are born blessed by God and the mission of life is to protect the weak and the hurting; not to focus on “qualifying for a non-existent Heaven

or being scared from a mythological Hell” is what motivates the Sikh community.²⁸ Christianity teaches that love for God must always be expressed in our concern for our neighbors. The fact that Christians and Sikhs share a commitment to service (*seva*) and the advance of social justice can work to dispel any perceived sense of “otherness” amongst our respective communities. Long before modern voices called for egalitarian and democratic values, the Sikh faith encouraged its followers to cherish each individual while also cultivating a social vision of justice rooted in tolerance. Sikhism teaches that those who earn money through anything but honest labor (*kirat*) are those who take “the blood of the poor.”²⁹

Perhaps one of the greatest teachings that Sikhism can relate to contemporary Christians, who can sometimes become caught up with a sense of their own sense of being right, is an unswerving commitment to mutuality. The Sikh scriptures teach that we should “accept all humans as equals and let humanity be your only sect.”³⁰ Guru Har Rai (1630-1661) was known to frequently quote the proverb of Baba Farid that every man’s heart is a jewel. Sikhs are called to pray not only for their own communities but for the benefit of all people. Sikhs are taught to “take care of others; even if they do not agree with us.”³¹ The ninth Sikh Guru, Tegh Bahadur, expressed this belief that he was his “brother’s keeper”, by willingly dying in defense of his Hindu neighbors when they were confronted by the tyrannical whims of the Mughal Shah Aurangzeb.

Our respective faiths will be enhanced by constructive and polemic-free Sikh-Christian dialogue. Listening is “the gateway to wisdom” and marks all who are sincere.³² God’s truth is not an exclusive property or a monopoly to be hoarded by one group but is a free and inclusive gift for all who are sincere and who seek after the truth.³³ All of us are God’s children: this is the heart of the declaration of Guru Nanak that “there is no Hindu here, nor a Muslim” (*Na Koi Hindu, Na Musalman*).³⁴ Interfaith harmony can proceed in spite of our different views or preconceptions when we set aside our egotism (*haumai*). We need to learn to listen to God and to each other. Our common enemy, Christian and Sikh, is hateful intolerance that seeks to marginalize and dehumanize the “other”. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky warned fellow Christians that they must guard against Jesus Christ Himself being held as a “prisoner” by authoritarians who fear an “open and ongoing dialogue” rooted in “freedom and love.”³⁵ A genuine love for all people, rooted in the maturity of one’s own faith, should remind Christians of the promises of the Bible that God loves the entire world (John 3:16) and is not willing that any child of God should perish (II Timothy 2:4). A transformative heart that engages others also creates a new shared space for a genuine sense of mutuality rooted in respect where barriers and categories fall to the wayside. As Guru Nanak explained: “Meeting with the Guru, I have abandoned the sense of “otherness”.”³⁶

“There is No Enemy; None is the Other”



Friends: courtesy, Nishkam Sewak Jatha, Kericho, Kenya

NOTES

¹ Kanra Mohalla 5, 1299, cited in *The Sikh Religion* published by the Sikh Missionary Center, Detroit, Michigan, 1990, 286.

² Singh, I. J. *Being and Becoming a Sikh*. Toronto: Centennial Foundation, 2003, 13.

³ Cheetam, David. “Sikhism and Interreligious Dialogue” in *The Sikh Review*, vol. 52: 2, no. 602, February 2004, 56.

⁴ Ballantyne, Tony. *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, xi.

⁵ An important study in this regard comes from Tony Ballantyne of the University

of Otago, New Zealand, who has recently published an important book on this topic: *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

⁶ Fox, Richard G. *History of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 109.

⁷ Gari Kabir, 324, cited by the Sikh Missionary Society, 275.

⁸ Tandon, Prakash. *The Punjabi Century, 1857-1947*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, 11-12.

⁹ Fenech, 295.

- ¹⁰ Singh, Gopal. *The Religion of the Sikhs*. New York: Asia Publishing House, 1971, 81.
- ¹¹ Singh, Wazir. *The Sikh Vision: Problems of Philosophy and Faith*. New Delhi: Ess Publications, 1992, 102.
- ¹² Pettigrew, Joyce J. M. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerilla Violence*. London: ZED Books, 1995, 197.
- ¹³ Fenech, Louis E. *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the Game of Love*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000, 46.
- ¹⁴ Nine-year old Sahibzada Fateh Singh was beheaded before the 7-year old Sahibzada Zorawar Singh on the 27th of December, 1705 near the city of Morinda where the Fatehgarh Sahib shrine can be visited today.
- ¹⁵ McLeod, W. H. *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 6.
- ¹⁶ Mahmood, Cynthia Keppley. *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, 49.
- ¹⁷ Talbot, Ian. *Khizr Tiwana, the Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India*. London: Curzon Press, 1996, 161.
- ¹⁸ See <http://www.minhaj.org/english/tid/13722/Leaders-of-Different-faiths-s> Accessed 4/4/11.
- ¹⁹ Kohli, Surindar Singh. *Sikhism and Major World Religions*. Amritsar, India: Singh Brothers, 1998, 118.
- ²⁰ Mahmood, 27-28.
- ²¹ The Dasam Granth Savayye, 2, cited in Kaur Singh, Nikky-Guninder, translator. *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus – Devotional Poetry from the Guru Granth and the Dasam Granth*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995, 109.
- ²² Guru Granth Sahib, 62, cited in Kaur Singh, Nikky-Guninder, translator. 9.
- ²³ Singh, Wazir. 18.
- ²⁴ Mahmood, 40.
- ²⁵ Vadahansu Alahanian 2:2-3 cited in Fenech, 121.
- ²⁶ Jakobsh, Doris R. *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning, and Identity*. London: Oxford University Press, 2003, 136.
- ²⁷ Mann, Gurinder Singh. *Sikhism: Religions of the World*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004, 82.
- ²⁸ Singh, Gurbarkhsh, *The Sikh Faith: A Universal Message*, Miami: Guru Nanak Mission, 2008, 131.
- ²⁹ Singh, Gurbarkhsh, 69.
- ³⁰ Jajji, “Morning,” 28, cited in Kaur Singh, translator, 58.
- ³¹ Mahmood, 133.
- ³² Neki, J. S. “The Wisdom of Listening.” *The Sikh Review*. Vol. 52:9, no. 609, September 2004, 26.
- ³³ Guru Nanak Dev said of truth that “truth is the knife; truth is pure steel.” Ramkaliki Var, Mohalla 1, 19.2, 956.
- ³⁴ Uberoi, J. P. S. *Religion, Civil Society and the State: A Study of Sikhism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, 61.
- ³⁵ Singh, I. J., 152.
- ³⁶ Kanra Mohalla, 5, 1299, cited by the Sikh Missionary Center, 286.