

# Millennium for a Sikh

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**R**ECENTLY I TALKED TO SOME CHRISTIAN FRIENDS, trying to gauge their opinion of the millennium. One of them said that he would be spending New Year's Eve as he always did – asleep in bed. When I asked him why, he said that he would have celebrated the religious festival some days earlier, referring obviously to Christmas. It was a welcome reminder that the great celebrations which will break out in places like Trafalgar Square in London and on Princes Street in Edinburgh are mainly of a secular nature and have very little to do with religion or faith, let alone with marking the birthday of the founder of Christianity.

The hype cannot be ignored. In Britain the physical symbol, the Millennium Dome, is already a marker on the London skyline. Anybody who has recently travelled by air to London will have noticed its enormous white expanse, a giant mushroom joined to the earth by pillars and string – or so it seems. There are many other prestige projects on which millions of pounds are being spent out of funds raised by the National Lottery. With its promotional image of a hand coming out of the sky and a finger pointing as if to say, 'It could be you!', the Lottery has become in some ways equivalent to an act of divine intervention. By portraying greed under the guise of God's grace, the millennium celebrations only pander to the baser side of human nature. By creating an opportunity for addiction and building on the psyche of desperation, there is a real danger that the celebrations will become a licence for further consumerism. What is the morality of it all? How can we celebrate while others are burdened under the crushing weight of third world debt? Surely Jesus would not have wanted his birthday to be celebrated in this way?

## *Three hundred years of the Khalsa*

These are questions which occur to me – a Sikh. They are important questions for me because Sikhs have themselves been celebrating an important anniversary this year. The three hundredth anniversary of the order of the Khalsa, the Sikh 'community of the pure', fell on the feast of Vaisakhi, 14 April 1999. When I spoke with my Christian friend about the millennial celebration, he remarked on how Sikhs have been

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able to mark Vaisakhi in a religious way. They have concentrated on worship, prayer and devotion. There have been continuous recitations of *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of families were involved in supporting the worship, preparing food for the celebrants and community, and contributing to an atmosphere of peace and devotion.

This tercentenary has been celebrated in such a way as to give Sikhs a prominence in the national consciousness. Sikhs are proud that their faith has been in existence since the time of the first guru, Guru Nanak – some 530 years. It may be still a long way to go to the Sikh millennium, yet that period of time has proved an eventful one in our homeland of India and promises to be more so, now that Sikhs have spread throughout the world and are in contact with other religions.

Sikhs in Britain, however, are also aware that we share many common values with the message of Christianity. For while we are deeply committed to our faith, Sikhs are always ready to accept the truths taught by other founders. In my opinion, Jesus could easily be regarded as a prophet figure for the Sikhs. *Śrī Guru Granth Sahib* is a universal scripture which not only contains the writings of the Sikh gurus but of Muslim holy men too. Prophets of other faiths are acknowledged and revered.

While the millennium forms the background to the reflections in this article, its real focus is on the two religious anniversaries of the year, the two births, two thousand years since the birthday of Jesus and three hundred since the birth of the Sikh Khalsa. When we celebrate such significant dates within a few months of each other what can we learn together? There are many differences apart from relative age and cultural context, but also many parallels, in the personality and message of the founders, in our ideas about God, and in the teaching about truth, justice, service and personal responsibility. There are moral and spiritual values which underpin both our faiths, our responsibility towards God and God's creation, both human and environmental.

### *Sikh celebrations – the feast of Vaisakhi*

First let me say something about our own celebrations this year and the meaning Vaisakhi has for us. Throughout the year the centenary celebrations have been covered by press, radio and the television networks: seminars and discourses, books and videos, festivals and fairs, street processions and staged performances, including a packed gathering in the Royal Albert Hall in London in which the Prince of Wales

and senior representatives of the main political parties participated. Everywhere there have been big processions with the *Guru Granth Sahib* covered in beautiful drapes and flowers, musicians singing hymns and attendants distributing the blessed *parshad*, dry fruit and sweets. People walked singing God's praises using the hymns of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth of the Sikh gurus, who was responsible for the formation of the Khalsa. Others displayed their proficiency in Sikh martial arts. There were drummers and people serving many types of vegetarian food and soft drinks to the marchers, all having a joyful and prayerful day out with their friends and families. Huge numbers gathered together, some fifty thousand in Southall, in West London; similar numbers in New York, and approximately a million in Anandpur in North India, where on Vaisakhi day the first Khalsa Sikhs were initiated.

It was probably March, according to the calendar used in North India at the time. Vaisakhi is now a big social and cultural occasion but originally it was a harvest festival. People's hard work had finally paid off and farmers could relax with the fruits of their labour. In the Panjab it was an occasion on which people from all over India could come together to see the guru, to stay at his place and be inspired by hearing the message which the line of gurus had preached since the time of Guru Nanak. Large numbers came together – 100,000 are spoken of. But at the end of the seventeenth century they had been suffering a long period of persecution at the hands of the Mughal rulers who tried to use state power to propagate Islam by force. There was terror in the towns and countryside. Conversions were frequently forced in the face of threats of death. It was said that the emperor Aurangzeb would not have breakfast until a whole pile of Hindu sacred threads were presented to him at the beginning of each day.<sup>2</sup>

The ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, chose death rather than submit to the arrogance of Mughal power. Once some Kashmiri brahmins came to him to invoke his assistance against the forced conversions. The guru remarked that to resist successfully would take the sacrifice of a holy person. But he accepted that to carry on practising his own faith meant standing up for the faith of others – for Hindus, members of another community. With Guru Tegh Bahadur's sacrifice, his son, Guru Gobind Singh, became leader of the community at the age of only nine years. He was deeply inspired by his father's martyrdom. Seeing that the people were so frightened that they were no longer prepared to admit to their faith, he looked forward to creating a community which would be recognized from a distance, which in times of trial and

weakness would be strengthened by having a strong and visible sense of identity.

On that Vaisakhi day in 1699 Guru Gobind Singh stood up and took a sword out of its scabbard, an act which caused some consternation. He asked for men brave enough to follow his teaching. One came up and offered himself to the guru, saying 'my head is yours'. The guru took him aside, behind the large tent in which they were meeting, and the people heard the striking of the sword against something hard. A moment later and the guru emerged with his sword dripping with blood. This went on five times. Then, the story goes, the five men were brought back to the gathering in the tent, dressed in identical robes and turbans. They had a special glow on their faces.

These first disciples are known as the *panj pyare*, the 'five beloved followers'. They embody the values by which the Khalsa is identified – compassion, courage, righteousness, detachment and integrity. But they also show that Sikh identity is of a very special kind, not one which seeks to assert its own right to freedom in religion but one which is prepared to fight for the right of others to worship freely. They also have equality in their second names: the men called Singh (lion) and the women Kaur (princess).

It is important to note that the *panj pyare* came not just from Panjab but from all over North India and that they stand for ideals and values which are in marked contrast to the place of their origin. There is a teaching in their names. The first, for instance, Daya Singh, came from Lahore, the capital of the state of Panjab, which was known at the time as a city of carnage and terror. The second came from Delhi, the capital of India, which had a reputation for moral bankruptcy. Yet the name of the first of the followers means compassion; the name of the second means righteousness. In other words, they teach by their example that compassion is still possible, that righteousness is still possible, when people adhere to what they believe in the face of oppression. These five disciples, speaking their own regional languages and with very different customs, formed a new community, one typified by qualities which spoke against the prevailing values of their home place. In its origins the Khalsa is not, therefore, a local or regional sect, but a universal casteless brotherhood and sisterhood.

### *The ten Sikh gurus and the person of Jesus*

Sikhs share with Christians so many of the same values: generosity and integrity of heart, selfless service to others and the pursuit of equality,

truth and justice. Much of the teaching, and many of the stories which inspire our two faiths, are similar. Sikhs are committed to ideals which inspire them to protect the freedom and rights of all people. In the early part of this century, when so many Indians were involved in the independence movement, Sikhs played their part in acts of passive resistance to the power of the British Raj. Charles Andrews, an Anglican clergyman from Cambridge and a great friend and supporter of Mahatma Gandhi, once remarked in wonder that Christians talk about the one Christ and one sacrifice, but 'I have seen many Christs sacrifice themselves'. Sikhs form but two per cent of the population of India, but in the first half of this century their contribution to the struggle for justice was immense. Seventy-six per cent of those who received death sentences, eighty-one per cent of those given life sentences, and most killed at the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919 were Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh describes in his writings how God sends prophets to the world to remind people of their allegiance to God, to bring people back to their spiritual lives and to teach the way to a happy and peaceful life. In the Sikh daily evening prayer, Sikhs recite the following from his writings:

At appropriate time, Brahma took on form;  
 At appropriate time, Śiva was born;  
 At appropriate time, Vishnu was revealed.  
 All this is the play of God . . .  
 God fashions the whole of creation.  
 My salutations are for him.  
 God created the whole world;  
 God created demi-gods, angels and demons;  
 God is the one who incarnates from beginning to end.  
 Realise this, that God, as such, is my Guru.<sup>3</sup>

What Sikhs believe, then, is that God sends his messengers to relieve humanity of its suffering. Rama, Krishna, Śiva and Vishnu came at their designated time. For Christians Christ was that messenger 2,000 years ago, just as for Sikhs God spoke through Guru Nanak and the chosen successors, including Guru Gobind Singh. And today it is just as important to study their lives, to hear their message, to learn from them. God chooses different forms and speaks in different ways in order for the message to be heard by human beings who live in different human

situations. Again and again we are reminded of our responsibility to God, to our fellow human beings and indeed to creation itself.

Of course, unlike the beginning of Christianity, the foundation of the Khalsa was not just a single event. It took some 230 years for the community to mature and to find its true identity. This was a process of evolution, not revolution, and it meant a long period of time bringing to fruition the original vision of Guru Nanak. But it is worth noting that in the scriptures all the Gurus describe themselves as Nanak. It is as if they are a single person, a single voice, the same light continuing in each of them. The gurus are named as the second, the third Nanak, and so on. When leadership was transferred to the next guru it was God's light which was transferred, the light which would permeate the whole line. Like Guru Nanak himself, each is described as having the same inner light. Like Jesus hearing the blessing of God the Father at his baptism, Guru Nanak is called to enjoy this special relationship with God.

Once Guru Nanak went for a swim in the river Wayeen. He was not seen for some time. Fearing that he had drowned, a search party was sent out – but to no avail. Eventually he came out of the river on the third day, when all hope of finding him alive had faded, saying:

There is neither Hindu nor Muslim.  
Whether we say Allah or Rama,  
We have the same body and the same soul.

It is said that at the time God called Nanak into his presence and gave him a bowl of nectar to drink. He then asked Nanak to go back and remind people of their origin and convey God's message: there is neither Christian nor Jew, neither Buddhist nor Jain, neither Muslim, nor Hindu, nor Sikh. All share the same humanity and the same spiritual origin.

### *God of love and grace*

This is the message which is periodically made manifest in the world. The prophet who inspires the community is blessed by God as God's son. Here the two faiths are very close. God is beyond all creeds. God does not cease being God if people do not worship him or if people do not believe. God is the God of both believers and unbelievers. The gurus' task is to remind people of the parenthood of God. With these words God explained to Guru Gobind Singh why he was sent: 'I will cherish you as my son. I have created you to teach people my path and

spread righteousness everywhere. Stop people from doing evil deeds.’<sup>3</sup> Thus, when people stand in the Gurdwara for the final prayer, they repeat the words of the fifth guru, Guru Arjan: ‘Lord, I pray to you . . . for you are the mother and father’. As human beings we are always trying to make God like a human being because, of course, we do not have any other way of describing God. So we use all forms of human relationship to speak of God in personal terms – friend, brother, husband. But we have to remember that God is also beyond such categories; God is supporter, sustainer and does not have to be fixed in terms of gender.

A verse from the Guru Granth Sahib describes the human relationship with God in this way:

If you take one step towards God  
God takes twenty steps towards you.

God always wants us to take the first step, like a parent wanting their child to walk – the child unsure, nearly falling, unsteady and frightened, the parent aware and sensitive, waiting ready with open arms to receive the child. Similarly God encourages us to take the first step and then takes many more steps towards us, twenty times more than we do, bestowing on us love, compassion, warmth, joy and goodness in abundance. Guru Arjan says:

My true Lord, I’ve come to seek your shelter.  
Grant me the joy and glory of the Holy Name.  
Dispel my anxiety. I know no other shelter.  
Exhausted I prostrate myself at your door.  
Pardon my sins for I am without goodness.  
Save me, my Lord, with your grace.  
You are the pardoner ever merciful,  
the support of us all.<sup>4</sup>

### *Social justice and jubilee*

Finally, let me say something about the whole question of the role which the community – whether the Khalsa or the Church – plays in taking forth the call of God to act justly and responsibly. The people whom God calls work to fulfil God’s demand for justice. This begins at the ritual level but affects all the many ways we lead our lives on a day-to-day basis, the ways we experience life together in the community and the responsibilities we find there.

There are three key principles behind the practice of Sikh faith. They make it very simple and practical yet at the same time very demanding. First, we are told to remember God in all the daily situations of our ordinary lives. God is not just to be remembered at set prayer times. We are to think about God all the time. This is not a matter of denying our worldly existence because we have been placed by God in this world to be honest and truthful with one another, and in that respect we should be earning our living with integrity. This is the second principle: honesty in our living with each other. God asks us to act responsibly for all of creation, to look after that which God has given us. None of this world is ours; we are the trustees of *God's* creation. It is never, therefore, a question of God simply leaving us to work out our own salvation. Rather God himself remains always very close to us in the community. God is not utterly distant, but with us, close to us, closer than we think and not some distant being inhabiting a distant heaven.

That implies a third principle. Everything we have is to be shared with others. Whatever we may have earned with our hard work, whatever we may have to eat, we have to be prepared to give to others. We will never come close to God by indulging our greed. To share with others, with other people and with other life-forms in this one world: that is the only way to salvation. Not that this is ever a question of what *we* are doing. It is what God is doing through us. God is using us. We are the agents and servants for God's gifts to those less fortunate than ourselves. There is a lovely Sikh saying, that the poor person's mouth is God's treasure-chest. Real treasures are not diamonds, gold and silver, which require constant security measures to keep them safe. Our real treasure lies with the liberation of the poor, for there is no greater gift than the gift of food which we can give to those in real need.

Like Christians, Sikhs believe in a just God who calls us to be just too, and to give to the poor. In the Gospels there is a story about the difficulty a rich man has in getting into heaven; it is easier, says Jesus, for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. It reminds me of another needle story, from the Sikh scriptures.

There was this rich merchant who thought that if he served the poor people once a year he would be able to get to heaven. Every time he made another million, he put another flag outside his house. Eventually he had loads of flags. He asked Guru Nanak what he should do. The guru gave him a needle, telling him to take it to the next life. So he took the needle home and showed it to his wife telling her what the guru had said. His wife just laughed and had to explain to him what the guru was telling him. How can anyone take anything into the next life? All the



rich man was thinking about was what he could do to earn the reward of heaven. The guru's teaching is that, if we are to prepare ourselves for the next life, then there is much more to this life than putting up more flags to show how wealthy we are.

At the centre of our two traditions are similar ideas about the need to be compassionate, to share what we have and at the same time to be truthful and honest with each other. Guru Nanak once chose to stay with a poor carpenter in a village. An invitation came for everyone to go the house of a rich man for a feast. Everyone went except Guru Nanak. The rich man sent servants to ask the guru why he did not come to partake of the great feast. Guru Nanak explained that he was more than satisfied with what the poor carpenter had given him. But the rich man insisted and eventually the guru went to the rich man's house. When the meal was served, however, he did not eat. The rich man was displeased and demanded to know why the guru would not take his special bread. Guru Nanak asked for a chapatti to be brought from the carpenter's house. Then, taking the rich man's bread in one hand and the poor man's chapatti in the other, he squeezed them. From the rich man's bread came blood; from the poor man's came milk.

The meaning is clear: the rich man's wealth was created by the squeezing of the poor, not treating them justly; the poor man earned his money through honest hard work. The true human value lies in the honesty which treats all people equally and with respect. Guru Nanak had been invited to attend not because the rich man wanted to be genuinely hospitable, to share his wealth, but because he wanted the presence of the holy man to make him feel more important.

### ***Conclusion: thoughts on the eve of the millennium***

For us Sikhs the purpose of our Vaisakhi celebrations is to remember what Guru Gobind Singh and the line of Sikh gurus wanted the community of the pure to be. The message of the Khalsa is simple and clear. It is to rededicate ourselves to the teachings of the Gurus, to lead a pure life and to be true to our faith in words and deeds. I feel that if Christians are to celebrate the millennium, then they too have to remember. This is what the millennium is about – not the marking of a merely secular date. But just as the story of the Khalsa is the story of the maturing of a community, with words eventually becoming deeds, so it takes time for the gospel message to be heard and understood.

Life does not stop because we think we have achieved something. Life goes on and changes. God's message has to be interpreted in the

context of each and every day that we live. We are asked to seek out the relevance of the message for today. Sometimes, of course, we are so distracted and troubled that we cannot see what the message is saying and in situations like that it is only God's grace which saves us. This is another thing which Sikhs and Christians share: our utter reliance on God. In this context, as we – people of all faiths – get closer to the millennium, it is essential that the life and message of Christ is reheard in the light of our current situation so that we can dedicate ourselves again to the values which he fostered throughout his life and through his ultimate act of self-sacrifice for others.

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#### NOTES

1 It takes a full forty-eight hours to complete the recitation from cover to cover. This is done by a relay of readers doing two-hour shifts, day and night. For the tercentenary, in one gurdwara, eleven such recitations were in process at the same time.

2 Sacred thread: a cotton thread worn over the right shoulder by members of the Brahmin or priestly caste as a mark of initiation.

3 Harbans Singh Doabia, *Sacred Nitnem* (1995), pp 234–235. (Translation by Charanjit Ajit Singh.)

4 *Amrit Kirtan*, p 278. (Translation by Charanjit Ajit Singh.)

5 *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, p 713.